



# Millions to the Polls

PRACTICAL POLICIES TO FULFILL THE FREEDOM  
TO VOTE FOR ALL AMERICANS

---

OVER THE HORIZON  
IDEAS

---

J. MIJIN CHA & LIZ KENNEDY

## OVER THE HORIZON IDEAS

**M**aking our election system function for all of our citizens should be a bedrock commitment of our nation. The current disparities by class and race in voter registration—and thus, voter turnout—undermine an essential tenet of our democracy: of, by and for the people. In order to address the current inefficiencies and inadequacies in our election procedures, we have outlined a robust set of policy recommendations and best practices. At the same time, we also believe the project to perfect our democracy is one that demands we reach higher—and think more boldly about ways to ensure all adult citizens are full participants in our elections. The two ideas presented here—Universal Voting and a federal plan to Improve America’s Election Fund to incentivize states to invest in their election systems—should be added to the national conversation about how to reach our democracy’s highest promise: that of one person, one vote.

### Universal Voting

The health of a democracy corresponds to the level of participation among its citizens. In some democracies, citizen participation is so important that voting is a requirement for all citizens. Countries with universal voting systems see a voter turnout rate that is anywhere between seven and sixteen percentage points higher than the U.S.<sup>1</sup> Thirty-two countries require their citizens to vote for at least one office or in at least one jurisdiction.<sup>2</sup> Of these countries, 19 enforce the duty to vote, usually by imposing a small fine on those that do not vote.<sup>3</sup> The fine provides an incentive to participate but is not overly punishing for those who want to exercise their right not to vote.<sup>4</sup> The option of voting for “None of the Above” also allows an alternative for those who do not wish to endorse any of the candidates.

If voting is made a requirement for citizens, then procedures and practices must be adopted to facilitate voting and eliminate barriers that cause so many Americans to miss out at the ballot box. In Australia, for example, Election Day is always on a Saturday so that most eligible voters are not torn between their obligations as workers and as citizens. Voting in Australia is also made more convenient allowing people to vote at a variety of places, including polling places or by mail or at mobile teams at hospitals, nursing homes and remote localities.<sup>5</sup>

In the United States, the greatest benefit to universal voting would be a potentially significant increase in voter participation. Here, a large segment of our eligible population does not vote. The 2008 election saw

historic levels of turnout, but overall turnout was still just over 62 percent.<sup>6</sup> In comparison, voter turnout in Australia is consistently between 93-95 percent.<sup>7</sup>

There is also a significant gap in turnout based on income levels in the U.S. In 2012, only 46.9 percent of eligible voters in the lowest income bracket voted.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, 80.2 percent of voters in the highest income bracket voted.<sup>9</sup> Universal voting could likely increase participation among all groups that currently have low levels of participation because the mandate could very well facilitate improvements in election administration that would make voting more convenient and accessible.

Universal voting may also help ease political polarization. Currently, with a polarized electorate, moderate and independent voters are more likely to be turned off of electoral politics, resulting in an over-representation of partisan voters. If everyone voted, the entire political spectrum would be represented and the partisan nature of our politics could be diffused because politicians would have to answer to a wider ideological spectrum. In addition, there is no evidence to indicate that universal voting benefits either party so there is no partisan advantage to the system.

There is concern that universal voting would remove the freedom to *not* vote, either as a political statement or as an exercise of choice. Particularly in the American context, elevating voting to a civic duty would generate heavy opposition from a wide variety of groups, from those concerned with anything that could be perceived as government overreach to traditional civil libertarians who could see voting as a right to be exercised by the individual not a duty that is imposed by the government. The option of choosing “none of the above” on the ballot, and appropriate exemptions for persons who may have a religious objection to voting, could alleviate these concerns.

Opponents of universal voting also argue that an increase in voters could result in elections being decided by misinformed or uninformed voters. But the U.S. long ago rejected literacy or other educational tests for voting, recognizing that a true democracy entrusts all of the people to participate in the exercise of self-government. Moreover, universal voting would provide additional incentives to parties candidates and election officials to produce informative election materials and conduct outreach to help educate voters.

Finally, universal voting does not necessarily remove registration barriers. If eligible voters run into registration issues, the requirement to vote could complicate their experience, rather than provide a solution. Adopting automatic voter registration would help make universal voting more successful. As discussed earlier, eligible voters could be automatically added to voter rolls as soon as they turn 18, streamlining registration and

removing bureaucratic hurdles. Coupling universal voting with automatic voter registration could provide a streamlined, accessible process that brings far more eligible voters into the electoral process.

### **Improve America's Election Fund**

In an effort to harness the best thinking at the state level, the Department of Education provides \$4.35 billion in discretionary grants awarded to states leading the way with ambitious plans for implementing coherent, compelling, and comprehensive education reform.<sup>10</sup> The program provides best practices examples to all states and local school districts throughout the country on educational reforms and advances specific goals of the Department of Education.

Likewise, a fund to improve America's elections could be created to encourage improvements at the state level. Tapping into the best practices of states, the Election Assistance Commission, or other appropriate agency, could administer a program that would provide grant money to states that improve their election administration in certain areas. Some possible areas for improvement could be:

- Adopting Same Day Registration
- Adopting Early Voting periods
- Increasing overall voter registration
- Decreasing time to vote at polling places on Election Day

States are still facing budget deficits and the opportunity to receive funds for election administration will be a strong incentive to improve their overall performance. The grant program could be structured to encourage applications from areas with lower electoral participation so as to achieve overall improvement, rather than only rewarding states that currently have high voter turnout. Best state practices could be collected and shared to improve election administration nationwide.

These are just two of the ideas that can be conversation-starters for envisioning the next generation of electoral reforms. Continuing to protect and ensure the freedom to vote will take creative thinking and the engagement of voters, advocates, scholars, election administrators, and elected officials. The next evolution of our electoral system should build on our current successes, learn from the mistakes, and look to engage millions more eligible voters. ■

## ENDNOTES

1. Harvard Law Review, *The Case for Compulsory Voting in the United States*, (December 2007), available at [http://harvardlawreview.org/media/pdf/compulsory\\_voting.pdf](http://harvardlawreview.org/media/pdf/compulsory_voting.pdf)
2. Tim Evans, *Compulsory Voting in Australia*, (2006) available at [http://www.aec.gov.au/about\\_aec/Publications/voting/files/compulsory-voting.pdf](http://www.aec.gov.au/about_aec/Publications/voting/files/compulsory-voting.pdf).
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. Michael McDonald, *2008 General Election Turnout Rates*, (Mar. 3, 2012), available at [http://elections.gmu.edu/Turnout\\_2008G.html](http://elections.gmu.edu/Turnout_2008G.html)
7. This is voter turnout as a percentage of voter registrations. Turnout as a percentage of the Voting Age Population is roughly 10 percentage points lower. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *Voter Turnout Data for Australia*, (Oct. 2011), available at <http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?CountryCode=AU>
8. The lowest income bracket is \$10,000 or less per year. U.S. Census Bureau, *Reported Voting and Registration of Family Members, by Age and Family Income*, (November 2012), available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/p20/2012/Table07.xls>
9. The highest income bracket is \$150,000 or more per year. *Ibid.*
10. U.S. Department of Education, *Race to the Top Program Executive Summary*, (2009), available at <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/executive-summary.pdf>.