

The Voting Vacuum
Sealing the Hole of Apathy

Let us not seek the Republican answer or the Democratic answer, but the right answer. Let us not seek to fix the blame for the past. Let us accept our own responsibility for the future.

--John F. Kennedy

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Voter apathy looms large in our society. It is promulgated by the disillusionment that potential voters feel with politicians who cannot live up to their campaign promises, who polarize the general public by following their own agenda, and, worse still, who commit felonies or unconscionable acts that dismay the average American voter. As ethics deteriorates in the political realm, why should a citizen who works a double-shift on voting day feel the need to miss that paycheck and risk losing the job altogether? Indisputably, people abstain from voting for a myriad of reasons. The inability to value the voting process and outcome enough to apply the effort – be that from disillusionment or the failure to find an adequate incentive, the incapacity to make it to the voting booths, being uninformed on platforms of the hopeful politicians or the voting process itself, and the flat-out denial of voting rights to a large part of the state population all serve to discourage the voting-age population in Texas from performing their civic duty. This combination of problems deserves a combination of solutions if any comprehensive resolution is to patch the gaping hole between society and the members it elects – or doesn't – to represent it.

While almost bribing the population to vote, tax breaks *do* provide an incentive to make it to the polls. As the saying goes, people dread the unavailability of taxes as equally as death and any effort to alleviate some of this societal burden would at least increase voter turnout among those people who have the ability to vote but who simply feel they have no reason to do so. The only fair tax incentive to offer – that is, the only one that would apply equally to all of the voter population – would be a sales tax break. Lest some fear that a tax break would undermine the Texas economy, this particular tax break could actually aid the economy by increasing the revenue flow between buyers and merchants in much the same way that tax-free day at the end of summer brings thousands of people out to stock up on school essentials. Additionally, as

opposed to some sort of income tax break, a sales tax break would affect both students and the elderly, formidable population groups that are largely unemployed. In another financially-minded vein, the voting system up until now has looked over a large segment of the population which, it may be argued, often needs the representation of compassionate politicians the most. Many low-income Texas residents toil rigorously, often in more than one job, to provide enough money for their families to on live day-to-day. Often, this necessity to work prohibits them from making it to the polling location once a year – much less four times a year for local elections. The state must take an active role in making voting less prohibitive by requiring employers to allow their workers leave on voting days, provided they show evidence that they did in fact vote. Indeed, employers should *encourage* this and not just set it up as state-mandated policy. One way to ensure that this comes to fruition is to provide a small tax break for companies who can prove that they have followed the policy and penalties to companies that fail to comply. Both a tax break and the ability to leave work without consequence would bring voting into the realm of possibility for much of the population that has hitherto abstained, or been forced to abstain, from considering it so.

If the state is truly interested in encouraging a larger voter turnout, then it must work with its communities in reminding its voting-age population why voting is such an important part of our democracy. Too often, private sector or non-profit groups have taken on this responsibility. While this should not be discouraged, the state cannot forget that voting provides value through both an informed citizenry and more meaningful state and community governance. The state does not have a duty to inform its population of each candidates' platform. It should, however, take a more active role in explaining the nuts and bolts of the voting process. The Secretary of State operates a website – votexas.org – which purports to do this. And yet, how many Texas

residents know of this website? And how many do not have access to a computer to locate it? The numbers on both counts are vast. The Secretary of State must realize this and institute a more comprehensive system to better advertise its website and provide the information located therein in paper form to state agencies responsible for the needs of Texas' low-income population. If better informed on the why, how, where, and when of voting, less burden will be placed on voters to go out of their way to discover this for themselves. And, in an age when the most convenient is often the path taken, this ease of access should encourage many would-be voters to cast their ballots on election days.

The more conservative bents of our society will perhaps look on one final antidote for the ailing voter turnout rates with much skepticism. The prison-industrial complex has taken particular hold in Texas to the extent that 1 in 11 Texans is now a felon. The law in Texas stipulates that any person currently incarcerated, on probation, or on parole is prohibited from voting. At first glance, it seems reasonable that those who have broken the laws of our society should not be allowed to participate in that society's civil responsibilities. And yet, the mass conviction and incarceration attitude that currently prevails marks a *substantial* portion of our state's population as unworthy to vote. In light of these numbers – *1 in 11* – perhaps it is time to amend the current law and allow more members the ability to vote if they so choose. If it still seems egregious to allow currently incarcerated felons the right to vote, extending voting rights to unoffending parolees or those on probation would allow a significant portion of our society to exercise their civic duty. Texas has indeed eliminated the waiting period between leaving the prison and probation system and having ones' voting rights reinstated, but the process is still confusing and arduous with an array of paperwork that serves to discourage the free men and women from even trying. These 800,000 people either need help in understanding what course of

action to take or a significant restructuring of the system itself in order to streamline the process. Programs such as the “Unlock Your Vote!” campaign, begun by the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition in 2001, have taken many strides in recent years to the benefit of convicted felons. As of March 2005, officials of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) sanctioned providing discharging felons (from prison and parole) with a voter registration card. Although this and other similar reforms have been proposed often in the state legislature recently, none has so far been made into law. In the best possible scenario, doing so would increase not only the amount of participatory voters but could also provide a sense of civic pride in the mind of reformed felons, thus discouraging recidivism.

The problem we face in sealing the hole of voter apathy is not without solution; and yet, if we truly desire to bring into the fold of the voting booths as many people who are able and willing, multiple solutions must reinforce themselves. A sales tax break is a “quick fix” solution which could arguably produce the highest numbers in increased voter turnout. In knowing that they will be allowed to save money on purchases in the future, people will suffer a minor inconvenience for something that costs little or no money to do. As we have thus increased voter turnout, we may say ‘case closed,’ wipe our hands, and move on to the next issue. But again, in instituting a reform like this one, we must not overlook the Texas residents who cannot capitalize on the incentive offered. The state and local communities must work together with employers, must take a more active role in disseminating voting information, and should help those people who have served their time gain access back into the role of valued citizen. These are worthy tasks at hand. Though they may appear daunting in their scale, reforms like these are the only ways to harbor a citizenry that truly believes in its elected officials. Disillusionment can thus give way to confidence, apathy to involvement, and Texas pride will bloom all the sweeter.