



Thoughts from Linda:

100% Democracy
The Case For Universal Voting

E.J. Dionne Jr. And Miles Rapoport
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I like both this book and its idea: that the timing for universal civic voting in the United States of America has arrived.

This book effectively lays out the case for change in what is a 'proposal' that these authors are offering. It is the result of an invitation by the editor of the New Press, Diane Wachtell, who reached out to the authors with a request to bring this well-formed set of ideas into more public view. The book builds on the work of the Working Group on Universal Voting, which is an organization created under the auspices of the Brookings Institution and the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard's Kennedy School. The back of the book lists the Working Group members and constitutional scholars, and lawyers who drafted the legal analysis of the proposal's constitutionality.

Both authors have a vast background in the topic and are well-established scholars, writers, and public servants. Miles Rapoport is a progressive politician who served as Secretary of State in Connecticut and served as the group Demos and Common Cause president. While he was active in the Connecticut legislature, he sponsored progressive legislation for campaign finance reform and improved access to the ballot. He also sponsored laws that banned political contributions by lobbyists during legislative sessions and allowed citizens to register to vote when they renewed their driver's licenses. He has a long-time interest in expanding democracy.

E.J. Dionne is an American journalist, political commentator, and long-time columnist for The Washington Post. He is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and a professor in the Foundations of Democracy and Culture at Georgetown University, among his many other roles in civic life.

The book lays out the context in which this proposal exists, noting many of the issues raised by the most recent election cycle of 2020, but it also takes us back to the history of how we reached our current state. The election of 2020 brought out a robust historic turnout in the US when 159.69 million Americans voted, representing the highest percentage (as measured by those voters who were eligible to vote) in over 120 years of 67 percent.

In the chapter entitled, “What if We Gave an Election and Everybody Came?” they explain that the book’s title refers specifically to an aspiration that every American should be guaranteed the right to vote with ease and without obstruction and that voting would be taken as a public responsibility of all citizens, in a similar way that jury duty operates today. They are careful to point out that they propose ‘mandatory participation’ not ‘mandatory voting.’ The distinction is an important one. The idea is not a new one, and in fact, it has been a practice in Australia for over 100 years, with great success.

In the chapter entitled “Democracy Sausages, Required Voting, and High Turnout,” they explain the example of Australia’s approach, noting the successes, challenges, and some nuances of the experience. The law calls for universal voting with a small fine for those who do not comply. It is compulsory for Australians over the age of 18 to vote. In some states, voters are automatically enrolled upon their birthdays, but it is also possible to register at a wide range of places, including post offices. People register, and today, 96.6% of all eligible voters are registered. They hold Federal elections every three years and make it quite easy (and fun, in typical Aussie style) by holding elections on Saturday. They allow early voting and voting by mail. The government provides mobile voting teams for individuals unable to travel or live in quite remote areas. On election day, citizens can vote at any polling place in their home state or territory. They offer online tutorials for first-time voters and others so that it is an easy process. The election administration (like the US) is non-partisan. In short, they offer an excellent model of efficiency and an instructive approach to the universality of this responsibility. Democracy is alive and well there, as turnouts consistently exceed 90% year in and out.

There are 26 other countries around the world where the idea of universal civic duty voting is in place.

We should also note that we learned the value of the secret ballot from Australia, where the states of Victoria and South Australia adopted the practice in 1856. While

early resistance to the secret ballot was fierce in the US, reformers ultimately prevailed, and Massachusetts was the first to adopt the idea in 1888. The terms "Australian ballot" and "Massachusetts ballot" became synonymous. By 1896, 39 out of the 45 states in the US had adopted this practice.

The premise of the approach revolves around the promise of "we the people," as reflected in the Preamble to the US Constitution. The idea is that universal civic duty voting would give us a system in which everyone would count, and the people who represent us would have to speak to all of us, not just the curated few that can swing an election when only 60% of those eligible to vote actually do.

The theory is that percentages of poor people, young people, and those of color would join the process immediately if this were adopted, reflecting the actual world of America today. Additionally, all jurisdictions would have incentives to institute what the authors call "Gateway Reforms," which, much like the practices of Australia, would make voting more convenient and allow citizens to fulfill their new legal responsibilities. Expectations are that schools and businesses would commit to a new wave of civic education and support. The nature of political campaigns would change. While today, much money is spent on finding "your base" and catering to them, the 100% solution would cause a broader focus and demand an appeal to all. Young people could get into the voting practice early, and over time, this practice would become a part of 'how we do things' in our culture, like jury duty, paying taxes, and answering census questions every decade.

The authors realize that this is a new idea for many, and when surveyed, only 25% of Americans currently say they would 'support' such a practice. They outline the rationale supporting the proposal's constitutionality and reasons for resistance, showing how each could be overcome. The key arguments against this are 1. The idea that this abridges the First Amendment, 2. That 'ignorant voters' should not have these rights (a clearly anti-democratic idea, but one voiced today), 3. That enforcement would be difficult and not equitable.

Finally, they take the reader through a plan for getting from here to there, illustrating how a bill could proceed and even giving an example of a text of a Connecticut bill introduced in 2021 by State Senator Will Haskell.

The authors quote President Abraham Lincoln's 1862 declaration: "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with

difficulty, and we must rise to the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.”

With close friends in Australia, I have had this conversation over the years with them. I intend to spend more time with this idea and introduce it to others, and I encourage you to explore it for yourself. I do not find it strange, but rather an excellent way to revive our democratic constitutional system in our republic.

As the authors note, “Declaring voting a civic duty by law would declare that everyone counts and has the responsibility to be counted.”