Voting is democracy with training wheels

BY JONATHAN BERNSTEIN
BLOOMBERG VIEW

If a new poll turns out to be a good prediction — it shows Donald Trump leading Hillary Clinton by only 6 percentage points in Texas — I'm going to get to vote in a competitive state this November. Thrilling!

Of course, it will be only my second time in nine presidential elections. Like most states, Texas typically isn't competitive at the presidential level.

Strike one against the Electoral College is that it turns voters in such states into bystanders. That's why some want to abandon the Electoral College and let the popular vote totals determine election outcomes.

I get it. In my first presidential election, Ronald Reagan took Arizona, where I voted, by 34 percentage points. That's the biggest blowout I've voted in, but other states where I've voted for president — Arizona twice, California twice, Texas three times — have had margins of 21, 13, 13, 21, 23 and 16 percentage points. The exception to these landslides was when I lived in Indiana in 2008. Barack Obama prevailed by a single percentage point — just under 20,000 votes.

Strike two against the Electoral College is that the only way a state such as Indiana or Texas gets close is if the national election is a blowout. Texas will only be contested if Clinton maintains a national lead of close to 10 percentage points, which means she'll win far more than the necessary 270 electoral votes regardless of what happens in the Alamo State.

So if we want every voter to cast a meaningful vote, we should get rid of the Electoral College, right?

Well … it's more complicated than that.

In Indiana in 2008, we were treated to a hard-fought campaign. But even though the contest was a nail-biter, I couldn't pretend that my vote actually made a difference.

Even in the 2000 election in Florida, where George W. Bush's official margin of victory was only 537 votes, no single vote, which would've cut Bush's margin to 536 or increased it to 538, mattered to the result.

A national vote for a single office in a nation of some 325 million people just can't be set up in such a way that one vote makes a difference. That would still be true if the Electoral College were reformed or eliminated. Many elections do come down to one, or at least a handful, of votes. But that happens almost exclusively in local elections with small constituencies.

The point isn't that people shouldn't vote — I vote in every election, no matter how big or small. The point is that you shouldn't mistake voting for democracy; it's simply one of many avenues of democratic engagement. As I've said before, voting is democracy with training wheels. If you really want to influence election and policy outcomes, you need to do more, generally by getting involved in a party or interest group.

The resources that campaigns find valuable — money, expertise, phone calls, labor — are generally portable across state lines. So even if Texas isn't competitive, we Texans can still contribute elsewhere. U.S. political parties are open source — anyone can walk in off the street and get involved, and if they stick around they can eventually influence the priorities or even the policy preferences of a party. Interest groups are less open to change (the National Rifle Association isn't going to support gun control, and NARAL won't oppose abortion rights, no matter how many new members join), but the larger an interest group becomes, the more influence it can have.

Best of all, local elections are the easiest of all to influence.

That the Electoral College gives the smallest states disproportionate strength is a legitimate criticism. But it's a less weighty issue once you recognize that you can exert political influence beyond voting. Because with or without the Electoral College, your individual vote is unlikely ever to be decisive.

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JIM YOUNG | REUTERS

Hillary Clinton speaks to customers at the Court Street Diner during a campaign stop in Athens, West Virginia, in May.

Cianchette

Continued from Page D1

This is the essence of "welfare reform" as Republicans talk about it. It gets couched in different language — "workfare," "hand up, not handout" — but it all goes back to individual responsibility. "Welfare reform" begins when those who need help — help almost always provided with tax dollars — take an affirmative step toward their own betterment.

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But the nuance of the statement "the best welfare program is a job" often gets lost at that point. In a perfect world, you should always be financially better off with a job than you would be receiving a government check. Everyone agrees with that, which is why you can see bipartisan agreement in the Maine Legislature on ending the "welfare cliff." And when you contribute more taxes than you consume in public services, you become a "puller" on the wagon of society.

However, there is more to it than dollars and cents. Like Pope Francis, those of us on the conservative side of the aisle believe having a job — working — offers dignity to the individual. And when people are caught in the "welfare trap," whether by broken but well-intended programs or generational inertia, it saps their spirit.

In several Maine cities, there are challenges like those faced in New Mexico and Utah. It shouldn't take a Republican to find solutions to them, whether it is making panhandlers work or housing the homeless. But it will take putting silly accusations aside and people focused on a shared goal. So as we get closer to November and your local candidates are knocking on your door, ask them how they intend to help people help themselves.

