

Shawn Robbins

Giessler & Gebhart

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Voting in the 1864 Election vs. Modern Day

Voting for a candidate to represent you is a right that has been upheld in America since its conception. It's what majorly set us aside from most civilizations/forms of government at the time, and it's perks inspired countless countries around the world, old and new, to take after us. However, the ability to exercise this right hasn't always been as straight forward. There have been times throughout American history where voting became a much more arduous task or was even dangerous. Two periods of time reflect this, the 1864 presidential election, and the recent 2020 presidential election. The difficulties of voting, what was done to alleviate those difficulties, and the results of both will be examined to get a better understanding of the election and America's current problems with voting.

It was the November presidential election in 1864. Normal everyday citizens could travel to the polls and vote as they please (although under the threat of the opposite political party), however, soldiers seemed to have no possible ways to vote in the upcoming election. Thus, the government formulated two main methods of voting for soldiers away from home. The first method was a system known as absentee/mail-in ballots. Soldiers in the field were distributed a paper to fill out with their desired candidate that was then mailed to their home state's polling stations; a law had to be passed for this to happen but not all states allowed the law to pass and thus the absentee ballot system was only approved in 25 states (Stillwell). The secondary way of letting soldiers vote was to allow them to return home momentarily, vote, and then come back to

the battlefield. Not only was this done for the presidential election, but was also a common practice for a wide variety of elections. In a letter from Abraham Lincoln to general William Sherman, Lincoln asks Sherman to let his men from Indiana return to vote in the state election, “Anything you can safely do to let her soldiers, or any part of them, go home and vote at the State election, will be greatly in point.” (Lincoln). The nature of absentee ballots, however, meant that they were easy to exploit in order to favor that of the opposing side. A group of men with connections spanning across the states attempted one of the most widespread voting frauds ever attempted in America up to that point; with help from inside military officials, the men forged absentee ballots for soldiers who were currently preoccupied with fighting or other issues (Waters). They forged ballots from wounded or even dead soldiers, and by the end of their work they attempted to ship **multiple crates full** of forged votes to New York (Waters). However, they were caught and arrested thanks to an inside man who collected evidence against them (Orville Wood), the event showed that voting fraud should always be a concern for presidential elections due to the scale and complexity of fraud individuals were able to create solely with the technology of the mid 1800’s.

Looking at Indiana now, it seems more complicated to cast a vote now than it was in the past. At least in the 1864 election mail-in votes were allowed to be used for those in the field, and soldiers were momentarily allowed to return home to quickly cast a vote. In modern times, our state’s voting system is not only harsh and confusing to the unaware, but also has only one major method of voting which takes ample time to complete. With Indiana being in the bottom 15 states for voter turnout, the process of both in-person and out of person voting needs to be streamlined and simplified to reduce physical contact and to promote more engagement from those who either don't have an interest in or knowledge about voting.

Alternative, easier, methods for Indiana voting should be presented to provide ease of access, and faster voting times. Mail-in/absentee voting has already been used in the few elections since quarantine started, and a decent amount of legislators support its use (Odendahl). Mail-in voting doesn't require voters to stand in a line, wait around, or interact with others. All voters have to do is just fill it out and send it, which helps circumvent one of the biggest reasons for voter apathy, the early in-person poll closing time (Wooten). However, mail-in voting isn't the only solution, as a concept already exists that could be integrated to simplify the voting process. Blockchain technology, mostly known as being used for bitcoin cryptocurrency, is a chain of transactions involving value that link to one another and verify each other (Susskind). If one transaction is tampered with in any way it invalidates the entire chain, making it secure (Susskind). This technology in combination with a highly monitored and secured app that allows citizens to vote could provide an extremely fast, accessible, and secure voting process that would reduce voter apathy. States can also save money on paper used for mail-in ballots and the manpower used to distribute those ballots. Around 150 years have passed since the original method of voting, and no one has seriously pursued a way to use current technology to simplify it. A system of blockchain voting could be the first step towards that, and would completely negate all aspects of physical restriction to vote. However, despite the current limitations, the in-person voting process can still be improved upon to alleviate the current issues it has.

The in-person voting process should be simplified and time spent should be decreased in order to reduce voter apathy and increase safety in the current pandemic. Lines became so large in Marion county that it took an entire business day of waiting to vote (Sikich). This has not only impacted Indiana's already low voter turnout, but also the safety during the current pandemic. Indiana's voter apathy problem combined with packed day long lines and pandemic conditions

means it's even more attractive for Indiana residents to stay in and not vote. The lines during a pandemic are a pretty good opportunity for the virus to spread. Setting up more ballot locations or even ballot boxes in the same location would spread and speed up lines, protect citizens, and in the long run reduce voter apathy. In addition to this, policies regarding in-person voting should also be changed. The Statehouse File contributes part of Indiana's voter apathy to the fact that, as mentioned before, Indiana polls close earlier than any other in the country, 6 pm (Wooten). If Indiana wants to increase voter turnout, a way to encourage those who wouldn't normally vote due to work to participate would be to increase the poll closing time by a few hours. Most of Indiana's voter turnout problems come from its policies, those that wouldn't take much effort to modify.

Changes to Indiana voting policy could allow voting to be more forgiving for the uninformed. Additionally, necessary voting information should be made available to those who need it. Julia Vaughn, the director of Common Cause Indiana, says that one reason for low voter turnout that could easily be fixed is that registration is due a month before any election (Wooten) (Daily Journal). Two fixes could be to either allow citizens to register on election day at polling stations, or for the state to automatically register citizens when they are eligible, similar to Oregon's policy (Wooten). Another problem Vaughn attributes to low voter turnout is those unaware of the candidates running or how to vote (Wooten). A proposed solution is to have a Civic task force that promotes engagement with Indiana's democracy and spreads information on how to participate. It would also be relatively easy to have a message in or before a candidate's public speaking event about how to vote. While changing state policies and regulations is an option, the far easier and effective method would be to look into the virtual voting method. Not only would it be easy to spot, download, and cast a vote; it would only take seconds to know the

overall outcome. The public could be updated in real-time, managing would be a breeze, and votes would be almost impossible to lose. Whether or not voting goes virtual in the future, something does need to change in the present about the state of voting, and not just in Indiana.

In order to entice those who have little knowledge about candidates or voting, the act of voting should be made simple and fast to encourage participation and bring more citizens into our local democracy. However, these are short-term measures, as the road to climbing back up from the 15th lowest voter turnout in the country is a long one. My hope is that encouraging voters to interact with not just the presidential elections but also our state elections will help strengthen our community. As a future voter, I'm interested to see how voting will change as the pandemic continues and if any new processes will be made to our current archaic systems. Will the changes last or fade like those thrown aside after the election of 1864 concluded? There could be a revelation down the line due to this pandemic that could change our once stoic system of voting forever.

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