Citizen Responsibility in a Democracy

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Proposal

It is proposed that all Ontario citizens who don’t vote lose their registered voter status, and hence lose access to a driver’s license, or car ownership, renewal, or social assistance, until they pay a reinstatement fee.

1. Civic Responsibility in Today’s Society

Who is responsible for keeping our Democracy strong? The government? The press? The courts? The people? All of the above? Some of the above more than others.

If the government is elected to do the will of the people - all of the people - then is it fair that they are protecting democracy for a dwindling majority against the expressed wishes of a determined minority? How can a press that values advertizing revenue first, ego-swabbing for its owners second, ever have enough respect as an institution honestly dedicated to the people? Who can ever forget how quickly the courts of Ontario turned away litigants in the controversial days of the Harris Conservatives, saying it had no mandate to comment on democratic rights. The people? How, if 35% non-participants disparage the process and its participants, and by inference the 65% who vote faithfully - do we expect to see leaders arise to protect our sick democracy? Already a majority of voters don’t vote in municipal elections. Voter participation in Ontario provincial elections has been declining at about 3% each decade.

The Citizens’ Assembly has been charged with trying to increase voter participation through electoral reform - if they can. A gargantuan task. Voter apathy is a sickness infecting much of western civilized countries. What makes us think we can find a solution when they can’t?

The answer is that ‘maybe someone will think outside the box’.

What box? The box of communal assumptions!

It is a basic assumption that the CA will find some solution based on existing electoral structures and process - either within our British heritage (Australia, New Zealand, Britain) or from other countries (Germany, France and
Japan are often mentioned.). Those solutions are elite designed and as such top-down. They are each designed around national values and circumstances, some of which may have little in common with Ontario’s. However the CA may or may not know that, or recognize such mismatches, in discussions and under pressure to recommend ‘something’ as the BC CA seems to have been under.

But more than that, how does importing a system that has the same voter participation problem solve ours?

The next commonly made assumption is that one should not expect too much of a voter - the more you ask, the fewer may show up. So we continue to believe that ‘greater minds’ need to arrange how they vote and who they vote with. As a consequence of our self-denigration, the concept that citizens could self-organize, or fill in a more complex ballot, or demand responsibility of other citizens has never come up - or at least there has not been enough courageous politicians to stand up for responsible citizens as intelligent voters. As Canadians we don’t want to offend anyone, so we don’t even ask for proof of citizenship or, perish the thought, that we insist the voter has been taught the consequences of his/her choice.

But, if we don’t value our voters as informed voters, why do we continue to express our support for democracy?

And horrors of horrors, we never want to hold the citizen who doesn’t vote - the unvoter - in any way responsible for letting our democracy down.

Why?

Since the last World War, popular desire to be civically responsible has declined as consumerism and instant gratification has increased - the so called narcissistic society. In that time, the social and political landscape has been dominated with constant calls for ‘more rights’. That movement has scaled the magnificent heights of self-entitlement to now demand convenience as a right.

How often have you heard ‘I demand my right to ..’ when you could easily substitute the phrase ‘the convenience’ for ‘my right’.

Simply put, we are ‘rights rich’ and ‘responsibility poor’. So if everyone wants to take - some more than others - who is going to give? How long do we reasonably expect our sick democracy to hold out?

Should we be surprised when popular cynical expressions denigrate the political participants and then we find that the political parties haven’t enough
volunteers? When it’s ‘me before you’ should we be surprised when service clubs, children’s sports and culture, charities go begging for civically minded helpers? 

No.

At what point, do we begin to insist on civic responsibility - before or after there is no longer anything to be responsible for?

2. Responsibility before Entitlement

If I don’t vote, there are no consequences. In fact I can be smug that I am above the problems of political life. I can tell myself that I know how it should be done but no one will ever listen anyway. I can tell myself whatever it is I’m doing is more important - or be honest with myself and just say I can’t be bothered.

If a member of any team let down the team, they would be asked to shape-up or leave. Not so for the unvoter. They can continue to receive the whole range of social and political services, trophies and all. In this case, the team is us and our forefathers - and too many of them didn’t just act as voters; they died so that their ‘team’ could be preserved.

These unvoters can drive on the roads that take a social consensus to develop and maintain; they can draw social benefits or work on government-funded projects that are, according to them, ‘none of their business’. They can send their children to schools in which they have no interest in maintaining quality and social values - like civic involvement. They can withdraw pensions, and receive government cheques, and profit from public contracts that others have defined through political involvement. They need not feel any responsibility when children’s groups fail for lack of coaches or leaders or just drivers. They have said clearly that it’s someone else’s responsibility.

In other words it’s a one way street for them - with hopefully no confining lane markers.

Let’s allow the fresh breeze of consequence for civic irresponsibility in.

Now, if a person needed to be a registered voter, to be able to qualify for some of the more basic of government services - driver’s license, car permits, social welfare - AND - one lost one’s registration if they didn’t vote, what would happen?

A. There would initially be a stampede by those who had failed to vote, and so lost their registration, hustling to get it back so they could access those government services. In fact they would be so glad to now have the ‘right to
drive’ etc that asking them for fee (let’s call it a ‘veterans’s tax) could be implemented.

B. The new revenue could help fund exclusively publically-funded elections thus ridding the system of those that the unvoters (and voters) dislike the most - the private self-interested political donors.

C. The voter registration would suddenly become accurate and the money that is now wasted on maintaining the current debacle of a list could be saved.

D. A whole new attitude about civic non-involvement will fall out from the controversy of demanding responsibility before entitlement. It will not stay fashionable to say ‘I’m too busy’.
3. **Comparison to Other Options**

The Australians have a requirement that all citizens must vote. In reality, it doesn’t work much better than our free-to-vote system. What happens is that enough are excused, presumably for health reasons, some flaunt the law and don’t vote, and a surprising percentage of voters purposefully invalidate their ballot, so that the net turnout is about 5% more than we currently achieve in Ontario.

Aged and infirm people in institutionalized homes in Ontario now vote in special polls. In Ukraine, the polling station is responsible for going out to the homes of shut-ins to collect their vote. Such activities will reduce the exemption losses mentioned above, but the real problem is among younger voters. For some of them, not showing up may not have consequences about driving or collecting welfare, so that the options may be to just ignore them or a widened range of consequences (e.g. limit tax rebates) might be considered. Spoiling of ballots, if they are paper, in a private booth is child’s play. However spoiling can be made very difficult if electronic voting machines are used. (I.e., if you walk out of a polling booth with the ballot not complete or over-voted or have done some other act of ‘vote sabotage’, the poll clerk knows and you don’t get your voter registration renewed.

In a nutshell, we can make the concept of ‘Responsibility before Civic Entitlement’ a reality if we try. There is nothing like having to reveal one’s irresponsibility to anyone and be made to pay a fine/fee to cure one of a bad habit.

*But let the unvoters face losing a valuable government service or face having to re-register at some cost, and watch us become the modern marvel of voter participation.*

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