

Tax me and make me vote

Bill Hall/Lewiston Tribune

Every autumn in Idaho, Sharon and I receive a friendly letter reminding us to pay our property tax. We do that without whining. We like living here and we pay our dues. So each year, we hand over the check and thank the courthouse personnel for all the sweat and service they have provided in looking after the money that keeps our community humming.

If you have to pay your taxes (and you do), only a monumental tightwad would snarl at the friendly clerks. Taxes are the financial support for everything from a fire department to a police force to schools for our wee ones, not to mention repairing pot holes.

So we hand over our tax payments and gain another charming chance to enjoy a chat with the ladies behind the courthouse counter. If you want to get huffy about your taxes, go find a county commissioner to yell at, but don't be a bully to the hired help.

We also enjoy a generous annual tradition by the clerks. Writing a large tax check can make your hand tremble and your eyes water, but the clerks calm us by putting out a small dish of hard candy as their thanks to us, the taxpayers. There is some symbolism in that candy dish when it comes time to pay our dues. A little bit of sugar makes the medicine go down.

However, I have a question on another topic: If the tax we owe is mandatory, then why isn't voting also mandatory?

Each year, a tax bill is stuffed into your mail box. Why isn't the same practice applied to voting - a letter in your mail box telling you to report for duty at the ballot box on election day?

A person would think the low turnout of voters in recent years would indicate more than half the members of our electorate have gone AWOL. Too many voters have deserted their post.

Other countries do better, partly because their voting is mandatory. Look at our good friends and allies, the Australians. They live in a full-service country. They pay taxes. And they vote. Both of those reasonable expectations will cost citizens dearly if they don't conform to the legitimate needs of a democracy.

In Australia, for instance, people who don't vote are customarily required to pay a fine of \$26. Maybe that's not a lot, but it isn't a badge of honor either.

Bear in mind, voting in Australia isn't easy with all those kangaroos bouncing up and down the streets, knocking over ballot boxes. But the brave citizens of Australia care enough about their country to indicate their choices on which inept politicians they want to show the door.

Some of my friends, fired up on coffee, reminded me the other day that not voting is sort of a way of voting. There is some truth to that. Withholding your vote and casting it for nobody is an adroit way of signaling your disappointment with some of those clowns in public office.

The Australians are required to go into the polling places, but they aren't required to cast an actual vote while there. However, while they are there, it would be easy to choose the less awful of two poor candidates. Eventually regular voting might stimulate a citizen's curiosity and encourage a little thinking for a change.

Sometimes, over years of watching elections, I was secretly glad that most of the voters who refuse to cast ballots are the kind of people who don't deserve to vote in a democracy - and they might not even be any good at it.

But there are ways to encourage the disinterested. My political science friend Richard proposes that we provide incentives rather than fines for non-voters. He offers the idea of reducing property taxes a bit for people who do vote. Maybe it's only a few bucks, but it could be enough to keep a person interested in his city and his country.

That is like Christmas shopping with the prices lowered.

For good measure, goody-two-shoes like Sharon and me could get our taxes lowered \$26 as an incentive to vote. And we should continue to receive our rightful share of hard candy to go with our hard tax bills.

But no whining, please. At least we can go safely to the polls without being run over by kangaroos.

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