



Calum MacKenzie's View From The Shore:

DeRegulate Voting?

The voting process was set up as a social service. In these days of ascendancy for neo-liberal thought which looks down on socialism as four letter word, isn't it time to de-regulate the process and let *laissez faire* voting rule? Some would even say that the resulting chaos would be no different in outcome than what we have recently come to expect.

As a young tad growing up in a far away land, I always looked forward to election day for it meant a day off from school which was used as a polling station. The schools were sited to be within walking distance in the catchment area for children, and even more accessible for adults of voting age, making them ideal for a leisurely stroll and some of socializing, as one took time to perform a civic duty. This worked out well in both rural and urban school districts and had the added advantage of lowering the costs of the election process itself as well as instilling in the minds of children that something important was happening. The voting process was set up somewhat reluctantly as a social service.

This aura of national importance given to elections was less evident in my adopted Canada. No school holiday was in the offing and the notion of partisan politics in the classroom, much like religion, was taboo. Teaching staff and the election officials just do not go there. Local private halls belonging to fire departments, legions, service clubs and the like were pressed into use, with the cost of leasing private facilities in every community, large and small becoming increasingly enormous. More importantly, the positive attitudes provided by holding the election in schools were not shared in the other venues.

In this age which calls for less government there is perhaps a reason to de-regulate the cumbersome apparatus of election officialdom. A national census held every ten years and sometimes at five year intervals should be sufficient to amend and update the voter rolls. Under the auspices of the national statistics bureau, e.g. Statscan¹, it should be a simple process to check a voter's residence and eligibility to vote. If de-regulation can work for the much bigger business of international trade and become acceptable to governments large and small world wide, surely its not too much of a stretch, or is it, to extend the philosophy to the election process?

Given that all tax payers have a right to vote on how their tax dollar is spent, all the ID that should be required is a municipal, state, on federal tax receipt. To demand further proof of eligibility is getting perilously close to taxation without representation, a distinct no-no in a democracy. If more proof of eligibility is required, government should be providing it, for many voters do not drive, hence no driver's license, and many do not travel abroad, hence no passport.

Even when valid ID is offered, if any part of the ID does not coincide exactly with the official data base it is not accepted. If photo ID or biometric indicators in so-called smart cards are

1 - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Statscan>

required the onus should be on election officials to make every effort to ensure enfranchisement promptly and politely, as a free service. To spring such demands on an electorate late in the process is not just unfair, it gives rise to blatant bullying and discrimination against those who can't defend themselves. Isn't de-regulation needed here? Privatization beyond the provision of hardware and software electronics is surely called for, isn't it?

With de-regulation, the private sector could get involved by providing streamlined and accurate systems to augment or even replace the burden of paper ballots and the great potential for human error. Voting machine manufacturers have the ability to provide user-friendly touch screen systems. The security problems and privacy issues previously experienced by computerized systems in which hackers played havoc with the speed and accuracy of the results have long since been ironed out by the financial sectors. Businesses and banks make millions of transactions daily so that everyday business is now carried out safely by ATM machines and internet transfers, without oversight or supervision. The day might well come when voting will have the same unmonitored convenience and simplicity if properly de-regulated. Right?

Certain practices at election time gives cause for alarm. Our population has increased since the last election and we can expect a greater turnout than last time even if the percentage remains the same. It behooves our election officials to make allowances for those increases and put in place equipment, facilities and practices which cater to increased turnout and allow a smooth, seamless process to proceed. In previous elections we heard rumours of an unequal distribution of ballot boxes so that districts likely to vote for one candidate received more resources than necessary and voted with ease. Others, likely to vote for a different candidate, were short on ballot boxes and had to wait as many as four hours in inclement weather in order to perform their duty. Not at all an inducement to participate in the democracy.

There were also rumours of vote rigging by partisan zealots, a practice which takes several different forms. Some voting machines were deliberately programmed to give a predetermined result. So certain votes were dropped or changed and simply cancelled, all without transparency and a clear explanation of what had happened. The manufacturers insist that the machines are not at fault, but local technicians had no problems adjusting the software to meet the wishes of their partisan mentors. Academics, who have made a study of the machines, have many reservations as to their efficacy and suggest that election officials should be demanding the same tested security standards as are demanded by banks in ATM machines with a paper trail receipt.