After all, for our society and for the individuals themselves, the best welfare program really is a job.

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Fuel

Continued from Page D1

about 5 percent. The U.S. produced roughly 13.3 billion gallons of ethanol in 2013, of which only 810,000 gallons came from cellulosic sources.

Cellulosic ethanol, though, has advantages over its corn-based competitor. Unlike ethanol made from corn, cellulosic fuel is made from largely inedible material, so there isn't a competition between food and fuel. (An estimated 38 percent of the 2013 U.S. corn crop was used to produce ethanol.) Corn also requires more labor and other resources, such as fertilizer, pesticides and fuel, to raise it for eventual use as fuel.

In addition, when measured from forest to fuel tank, the greenhouse gas emissions from ethanol made from cellulose are significantly less than emissions (in this case, from field to fuel tank) from ethanol made from corn.

And wood already is poised to power jet fleets across the country before the decade is out. Red Rock Biofuels, a Colorado-based energy company, plans to begin construction of a biorefinery this year in Lakeview, Oregon. It is expected to annually turn 140,000 dry tons of wood — mostly tree tops and limbs — sourced from within a 50-mile radius of the plant into 12 million gallons of jet fuel.

The company will sell 3 million gallons a year between 2017 and 2024 to FedEx to fuel its jet fleet. Southwest Airlines also will purchase 3 million gallons of jet fuel a year from the biorefinery.

Low prices, high uncertainty

With an annual appetite of about 5 billion gallons of fuel, the Department of Defense is the largest energy consumer in the country. The purchasing power of the military could jump-start demand for alternative fuels, such as Maine-made cellulosic ethanol, and military support could eventually make the fuels more cost-competitive.

The U.S. Navy, for instance, aims to source 50 percent of its energy from alternative fuels — including nuclear power, renewables and biofuels — by 2020. Currently, the Navy gets about 17 percent of its energy from alternative fuels, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. But this includes no biofuel.

The support from the federal government "helps us commercialize and learn how to make biofuels cheaper," UMaine economist Jonathan Rubin said.

Maine, with an abundant supply of wood, could support at least one modest-sized biorefinery to produce cellulosic ethanol and jet fuel, according to Rubin.

Rubin, along with fellow UMaine economist Sharon Klein and economics graduate students Binod Neupane and Stephanie Whalley, published a study in a recent issue of the Journal of the Transportation Research Board that estimated that 3.9 million dry tons of wood are available for biofuel production.

Not all of that wood, however, would realistically be available to a biorefinery. Hauling costs for wood are high, so a biorefinery would need to source its feedstock from within a smaller geographic area. A biorefinery based at the former Old Town mill, for example, could sustainably harvest from within a 50-mile radius between 650,000 and 735,000 dry tons of wood for ethanol production.

"Costs are significant for transportation of biomass," Rubin said. "You really have to look at how much is biologically available on a sustainable harvest basis in, say, a 100-mile radius."

A fundamental challenge cellulosic ethanol has to overcome in the short term before it can leap into commercialization is a prolonged slump in the price of oil. Crude oil prices have fallen from nearly $100 a barrel in 2014 to $41.16 this year, and prices are forecast to remain low into 2017, according to the Energy Information Administration. It's a fact of life with which even the proposed biorefinery in Oregon has to grapple.

Unless the price of oil rises closer to $100 a barrel, low oil prices will be a barrier to cellulosic biofuels' inclusion in the Department of Defense's energy portfolio. Despite its stated goal of reducing its consumption of petroleum-based fuel, the Department of Defense between 2007 and 2014 purchased just 2 million gallons of alternative fuels for about $58.6 million, according to a 2015 Government Accountability Office report. Over the same period, it bought 32 billion gallons of petroleum-based fuels for about $107 billion.

What alternative fuels the Department of Defense has purchased have been used only for demonstration purposes. Federal law requires the department to consider whether the cost of alternative fuels is competitive with conventional fuels, slowing their adoption by the military.

"It's a challenging world to produce a biofuel with gasoline at just over $2 a gallon," Rubin said.

