

Ethan Allen Institute

Newsletter – May 2020 (Printer Edition)

Top Story: State and National Polls Show Lack of Confidence in Vote-by-Mail

Two polls, a [survey of Vermonters by True North Reports](#) and a national [poll by Rasmussen](#), show clearly that there is a profound lack of confidence that voting by mail will be safe and secure.

According to the TNR survey, despite the constant drumming by the media and left-wing politicians and activists that voter ID requirements are a form of suppression, 71 percent of Vermonters said “yes” when asked if an ID should be required to cast a ballot. Only 20 percent said no, and the remainder were unsure.

On the specific question of the use of absentee ballots, a majority of Fifty-three percent recognized that election officials don’t have the ability to verify the identity of persons filling out absentee ballots while less than three in 10 thought they could. A plurality of forty-one percent (41%) agreed that the absentee ballots increases the likelihood of election fraud, while only thirty-three percent (33%) percent said it does not.

Nationally, Rasmussen found that Sixty-two percent (62%) of voters believe that having everyone vote by mail is likely to increase voter fraud, while just twenty-nine percent (29%) disagree. The totals include 39% who believe an increase in fraud is “Very Likely” and just 15% who say it is “Not at All Likely.” Within those numbers, 59% of independent voters believe voting by mail would probably lead to an increase in voter fraud, and even a plurality of Democrats agree, 48% who say it’s likely to 45% who disagree.

There has been a long and persistent campaign by left-wing activists aided and abetted by the media to portray any measure to prevent vote fraud as somehow anti-democratic. Of course, it’s not. Quite the opposite. And, if politicians who care about the integrity of elections were willing to take a stand, they would find solid majorities of citizens on their side.

-- Rob Roper, president of the Ethan Allen Institute.

Commentary: Recovery Moving Forward

By John McLaughry

On November 3, 1927 Vermont took a hell of a shellacking. October had been extremely rainy. Then in two days nearly a foot of torrential rain fell on most of Vermont.

The soggy mountain forests couldn't hold it. Down it came in gushing brooks and wild brown rivers, sweeping away nearly two hundred years of settlement and improvement.

The flood waters made nine thousand people homeless, damaged or destroyed 1,258 bridges, washed out 250 miles of the Central Vermont Railroad; and claimed the lives of 84 people.

"The low-lying farms suffered the greatest disaster. Where topsoil was not carried away, layers of gravel and sand three feet deep had buried it, and when the flood subsided, fields and pastures were strewn with half-buried cattle and other livestock...In a few hours of violence Vermont had suffered a property loss of some thirty million dollars in farm, industry, highways, private and public buildings," according to historian W. Storrs Lee. That's the equivalent of \$445 million today.

Bear in mind, in 1927 there was no health or unemployment insurance, no small business loans, no farm disaster payments, no Social Security or welfare checks, and no Federal recovery programs. The only Federal money Vermont got from Washington was \$2.5 million for rebuilding major roads and bridges. The Red Cross played a noteworthy role in disaster relief, but "most of the mopping up was done by Vermonters themselves" (Lee).

Now move forward 93 years. Vermont's population has grown by 74%, to 623,000. Our state is tied together, and to New England and the world beyond, by a network of major highways, railroads, air freight and internet. The village-based agricultural economy of 1927 has become an economy strongly dependent on trade.

Now we have been shellacked by another natural disaster, COVID-19. But where in 1927 the unflooded parts of Vermont kept the economy running, and brought relief to the people of the flood damaged areas, this time the whole country has taken the shellacking. Even if our death toll (35 as of 4/16) remains below the 1927 level (84), the shutting down of the economy for fear of virus transmission has produced still uncalculated millions of dollars in lost incomes, closed schools and colleges, and tottering businesses.

Not the least of the catastrophic effects is the disappearance of hundreds of millions of dollars in tax revenues over the next two or three years. The Federal CARES act and its successors will help individuals and businesses stay alive in a way inconceivable in 1927, but Washington will not supply much or any of the lost millions in tax revenues needed to sustain state and municipal governments.