Certain voters were disenfranchised if they had a recent change of address even though there is a 90 day rule to protect them. The excuses of armed services personnel, ambulance drivers, airline crews, and many others who had to work away from home base on a temporary basis were not accepted. It's all very well to say that they should take advantage of mail-in ballots, provisional ballots or early voting allowances, but that does not meet all of the needs. There are vile rumours abroad that votes cast using those vehicles were deliberately trashed and not counted.

Some are not allowed to vote if they have a felony conviction against them or on parole. Others if they are incarcerated awaiting trial even if later found innocent, but in some jurisdictions those convicted are allowed to vote from jail. The inconsistencies in voting rules are

astounding and worthy of overhaul and standardization. Stealbackyourvote.org² suggests that many people have been disenfranchised because of the plethora of inconsistent regulations governing the process.

Purging voters from the voter rolls is another partisan tactic used to reduce the numbers of those who subscribe to a different set of values. This tactic is prevalent in swing ridings likely to affect the outcome of the election. Typically the purging occurs very close to the election and happens behind closed doors, in secret. No explanation is given for the opaque process and often the reasons behind the purge are not known until voting day, when the voter is turned away from the booth. If purging is to be tolerated it will be better countenanced if it is standardized, uniform, consistent, non-discriminatory and openly fair. The process should be on-going, with publicly available lists and a defined process for individuals to challenge inclusion on the lists of the purged.

Changing the electoral boundaries in the process known as re-districting so that one party has an advantage over another is another popular tactic. Without rhyme or reason people registered with one party are grouped together into one riding leaving that party in a minority position in all the neighboring ridings. Although there are rules in place governing this re-districting of electoral boundaries, they have been mostly ignored.

The question at the top of this piece is asked mostly tongue in cheek. Rather than de-regulate the election process, there is an urgent need to tighten up the regulations so that voting becomes fair for all. The anomalies which gained air time on internet programs, have now been taken up by print, radio, and television programming. It may be too little too late, but this time around millions are aware of the potential problems and willing to speak up in defense of democracy.

Certain jurisdictions have been named as complicit in using faulty voting machines, illegal purging of voting rolls, questionable ID checking practices, voter fraud, registering of fakes identities (using the names of family pets, farm animals and the dead), discarding legally cast votes (from mail-ins, provisional voting, early voting, intimidating voters (partisan henchmen at polling stations), raising election day hurdles (lack of personnel, and equipment, and long waits) and failing to notify voters of voting status such as purging.

Discrimination against the poor, minorities and immigrants is no longer taken to be conspiracy theory. The class warfare waged at election time is blatant discrimination of the most evil kind. Education of the middle classes so that they know what their rights are, should be an on-going task. They must learn how to check that their voting machine records the vote they cast. If purged from voter rolls, they should check early to learn that status and how to reverse it. They should check that their ID documents are a perfect match for the official database material. They should beware of being accused of faking ID, residence address (even if foreclosed), citizenship, etc. If they have a felony in their history, they should seek advice on its affect on voting. They should be prepared to be subjected to intimidation. In order to negate any adverse surprises on voting day, they should seek early confirmation that their voting eligibility is intact.

The above paragraph describes the major ways in which a vote can be stolen. Let us now turn to ways in which that theft can be prevented. Get out early to check that your registra-

² - <http://stealbackyourvote.org/>

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tion, and eligibility to vote, are in good order. Ensure that all your ID information is perfectly consistent and matched to the voter database. Vote early at a fully staffed polling station and if any doubt exists, demand adjudication. Arrive at the polling station in a large group; (Jesse Jackson recommends five³), to give added support against intimidation. If at all possible, do not mail in your ballot for mail-in ballots have been known to disappear. Vote unconditionally in a straight forward process with no ifs, ands, or buts; and do not accept provisional voting forms. Plan to spend voting day working and helping others through the process.

As a postscript; some voting registration carried out by third parties, such as ACORN⁴, have fallen into disrepute. Although the registration of dead people, farm animals and family pets, e.g. in no way guarantees them a vote, it does add to the cynicism surrounding the democratic process of voting. This is one area where the heavy hand of government is needed at every level to ensure the integrity of the system.

Resources for this article

<http://www.democracynow.org/>
<http://airamerica.com/search/node/robert+f.+kennedy>
<http://www.gregpalast.com/>

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³ - <http://www.gather.com/viewArticle.jsp?articleId=281474977473082&grpld=3659174697244816&nav=Grouppspace>

<http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article20984.htm>

⁴ - <http://www.acorn.org/>