

Keep the Faith

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Three steps to modernize and reform American elections would help rebuild faith in our democracy.

By [Simon Rosenberg](#) Opinion Contributor April 25, 2016, at 6:00 a.m.

It is easy to forget perhaps how radical an idea America's democracy was in the 18th century. Oligarchical elites controlled governments and people, and authority was derived from the "divine right of kings." Our Founding Fathers had to replace that authority with a new one, writing in the Declaration of Independence that governments would derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed."

Through the lens of today, this simple phrase is profound and powerful. The clear implication is that our Founders believed that it was only through the process of achieving consent could a government be just; and that governments without consent would struggle to be just (or effective, popular, etc). In a year in which there has been so much talk of corruption and rigged political systems, this idea – whether part of the problem we face today in America is that the system is no longer capable of conveying consent – is something I think worth exploring.

Consider this:

Only 13 percent of Americans approve of the job Congress is doing. The leading candidate for president in 2016 has a 32 percent approval rating. 75 percent of Americans now believe government corruption is widespread. In a 2014 poll, only 19 percent of Americans said their government currently had "the consent of the governed."

- Two thirds of Americans are eligible to vote; two thirds of eligible voters and 44 percent of all Americans are registered to vote; 86 percent of registered voters voted in 2012 (126m); 51 percent of voters in 2012 voted for Barack Obama. This means that only 30 percent of all eligible voters voted for the winning candidate for president in 2012, and only 20 percent of all Americans. Fully 70 percent of all eligible voters in the United States did not cast a vote for the winning presidential candidate in 2012. In 2014, 64% of all eligible voters did not cast a ballot for either the Senate or House.
- In 2012, 17 percent of registered voters cast ballots for president in a contested state. 4 percent cast ballots in a contested race for the House. 2 percent cast ballots in a contested Senate race. Taken together, this means that at least 85 percent of all eligible

voters in the 2012 election either did not or could not cast a vote that would help determine their representation in Washington.

Or consider this week's Democratic primary in New York. Only 35 percent of registered Democrats turned out. Assuming that a third of the 3 million registered independents in New York consider themselves Democrats (it could be much higher), only 29 percent of self-identified or registered Democrats voted on Tuesday. Hillary Clinton won 58 percent of that 29 percent, or 16 percent of all Democrats in New York. This means that 84 percent of all registered New York Democrats did not cast a vote for Hillary Clinton.

Given all this, it is reasonable to ask whether the conditions in our country and our political system as currently designed are leaving our leaders in Washington without the level of consent required to govern effectively, or justly. After more than 25 years in national politics, my own take is that re-establishing a higher degree of true consent should be a central goal of those wanting to address the discontent so evident in our body politic today.

So what can we do? Many things, but I will start three related to making it easier for people to vote, and for their vote to be more meaningful:

Remove barriers to participation. At a design level, our current election system discourages participation. In many states, at the time of maximum interest in an election – the weeks before Election Day – remains the only time you cannot register to vote. The entire registration system is both anti-democratic, and archaic, designed for an age when registrars needed weeks to receive registration changes in the mail to produce hard copy voter rolls for elections. We are in a different time now, and making registration automatic, moving to same day registration and on-line registration systems, adopting no-excuse absentee ballots or universal vote by mail, eliminating caucuses, committing to no longer than 30 minute waits to vote, mandating 14 hour election day opening times and one week of early voting (states can do more) should become the norm of a better, more modern and more user-friendly American electoral system.

30 percent of eligible voters voted for the winning presidential candidate in 2012. Perhaps our goal should be to get that number up to 50 percent in the years ahead.

Deeper structural reforms should be considered. Reforms like eliminating the Electoral College, adopting non-partisan redistricting, docking the pay of members of Congress for every day the budget is late, and addressing what has become a pernicious small state bias in the construction of our Congress should be considered and debated.

Modernizing the machinery of elections. Despite the hard work of well intentioned election officials across the country, the machinery of our elections uses expensive, antiquated 20th century technology. The inefficiency and ineffectiveness of these systems not only discourage innovation and modernization (like same day voting), but their cost means fewer machines and polling locations – meaning longer wait times and other inconveniences that discourage participation.

The good news is that more than 40 of the 50 states will be updating their voting machinery and backend before the 2020 election. It is critical that the states demand and test more modern technology that can scale as turnout increases, cost less so as to provide greater ease of Election Day voting, and have modern data capacities to allow for "real time voter books" or much needed advances in identification/authentication for voters themselves.

Far too many Americans have lost faith in their government's ability to act on their behalf. Unchecked, over time, this sentiment will weaken our democracy and our nation. Arguably, it already has.

Our leaders, particularly younger ones, should see this broad discontent as one of America's greatest challenges, and work hard to address it as we would more traditional foreign or domestic policy challenges. A central path to re-establishing trust is to re-imagine and build a modern electoral system in the U.S. that can begin to restore a more persuasive sense of consent by the American people in their leaders. This issue is not a partisan one, but an American one, and it needs to be addressed with the kind of vigor and determination we've seen so many times in our proud history.

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