

## Wasted Votes

It's that time of year when Americans can exercise their constitutional right to abstain from voting. Which they do. Even in the presidential election of 1964, when President Lyndon B. Johnson received more than 60% of total votes, that was still a smaller number than the votes not cast.

And presidential years are regularly the ones with the highest voter turnouts.

A classic example of what can happen in an "on" year occurred in Pennsylvania in 1990 when a popular incumbent governor won reelection by a roughly 2-1 margin, often cited as a tremendous victory. It was a great win almost any way you look at it. Almost but not quite.

In 1990 Pennsylvania had a total population of about twelve million. Of course this included children and other ineligible voters. There were about nine million eligible voters. Of these six million were registered. Of these, about three million voted, of which the governor received two million and his opponent one million.

In brief, his "overwhelming" victory totaled two million of a potential nine million, about 22%. Which, of course, is no reflection on the governor, or his opponent. They did the best they could. But it is a necessary assumption that those who voted were representative of the entire electorate.

Assumed but not necessarily so.

By contrast, this year is a so-called "off-year" when neither the presidency, members of the Congressional House and Senate, nor even most state governors and members of the state legislatures have to face the voters. Turnouts for the local elections in these years may be as low as 10%.

One argument of many nonvoters is that all politicians holding or seeking the 700,000 or so elective offices in the nation are not good enough to earn their support. It apparently can be quite satisfying to feel so superior to what over the years amounts to millions of your fellow citizens.

Another is the statement that the voter is going to cast a protest vote by not voting. Where else is something going to be done by not doing it. In fact, a nonvoter is agreeing to accept the decision of the electorate whatever it may be. Better to be former Vice President Alben Barkley of Kentucky who, according to Dean Acheson, when asked which of two candidates would get his vote said, "I haven't made up my mind yet; but when I do, I'll be bitter as hell."

Then there are the circumstances where third party, or atypical major party, candidates present themselves, and voters are urged to not "waste" their votes.

When that happens there is no way to know what might have happened if they had voted their true preference. Voting for a perceived winner is a true wasted vote because it indicates support and authority that is not there. Not only does it not affect the ultimate outcome but it distorts the truth and permits a winner to claim an unwarranted mandate and may scuttle the opportunity for real change.

There are only two true "wasted" votes - the one that is not cast and the one cast falsely.

And, the reason for this commentary which normally concerns education, perhaps nowhere is this more likely, and unfortunate, than in local school board elections where the turnout is often so low a few miscast votes may determine the outcome.

A few examples, good and bad, of the difference one vote has made:

In 1645 it gave Cromwell control of England. In 1649 it led to Charles I being executed. In 1845, it brought Texas into the Union; in 1868 one vote saved President Andrew Johnson from impeachment; In 1875, one vote changed France from a monarchy to a republic; in 1876 one vote made Rutherford B. Hayes president; in 1923 one vote made Adolph Hitler leader of the Nazi Party; in 1941, just weeks before Pearl Harbor, one vote saved Selective Service. On a larger scale, in 1796 a change of less than 100 popular votes in Pennsylvania would have cost Jefferson the presidency, and in 1800 a shift of 214 votes in New York City would have cost him reelection. Imagine no President Thomas Jefferson.

Such examples are endless, even if unknown.

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