

## CHAPTER 8

# Political Participation

### OBJECTIVES

This chapter reviews the much-discussed lack of voter turnout and of other forms of political participation in the United States. After reading and reviewing the material in this chapter, the student should be able to do each of the following:

1. Explain why the text believes that the description, the analysis, and many of the proposed remedies for low voter turnout rates in the United States are generally off base.
2. Compare the way that turnout statistics are tabulated for the United States and for other countries, and explain the significance of these differences.
3. Describe how control of the elections has shifted from the states to the federal government, and explain what effect this shift has had on Blacks, women, and youth.
4. State both sides of the debate over whether voter turnout has declined over the past century, and describe those factors that tend to hold down voter turnout in the United States.
5. Discuss those factors that appear to be associated with high or low political participation.

### OVERVIEW

The popular view that Americans don't vote as a result of apathy is not quite right. It would be much closer to the truth to state that Americans don't register to vote—but once registered, Americans vote at about the same rate as citizens in other nations. There are also many factors—having nothing to do with apathy—that shape participation rates. These include age, race, party organization, barriers to registration, and popular views about the significance of elections.

The most powerful determinants of participation are schooling and information, and the next most powerful is age. Race makes a difference, but black participation rates approximate white rates when controls are in place for socio-economic status.

Compared to other nations, Americans vote at lower rates, but more frequently and for many more offices. For these reasons, elections make a bigger difference in the conduct of public affairs in the United States than elsewhere. Americans also engage somewhat more frequently in various non-electoral forms of participation, such as writing letters to officeholders, attending meetings, and other political activities.

### CHAPTER OUTLINE WITH KEYED-IN RESOURCES

- I. A closer look at nonvoting
  - A. Alleged problem: low turnout of voters in the U.S. compared to Europe
    1. Data are misleading: tend to compare turnout of voting-age population; turnout of registered voters reveals problem is not so severe
    2. Real problem is low voter \_\_\_\_\_ rates
      - a) Proposed solution: get-out-the-vote drives
      - b) But this will not help those who are not registered

3. \_\_\_\_\_ is not the only cause of nonregistration
  - a) Registration has costs in the U.S.; there are no costs in European countries where registration is \_\_\_\_\_
  - b) \_\_\_\_\_ law of 1993 took effect in 1995, lowered costs and increased registration throughout the country
- B. Voting is not the only way of \_\_\_\_\_—by other measures, Americans may participate in politics more than Europeans.
- C. Important question: how do different kinds of participation affect the government?
- II. The rise of the American electorate (THEME A: POPULAR PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIONS)
  - A. From state to federal control
    1. Initially, \_\_\_\_\_ decided who could vote and for which offices
    2. This led to wide variation in federal elections
    3. Congress has since reduced state prerogatives through law and constitutional amendment.
      - a) 1842 law: House members elected by district
      - b) \_\_\_\_\_ (1870): seemed to give suffrage to African Americans
        - (1) Opened the door to literacy tests, poll taxes, and grandfather clauses
        - (2) Voting Rights Act of 1965 finally guaranteed right to vote to Blacks
      - c) Women given right to vote by \_\_\_\_\_ Amendment (1920); participation rose immediately, but no major impact on electoral outcomes
      - d) 18-year-olds given suffrage by \_\_\_\_\_ Amendment (1971); voter turnout among the newly eligible was low, and has continued to fall
    4. National standards now govern most aspects of voter eligibility
    5. \_\_\_\_\_ Amendment was ratified in 1961, giving District of Columbia residents the right to vote in presidential elections.
  - B. Voter turnout
    1. Debate about declining percentages of eligible adults who vote: two theories
      - a) Real decline caused by lessening popular interest and decreasing party mobilization
      - b) Apparent decline, induced in part by the more honest ballot counts of today
        - (1) Parties once printed the ballots
        - (2) Ballots were cast in public
        - (3) Parties controlled the counting
        - (4) Rules regarding voter eligibility were easily circumvented
        - (5) \_\_\_\_\_ ballot (standard, government, rather than party, printed, and cast in secret) was adopted throughout the country by 1910
    2. Most scholars see some real decline due to several causes:
      - a) Registration is more difficult—there are longer residency requirements; educational qualifications; discrimination; and registration has to occur far in advance of elections
      - b) \_\_\_\_\_ controversy in 2000 presidential election has provided for some changes to make voting more consistent nationally, but stops short of creating a uniform national voting system
      - c) Continuing drop after \_\_\_\_\_ cannot be easily explained, and may be a function of how turnout is calculated, rather than a substantial phenomenon
    3. Some scholars believe that non-voters mirror voters, so their absence has little effect on electoral outcomes

