

Rage Against the Machine: Why Voting Doesn't Work and What You Can Do About It

by Erik Aronesty

I was sitting in a bar listening to the presidential “debate”, thinking the same thought I always do when listening to politicians. Why must I choose between two people that I don't like? Since I live in New York, where Democrats usually win the electorate, should I even bother voting? Are my votes even counted?

It's always easy to blame the current President for the nation's current problems, and I'll admit that I'm often tempted to blame Bush. But the reality is that he is not to blame. The blame can be placed squarely on us, the citizens, and on our unwillingness to reform an outdated voting system.

Only 51.3% of the eligible voters bothered to show up at the polls in the 2000 election. Clearly American voters are not inspired by their candidates.

So this brings us to the first problem: **Why must we choose between two?**

Suppose someone likes a Libertarian or Green party candidate more than the “Republican” choices. They well know that if they were to vote for a minority group, their vote would be wasted unless it's for a candidate in a district where that party is polling better than 25%. Many voters assume that this problem is an inherent fact of democracy, but it is not. The flaw rests squarely on the U.S.'s archaic election system.

Instead of selecting just one candidate, our voting machines should allow voters to answer “yes or no” to each of the candidates. The candidate with the most support would then win. This would safely allow someone to vote for a Libertarian candidate, as well as a Republican, without any chance of wasting votes or spoiling an election. Such a system allows for any number of candidates, and has even been shown to increase voter turnout by as much as 50%.

For example:

PLURALITY BALLOT	APPROVAL BALLOT
Directions: Vote for one candidate.	Directions: Vote for as many candidates as you approve of.
<input type="radio"/> Michael Badnarik (Libertarian)	<input type="radio"/> Michael Badnarik (Libertarian)
<input type="radio"/> Ralph Nader (Reform)	<input type="radio"/> Ralph Nader (Reform)
<input type="radio"/> George W. Bush (Republican)	<input type="radio"/> George W. Bush (Republican)
<input type="radio"/> John Kerry (Democrat)	<input type="radio"/> John Kerry (Democrat)
<input type="radio"/> David Cobb (Green)	<input type="radio"/> David Cobb (Green)
<input type="radio"/> Michael Peroutka (Constitution)	<input type="radio"/> Michael Peroutka (Constitution)

This simple system is known as Approval Voting and used by the American Society of Statisticians, the United Nations and is promoted by many respected political and economic scientists. It's also just plain obvious why it works better. The candidate with the most support wins – not the candidate with the fewest competitors.

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This brings us to the second question: **Since I live in New York, should I even bother voting?**

An interesting fact of living in the U.S. is that its citizens do not have the right to vote. Let me repeat this for emphasis: The citizens of the United States do not, yet, have a Constitutional right to vote. In fact for 30 years our President was chosen by the state legislature. Section 1, Article II of the Constitution says, “Each state shall appoint, in such manner as the Legislature thereof may direct, a number of electors” ... It then goes on to describe how the electors, not the citizens, vote for President.

The result of this system is that your Presidential vote doesn't carry nearly as much weight as do your state and local votes. The “electoral college” allows state legislatures to divide up and allocate votes as they see fit.

In fact, nowhere in the Constitution are the citizens of this country given a right to vote and to have their vote counted. In 1989 an amendment to do away with the Electoral College passed the House of Representatives with 83% of the vote, 338-70. Predictably, that amendment failed in the Senate.

Until we have this right in place, grassroots campaigning and

local elections are far, far more important than national elections.

And finally: **Are my votes even counted?** The answer is “maybe”.

This country has had a long history of voting fraud, about which whole novels can be written, but here are some examples:

When precinct workers in the 1974 Dade County elections discovered that the voting machines they were using were rigged, they walked off the job and refused to certify the election process. Police and fire fighters took over the polling duties. The next day, the Miami Herald reported the walk out, but not the reason. When the precinct workers went to the media to report the election rigging, the media ignored them. So did the local attorney general. So did the FBI. Citizens who tried to observe the next election were arrested for disturbing the peace.

In 1997, the respected Washington, DC publication, The Hill (thehill.com/news/012903/hagel.aspx), confirmed that Republican Senator Chuck Hagel was the head, and continues to own part of, ES&S – the company that has installed and programmed nearly half the voting machines used in the United States.

In 2002, Diebold systems supplied the state of Georgia with electronic voting machines. In that election, the incumbent Democratic Governor Ray Barnes was defeated, giving the Republicans their first victory there in 134 years. The poll results showed a miraculous 12-point shift in the last 48 hours. Diebold was subsequently sued for applying a last-minute code patch to the machines that was never reviewed and was also, coincidentally, deleted just after the election.

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In April, 2004 California's Voting Systems and Procedures Panel, by an 8-0 vote, recommended that California cease the use of certain Diebold machines.

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Suffolk

“Long Island’s cultural life...like its population...is decentralized, spread all around. It’s important, therefore, that business owners support culture and the arts at the local level – the community arts groups that are the primary providers of culture and art to all Long Islanders.”

The Barbash Family, owner/operators of The Villages West Development Corp., Barbash Associates Inc., and Harbor Club LLC



Entrepreneurs and the arts? It’s a more natural union than many might think. Creativity and innovation can’t flourish in culturally barren soil. Smart business people know that the spirit of a talented, educated workforce is stimulated and nurtured by the cultural dynamic of its community – that local theater groups, galleries and arts councils are an important part of what makes Suffolk County a great place to live and work.

Supporting the rich and diverse cultural life of Suffolk County is good business. For more information on how your company can help, call Michelle Isabelle-Stark, Director of the Suffolk County Office of Film and Cultural Affairs: **(631) 853-4843**.

Steve Levy, County Executive

30% of all votes in the 2004 elections will be tabulated by electronic machines that don’t have vote-verification systems.

It would be trivial to develop public, open-source devices that use military-grade encryption, and employ modern vote-verification technologies. Australia already uses such a system, and many local elections use these systems. (It’s important to use open-source code so that the machine’s operation and security can be scrutinized by the public for possible flaws and biases. It also saves taxpayers money.)

Why are our voting machines owned and operated by private companies? Perhaps it’s because the people in charge got there using an old, corruptible system and they have no interest in changing to a new fair and open system. Or perhaps it’s simply because there’s a lack of public interest and support for reform.

Nevertheless, when a voting system is so severely broken in all these ways, it’s hard to blame the leaders who got promoted by it.

How do we, as a people, get out of this vicious cycle before the U.S. crumbles into

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some sort of delusional feudal empire? We start at the bottom and work our way up. We can use Approval Voting in school elections, on web polls, and in our daily lives. We can teach kids how to use simple hand counts, and how to use voting to make group decisions. We can petition local election boards to move to open, secure, verifiable, and certified voting machines. As the people grow in confidence with these technologies, more and more educators and local politicians will begin to support vote reform, and the system will begin to shift gears.

Contacting the following groups can help you become a respected “voting rights activist” in your own community:

- Citizens for Approval Voting: <http://www.approvalvoting.org/>
- The Center for Voting and Democracy <http://www.fairvote.org/>
- A technical analysis of various election systems: <http://www.electionmethods.org/>
- Open voting software, used in real elections: <http://www.open-vote.org/>, <http://www.openvotingconsortium.org/>
- Latest news on the Constitutional Right to Vote Amendment: <http://www.fairvote.org/righttovote/>