

Horton's

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‘The Right to Vote’...A Higher Allegiance

By Steve Horton

Veterans Day is approaching and once again Americans will take this opportunity to thank the many thousands of men and women who served in the military. And rightly so.

Along with “thanking them for their service,” we’ll be reminded that “freedom isn’t free.” That sacrifices have been made by our fellow citizens—past and present.

Sacrifices of their time, but also, in too many cases, of their physical and mental health. Not every person who put on a uniform was placed in harm’s way during their tour of duty, but everyone who did so faced that possibility. There were no guarantees. And each, regardless of their assigned duties, was part of a larger purpose.

We’ll also be reminded that these veterans, with their service, helped protect our freedoms. One of those freedoms is the right to vote; that act by which an individual helps select representatives for the various levels of governments (local, state and federal) and helps decide on various proposals, including special taxes and constitutional amendments.

It ought to be a right that can be exercised without undue restrictions, litmus tests, or the need to navigate an obstacle course. Just as



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we don’t (or certainly shouldn’t) qualify our thanks to a veteran for his or her service, neither should we qualify the degree in which a citizen is entitled to exercise this right.

But that doesn’t seem to be a view shared by everyone, particularly not by some of those who control the levers of governmental power and want to pick and choose who gets to vote—or discourage them from doing so—with the goal of maintaining partisan advantage.

To an extent, I understand their motivation, given that politics is a rough-and-tumble affair, oftentimes waged bare knuckles style, and that a winner-take-all outcome is at stake as to who controls those levers and, thus, determines public policy and future direction.

That said, there needs to be a higher allegiance. The right-to-vote should not be tampered with or withheld in a cavalier manner. It’s too fundamental to our democracy.

A 'free' people means precisely that. It means each of us is free and, thus, share the same rights. It means that when it comes to voting, each of our voices matter and each of us deserves equal and reasonable access.

The efforts to place certain qualifications and restrictions on voting have, of late, been done in the name of preventing voter fraud—a bloody flag that gets waved to draw attention away from what's happening.

I certainly don't want a return to the days of ballot stuffing, or of dead folks in the cemetery mysteriously arising from the grave to impact an election, or the wholesale buying of votes with free drinks at the saloon. Or, nowadays, would I wish to learn that an outcome was changed via computer hacks.

But curtailing or even taking away people's right to vote as a means of preventing voter's fraud is throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

The greater fraud is using the law to create those undue restrictions, litmus tests and obstacle course. One of the points of dispute has been the requirement of a photo ID when showing up at the polls.

While I don't have a problem with that stipulation, the questions arise as to what kind of ID (besides a drivers license) passes muster, where can it be obtained, and at what cost? Is the location conveniently nearby or halfway across the state? Is it easily obtained or do you need a brief-case full of supporting documents?

Purging voter registration rolls, making people wait for a couple of hours at the polls due to a lack of voting machines, restricting early voting, or limiting the use of absentee ballots are other means by which the law is used for the purpose of discouraging or denying participation.

I grew up during the early 1960s when the Civil Rights Movement in the South was focused on black Americans being able to exercise this fundamental right—freely and

without threat of violence. I, like many others of that era, witnessed both blacks and their white supporters being beaten, attacked by fire hoses and police dogs, and jailed as they demonstrated for this cause.

And we saw or read news accounts of several of them being murdered, including Viola Liuzzo, the Detroit housewife who went to Selma, Alabama in 1965 to lend her support and was shot.

If we're going to wave a bloody flag on voter fraud, then we'd do well to remember those sacrifices and how the power of government and the law was once-upon-a-time, and not so long ago, used to deny this right to a wide swath of Americans.

In the upcoming General Election, set for Nov. 6th, those who vote will not only face a long list of candidates, but a few proposals. Among them is Proposal 3.

The ballot language reads:

A proposal to authorize automatic and Election Day voter registration, no-reason absentee voting, and straight ticket voting; and add current legal requirements for military and overseas voting and postelection audits to the Michigan Constitution.

This proposed constitutional amendment would allow a United States citizen who is qualified to vote in Michigan to:

- *Become automatically registered to vote when applying for, updating or renewing a driver's license or state-issued personal identification card, unless the person declines.*

- *Simultaneously register to vote with proof of residency and obtain a ballot during the 2-week period prior to an election, up to and including Election Day.*

- *Obtain an absent voter ballot without providing a reason.*
- *Cast a straight-ticket vote for all candidates of a particular political party when voting in a partisan general election. Should this proposal be adopted?*

[] YES

[] NO

I'm well aware that partisan differences framework this proposal, that ulterior motives may be at play with both proponents and opponents, and partisan advantage or disadvantage will influence how many people decide to mark their ballot.

I'll grant that people, quite apart from partisanship, can have honest differences of opinion over the merits and specifics of what's being proposed with this amendment.

As for me, I plan to mark the 'yes' option because, in my view, the goal should always be to encourage and assist widespread voter participation. That's my higher allegiance.

First of all, I don't need someone in authority, as far as straight-ticket voting goes, to tell me to eat my spinach. If I want to vote all Republican or all Democrat or all Libertarian or whatever, then that's my choice. It should be convenient rather than a chore. And, as a citizen, this convenience should not be denied me by a law that's actual purpose is to gain political advantage.

I also don't believe absentee voting should only be an option for old folks (of which I'm now one) or those meeting certain criteria. It should be an option for all registered voters. In fact, I think you can probably do a more informed job of voting and be less likely to make a mistake with an absentee ballot.

I don't plan to use one, though, because I enjoy the act of going to the polls, chatting with the election workers, and seeing the others doing the same. It boosts my civic pride. But if I wanted to vote at home, I shouldn't be denied that choice.

As for registering to vote, as long as a person is qualified by age, residency, and citizenship, what difference does it make when they do it? Modern technology allows for quick verification. I hear the worries (or more accurately, the justifications) that if this is allowed, then someone might vote who isn't supposed to. Again, the bloody flag.

But my greater concern is when people want to vote, make an effort to do so, and are met with assorted roadblocks and detours. We need to applaud civic involvement, not discourage and thwart it.