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OPINION

DAILY DIGITS
25 Percent of British veterinarians who claim to have treated a drunk dog.
Source: Halifax Pet Insurance

THE SALAD STRIKES BACK | CEZARY PODKUL

Can money bring voters to polls?

In Arizona, voters will decide today on a ballot measure that would reward one lucky voter with lottery funds

Election Day is always a bitter-sweet time for me. I love the suspense, the excitement and the feeling of togetherness and unity as the whole country waits to see who its newly elected leaders are going to be.

However, as an immigrant, being ineligible to vote certainly dampens some of that excitement. Each Election Day, as I only dream of what it would feel like to cast a ballot, millions of Americans — about 80 million eligible voters in the 2004 general election alone — don't vote.

Obviously, low voter turnout is a real problem. And over the years, various quirky initiatives — such as the Votergasm pledge (Votergasm.org), under which voters pledge to withhold sex from non-voters — have been proposed. Yet still, nothing seems to be able to stem the general trend of decreasing voter participation.

Hence, on this Election Day, rather than endorsing any specific candidate, party or platform, I would like to heartily endorse a clever Proposition that's made its way on to the Arizona ballot: proposition 200, the Arizona Voter Rewards initiative (voter-rewards.org).

The idea behind the proposal is simple: increase voter turnout by awarding a \$1 million lottery prize in every election to one lucky Arizona voter. The money for the prize would come from the unclaimed prize fund of the Arizona State Lottery, and the law would be retroactive so that anyone who voted in either the September 2006 primary

and/or the November 2006 general elections would be eligible to win the prize.

"This is like a door prize at a church social," said Mark Osterloh, the passionate chairman of the Voter Rewards initiative, "and it doesn't cost you a penny."

However, opponents of the proposition argue that it is degrading to the very idea of voting. By turning the ballot into a lottery ticket, they contend, we would be sending voters the wrong message: Vote because of the chance to win \$1 million, not because it is your civic duty.

"Everybody should be voting because it's their duty to vote," Osterloh contends, but, citing a turnout of one in four eligible voters, he adds that "you have to have incentives to get people to do things."

And voting is no exception. In Australia, for example, voting is mandatory; those who fail to vote risk being fined or even imprisoned. No surprise, then, that voter turnout in Australia is at 95 percent. In contrast, according to data from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 48.3 percent of the eligible electorate voted in elections over the last 40 years.

In America, however, we cannot punish people for not voting since not voting is itself a matter of free speech and is therefore protected by the First Amendment. Thus, since Osterloh's proposal provides a non-coercive, constitutional way of increasing our shamefully low voter turnout, it's worth a try.

Admittedly, though, we must judge the proposal's success as much by the quality



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of the voters as by their quantity. "Voting participation in the U.S. is skewed by education and income. This plan offers hope of attracting a more representative voter base," Political Science professor Jack Nagel said.

However, Nagel also noted that critics would argue that the plan would bring a more uninformed electorate to the polls.

But "I expect that politicians would reach out to inform and persuade them and would offer policies more tailored to the needs of people who are now outside the political process," he said.

Osterloh believes that, once the voter decides to go ahead and vote, he or she will take care to learn about the candidates and the issues.

"If you want an educated voter, the first thing you need is a voter," Osterloh said.

If this is indeed the case, then the Arizona Voter Rewards initiative certainly deserves a chance. At the very worst, the turnout might not change at all, and the states' unclaimed lottery prizes will have been disbursed; at the very best, both the quality and quantity of the electorate may increase, in which case, the nation as a whole may benefit since other states may consider the same solution.

"It may not be [the] ideal way, but it's worth a try. It is good to have Arizona as our laboratory," Nagel said.