. . . and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Abraham Lincoln

DEAR BEEF

BALLOT ANXIETY

My midterm ballot was long, eight pages of three columns mostly filled with judicial appointments and state measures. I found it difficult to get through. Information was hard to come by and, frankly, my schedule is busy. I did what I could, but still felt my vote was not informed. I feel bad. What am I missing? *–Name Withheld*

Nothing. Ballots in many states are bloated. They often include judicial appointments in a variety of complex forms and citizen-led ballot initiatives with the power to amend state constitutions.

States with this approach do so to *increase representation*. Elected judges are theoretically more responsive to the public than appointed ones. Citizen-led ballot initiatives offer a way for voters to circumvent elected leaders refusing to pass popular legislation.

However, the inclusion of these items puts the onus on time-starved voters to research long slates of candidates and dive into complex policy considerations, often without meaningful information.

The result? Battling AI slop and special interests. Casting by party preference. Relying on screenshots of another's choices and Instagram cheat sheets. Maybe even *not voting* on one or more items.

This is classic *quantity over quality*, something rejected in nearly all other corners of life. An alternative is to slim down ballots and return decisions to elected policymakers, who have the time and resources to properly vet judicial candidates and evaluate legislative proposals. (That's what they're paid for.) With smaller ballots, voters could center their energy on vetting and challenging their leaders.

Consider the federal government. No initiatives are voted on and only four offices are elected. Simplicity is strength. Voting as a focused exercise, not a stress-inducing (even futile) research project.

States ought to reconsider their practices. I'm with you.

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EXTRAORDINARY ISSUES

BEEF

NO. 2 LOS ANGELES

MAKE VOTING COUNT

Beefreaders—Picture it. The first election I voted in. I took the day off from school to work the polls. It was a memorable day, with many checks and balances. Sealed boxes of voter lists and ballots. Rules for how and when to open them. Many sheets with many signatures, the other workers and me signing and verifying. Trained a few days before. Closing and delivering were likewise regimented. We handed out stickers, too, and voted ourselves. The entire experience was solemn, almost sacred.

How things have changed. My 18-year-old self, even after living through the Bush v. Gore debacle four years earlier, couldn't have imagined the across-the-board assault on the American vote that followed and continues.

Another Electoral College result that gave the presidency to a loser. Intensified gerrymandering. Voter ID laws and other restrictions engineered specifically to disenfranchise minority voters. Election workers and officials subject to attacks, threats, and other forms of harassment. Political pressure campaigns to alter results. The gutting of the Voting Rights Act. January 6.

Even the U.S. Postal Service isn't immune. Though its couriers swiftly complete their appointed rounds in snow and rain, in heat and gloom—they can be pressured to hold our ballots back.

All this nonsense must stop. Our votes must *count*, or we shall perish.

XOXO

HOW BEEF

VERY BEEF ..... **Participation**

BEEF ..... **Equal Weight**

NOT BEEF ..... **Voter Fatigue**

NEVER BEEF ..... **Disenfranchisement**

PLAN BEEF

HOW TO MAKE VOTING COUNT

Outlaw Gerrymandering. Structuring congressional districts to solidify political power rather than represent majority interest undermines the right of the people to control their destiny. Base districts on democratic principles, not political interests.

Tie Presidents to the Popular Vote. The majority should elect the president, something the NPV law (*nationalpopularvote.com*) would guarantee by changing who gets appointed to the Electoral College. No constitutional amendment needed, within the control of states alone to pass, and 48 more electoral votes to go.

Make Voting Easier. Mandate nationwide, uniform, and expanded poll hours. Require easy and accessible access to poll stations, and increase staff and capacity at them. Ban voter ID laws and limit purges of voter lists. Automatically send ballots to registered voters.

Lock Up Election Deniers. Restore faith in election results and the peaceful transition of power. Swiftly prosecute anyone subverting election results or clinging to office unlawfully.

Shorten State Ballots. Long state ballots are unenjoyable and hard to navigate. They give the illusion of power while dividing voters' attention. Focus voting energy.

Fete the Vote. Declare Election Day a national holiday. Create nationwide celebrations. Fireworks.

BEEF NO. 2

MAIN BEEF

OUR GOVERNMENT IS DECREASINGLY OF, BY, AND FOR US

Compared to the brute force of an autocrat and the divine lineage of a monarch, a democratic government derives its legitimacy from the consent of the governed. This is government *of the people*. In the U.S., that's why four offices—president, vice president, senator, and representative—are elected.

Government *by the people* exists when citizens control their government. Control is twofold. First, ordinary citizens *vote* for their leaders. Then, those elected *run* the government.

A government *for the people* serves the general public and promotes its interests as opposed to benefitting wealthy minorities and corrupt sycophants, as has historically been the case in many autocracies and monarchies.

When democracy is not *of the people* and *by the people*, it ceases to be *for the people.* Lincoln warned of the potential for this breakdown, and we are experiencing it: a crisis of governmental legitimacy and citizen control. What is going on?

Threats to *legitimacy* include maneuvers that disrupt the equal weight of each voter's power. Roughly speaking, the goal is one vote per voter. Two persistent threats create an imbalance.

Gerrymandering designs congressional districts around voter demographics instead of physical location. This discounts the voting power of would-be majorities—including Republicans in rural California, Black liberals in the south, and Latinos of any persuasion in the Sun Belt—by pitting them against voters in unrelated areas.

Appointments to the Electoral College, which selects the president and vice president, are made in most states under a *winner-take-all system* where the majority winner receives all a state's electors. For example, if a state has 10 electors and voters are split 51%-to-49% on a candidate, the 51% winner gets all 10 electors. On a national scale, this distorts outcomes. On average, voters in battleground states have *200 times the voting power* in presidential elections than voters in less highly contested areas.

Threats to *control* include roadblocks making it harder for people to vote and attempts at overturning elections.

Although there have been no instances of widespread election fraud in the United States, select factions versed in doublespeak (particularly Republicans) pursue schemes to disenfranchise voters under the guise of preventing non-existent fraudsters. Enacting voter ID laws, cleansing voter lists, challenging mail-in voting, and filing frivolous lawsuits to win elections using courts rather than ballot boxes are common tactics.

Finally, violence and pressure campaigns geared towards illegally retaining positions. From March 1797 until January 2021, the peaceful transition of power had been a hallmark of American democracy. It guaranteed that *votes meant something*, that political power would change based on the force of voting alone.

When this system breaks down, the government stops working for us. The bedrock of our democracy is the vote. Being able to do it and knowing it will be respected. It's being undercut, and it's time to correct course before it is too late.