

B 7. VOTING AND POLITICAL DISINTEREST

In our democracy voting should be considered both a privilege and a responsibility, but many do not consider it to be either for various reasons.

Some just don't want to be bothered, they just are not interested in what goes on in politics. They have their lives to live, and that has enough problems, & in any free time they want to be entertained. This is understandable, & they can be forgiven if they then do not even vote. For if they voted, it might be on the basis of mere hunches, or superficial impressions, of even gross misinformation. For example, someone in our acquaintance said that if they voted, they would likely vote for (named the candidate) because of their nice smile. Do we know how many such there are among non-voters? or how many rely primarily upon a single source they enjoy for their political opinions, perhaps a Tv or radio commentator or talk show host? or heard a spot political commercial and did or did not like it & voted accordingly?

Then there are those who hear all the exaggerated promises of politicians & know they can't deliver on all of them, or are disgusted by the bickering or by the personal attacks on each other, or think it is all excessive personal ambition of candidates with their fancy talk of principles just window dressing. These are valid reasons for disgust, but should they opt out of voting, & how many do much of the time?

Then there are those who think it does not matter anyhow. But that is just wrong. Candidates for office usually do represent different positions on what government should do, & which one is chosen likely could affect a lot of people. Of course in campaigning they tend to overstate the differences between them. One claims to be for freedom & the other for reducing insecurity, but in fact both candidates want both--they differ on what it is more important to work for a little more of in the existent situation. It is also true that when one political party seems more popular and wins more elections than the other major party, the latter slides some distance toward the other to win more votes. This is generally true, so some voters conclude erroneously that there is really no difference between major political parties.

But not voting because one assumes it will not make any difference is stupid. Votes do make choices between alternative policies that can affect many voters. Of course elections are not usually decided by one person's vote, but the reasoning that one does not matter is common, and when many do not vote for that reason, they leave the determination of policy to those who know which way they want policy to go. Sometimes they are people who support some one special interest rather than the common interest, & know they have to vote to have a chance to win over those who, if they voted, would serve the common interest instead. Or the outcome

might be determined by those representing one particular ideological position, and knowing they may be a minority, every single one of them votes. With enough non-voters, even actively voting minorities can win elections and determine policies that are then imposed on all non-voters who otherwise could have prevented such an outcome.

Voting is really a privilege because it gives everyone a chance to have their influence on government decisions that could affect them directly. They should accordingly know, or learn if they did not know at the outset, what policies would be in their own interest and what would not. Otherwise their vote may not serve their own interest but go against it.

But every citizen has a responsibility to do at least something to promote the general public interest, even sometimes when it costs him or her something instead of benefitting oneself. Life does not work well if we all strive only for ourselves alone, for it then becomes, as political thinker Thomas Hobbes once said, nasty, brutish and short. We all know that our ego needs to be socialized, because we each would not be alive from birth on unless someone cared for us instead of only for themselves. And most of what we know was taught us by others or was learned from them. Never in life, for most of us, do we have to produce everything we have or want, because others produce most of it, and if we contribute also, according to our ability, can buy it in a market. Indeed most of us care for at least some others, so are not entirely selfish. As voters we have a responsibility therefore to vote for policies that promote the general well-being, not just our own.

So it behooves us to try to learn what policies will and what will not promote the general public good and not only our own, and to vote accordingly. So informed voting for the public good is a responsibility in a democracy, not only a privilege.

But knowing this much in a complex world is not easy, and perhaps no one can know all that would help promote our own interest and also the public interest. But we should not vote in complete ignorance either, for then we might inadvertently promote exactly the wrong things.