## III. Who participates in politics? (THEME B: POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND VOTING)

## A. Forms of participation

1. Tendency to exaggerate participation
  - a) Voting the commonest form of political participation, but to \_\_\_\_\_ percent of citizens report voting regularly when they have not \_\_\_\_\_
  - b) If voting is exaggerated, other forms of participation also likely to be exaggerated
2. Verba and Nie's six forms of participation and six kinds of U.S. citizens
  - a) \_\_\_\_\_ rarely vote, contribute to political organizations, or discuss politics: (little education, low income, young, many Blacks; 22 percent)
  - b) \_\_\_\_\_: vote but do little else; not much education or income, older
  - c) \_\_\_\_\_ vote and get involved in campaign activities; more education, \_\_\_\_\_ interested in politics, identify with a party, take strong positions
  - d) \_\_\_\_\_: nonpartisan community activists with a local focus
  - e) \_\_\_\_\_ don't vote or participate in campaigns or political organizations, but contact politicians about specific problems
  - f) \_\_\_\_\_ Participate in all forms of politics (highly educated, high income, middle age; 11 percent)

## B. The causes of participation

1. Those with schooling or political information are more likely to vote
2. \_\_\_\_\_ vote more because church involvement develops the skills associated with political participation
3. Men and women vote at the same rate
4. Race
  - a) \_\_\_\_\_ participation is lower than that of whites overall
  - b) \_\_\_\_\_ Controlling for socioeconomic status, Blacks participate at a higher rate than whites
5. Studies show no correlation between distrust of political leaders and not voting
6. As turnout has declined, registration barriers have been dropping and so they cannot account for the differences
7. Several small factors decrease turnout
  - a) More youths, Blacks, and other minorities in population are pushing down the percentage of \_\_\_\_\_ adults who are registered and vote
  - b) Parties are less effective in mobilizing voters
  - c) Remaining impediments to registration have some discouraging effects
  - d) Voting is \_\_\_\_\_ in other nations
  - e) Possible feeling that elections do not matter
8. Democrats, Republicans fight over solutions
  - a) No one really knows who would be helped by increased turnout
  - b) \_\_\_\_\_ tend to be poor, minority, or uneducated.
  - c) \_\_\_\_\_ But an increasing percentage of college graduates and white-collar workers are also not voting
  - d) Hard to be sure that turnout efforts produce gains for either party: Jesse Jackson in 1984 increased registration of southern whites even more than southern Blacks

## C. The meaning of participation rates

1. Americans vote less, but \_\_\_\_\_ more
  - a) Other forms of activity are becoming more common
  - b) Some forms of participation are more common here than in other countries
2. Americans elect more officials and have more elections
3. U.S. turnout rates are heavily skewed to higher status persons

**IMPORTANT TERMS****\*activists**

People who tend to participate in all forms of politics.

## IMPORTANT TERMS

* <b>activists</b>	People who tend to participate in all forms of politics.
* <b>Australian ballot</b>	A government-printed ballot of uniform dimensions to be cast in secret that many states adopted around 1890 to reduce voting fraud associated with party-printed ballots cast in public.
* <b>grandfather clause</b>	A clause in registration laws allowing a person who do not meet registration requirements to vote if he or his ancestor voted before 1867.
* <b>literacy test</b>	A requirement that citizens pass a literacy test in order to register to vote.
* <b>poll tax</b>	A requirement that citizens pay a tax in order to register to vote.
* <b>registered voters</b>	People who are registered to vote.
* <b>voting age population</b>	Citizens who are eligible to vote after reaching a minimum age requirement.
* <b>white primary</b>	The practice of keeping Blacks from voting in southern states' primaries through arbitrary use of registration requirements and intimidation.

## THEME A: POPULAR PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIONS

### Instructor Resources

Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals, A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals*. New York: Random House, 1971.

M. Margaret Conway, Gertrude Steuernagel, and David Ahern, *Women and Political Participation: Cultural Change in the Political Arena*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2004.

M. Margaret Conway, *Political Participation in the United States*, 3rd ed. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2000.

Rodolfo O. de la Graza and Louis DeSipio, *Ethnic Ironies: Latino Politics in the 1992 Elections*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996.

John Gastil, *By Popular Demand: Revitalizing Representative Democracy Through Deliberative Elections*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000.

Pei-te Lien, *The Making of Asian-America through Political Participation*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001.

