



IT'S TIME WE SHARED THE POWER OF 'X'

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TWO things define democracy: freedom and equality. Democracy is manifested by the vote. The vote is the great equaliser because it gives each eligible adult -- through the concept of one-man-one-vote -- an equal power to elect his leaders. Yet, even now, there are countries that have yet to join the democratic fraternity. So, Malaysians can count themselves lucky.

Article 119 of the Federal Constitution guarantees a Malaysian citizen aged 21 and above the right to vote, subject to certain conditions. But, of 15.47 million citizens who qualify, only 11.08 million have registered as voters, leaving 4.39 million, or nearly one-third, unaccounted for. It is a perennial problem that causes much hand-wringing and for which no real solution has been found.

So, after many years of discounting the idea of automatic voter registration, the Election Commission is now looking at the pros and cons of introducing it. Studies elsewhere have shown that automatic registration results in a higher voter turnout at elections. That certainly seems desirable. But does the end justify the means? If democracy is defined by freedom, would it be democratic to force people to exercise their right to register or to vote? And should the responsibility to register lie with the government or with the citizen?

What would be the sense in having freedom to choose, if that choice is surrendered to the government? In Australia, registration is compulsory, but failure to register does not result in a penalty. Once registered, however, voting is mandatory, and failure to vote results in a show-cause request and subsequently a fine. In the United Kingdom, registration is compulsory but voting isn't. Eight states in the United States have Election Day Registration -- that is, voter registration on election day itself.

In Malaysia, neither registration nor voting is compulsory. And, as things stand, registration in Malaysia is simple enough -- as simple as going to a post office and renewing a driver's licence. But what is lacking is the desire by the citizen to register and to vote. Voting is supposed to be a proactive act, not a reactive one. This can only come from citizens understanding their role and responsibility in determining the future. A voter doesn't have to inherit the past. A voter has the power to set the future of his own choosing. That is what the vote is about. But this choice has to begin with choosing to register.