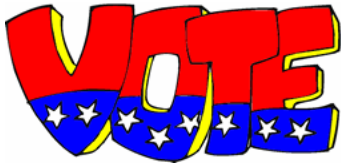


The Economics of Voting: What Do You Mean My Vote Doesn't Count?



According to data obtained from the "Statistical Abstract of the United States," in the 2000 presidential election the voting-age population of 18 to 20 years old was 11.9 million. Of that population 40.5% reported they were registered to vote but only 28.4 % reported they voted. This voter behavior was not a one-time aberration. In fact, of all eligible voter population groups, 18 to 20 year olds have consistently been the least likely to vote in national elections. Does such voter behavior on the part of the young mean they are uncaring, irresponsible members of society; or, does such voter behavior represent individual rationality?

The Founding Fathers believed that a concerned and informed electorate was necessary in establishing, and maintaining, an efficient and effective democratic society. Eligible voters were expected to take time to study the issues and candidates, discuss these issues and candidates at public meetings, and then carefully weigh the relevant information before deciding how to vote.

Although an informed citizenry is desirable from a social point of view, it's not clear that individuals will find it personally desirable to become politically informed because obtaining detailed information about issues and candidates is a costly endeavor. Many issues are complicated, and a great deal of technical knowledge and information is necessary to make an informed judgment on them. To find out what candidates really believe (and how they will act on those beliefs if elected) requires a lot more than listening to their campaign slogans. It requires studying their past voting records, reading a great deal that has been written either by or about them, and asking them questions at public meetings. Taking the time and trouble to do these things is the cost that each eligible voter has to pay personally for the benefits of being politically informed.

What are the benefits from being politically informed? Basically, there are two. Consumption is the first: some people simply enjoy being informed; it is a form of entertainment, like going to the movies or parties. These people will be willing to make an effort to acquire some information on public issues just for the sake of knowledge. The other benefit from being informed has nothing to do with satisfying intellectual curiosity. Being politically informed provides one with the knowledge to influence social decisions in directions that will yield him or her the greatest benefit. Unfortunately, this does little to motivate most people to become informed because it isn't much of a benefit. The probability of one person's vote having any effect on an election is practically zero. With millions voting in national elections, each citizen is safe in assuming that his or her vote really doesn't count, at least in terms of being decisive.

So for most people, including eligible voters 18 to 20 years of age, the costs of becoming politically informed are noticeable, while the benefits are negligible. As a result, most people limit their quest for political information to listening to newscasters or political pundits, casual reading, and conversations with friends and family. Even though most people would be better off if everyone became more informed, it isn't worth the cost for most individuals to make an effort to become informed themselves. You will receive the benefits from the awareness of others whether you study the issues or not. And if no one else becomes informed on the issues, you are not going to change things noticeably, no matter how politically aware you are. Therefore, voter apathy is not the result of moral decay or lack of patriotism in our society. It's

simply the result of individuals acting rationally. This phenomenon is known as rational ignorance and apathy.

The implications are very interesting. For one thing, legislators have an easier job than they otherwise would. With most of the public poorly informed on complex issues, elected representatives are under less pressure to be informed themselves. They will be able to score points with their constituents back home for policies that give the appearance of solving problems, whether they do or not. Since the effects of many policies are hard to predict, even by knowledgeable experts, we can expect a great deal of legislation to be passed that aggravates the problem it was intended to solve.

Lack of political awareness on the part of the public also makes it easier for politicians to get away with exaggerated claims and promises—false and misleading advertising. Whether we are dealing with a politician promoting his or her candidacy or a salesperson promoting his or her product, such as a car, there is a tendency to exaggerate the truth if it will help convince the consumer to vote for, or buy, the product. The more consumers know about a product, the less advantage can be realized by false advertising. And the fact is that most people spend more time and effort sizing up the alternatives when they buy a car than when they vote for a political candidate. Polls consistently indicate that the majority of the people of voting age do not even know who their congressional representatives are, much less how those representatives stand on specific issues. When people buy a car, they at least kick some tires and take a test drive; more often than not, they have an experienced mechanic check it out if the car is pre-owned. People are motivated to become somewhat informed because, as opposed to a political election, the decision they make on a car is the decision that determines what they get. This reduces the benefits that a salesperson can realize from gross misrepresentation, though it does not eliminate it entirely. But don't expect to hear the outrageous whoppers from salespersons that politicians tell routinely: salespersons can be sued; politicians cannot.

But why did 28.4% of 18 to 20 year olds vote in the 2000 presidential election? An important explanation is that there is an expressive benefit from voting having nothing to do with the election's outcome: People feel good about expressing support for, or opposition to, particular policies and candidates. And since no one vote is likely to affect the outcome, it costs a voter effectively nothing to achieve expressive satisfaction by voting. So if a person feels good about expressing support for "helping the poor" or "protecting the environment," he or she can vote for government programs that claim to accomplish these noble goals (or for candidates that support them) at almost no personal cost, no matter how much these programs will cost, for example in higher taxes, if they pass. While expressive voting has the desirable effect of motivating more people to vote, it does little to motivate people to vote on the basis of information rather than emotion.