

Gail Marshall: We're California: Let's make voting fun

By Gail
Marshall



You stand at, say, the Fulton Mall underpass with two choices facing you: Take the escalator, or take the stairs. If it's me, and apparently most people like me, I'm takin' a ride to the top.

Wait a second. Rewind. Look again at that staircase. What if those steps were not cement but oversized piano keys. Think of the movie, "Big." Every time you took a step, you played a note.

OK, I'm going to be dancing all over that staircase. In a real experiment conducted by Volkswagen a few years ago, suddenly I'm one of 66% *more* people who took to those stairs.

What Volkswagen explored in a global contest was this: Will people do what's good for them if it's fun?

Another entrant, from Serbia, focused on this goal: Train children to fasten their seat belts. A car was rigged up so the entertainment features, the headphones and the DVD, would not work unless the belts were snapped. Bingo. Compliance skyrockets.

The idea is being tested in Sweden in the hope it could be applied to all vehicles in the future.

That got me noodling. What other good things could happen if we made it fun?

The current push is to get people to vote. President Barack Obama brought up the topic of mandatory voting last

week. Oh, yeah. People love anything mandatory. But it does make it easier. Oregon just made voter registration automatic. That gets them halfway there. But folks still have to mark the ballot and send it in, because they have mail-in ballots. We will watch and see if that helps.

Another group of local people have a high-minded proposal. Create more rigorous civics classes in high school and make them a requirement. We don't vote, the theory goes, because we haven't been taught the importance of our vote. We need more education.

I so wish for all these things to work. But part of me says, are you kidding me?

Case in point: Fresno's recent judicial race, where the top two candidates just spent \$1 million in a record-breaking campaign.

The winner, Lisa Gamoian, holder of a juris doctorate, and celebrated prosecutor with decades of experience, hadn't voted in about 10 years. I'm going to guess she has probably read more books than are in the entire branch of Fresno's Barnes and Noble.

Her opponent, Rachel Hill, another juris doctorate, only voted about half the time, and she defended that record.

More classes for high school kids, seriously? Stop the madness!

It's time to make voting fun.

Consider the obvious — a lottery. Everyone who votes gets entered.

Would that work? Based on another Volkswagen campaign experiment, sure.

The winner of the Volkswagen Fun Theory award was an American, Kevin Richardson. His idea was to put up speed monitors with cameras on the road. People speeding got tickets, and people who were going under the speed limit were entered into a lottery to win the money raised by the speeders' fines. People slowed wa-a-a-y down.

His idea was so good that Volkswagen teamed up with those sensible people in Stockholm, Sweden, and made this a reality.

I say we have a "fun theory" contest ourselves in the Valley and see who can make voting a blast.

Valley people love competitions. Why not pit cities against each other for big prizes? The city that gets the most voters gets a Taylor Swift or U2 concert with tickets given to voters. Or appeal to our philanthropic side and the winning city gets to choose a charity. We could bring clean water to one of our neighboring towns.

Then our next task will be to get better candidates by making running for office more fun. Right now you get to walk precincts, dropping off expensive print materials. Next, spend hours on the phone begging your friends, relatives and people you never met to cough up money that would be far better spent on charities rather than TV commercials we all hate watching, robocalls we ignore or mailers we throw in the trash. Plan to loan yourself several grand as well.

"Fun is the easiest way to change people's behavior for the better," according to Volkswagen. "We apply this to every environmentally friendly innovation we make. It should never be a compromise to help the planet. We believe more people will act responsibly and drive greener if they have fun on the way."

Even if your candidate doesn't win, it would take a little of the sting out if we could each make a selfie video saying, "We voted in the election — we're going to Disneyland!"

Gail Marshall is an associate editor for the Opinion pages. What's your big idea for making voting and running for office more fun? Send your thoughts in 200 words or fewer to letters@fresnobee.com.