James A. Morone, *The Democratic Wish: Popular Participation and the Limits of American Government*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998.

Randy Shaw, *The Activist's Handbook: A Primer for the 1990s and Beyond*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996.

## Summary

It is a fallacy that fewer Americans than Europeans, in proportional terms, vote. However, voting rates in the United States have declined in recent decades. The reasons for this decline are complex. First, the United States has an almost bewildering number of elective offices, an estimated 521,000 positions. Voters' enthusiasm for elections is surely deflated by the sheer volume of names with which they must familiarize themselves. Too much democracy, in terms of either selecting government offices or making policy, is exhausting.

A second explanation for the poor turnout rate involves the mechanics of voting procedures. It is common in other countries for voting to be compulsory by law and for registration to be carried out automatically by the government. Mandatory voting would probably fail to survive a constitutional challenge in this country on First Amendment grounds; just as people have a right *not* to speak (like refusing to salute the flag), it would seem to follow that they have a right to refrain from voting—a form of speech—as well. Simplifying registration is a different matter. Republicans in particular have tended to resist any easing of registration standards. President Bush vetoed legislation designed to enable voters to register when obtaining a driver's license, but Congress passed the legislation in 1993 and it went into effect in 1995. The motor-voter reform has not altered the balance of Democrats and Republicans in states that have implemented this reform, though it has increased the number of registered independents.

The weakness of political parties must also be considered. In contrast to the past, parties today lack the patronage and other resources to mobilize voting blocs. Moreover, the impact of progressive reforms—such as the Australian ballot and stricter registration requirements for voting—have contributed to the loss of party influence over the electorate.

All these factors combine to explain why people do not vote in large numbers in the United States. Yet it is equally important to comprehend the other side of the issue, namely, the factors that do make people vote. Research underscores the significance of personal characteristics in a person's decision to participate on election day. Education is the most critical variable. As their educational level increases, individuals develop a stronger sense of civic duty and a greater interest in, and knowledge of, politics. But education alone is not a sufficient explanation, since voting rates have continued to decline despite the proliferation of college degrees in recent decades. Another characteristic that correlates with voting is age; older voters are more likely to participate. But here again, overall voting rates have diminished while the population has aged. Something other than personal characteristics therefore seem to play a role in election turnout—the characteristics of the election itself. Most recent elections have presented voters with uninspiring candidates who failed to stimulate interest or excitement. The lack of a realigning issue has made politics boring. However, turnout reaches notable peaks in certain elections, as in 1964 (a sharp ideological choice between candidates) and 1992 (an economy in recession and the charismatic candidate H. Ross Perot). Voters participate when aroused to do so.

## Discussion Questions

1. What have been the policy consequences of a broader electorate? Which extensions of the suffrage have changed policy outcomes, and which have mattered little?
2. What could be done to increase voter turnout? Would a program of reforms to increase voting turnout need to focus on the cost of voting, the benefits, or both? Which do current reform proposals do?
3. Why not simply make voting compulsory? If you do not want to use coercion to induce voting, why not pay people to vote? If elections are a public good in which all citizens have a stake, why should we depend on unpaid voluntary action?

4. Why is a large turnout a good thing? We say, rightly, that we have free speech in this country, even though most people have nothing particularly controversial or interesting to say. Why is our country less democratic if people simply choose not to vote?

## THEME B: POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND VOTING

### Instructor Resources

Geoffrey Evans, ed., *The End of Class Politics? Class Voting in Comparative Context*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.

Jeff Manza and Clem Brooks, *Social Cleavages and Political Change: Voter Alignments and U.S. Party Coalitions*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Thomas E. Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter: Public Involvement in an Age of Uncertainty*. New York: Vintage, 2003.

Robert W. Speel, *Changing Patterns of Voting in the Northern United States: Electoral Realignment, 1952–1996*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999.

Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers, *Why the White Working Class Still Matters*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.

Susan J. Tolchin, *The Angry American: How Voter Rage Is Changing the Nation*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998.

Herbert F. Weisberg, *Democracy's Feast: Elections in America*. Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 1995.

Herbert F. Weisberg and Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier, eds., *Reelection 1996: How Americans Voted*. Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 1999.

### Summary

There are many ways in which Americans can participate in politics—ranging from voting, which a majority do with some regularity, to belonging to a political club or organization, which only a few do. In an elaborate analysis of the ways people participate, Verba and Nie discovered six different kinds of citizens.