Just one example: The consumption taxes that provide a third of the Education Fund revenues are expected to shrink by \$89 million by the end of the 2020 fiscal year two months from now. After spending all of its reserves, the Education Fund will likely come up \$40 million short by that date. Voters have already approved school year 2020-21 elementary and secondary school budgets \$73 million larger than this year's, even as the school population continues to decline.

Our school finance law makes residential school property taxes the last resource to cover shortfalls. Absent dramatic changes in spending and/or taxes, that fact points to shocking increases in school property tax rates – at a time when many thousands of Vermonters won't have enough income or savings to pay their property tax bills.

If there is any silver lining to this dark fiscal cloud, it is that it should cause wise policy leaders to reason thus: "We're already spending \$17,873 per K-12 pupil, fifth among the states, 51% above the 50-state average. We can't possibly increase local education spending when the taxes to finance it are tanking, along with income and other

taxes. We must reexamine what Vermonters are getting for their billion and a half dollars of education spending.”

“This will require knowledge, imagination, and especially courage. Our high-spending K-12 education system got that way by 50 years of decisions heavily influenced by special interest (“stakeholder”) pleading. The economic shock of the pandemic forces us to do things differently. We can maintain today’s educational quality, and probably improve it, but it will have to be done over the fervent resistance of those interests.”

That will require not just wise policy, but a strengthened civil society in our towns and cities where, as after the 1927 flood, citizens come together to improve the education of our children, the wellness of families, the care of old people, the economic strength of our small businesses, and every other aspect of mutual aid and flourishing community life.

- John McClaughry is vice president of the Ethan Allen Institute

Commentary: Voting By Mail Needs to Be More Secure

By Rob Roper

Given the potential COVID-19 health risks associated with standing in line at polling places there are understandably more calls for a move to voting by mail. This may turn out to be necessary, but, if we are going to change the way we vote, we also have to ensure that the new ways are just as secure as the old. Otherwise citizens cannot have faith that the outcomes of elections are fair, accurate, and therefore, valid.

The bedrock principle that ensures public confidence in the outcomes of elections is “one person, one vote.” In a polling place, the secret ballot ensures that Warren Buffet’s vote carries exactly the same weight as his secretary’s. But, voting by mail as presently practiced cannot guarantee that the secret ballot and one person/one vote is actually taking place.

When citizens go to the polls to cast their ballots, each vote is cast under the supervision of election officials. Each voter presents his or herself and is checked off to ensure they only vote once. Not only is each voter ensured privacy for filling out his or her ballot, away from any influence or witness as to how he or she votes, but the community at large is ensured that the votes cast were made without the undue influence of other parties. This is every bit as important.

At a polling place, if election officials check off 500 voters as they pass through but find 600 ballots in the box, a red flag goes up that something is fishy. But, if those same election officials receive 600 absentee ballots in the mail, one hundred of which were fraudulently “stuffed,” the likelihood of that red flag going up is minimal. (In fact, you’d probably get a self-congratulatory press release praising the “fact” that voter participation was up twenty percent over the last cycle.)

Secrecy and singularity cannot be guaranteed with votes done through the mail. Election officials have too few and too weak tools for ensuring that the voter to whom “one vote” is being attributed is actually the “one person” who filled out the ballot. Or, if it is the correct voter, neither election officials nor the community at large has any idea whether or not inappropriate pressure was being applied by a spouse, caregiver, boss,

landlord or campaign operative looking over the shoulder of the voter as he or she filled out the ballot.

We can't know in this case, for example, that Buffet didn't use his power and wealth to bribe his secretary to vote a certain way or threaten to fire her if she didn't. The more we rely on absentee ballots, the more inequity we build into the system as it allows for the rich and powerful, either individuals or organizations, avenues and opportunities to buy or bully votes. The poor and elderly are the most likely to be victimized under such a system.

This is what happened in the North Carolina 9th, a U.S. congressional district with a bigger population than the entire state of Vermont, when the 2018 results were nullified by a court due to the decisive level of "vote harvesting" of absentee ballots. Vote harvesting is when campaign operatives show up on someone's doorstep who has just received an absentee ballot (sometimes requested by that same campaign operative without the knowledge of the voter) and offers to "help", threaten or bribe the voter fill out the form in a pre-determined way. In some cases the operative would just steal the ballot right out of the mailbox. In the NC-9 race, not only were fraudulent absentee votes for the cheating candidate turned in, legitimate votes for his opponent were collected destroyed before they even got into the hands of election officials.

