

editorial opinion

Elusive voters emerge for sporadic exercise

As close as the presidential race was, the outcome was not Tuesday's big surprise. The big surprise was the large number of metropolitan-area voters turning out to vote.

It is to the credit of area voters that they should deem important an election that, until a few days ago, was expected to be one of the more lackluster of the century.

What possesses the electorate to vote in large numbers one year, only to ignore their voting rights the next time around?

A more obvious reason is that voters aren't convinced of the importance of all elections. But lately, it has been more a rule and less an exception that voters don't vote. Voters tend to vote only when there is a candidate or an issue that captures or shakes their collective imagination.

BUT, THIS REASON does not stand up. In numerous presidential elections in the last two centuries, candidates have won by a margin so slender that a difference of one vote per precinct could have changed the election results. Such was

the case with Nixon's win over Humphrey in 1968. This is the case, not only in presidential races, but in elections on every level. Once candidates for office or proposals are on a ballot, it becomes the business of every member of the electorate, because whatever the outcome of the ballot item, it will affect lives.

Another complaint of more reluctant voters is that voting is not easy enough. This argument has merit in that voters are expected to make decisions on issues and candidates where there is not enough impartial information available for the average person to have a considered opinion.

There have been suggestions to make voting an easier process, the most valid of which is that general election days be national holidays.

ANOTHER SUGGESTION, touted as a futuristic voting method, is to have a box on every television set on which a voter can register a yes or no or candidate preference vote, thereby making television a tool of democracy and election results more immediately available.

But in the end, reluctant voters will have to realize that voting cannot always be easy, as anything worthwhile is not always easy to come by.

One of the more prevalent reasons voters give for not voting in presidential elections is that their popular vote outcome can be negated by the electoral college system. Unfortunately, this complaint rings too true.

It is a sad commentary on a democratic republic, founded on the principle of one-man-one-vote representation, that voters do not, in fact, elect their president. That there have even been times in our history when the man the voters chose was not the choice of the electoral college and therefore not the president.

BUT, VOTERS SHOULD not allow that to discourage them from voting — their votes can still make the difference.

Yes, there are problems with the election process in this country, but none of them alone nor all of them together warrant voter boycotts of the polls.

And, though there is no other country in the world where voters have the freedoms and choices they have here, there is good reason for Congress to look into the election processes and see what might make voting an easier responsibility for citizens to perform.

Moreover, Congress should take a critical look at the electoral college with an aim to abolish it.



Some folks are in a rush to get out and go nowhere

There are five minutes to go in the ball game. The score is 27-6, and people start to stand up to leave. Ball games have been decided in the last two minutes, and people have paid for a full 60 minutes of football, but there is a gradual migration toward the exits.

The people involved will not get home any quicker than the people who stayed the final few minutes because the expressway will be clogged and one of those who stayed is always the guy who blocks the parking lot.

A plane touches down on the runway, and immediately five or six passengers stand up, take their coats from the rack overhead, and start a rush to the front of the plane even before it has taxied to the gate. These same people can be seen waiting at the baggage counter, getting their bags at the same time everyone else does.

THE FINAL CURTAIN goes down at the Fisher Theater, and some playgoers stand up and start to move toward the exits, even as the actors and actresses take their bows on stage. The encores sometimes add something to the show when the star ad libs to the audience.

Rude though it is, these people migrate to the exit, but they don't get home any quicker because they are going to be in the traffic snarl in the parking lot.

Eccentricities

BY HENSA HOLLIN



The words "The End" appear on the screen, and before the lights can be turned on, and while the credits are being shown, moviegoers head toward the exits, disturbing those who would like to see who was in the motion picture. These people will be caught in the parking lot and won't get home any earlier.

It is Sunday morning, and before the church service is over, people are straggling out the front door, heading toward the parking lot. They were willing to spend some time with the Lord, but they were so busy they had to cut the experience short.

I HAVE OFTEN wondered where all these people are rushing to and what is so important that they feel they may infringe upon the enjoyment of those who have paid for the full show and do not leave early.

Since seldom do they get anywhere quicker, why do they have to leave so early?

Secret 'strategy' meetings shut out only the public

Conventional wisdom said it had to be done that way, and conventional wisdom may have been wrong.

Conventional wisdom, in this case, held that local governing boards needed to hold collective bargaining strategy sessions in secret.

Thus, when the Michigan Legislature passed the new "open meetings" law that takes effect next April, collective bargaining was one topic that was exempt from the sunshine of public scrutiny.

AT SCHOOLCRAFT College this year, the board of trustees interrupted many of its business meetings to hold secret sessions on collective bargaining strategy.

The effect was to shut out only the public. The union found out anyway what the board was willing to offer.

Trustee Leroy Bennett revealed last week that in actual negotiating sessions, the Faculty Forum (instructors union) negotiators knew when they sat down at the table how much leeway the board's negotiating team had.

How did the faculty union break the shield of secrecy? With modern electronic equipment, it would be fairly easy to "bug" the board's meeting room, which is open to the public during general business sessions.

More likely, however, either a person on the college staff or a member of the board of trustees leaked the information.

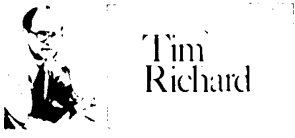
THE POINT is that interested parties can penetrate the veil, if it's worth the money.

That point was made to a legislative committee as it was writing the "open meetings" bill. The folks from Common Cause maintained it was silly to allow real estate transactions to be discussed in secret because real estate agents always found out anyway what was going on. Only the public gets shut out of a secret meeting.

The same is true of collective bargaining, it now appears.

TWO OTHER EXAMPLES will help make the point.

