

## CHAPTER 8

# Political Participation

### OBJECTIVES

This chapter reviews the much-discussed low voter turnout and the poor percentage 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 ways 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 do not vote because 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. Many other factors—having nothing to do with apathy—also 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 with citizens of 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 nonelectoral 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 United States compared with Europe
    1. Since 1996, 60 percent of citizens aged 18 and older who are eligible to vote actually registered to vote during mid-term congressional elections with this percentage rising to 66 percent during presidential elections.
    2. Only 43.6 percent of those registered to vote actually voted in the 2006 midterm Congressional elections.

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3. Comparing the percentage of registered voters who voted to the total percentage of the population eligible to vote, we see that 70.7 percent of registered voters voted.
4. Cross-national comparisons of voting turnout rates between the United States and Europe reveal three factors:
  - a) Ranked in terms of average voter turnout as a percentage of voting-age population during the period 1945 to 2007, the United States ranks last behind democracies such as Germany (81 percent) and India (61 percent).
  - b) Ranked in terms of voter turnout among registered voters, the United States is in the middle of the pack, with France at 67 percent and the United Kingdom at 75 percent.
  - c) Ranked in terms of voter turnout during presidential elections, the United States would be in the top half of the pack at 70 percent, ahead of Japan (68 percent) and Canada (69 percent).
5. Apathy on national election days is not the source of the problem. A majority of those registered to vote actually participate. The problem is the low percentage of eligible person who actually register. How do Americans stimulate registration? How do they get registered voters to actually vote?
  - a) Various get-out-the-vote (GOTV) strategies have a limited impact on actual turnout.
  - b) When asked, registered voters who did not vote gave three reasons for not voting:
    - (1) About a quarter of registered voters stated they were too busy or had scheduling conflicts
    - (2) Family chores or obligations (12 percent)
    - (3) They believed their vote would not matter (12 percent).
6. Other proposals to the problem of nonvoting include making Election Day a national holiday or holding elections on weekends. Voting prior to elections by mail in ballots or no fault absentee voting have also failed to produce significant increases in voter participation.
  - a) 40 million registered voters failed to vote in the 2006 and 2008 elections.
  - b) 40 million voting-age citizens failed to register in either of the two elections.
7. In Europe, registration is done by the government. In the United States, the burden falls on the individual. Would reducing the cost of registrations increase the percentage of eligible voters who are actually registered?
  - a) In 1993, Congress passed the Motor Voter law, which allows people in all fifty states to register to vote when applying for driver's licenses and to register through the mail. Many did register but did not vote.
  - b) Data still show many have not registered.

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- B. Voting is not the only way to participate; 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: EXPANDING PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIONS)
  - A. From state to federal control
    - 1. Initially, states 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) By 1842 law, House members elected by district
      - b) Fifteenth Amendment (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 blacks the right to vote
      - c) Women given right to vote by Nineteenth Amendment (1920); participation rose immediately, but no major impact on electoral outcomes
      - d) Eighteen-year-olds given suffrage by Twenty-sixth Amendment (1971); voter turnout among the newly eligible was low, and has continued to fall
      - e) In 2008, 52 percent of the eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-old voting population voted. This was higher than 2000 (41 percent) and 2004 (48 percent) but lower than 1972 (55 percent) or 1992 (52 percent). From 1996 to 2004, under-thirty voters only accounted for 17 percent of the electorate. That figure rose to 18 percent in 2008.
    - 4. National standards now govern most aspects of voter eligibility.
    - 5. Twenty-third 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 decreasing 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) Australian ballot (standard, printed by the government rather than parties, 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: longer residency requirements; educational qualifications; discrimination; and registration has to occur far in advance of elections
      - b) Florida 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 1960 cannot be easily explained, and may be a function of how turnout is calculated, rather than a substantial phenomenon.
    - 3. Some scholars believe that nonvoters mirror voters in their demographic and ideological composition, so their absence has little effect on electoral outcomes.

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### III. Who participates in politics? (THEME B: REASONS FOR PARTICIPATION)

#### A. Forms of participation

1. Tendency to exaggerate participation
  - a) Voting is the commonest form of political participation, but 8 to 10 percent of citizens report voting regularly when they have not.
  - b) If voting is exaggerated, other forms of participation are also likely to be exaggerated.
2. Verba and Nie's six forms of participation characterize six kinds of U.S. citizens:
  - a) Inactives: rarely vote, contribute to political organizations, or discuss politics (little education, low income, young, many blacks; 22 percent)
  - b) Voting specialists: vote but do little else; not much education or income, older
  - c) Campaigners: vote and get involved in campaign activities; more education, interested in politics, identify with a party, take strong positions
  - d) Communalists: nonpartisan community activists with a local focus
  - e) Parochial participants: don't vote or participate in campaigns or political organizations, but contact politicians about specific problems
  - f) Activists: Participate in all forms of politics (highly educated, high income, middle aged; 11 percent)

#### B. Participation: Cause and Meaning

1.
  - a) Political participation of any form is greater among people who have gone to college, are employed. It is greater among white and blacks than Hispanics.
  - b) These differences are descriptive but make generalization problematic. Religion increasing political participation is too sweeping a statement. "Certain types of religious expression" can sometimes increase political participation.
  - c) Americans participate in nonvoting activities at higher rates than citizens of other democracies. According to a groundbreaking book published in 2008 by Corwin E. Smidt, factors influencing political participation are complicated. Americans vary by religious tradition but also by their level of public religious practice on a scale (high or low).
2. Holding other variables constant (income, race, gender, age, marital status) mainline Protestants are more likely than members of other religious traditions to participate in voluntary associations.
3. Regardless of religious tradition, those whose form of religious expression involves high levels of both public and private practice are more likely to join voluntary associations.
4. What about religion in relation to political engagement? Religion is a significant factor in determining who votes but no more than education or income.
5. One's form of religious expression has a greater impact in shaping civic rather than political participation.