If Vermont is going to rely increasingly on absentee ballots in elections, Secretary of State Jim Condos and members of the legislative Government Operations Committees need to be able to demonstrate that the kind of vote harvesting schemes that took place in North Carolina, and other districts to less dramatic effect, cannot happen here. And they need to show in detail exactly how the safeguards work in practice to ensure that they don't. If reliable safeguards are not in place now, they need to be by the August primary and November general elections.

It's not enough to scoff and say it's not an issue and "our elections will be safe and secure." It is an issue. We've seen it happen. The reason so few people are prosecuted for vote fraud isn't because elections are secure, it is because the rules have been loosened to the point where it is practically impossible to detect, and, if detected, to catch and prosecute offenders. Just look at how many tax/identity fraud schemes pop up targeting senior citizens every year. Do you really think people who would steal an old lady's social security check would draw an ethical line at stealing her vote when control over millions, billions and trillions of tax dollars are at stake?

Yes, we want everybody to be able to vote and to do so as safely and conveniently as possible. But these goals must be met in concert with maintaining the security of and confidence in the one person/one vote standard. Otherwise, we have lost, or rather throw away, the democratic bedrock of our republic.

- Rob Roper is president of the Ethan Allen Institute.

Events

April 21 POSTPONED. EAI's 27th annual Jefferson Day dinner will feature popular Vermont economist Dr. Art Woolf speaking on "Settling Mr. Jefferson's Republic, and Resettling Ours" has been postponed until we are able to determine a safe time to

reschedule the event. If you have any questions, please contact us at eai@ethanallen.org or call 802-695-1448.

For information about putting on EAI events, please email rob@ethanallen.org.

News & Views

State Revenue Falling Off a Cliff. A [new projection](#) by the Vermont legislature's chief economist found the state could lose out on \$430 million in tax revenue next fiscal year — or 17.4 percent of what it was counting on collecting. The analysis, provided to two House committees Wednesday morning by economist Tom Kavet, is the first to look beyond the already grim forecasts for the current fiscal year, which ends in June, and consider the longer-term impact of the coronavirus pandemic. ([Seven Days, 4/30/20](#))

Potentially Massive Property Tax Increase on the Horizon. Due to the loss of revenue feeding the state education fund from the Rooms & Meals, Sales & Use taxes as well as other “feeders” Rep. Janet Ancel, chair of the House Ways & Means Committee, estimates it would require a 17¢ property tax increase to make up the difference.

A Keen Observation (And Sense of Irony). “Having worked in one of the top small schools in our state for 33 years, I am deeply appreciative of the dedication of our teachers and the importance of local schools. I am also appreciative of the role the VTNEA has played in raising the salary and benefit levels from pretty abysmal levels in the 70’s and 80’s. Unfortunately at this time, Vermont NEA President Tinney’s comment, “A very small segment of our population holds an outside share of resources, sheltering them from a reality of scarcity faced by thousands of Vermonters every day,” might also be applied to the share that K-12 teachers salaries, health benefits and pensions now take out of the state budget. The pandemic has heightened the need for adjustments and it will be a challenge for the VTNEA to move beyond looking after the narrow self-interests of its members to help making the changes necessary for the overall good of the people of our state.” -- John Freitag, commenting on [VT Digger, 4/27/20](#)

Key Metric Says “Open the Economy NOW!” As the reason for the shutdown was to avoid a particular cause of death (lack of hospital capacity), it would follow that the only relevant metric for deciding on whether to re-open the economy is hospital capacity. The key question our leaders should be asking themselves with regard to re-opening the economy is whether we currently have an issue with hospital capacity? The answer to this question is a resounding ‘no’. -- Aimee Stephenson, PHD, Microbiology and Molecular Genetics ([EAI, 4/28/20](#))

No Beer to Cry in. “The organization that represents makers of artisan spirits in Vermont warned Tuesday that losses from the coronavirus may force a large number of craft producers across the country out of business — permanently.” ([WPTZ, 4/29/20](#)) This would be a terrible blow for the Vermont economy and the Vermont brand.