At Schoolcraft, the trustees got their nearly-finished copies of the bargained agreement Oct. 25.



Tim Richard

Yet a state association of college English teachers wrote a letter to trustees protesting one provision in the contract, and the letter was dated Oct. 22. Thus, a special interest group had apparently seen at least part of the final contract before the board of trustees did.

A few years ago, Clareneville School District and the MEA affiliate reached an agreement in negotiations, but they wouldn't let the public know the terms until after the board and the union membership had ratified it. Yet even before ratification, a Clareneville administrator delivered a copy to a Farmington administrator. Thus, an out-of-district administrator got favored treatment over the Clareneville public.

That kind of thing goes on elsewhere all the time.

SOME FOLKS suggest the entire collective bargaining process be opened to the public. I have doubts.

For one thing, the discussions would be terribly technical and boring. More importantly, negotiators would tend to play to the cheering galleries rather than to negotiate with each other.

Arch Vallier, who plays the role of the neutral midpoint on the Schoolcraft board, has privately been telling other trustees they need to open up, "quit hiding," and let the public know the broad outlines of what the college is demanding and offering in negotiations.

Arch is right. Not only is the board's policy of secret meetings a disservice to the public, but it simply isn't working. The Faculty Forum openly carries student and public favor, and the board's out elected officials—sits there with its doors closed.

Suddenly, twilight comes earlier

- Daylight saving time is over, and it's dusk or even dark now when many of us are driving home from work. Early nightfall conceals the energetic movements of youngsters walking along roadways, darting across playing streets, fielding an overthrown football or unlighted piles of leaves.
- It may seem trite to remind motorists to use common sense and extra caution—unless you've ever sucked in your breath and hit the brakes when a young figure appeared suddenly in your headlights.
- If your child's jacket is dark, buy some reflector tape and wrap it around the sleeves.
- Make sure all the bicycles have lights and reflectors.
- Caution the kids not to hide in piles of leaves along the curbs.
- Be patient yourself.
- And now that it's rainer, this is the season to make your annual change of windshield wipers and reduce distorted vision and glare.

Long lines, ballots

Absentee voting soars

Before the next quadrennial plebiscite, we must simply do something about the long, long ballot and the long, long lines people must stand in to vote. The way we're doing it now is costing us too much money.

We have known for years that our ballots are too long, but the lesson about cost was driven home just last week by some revelations in Bloomfield Township.

Clerk Deloris Little revealed that it costs \$10 apiece to process absentee ballots, and that's a conservative figure. Someone has to handle the application for an absentee ballot, the ballot must be stuffed into an envelope and mailed; then the returned ballot must be opened and processed.

WHAT'S NEW this year is the astounding number of voters who are figuring out how to beat standing in line by getting an absentee ballot.

In Bloomfield Township's case (this is written prior to the election), it was expected that as many as 6,000 persons would vote by absentee ballot. That is 20 per cent of the registered voters. That is also an incredible amount of work for the clerk's office and an incredible expense—\$60,000. You can hire three policemen for a year with that kind of money.

And you can also figure that the costly expense is being repeated in Greater Rochester, Birmingham, Troy, Southfield, Farmington.

The situation may be even worse in Canton Township in neighboring Wayne County. There the supervisor, defeated in the August primary, staged a write-in effort and urged his swarm of supporters to use absentee ballots because it's easier to write in a name that way than on a machine.

THERE ARE PROBABLY two reasons the absentee ballot has become so popular.

One is that folks are finding out about a law that is a few years old which allows anyone age 60 or older to vote by absentee. Age alone is reason enough; you don't have to say that you're going to be out of town, sick in bed, too lame to walk or working long hours.

The other reason, Mrs. Little opines, is that the requests are invalid. A person says some of the requests are invalid. A person says he is going to be out of town. Is the clerk going to visit his house election day to check up? A person says he's attending an out-of-town university. Is the clerk going to drive to Ann Arbor or East Lansing to see if the "student" is really in class that day?

A lot of administration of the election laws is based on trust in people's basic honesty. Clerk Little and others in Oakland County are beginning to doubt some folks' basic honesty.

AT THIS WRITING we have no hard figures to show that a greater proportion of voters use the absentee method in presidential elections than in (say) school district elections, but that is probably the case.

The reason is fairly clear: The school election gets a smaller turnout (10 or 15 per cent in the typical district), and the ballot is shorter—a couple of trustees, a millage proposal, a couple of community college trustees; you're done in 30 seconds.

And so we come back to the proposition that it's costing us too much extra money to have a bed-sheet ballot and tempt some folks to lie in order to get an absentee ballot.

THE POSSIBLE reforms make a list as long as your arm:

- Weekend voting—Italy, West Germany and several South American countries do this. By spreading voting in a big election to leisure days, fewer working folks are inconvenienced. Northville School District has used Saturday elections.
- Two-day elections—This could be employed in presidential elections where the turnout is so massive. It would be cheaper than buying extra voting machines that would be needed only once in four years.
- Appoint judges—In some counties, the non-partisan judicial ballot is as long as the partisan ballot. Voters have to decide on judges who are mere names. Legal ethics and the natural reserve of the legal profession prevent candidates from raising many substantive issues.
- Revive the old spring election—Michigan got rid of this with the 1964 constitution. In spring we used to elect the State Supreme Court, the highway commissioner, the superintendent of public instruction and other such functionaries. Maybe eliminating the spring election was a mistake.
- The possibilities are many. They should be explored. If we don't do something, we will continue to be short of police funds and have to squander thousands of local tax dollars on overtime pay and part-time help for the clerk's office to handle absentee ballots.

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