Student

Continued from Page D1

it was like having to wait for somebody to come help me and a visceral feeling that my sense of dignity was challenged as the certified nursing assistant dropped my pants and helped me sit down.

Because of the many experiences I encountered, as a future physician, I will be mindful when I write prescriptions, as I truly understand now what it means to eat pureed foods, to take nighttime medications, and to be restricted from moving on one's own or from going outside. I have lived this life.

I have emerged from this project learning it is easy to take dignity for granted; life is more fragile than you think.

The nursing home community actually is quite special. Age is much more abstract than I realized, and I now know to look for the person that is behind every pair of eyes, no matter how old or ill they appear.

I am a happier person because of this project, as odd as that might sound. I will always be grateful for the chance to have participated in this project, and I encourage anyone presented with this opportunity to seize it.

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MARILYN GUGLIUCCI

Joshua Allen eats a meal while living at the St. Andre Health Care nursing home in Biddeford for 10 days this summer.

Data

Continued from Page D1

stores the communications between students, parents and teachers; and presentation software stores students' work and their communications about it.

In addition, teachers and schools may direct children to work on branded apps or websites that may collect, or allow third parties to collect, IP addresses and other information from students. This could include the ads children click on, what they download, what games they play, and so on.

How student data are used

When "screen time" is required for school, parents cannot limit or control it. Companies use this time to find out more about children's preferences, so they can target children with advertising and other content with a personalized appeal.

Children might see ads while they are working in educational apps. In other cases, data might be collected while students complete their assignments. Information might also be stored and used to better target them later.

For instance, a website might allow a third party to collect information, including the type of browser used, the time and date, and the subject of advertisements clicked or scrolled over by a child. The third party could then use that information to target the child with advertisements later.

We have found that companies use the data to serve ads (for food, clothing, games, etc.) to the children via their computers. This repeated, personalized advertising is designed specifically to manipulate children to want and buy more things.

Indeed, over time this kind of advertising can threaten children's physical and psychological well-being.

Consequences of targeted advertising

Food is the most heavily advertised class of products to children. The heavy digital promotion of "junk" food is associated with negative health outcomes such as obesity, heart disease and diabetes.

Additionally, advertising, regardless of the particular product it may sell, also "sells" to children the idea that products can make them happy.

Research shows that children who buy into this materialist worldview are more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression and other psychological distress.

Teenagers who adopt this worldview are more likely to smoke, drink and skip school. One set of studies showed that advertising makes children feel far from their ideals for themselves in terms of how good a life they lead and what their bodies look like.

The insecurity and dissatisfaction may lead to negative behaviors such as compulsive buying and disordered eating.

Aren't there laws to protect children's privacy?

Many bills bearing on student privacy have been introduced in the past several years in Congress and state legislatures. Several of them have been enacted into laws.

Additionally, nearly 300 software companies signed a self-regulatory Student Privacy Pledge to safeguard student privacy regarding the collection, maintenance and use of student personal information.

However, they aren't sufficient. And here's why:

First of all, most laws, including the Student Privacy Pledge, focus on Personally Identifiable Information (PII). PII includes information that can be used to determine a person's identity, such as that person's name, Social Security number or biometric information.

Companies can address privacy concerns by making digital data anonymous (i.e., not including PII in the data that are collected, stored or shared). However, data can easily be "de-anonymized." And, children don't need to be identified with PII in order for their online behavior to be tracked.

Second, bills designed to protect student privacy sometimes expressly preserve the ability of an operator to use student information for adaptive or personalized learning purposes. In order to personalize the assignments that a program gives a student, it must by necessity track that student's behavior.

This weakens the privacy protections the bills otherwise offer. Although it protects companies that collect data for adaptive learning purposes only, it also provides a loophole that enables data collection.

Finally, the Student Privacy Pledge has no real enforcement mechanism. As it is a voluntary pledge, many companies may scrupulously abide by the promises in the pledge, but many others may not.

What to do?

While education technologies show promise in some areas, they also hold the potential to harm students profoundly if they are not properly understood, thoughtfully managed and carefully controlled.

Parents, teachers and administrators, who serve as the closest protectors of children's privacy at their schools, and legislators responsible for enacting relevant policy, need to recognize the threats of such data tracking.

The first step toward protecting children is to know that that such targeted marketing is going on while children do their schoolwork. And that it is powerful.

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