The Vote-by-Mail Mess in Wisconsin. “Three tubs of absentee ballots that never reached voters were discovered in a postal center outside Milwaukee. At least 9,000 absentee ballots requested by voters were never sent, and others recorded as sent were never received. Even when voters did return their completed ballots in the mail, thousands were postmarked too late to count — or not at all.” -- [New York Times, 4/9/2020](#)

VT Environmentalists think this is a great time for a Carbon Tax! Dr. Alan Betts, an atmospheric scientist who works closely with the Vermont legislature on environmental issues, published an [op-ed](#) in which he states, “Now is a perfect time to add a fossil carbon tax, when the price of oil is low, to fund the transition to an efficient society powered by renewable energy. The public would not notice....” ([Times Argus, 4/25/20](#)) There’s democracy in action for ya! Sneak in a policy when the public is distracted by other issues. Unfortunately, this sentiment also exists in force in the House Energy & Technology Committee, and in the Climate Caucus. But, make no mistake, the public is paying attention and we will definitely notice.

Good! 'Common property' amendment dead for this year. “PR9, the proposed amendment to the Vermont Constitution declaring natural resources “the common property of all the people,” will not be taken up this year, lead sponsor Sen. Chris Bray (D-Addison), chair of the Senate Natural Resources and Energy Committee, said yesterday. In response to a Vermont Daily inquiry, Bray answered, “I can say, with regret, that the Constitutional amendment will not be taken up. I am sure we don’t have enough time for that work, which, by virtue of its very nature, requires the greatest diligence of all — i.e. the careful amending our legal foundation, a/k/a the Vermont Constitution.” (Vt Daily 4/28/20)

Public Transportation Crashes. “Overall, public transportation has seen a 55% reduction in overall service hours, and a 72-75% decrease in ridership. “That does allow for the social distancing, in most instances,” MacDonald said. Demand response – that is, calling for a ride – is down by 80%. Green Mountain Transit (GMT) riders have dropped from 7,000 a day to 2,000 a day. “We’ve lost a lot of those commuters. Those that remain are the true needs riders for essential services. We can expect that to be consistent during the emergency services.” MacDonald also noted that “in Burlington, we’re seeing a higher percentage of people choosing not to wear face coverings.”

Don’t Look to Fed for Help on Pensions. Senate Majority Leader and President Trump have both strongly signaled that they have no intention of letting fiscally irresponsible states use the COVID-19 crisis to collect bail out money to patch up self-inflicted financial crisis that existed before the pandemic, ie unfunded pension liabilities. “I would certainly be in favor of allowing states to use the bankruptcy route,” McConnell [said recently](#). Vermont’s pension crisis was huge before this economic body blow, and, because we were already lowballing estimates of needed taxpayer funding on overly optimistic expectations of investment returns, the precipitous drop in the stock market will make matters far more challenging – and expensive – moving forward.

Climate Justice speaks: “... the connections between coronavirus and the climate crisis are on our minds a lot these days. There's a lot to consider: how many of the same

communities are worst impacted in both crises, and for deeply interconnected reasons; how [industrial food systems](#) and capitalism have contributed to both crises; how governments are using this crisis as an opportunity to [build up fossil fuel infrastructure](#), [repeal environmental protections](#), and [criminalize climate activism](#).”- Lily of [350.org](#) (4/10/20)

Useful Thought: “Grand designs for Vermont to somehow solve global warming are revealed now as expensive and unrealistic -- taxing Vermonters to buy EV cars and solar panels manufactured out-of-state (or out of the country) will NOT do a thing to grow our economy or pay our bills.” - John Klar (April 8, 2020)

VSC Not Alone in Financial Distress. “With colleges shuttered, revenues reduced, endowment investments plunging, and the added struggle of shifting from physical to virtual education, Moody’s has downgraded the entire sector to negative from stable. The American Council on Education believes revenues in higher education will decline by \$23bn over the next academic year. In one survey this week, 57 per cent of university presidents said they planned to lay off staff. Half said they would merge or eliminate some programmes, while 64 per cent said that long-term financial viability was their most pressing issue. It’s very likely we are about to see the hollowing out of America’s university system.” ([Financial Times, 5/27/20](#))

Movie of the Month

[Planet of the Humans](#)

