

The Importance of Voting

By Oliver Moll

Asking a free man the importance of voting is like asking a satiated man the importance of eating. When faced with the question, of course the answer would be an emphatic affirmation that both are required to achieve life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I submit that in order to examine this question thoroughly one must study the corollary. What is the significance of not voting, not being allowed a vote? What is the effect of oppression on the human condition? I think the starving man can give a much more compelling debate with regard to the importance of eating. The same can be said about a man or a woman who is denied his or her vote. The denied voter, if brave enough, would give a passionate dissertation about how disenfranchisement and powerlessness over their own circumstance leads to desperation.

What happens when people cannot vote? Only 90 miles south of my home state of Florida, the Cuban people drown in the Florida Straights trying to float to freedom. They bind together inner tubes and pieces of wood placing their grandmothers and children on these makeshift contraptions for a chance at the freedoms that we enjoy. In China, students were crushed by tanks in Tiananmen Square as they bravely protested against the communist regime, and advocated for their rights to have a say in what would happen in their lives. In Iraq, people came out to vote in record numbers under threat of extreme violence. The idea of being heard was so intoxicating to these once oppressed people that they would risk their lives and the lives of their children so that their government might reflect their values, their hopes, their dreams and not those of their former tyrannical dictator, Saddam Hussein. His ruthless rule muzzled voices and stifled debate in order to advance his own agenda at the expense of the Iraqi people.

By its very definition, a free society requires that we not dwell on our freedoms because they are inalienable. Obsession over these matters stifles creativity and productivity. How many prisons, insane asylums or work camps have been filled with the best and the brightest of people? How many talented poets, scientists, writers and philosophers have been rendered unproductive by tyrannical dictators because their ideas threaten absolute power? The ballot in the hands of free people is mightier than any weapon system modern man has been able to develop. A nation's greatest resource is its people. If all of the best and brightest minds are consumed with acquiring that which free people take for granted, then how will new products be developed? How will cures for crippling diseases be found? How will technology advance? Perhaps some well written political commentary veiled in fictional novels might be printed before its author is executed. The overall result of oppression is a vacuum where all of the intellectual capital of a nation is consumed in a struggle where nothing new is created.

What happens when people choose not to vote? This is even a more interesting and less obvious conundrum. While some people risk their lives for a chance to vote, others apathetically allow their chance to slip away. Is it an inconvenience to take time out to vote? Is the registration process overwhelming? Do people feel so insignificant that they think that their vote does not count? Do people choose not to vote as a mechanism to protest? Do people know enough about their own history and their own government to realize what a privilege it is to vote? Do people know how much blood has been shed and how much has been sacrificed over the years to ensure their right to vote? Or maybe, they don't feel compelled one way or the other to contribute to the process. Many theories have been formulated. Many attempts have been made to energize people to vote, and many opportunities to vote have been provided. Remembering that people are free to vote as well as free not to vote compels the candidates to make a strong argument to the voter. Whether the people are moved or not by the issues of the day is part of the process.

We are in the middle of a highly contested presidential election. The war on terror is in full swing. The economy is taking a stumble with home foreclosures and rising food prices. Gas prices are through the roof, the third world is industrializing, and we are under terrorist threat. Is it then surprising that there are record numbers of people registering to vote? Record numbers of people voted in the presidential primaries, and there seems to be an insatiable appetite for the never ending news cycle to satisfy our hunger for information. Would peaceful participation in the process be replaced by violence if in fact the people felt there was no way to be heard? An example of violence due to people's lack of faith in the electoral process is currently occurring in Zimbabwe. Citizens of Zimbabwe are resorting to violence to settle political differences, because they feel that they are in fact not being heard by their own government.

After careful analysis, the freedom to vote is the cornerstone of a free nation's productivity and creativity. Free people have the luxury to dream and create knowing that their rights are protected. Voting provides for peaceful transition of government over decades. No elected position is held in perpetuity. Voters know the every two to four years they decide who stays and who goes. This accountability ensures that the voters' voice is considered as policy is made. A free society serves as an example to those who are not free that it is worth investing their human capital in the struggle for freedom. It can be realized and it does work. So, what is the importance of voting? Hold your breath for thirty seconds and then consider the importance of breathing.

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