#### C. The meaning of participation rates

1. Americans elect more officials and have more elections.
2. Latinos doubled their participation rates in elections between 1996 (5 percent) and 2008 (9 percent). Latino voters gain political information from church membership but also have politically relevant skills and attach quasi-religious meaning to civic engagement.

## IMPORTANT TERMS

<b>activist</b>	Person who tends 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 does not meet registration requirements to vote if he or his ancestor voted before 1867
<b>literacy test</b>	A requirement that citizens prove that they can read before registering 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 the 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: EXPANDING PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIONS

### Instructor Resources

Benjamin R. Barber. *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

M. Margaret Conway, Gertrude Steuernagel, and David Ahern. *Women and Political Participation: Cultural Change in the Political Arena*. 2nd ed. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2005.

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

David L. Epstein et. al., eds. *The Future of the Voting Rights Act*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006.

James H. Fowler and Oleg Smirnov. *Mandates, Parties, and Voters: How Elections Shape the Future*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007.

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

Richard Gunther, José Ramón Montero, and Hans-Jürgen Puhle. *Democracy, Intermediation, and Voting on Four Continents*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Michael Keren. *Blogosphere: The New Political Arena*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006.

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

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

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

Rafael López Pintor and Maria Gratschew. *Voter Turnout Since 1945: A Global Report*. Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2002.

Lorraine Gates Schuyler. *The Weight of Their Votes: Southern Women and Political Leverage in the 1920s*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

Gerry Stoker. *Why Politics Matters: Making Democracy Work*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Mariano Torcal and José Ramón Montero, eds. *Political Disaffection in Contemporary Democracies: Social Capital, Institutions, and Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Cliff Zukin et al. *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

### 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 (for example, 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. Congress passed the motor-voter reform legislation to make voter registration easier. By 2001–2002, over 40 percent of all voter registrations were submitted at state motor-vehicle offices. However, subsequent research has shown that the turnout among those who register at motor-vehicle offices was lower than those who registered using other methods.

The weakness of political parties must also be considered. In contrast to political parties of 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—has contributed to the loss of party influence over the electorate.

Despite the lack of voting participation by many Americans, it is an important hallmark of our democratic system that so many people are considered eligible to vote. Although the electorate once was restricted to white male property owners, it has since been expanded to include citizens of all economic means, minorities, women, and young adults. Only noncitizens and felons are routinely denied the right to vote.

### Discussion Questions

1. What have been the policy consequences of a broader electorate? Which extensions of the suffrage have changed policy outcomes? Which have mattered little?
2. Are some parts of the voter registration process or Election Day experience intimidating to young, inexperienced voters? If so, what might be some practical ways that new voters could become more familiar with the requisite procedures?

3. In November 2006, Arizona citizens rejected a ballot measure that would have made residents eligible to win a \$1 million cash prize simply by voting on Election Day. Are there potential drawbacks to offering financial incentives to encourage voter participation? Would the prospects of winning money in a random drawing (with odds much greater than the typical state lottery) entice you to vote? Would you have voted in favor of this proposal?
4. Why is a large turnout a good thing? Americans say, rightly, that they have free speech, even though most people have nothing particularly controversial or interesting to say. Why is the United States less democratic if people simply choose not to vote?

## THEME B: REASONS FOR PARTICIPATION

### Instructor Resources

David E. Campbell. *Why We Vote: How Schools and Communities Shape Our Civic Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Taeku Lee, S. Karthick Ramakrishnan, and Ricardo Ramírez, eds. *Transforming Politics, Transforming America: The Political and Civic Incorporation of Immigrants in the United States*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006.

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

S. Ramakrishnan. *Democracy in Immigrant America: Changing Demographics and Political Participation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.

Gary M. Segura and Shaun Bowler, eds. *Diversity in Democracy: Minority Representation in the United States*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005.

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.

Martin P. Wattenberg. *Is Voting for Young People?* New York: Pearson Longman, 2008.

### Summary

Americans can participate in politics in many ways, 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 offers, it is not surprising that over 40 percent of Americans either do not participate at all or limit their participation to voting. Compared with citizens

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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 do are likely to have more political influence than those who do not. Research underscores the significance of personal characteristics in a person's decision to participate on Election Day. Higher education is the single most important variable in determining participation. 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, because 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 decreased while the population has aged. Overall, minorities participate less than whites; however, after adjusting for income, researchers found that blacks participate more frequently than whites.

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 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. Do the unequal levels of participation found among groups of American voters affect the outcomes of elections? Do they alter the types of policies that are ultimately adopted? If you were a candidate, which group would you be more likely to actively court: a middle-aged, college-educated woman or a nineteen-year-old male high school graduate? Why?
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 "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 videotext 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 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, and so on) 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. Although the Internet now gives citizens greater access to political information than ever before, participation is decreasing—not increasing—among the electorate. In light of this, would Barber’s recommendations to increase civic competencies and improve access to political information significantly improve the participation rates of nonvoters? Why or why not?
3. Is there anything that Barber did not identify that you think would increase the political participation of young adults?