Written and Directed by Jeff Gibbs

Produced by Michael Moore

Rumble Media, 2020 (1hr 40 min)

Michael Moore and Jeff Gibbs have produced a documentary, *Planet of the Humans*. This documentary takes aim at the renewable energy industry and many of the heretofore unreported negative impacts it has on our environment. Many of the scenes take place in Vermont and features many Vermont environmental personalities. Since movie theaters are currently closed, Moore and Gibbs released the documentary on YouTube on April 21, in time for the 50th anniversary of Earth Day on April 22. You can watch it for free at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zk11vI-7czE>. So far, it has over 4 million views on YouTube, and 34,000 comments.

To say this film is controversial is putting it mildly. As my friend, blogger Rod Adams put it: “Like many Moore films, this one has a cast of white-hatted scientists and activists opposing black-hatted billionaires, bankers, corporate leaders and politicians. In what may be upsetting to some, this film’s black-hatted group includes the leaders of numerous major environmental groups including the Sierra Club, [350.org](#), and Riverkeepers.” (<https://atomicinsights.com/nuclear-energy-makes-a-cameo-appearance-in-jeff-gibbs-planet-of-the-humans/>)

Yes, this film is a descendent of *Roger and Me*, Moore's earlier film about General Motors CEO Roger Smith. However, in this film, the most easily identified "bad guy" is Bill McKibben. McKibben is a professor at Middlebury College and founder of 350.Org, a not-for-profit that attempts to limit carbon dioxide release to 350 ppm in the atmosphere. It is currently around 415 ppm.

Most of us Vermonters will enjoy watching much of the film, especially the many parts set in Vermont. There's a scene at a solar festival, where the festivities are supposedly running off solar arrays. But the film makers literally go behind the curtain to show that the festival had to plug into the regular old power grid to run the amplifiers for the stage show.

There are painful scenes of clearing mountain land for wind turbines at Lowell Mountain. There are scenes where McKibben promotes the use of biomass, especially at Middlebury's boilers, and scenes where he evades questions on biomass. (By the way, if you do watch the film, watch the final credits, which include updates to many of the issues described in the film.)

Outside of Vermont, the movie exposes the negative environmental impacts of mining materials for solar panels, wind turbines and batteries for electric vehicles.

The outcry from more traditional environmentalists has been loud and long. They claim the film has one inaccuracy after another. They say, for example, that newer solar panels will last 20 years, and the film describes solar panels as lasting ten years. They are concerned that McKibben has been "attacked" as inconsistent in the film, when he has simply changed his position on biomass over time.

However, the main points of the film's arguments are very solid: renewables take up a lot of land, interrupt a lot of ecosystems, and won't save the planet from global warming. This film has already opened a new conversation about renewables, and millions of people are taking part. After this film, the idea that renewable proponents are wearing the white hats will never be quite as solidly entrenched.

This is good. Unfortunately, the main conclusion of the film is that we humans are the problem. We must reduce our consumption. We must also reduce the population of earth by billions of people. The problems are not just about renewable energy. The problem is humans.

(Spoiler alert) One of the filmmakers has suggested that you watch it with a friend because people are reporting that they feel sick or cried after watching the film. And if the supposedly-required death of billions of people doesn't upset you, you can watch the last scenes of the movie, which show an orangutan dying because its habitat has been destroyed. Indeed, I agree that you should watch this film with a friend.

The good news that this Michael Moore film has opened an important conversation about the role of renewables. The bad news is the conclusion is no-exit-Malthusian.

- Review by Meredith Angwin, who formerly headed the Energy Education Project of the Ethan Allen Institute.

The Final Word

May Survey: Vote by Mail

Can Vermonters trust the results of elections run entirely (or mostly) through the mail?

- Yes, voting by mail will be reliable and accurate.
- No, voting by mail is not secure from fraud and error.
- Maybe, if new security measures are implemented.

[CLICK HERE](https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/VTvotebymail) to take the survey! <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/VTvotebymail>

April Survey Results: COVID-19 Response

How has the response to the COVID-19 vDo virus been?

- Too aggressive. 62.9% (78)
- Not aggressive enough. 8.87% (11)
- About right. 28.23% (35)