1. *Inactives* participate little if at all (22 percent).
2. *Parochial participants* neither vote nor engage in campaigns or community activity, but they do contact officials about specific, often personal, problems.
3. *Communalists* engage in community activities of a nonpartisan nature.
4. *Voting specialists* regularly vote but do little else.
5. *Campaigners* vote and also participate in conflicting political activities, such as campaigns.
6. *Complete activists* participate in all forms of political activity (11 percent).

Considering how few tangible rewards participation produces, it is not surprising that over 40 percent of Americans either do not participate at all or limit their participation to voting. Compared to citizens of other democracies, Americans vote less but engage more in communal activity. If voter turnout has

decreased over the past twenty years, however, it seems that other forms of participation, such as writing letters to public officials and engaging in demonstrations, have increased.

Who participates in politics is an important issue because those who participate are likely to have more political influence than those who do not. Higher education is the single most important factor in producing a high degree of participation. Older persons and men are also likely to be active. Blacks participate more than whites of equal socioeconomic status.

The absence of citizen involvement in other countries carries a cost in that governments have a freer hand to operate without much public scrutiny. As levels of participation escalate, governments come under greater pressure to be more open about their decision-making processes and outcomes. B. Guy Peters has found this pattern to exist in contemporary Great Britain: “The increasingly participative nature of British citizens...is making them increasingly resentful of their lack of involvement in government, and there is now a need to reexamine the secrecy and limited democracy of British government.” In the United States, the consistently participative character of Americans has arguably compelled the government to be more responsive to public concerns.

## Discussion Questions

1. What sorts of people are overrepresented among those who participate a great deal? Does this bias in participation suggest a bias in the policies that the government will adopt? If so, what sort?
2. What forms of political participation have become more common in recent years? Which are less common now? Why do you think this is the case?

## Abstract for Theme B

### How to Increase Political Participation in the United States

Benjamin Barber’s article, entitled “Voting is Not Enough: A Plan for Strengthening Democracy” (*Atlantic Monthly*, June 1984, pp. 45–52), has become a foundational work for those seeking to increase political participation in the United States. Barber proposed the following ten measures for promoting a strong democratic program aimed at participatory self-government:

1. *A national system of neighborhood assemblies* would instill civic competence, serve as a forum for public discussion on local, national, and international issues, and might eventually become “legislative bodies for local laws and even for national referenda.” In short, “strong democracy rescues the neighborhood from nostalgia and restores it to a central position in the democratic body politic.”
2. *A civic communications cooperative* would embrace the latest satellite transmission, video-computer interactions, and information retrieval systems, loosely modeled on the British Broadcasting Corporation. The cooperative would experiment with innovative civic broadcasting, develop standards for regional and national video town meetings, and oversee electronic polling and voting, among other functions.
3. *A civic videotex service and civic education postal act* would collectively enrich the flow of information to Americans. The former would be “a standard, nationwide, interactive service providing viewers with regular news, discussions of issues, and technical, political, and economic data....As a free channel offered by every cable company, the service would equalize access to information.” The latter postal act “would offer a heavily subsidized rate to all legitimate publishers of newspapers, journals, magazines, and books.”

4. *Selective experiments in decriminalization and informal justice* would allow local communities to handle minor disputes (petty misdemeanors, traffic violations, etc.) through surrogate civic judges and juries.
5. *A national initiative and referendum process* would enhance public political consciousness and probably participation as well.
6. *Selective experiments in electronic balloting* would allow it first to “be exploited as an instrument of deliberation and discussion—a medium for polling rather than for final voting.”
7. *Selective use of a lottery system of election* would “neutralize the skewing effect of wealth on public service, spread public responsibilities more equitably across the entire population, and involve a great many more citizens than is usual in representative systems in making and administering policy.”
8. *Selective experiments with voucher systems* would help to mobilize citizens to exercise choice in the development of public services such as schools and housing.
9. *A program of universal citizen service* “would enlist every young American—male and female—in a service corps for one to two years of either military or nonmilitary training and service. Service in the corps would thus become a concomitant of citizenship.” Areas of service would include the military, urban or rural projects, the international arena, and the logistics and administrative services corps. Rigorous training would precede service in any of the five corps.
10. *Common work and common action programs* would involve volunteers primarily at the neighborhood level.

### Discussion Questions

1. Which of these ten measures do you believe would be the most appealing to the American public, given current participation patterns? Which proposals would be the most objectionable?
2. Would an increase in voting in local, state, and federal elections be a logical consequence of the adoption of Barber’s proposals? Why or why not?
3. How can technological change be used to increase political participation? Or do you expect innovations in information and communication to discourage participation?