

Vote. That's Just What They Don't Want You to Do.

By **THE EDITORIAL BOARD** MARCH 10, 2018

This is a fragile moment for the nation. The integrity of democratic institutions is under assault from without and within, and basic standards of honesty and decency in public life are corroding. If you are horrified at what is happening in Washington and in many states, you can march in the streets, you can go to town halls and demand more from your representatives, you can share the latest outrageous news on your social media feed — all worthwhile activities. But none of it matters if you don't go out and vote.

It's a perennial conundrum for the world's oldest democracy: Why do so many Americans fail to go to the polls? Some abstainers think that they're registering a protest against the awful choices. They're fooling themselves. Nonvoters aren't protesting anything; they're just putting their lives and futures in the hands of the people who probably don't want them to vote. We've seen recently what can happen when people choose instead to take their protest to the ballot box. We saw it [in Virginia in November](#). We saw it, to our astonishment, [in Alabama in December](#). We may see it [this week in western Pennsylvania](#). Voting matters.

Casting a ballot is the best opportunity most of us will ever get to have a say in who will represent us, what issues they will address and how they will spend our money. The

right to vote is so basic, President Lyndon Johnson said in 1965, that without it “all others are meaningless.”

And yet every election, tens of millions of Americans stay home. Studies of turnout among developed nations consistently rank the United States [near the bottom](#). In the most recent midterms, in 2014, less than [37 percent of eligible voters](#) went to the polls — the lowest turnout in more than 70 years. In 2016, [102 million people didn't vote](#), far more than voted for any single candidate.

The problem isn't just apathy, of course. Keeping people from voting has been an American tradition from the nation's earliest days, when the franchise was restricted to white male landowners. It took a civil war, constitutional amendments, violently suppressed activism against discrimination and a federal act enforcing the guarantees of those amendments to extend this basic right to every adult. With each expansion of voting rights, the nation inched closer to being a truly representative democracy. Today, only one group of Americans may be legally barred from voting — those with felony records, [a cruel and pointless restriction](#) that disproportionately silences people of color

In the months leading up to the midterm elections on Nov. 6, when the House, Senate and statehouses around the country are up for grabs, the editorial board [will explore the complicated question](#) of why Americans don't vote, and what can be done to overcome the problem. The explanations fall into three broad categories.

SUPPRESSION A 96-year-old woman in Tennessee was [denied a voter-ID card](#) despite presenting four forms of identification, including her birth certificate. A World

War II veteran was [turned away](#) in Ohio because his Department of Veterans Affairs photo ID didn't include his address. Andrea Anthony, a 37-year-old black woman from Wisconsin who had voted in every major election since she was 18, [couldn't vote in 2016](#) because she had lost her driver's license a few days before.

Stories like these are distressingly familiar, as more and more states pass laws that make voting harder for certain groups of voters, usually minorities, but also poor people, students and the elderly. They require forms of photo identification that minorities are much less likely to have or be able to get — purportedly to reduce fraud, of which [there is virtually no evidence](#). They eliminate same-day registration, close polling stations in minority areas and cut back early-voting hours and Sunday voting.

These new laws may not be as explicitly discriminatory as the poll taxes or literacy tests of the 20th century, but they are part of the same long-term project to keep minorities from the ballot box. And because African-Americans vote overwhelmingly for Democrats, the laws are nearly always passed by Republican-dominated legislatures.

In a lawsuit challenging Wisconsin's strict new voter-ID law, a former staff member for a Republican lawmaker testified that Republicans were ["politically frothing at the mouth"](#) at the prospect that the law would drive down Democratic turnout. It worked: After the 2016 election, [one survey found](#) that the law prevented possibly more than 17,000 registered voters, disproportionately poor and minority, from voting. Donald Trump carried the state by fewer than 23,000 votes.

FAILING TECHNOLOGYThe legitimacy of an election is only as good as the reliability of the [machines that count the votes](#). And yet [43 states use voting](#)

[machines](#) that are no longer being made, and are at or near the end of their useful life. Many states still manage their voter-registration rolls using software programs from the 1990s. It's no surprise that this sort of infrastructure failure [hits poorer and minority areas harder](#), often creating hourslong lines at the polls and discouraging many voters from coming out at all. Upgrading these machines nationwide would cost at least \$1 billion, maybe much more, and Congress has consistently failed to provide anything close to sufficient funding to speed along the process.

Elections are hard to run with aging voting technology, but at least those problems aren't intentional. [Hacking and other types of interference are](#). In 2016, Russian hackers were able to breach voter registration systems in Illinois and several other states, and [targeted dozens more](#). They are interfering again in advance of the 2018 midterms, according to intelligence officials, who are demanding better cybersecurity measures. [These include](#) conducting regular threat assessments, using voting machines that create paper trails and conducting postelection audits. Yet President Trump, who sees any invocation of Russian interference as a challenge to the legitimacy of his election, consistently downplays or dismisses these threats. Meanwhile, Mr. Trump's State Department [has not spent a dime](#) of the \$120 million Congress allocated to it to fight disinformation campaigns by Russia and other countries.

DISILLUSIONMENT Some people wouldn't vote if you put a ballot box in their living room. Whether they believe there is no meaningful difference between the major parties or that the government doesn't care what they think regardless of who is in power, they have detached themselves from the political process.

That attitude is encouraged by many in government, up to and including the current president, who cynically foster feelings of disillusionment by hawking fake tales of rigged systems and illegal voters, even as they raise millions of dollars from wealthy donors and draw legislative maps to entrench their power.

The disillusionment is understandable, and to some degree it's justified. But it creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. When large numbers of people don't vote, elections are indeed decided by narrow, unrepresentative groups and in the interests of wealth and power. The public can then say, See? We were right. They don't care about us. But when more people vote, the winning candidates are more broadly representative and that improves government responsiveness to the public and enhances democratic legitimacy.

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These obstacles to voting and political participation are very real, and we don't discount their impact on turnout. The good news is there are fixes for all of them.

The most important and straightforward fix is to make it easier for people to register and vote. Automatic voter registration, which first passed in Oregon just three years ago, is now the law or practice in nine states, both red and blue, and the District of Columbia. Washington State [is on the cusp](#) of becoming the tenth, and New Jersey and Nevada may be close behind. More people also turn out when states increase voting opportunities, such as by providing mail-in ballots or by expanding voting hours and days.

The courts should be a bulwark protecting voting rights, and many lower federal courts have been just that in

recent years, blocking the most egregious attacks on voting in states from North Carolina to Wisconsin. But the Supreme Court under Chief Justice John Roberts Jr. has made this task much harder, mainly by [gutting a key provision of the Voting Rights Act](#) in a 2013 case. Decisions like that one, which split 5 to 4, depend heavily on who is sitting in those nine seats — yet another reason people should care who gets elected.

In the end, the biggest obstacle to more Americans voting is their own sense of powerlessness. It's true: Voting is a profound act of faith, a belief that even if your voice can't change policy on its own, it makes a difference. Consider the attitude of [Andrea Anthony](#), the Wisconsin woman who was deterred by the state's harsh new voter-ID law after voting her whole adult life. "Voting is important to me because I know I have a little, teeny, tiny voice, but that is a way for it to be heard," Ms. Anthony said. "Even though it's one vote, I feel it needs to count."

She's right. The future of America is in your hands. More people voting would not only mean "different political parties with different platforms and different candidates," [the writer Rebecca Solnit said](#). "It would change the story. It would change who gets to tell the story."

There are a lot of stories desperately needing to be told right now, but they won't be as long as millions of Americans continue to sit out elections. Lament the state of the nation as much as you want. Then get out and vote.