

Visual 7 The Mystery of the Voters Who Don't Vote

Americans are known around the world for their love of liberty and democracy. Many Americans have fought and died to protect their system of government and way of life. Free elections are central to that system of government. Together with safeguards for protecting individual rights, free elections are the heart of American democracy.

Yet many Americans do not vote. Only about half of all eligible voters vote in presidential elections, for example.

Why don't more Americans vote?

Handy Dandy Guide

1. People *choose*.
2. People's choices involve *costs*.
3. People respond to *incentives* in predictable ways.
4. People create *economic systems* that influence individual choices and incentives.
5. People gain when they *trade* voluntarily.
6. People's choices have consequences that lie in the *future*.

Activity 7 The Mystery of the Voters Who Don't Vote

Directions. Read the *Handy Dandy Guide* and the mystery. Read the clues assigned to your group. Be careful. While all the clues are correct, only some are *useful* in solving the mystery. Decide which clues are most relevant to solving the mystery. Use the clues and one or more of the ideas from the *Handy Dandy Guide* to figure out a solution to the mystery. Write your solution.

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The Mystery

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The Clues

1. Because of "Motor Voter" legislation and other innovations, it is relatively easy for most Americans to register to vote.
2. At the federal, state, and local levels, there are many elections in the United States. An American who voted in all the elections for which he or she was eligible would do a lot of voting.
3. In presidential elections, long lines of voters often form at the polls.
4. It can be difficult for voters to find reliable information about candidates and issues—especially local candidates and state or local issues addressed in referenda.
5. Each state elects two United States Senators.
6. Few elections in the United States are ever decided by one or two votes.
7. There are two kinds of elections—primary and general.
8. The 26th Amendment to the Constitution made 18 the legal voting age.
9. Voting takes place in polling places.

Record your solution and explain it briefly here:

and states everywhere guarantee free parking?

Maybe it is too good to be true. Is parking really free in Fargo?

Clues 1 and 8 are the most important for solving this mystery.

Solution

The curbside space along city streets has, potentially, many uses (Clue 1). It could be used to add another lane to the street, perhaps a bicycle lane. It could be sold or leased to shop owners who wish to expand their operations. Using the space for one of these purposes means not using it for the others (Clue 8). The unselected use is the opportunity cost of the choice that is made. Since an opportunity cost of this sort is inevitable, parking is not free in Fargo, even if city officials say that it is.

LESSON 5

The Mystery of the Missing Pubs

Pubs are central to social life in Ireland. They serve as social centers for neighborhoods, providing people with places to meet for business and pleasure.

Ireland in the 1990s has had a strong economy. The “Celtic Tiger” is the envy of Europe. Given the attachment of many Irish people to the pubs, and given the recent strength of Ireland’s economy, you might suppose you could find a pub on every corner in Irish towns and cities. But generally this is not so. Even in Dublin, there are some neighborhoods with only a handful of pubs to serve thousands of people.

Why are there so few pubs in Dublin?

Clues 4, 7, 8, and 9 are the most important for solving this mystery.

Solution

Pub owners in Ireland compete with one another to sell food and beverages to their customers. The more pubs, the more competition. But competition is reduced by laws aimed at reducing drinking (Clue 4). In keeping the number of pubs down, these well-

intentioned laws protect established pub owners from widespread competition (Clues 7 and 8). Pub owners thus have an incentive to keep the restrictions in place, since they benefit from the protection it affords them (Clue 9).

LESSON 6

How We Almost Got a Sixth Great Lake

Every school student knows there are five Great Lakes. They remember the lakes easily by recalling “HOMES,” the letters of which stand for Lake Huron, Lake Ontario, Lake Michigan, Lake Erie, and Lake Superior. This is common knowledge. Yet, Mr. Patrick Leahy, a United States Senator from Vermont, believes that Lake Champlain, which borders Vermont, New York, and Canada, is also a Great Lake. “Vermonters have always considered Lake Champlain the sixth Great Lake,” he declared in 1998. Then he undertook an effort to have Lake Champlain officially designated as a Great Lake.

Why would a U.S. Senator think there are six Great Lakes when school children know that is not true?

Clues 6 and 9 are the most important for solving this mystery.

Solution

In order to gain re-election, men and women elected to serve in Congress seek votes from people in their home states. Their interest in re-election creates a strong incentive to support federal funding for projects in their home states and districts. In 1998, Senator Patrick Leahy discovered what looked like a new way to pursue federal research dollars for Vermont. He tried to have Lake Champlain, which borders Vermont, officially redefined as one of the Great Lakes (Clue 9). If Lake Champlain had been so designated, the change would have allowed researchers in Vermont to compete for research funds made available by the National Sea Grant Program (Clue 6).

LESSON 7

The Mystery of the Voters Who Don’t Vote

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have fought and died to protect their system of government and way of life. Free elections are central to that system of government. Together with safeguards for protecting individual rights, free elections are the heart of American democracy.

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Why don't more Americans vote?

Clues 2, 3, and 4 are the most important for solving this mystery.

Solution

People decide whether to vote or not vote, taking into account the costs and benefits associated with the choice. What does it cost to vote? Some time and effort spent registering, gathering information about the candidates (Clues 2 and 4), waiting in line at the polling station (Clue 3), and so forth. Not a high cost, you might say, especially not for citizens who value their participation in the electoral process. But many citizens see little benefit in such participation. The odds are that no single vote will determine the outcome of an election, they say (Clue 6), and the outcomes don't matter all that much to them anyway. Any cost at all, then, seems too much. Let others do the voting, these non-voters say, in effect; we'll "free ride" on the good citizenship of the voters and benefit as much or as little as they do from the outcomes.

Just for fun, you might invite your class to discuss possible ways of reducing the cost of voting. For example: what might the effect be of holding major elections on national holidays? Would a scheduling change of this sort increase or decrease the cost to voters?

LESSON 8

The Corny Fuel Mystery

In the midst of the energy crisis of the late 1970s, the U.S. federal government hit on a new idea. Researchers had found ways to mix ethanol—a fuel distilled

from corn—with gasoline. This discovery raised hopes that this new fuel mixture would reduce the amount of gasoline Americans used, thus decreasing United States demand for foreign oil while improving air quality. To encourage the use of ethanol, the federal government provided a subsidy to fuel producers by reducing the gasoline tax on fuel made with the ethanol mixture.

A study done in 1997 by the General Accounting Office (GOA) of the federal government showed that the ethanol subsidy was expensive (it had cost taxpayers \$7 billion since 1979) and did little to improve the environment or reduce imports of foreign oil. However, efforts to abandon the ethanol subsidy have failed to gain approval in Congress.

Why would the United States government provide subsidies for the production of an alternative fuel that does not help the environment, does not reduce consumption of foreign oil, and costs taxpayers billions of dollars?

Clues 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 9 are the most important for solving this mystery.

Solution

A government subsidy creates a strong incentive among those positioned to claim it (Clues 4, 5, and 9). While the ethanol subsidy seems large, few taxpayers are likely to notice its effect, since the cost of the subsidy is spread out over many people. On the other hand, the producers of ethanol are very aware of the benefits in jobs and income that the subsidy confers on them. Given any threat to those benefits, they get busy alerting politicians to their interest in the matter (Clue 6). Elected officials from the Midwest find it difficult to resist pressure arising from interest groups back home (Clues 2 and 3).

LESSON 9

The Urban Housing Mystery

While most American cities provide an adequate range of housing possibilities for their citizens, some do not. In New York City, people looking for a place to live typically have a hard time finding apartments. Some