

## AP POLITICAL SCIENCE

### "DOES THE UNITED STATES HAVE A VOTING PROBLEM?"

#### Directions:

1. Read the provided articles below that discuss voter participation in the United States.
2. Develop a "**12-Step Program**" that you believe could "cure" the United States of its voting problem. **Your 12-Step Program MUST:**
  - reference facts and analysis presented in the above articles and your textbook regarding voter turnout in the United States
  - proceed logically from the 1st through the 12th step
  - provide a rationale as to **HOW** each step would help improve voter turnout rates

# Where Have All the Voters Gone?

By Thomas E. Patterson

*Mr. Patterson is the Bradlee Professor of Government & the Press at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. The article is derived from his recently published book, *The Vanishing Voter* (Knopf, 2002).*

Writing in the 1950s, political observers were optimistic about the future of voter participation. Turnout had fallen sharply in 1944 and 1948. In Britain as well as the United States, partisan activity was waning. No analyst has fully explained why this had to be the case or why the wartime governing parties in both England and the United States suffered stinging defeats in postwar legislative elections.

By the 1950s, however, voter turnout was back to normal, and all signs in the United States pointed to ever higher rates. College-educated Americans were half again as likely to vote as those who had not finished high school. With college attendance on the rise, the trend appeared unmistakable. Moreover, women had been steadily closing the voting gap that had existed ever since they had gained the vote in 1920. Their turnout rate initially was not much more than half that of men; by the 1950s, the gap had narrowed to 10 percentage points. And signs of racial change were clearly evident. It would only be a matter of time before literacy tests, poll taxes, and other legal barriers to black participation were removed.

Yet, turnout did not increase after the 1950s. In fact, the period from 1960 to 2000 marks the longest ebb in turnout in US history. Turnout was nearly 65 percent of the adult population in the 1960 presidential election and stood at only 51 percent in 2000. In 2002, turnout was 39 percent in the November election and a mere 18 percent in the congressional primaries.

Fewer voters are not the only sign of the public's waning interest in political campaigns. In 1960, 60 percent of the nation's television households had their sets on and tuned to the October presidential debates. In 2000, fewer than 30 percent were tuned in.

What's going on here? Why is the bottom dropping out on electoral participation? During the 2000 election campaign, as part of the Vanishing Voter Project at Harvard University's Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy ([www.vanishingvoter.org](http://www.vanishingvoter.org)), we interviewed nearly 100,000 Americans to discover why they are disengaging from elections. Combined with polling data from earlier elections, this evidence provides partial answers to the puzzle of the vanishing voter.

In this article, the first in a series of five to be presented a week apart on HHN, I will summarize the effect that changes in the political parties have had. Subsequent articles will explore the impact of changes in the media, candidate behavior, political competition, and election law.

## Parties and Participation

There was a long period in American history when elections were waged on economic issues powerful enough to define the two major parties and divide the public. These issues stemmed from Americans' deepest hopes and fears, and had the power to cement their loyalty to a party and draw them to the polls. That era ended with the triumph of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, which, along with Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, put in place government programs that greatly reduced the sources of economic resentment and insecurity that had fueled party conflict. A safety net for the economically vulnerable was in place, as were policy mechanisms for stabilizing the economy. An electoral majority that could be easily rallied by calls for economic redistribution no longer existed.

As the economic issue weakened, a large set of less comprehensive issues emerged. Civil rights, street crime, school prayer, and welfare dependency were among the earliest of these issues, which were followed by others including abortion, the environment, education, and global trade. All were important, but they intersected with each other in confounding ways. And none had the reach or the endurance of the economic issue. As a result, the issues of one election were usually different than the issues that had dominated the previous election or would be at the forefront in the next one.

How could the political parties create cohesive and enduring coalitions out of this mix of issues? The short answer is that they could not do so. The issues were too crosscutting and too numerous for either party to combine them in a way that could easily satisfy a following. By the 1970s, self-described independents accounted for a third of the electorate. People also found it increasingly difficult to think and talk about the parties. Americans were better educated than they had been in the 1950s, but they had a harder time saying what the parties represented. In the 1950s, less than one in ten had nothing to say when asked in polls what they liked and disliked about the parties. By the 1970s, three in ten had nothing to say.

Since then, political parties have not recovered their prominence. They are relatively weak objects of loyalty and thought, which has diminished Americans' concern with election politics. Like any other emotional attachment, party loyalty heightens interest and commitment. For its part, party awareness reflects people's ability to recognize what's at stake in election politics and the options available to them. "My mind has just gone blank," said a Florida resident in 2000 when asked in one of our surveys to describe the parties.

Americans who today have a party loyalty and an awareness of the parties have a voting rate more than twice that of those who call themselves independents and who cannot find words with which to describe the parties. That was true also in the 1950s. The difference today is that the percentage of citizens in the high-voting group is much smaller and the percentage in the low-voting group is much larger than in the 1950s. The type of citizen that votes less often has been gradually replacing the type that votes more often.

The change in party politics helps to explain why, disproportionately, the decline in participation has been concentrated among Americans of low income. Although a class bias in turnout has been a persistent feature of U.S. elections, the gap has widened to a chasm. The voting rate

among those at the bottom of the income ladder is only half that of those at the top. During the era of the economic issue, working-class Americans were at the center of political debate and party conflict. They now occupy the periphery of a political world in which money and middle-class concerns are ascendant. In 2000, low-income respondents were roughly 30 percent more likely than those in the middle- or top-income groups to say the election's outcome would have little or no impact on their lives.

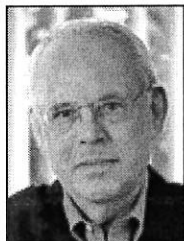
The change in party politics also helps to explain why candidates now have trouble crafting messages that voters find compelling. Candidates have never had so many communication weapons at their disposal, yet they have never found it so hard to frame their message. As Franklin Roosevelt's voice crackled into living rooms through the vacuum-tube radio, his pledge to "the forgotten man" had a persuasive power that today's media consultants would envy. Listeners didn't have to be told what FDR had in mind or to whom he was speaking. Campaign messages today are strikingly different in the wide range of issues they address, the contradictions they contain, the speed with which they turn over, and the small percentage of voters with whom they resonate. After their defeat in the 2002 midterm election, Democratic leaders were roundly criticized for failing to put out a message that captivated voters. However, Democratic politicians are neither stupid nor apolitical. If a simple and compelling message was readily available, they would have seized it. Such messages are today quite rare. If Republicans could not rely on their perennial "let's cut taxes" pitch-which is now closer to a fight song than a true governing philosophy-they would face the same problem.

A century ago, James Bryce worried that the growing complexity of American society threatened the parties' ability to forge and mobilize cohesive majorities. Social complexity is now orders of magnitude greater and has clearly overtaken the parties. The consequences include a lower rate of electoral participation.

Source: George Mason University's History News Network, 11-18-02



<http://writ.news.findlaw.com/dean/20001107.html>



## VANISHING VOTERS: WHY AMERICANS DON'T VOTE, AND HOW THAT MIGHT CHANGE

By **JOHN DEAN**

Wednesday, Nov. 08, 2000

Despite the close vote in the presidential election Tuesday, it appears that only about half the potential voters -- 51 percent -- exercised their right to vote. That figure is only marginally better than it was four years ago. According to official Census Bureau and Federal Election Commission figures, only 49 percent of those of voting age participated in the last presidential election in 1996. This follows the trend of a steady decline in voting during the 20th Century, which began with a 75 percent turnout in the 1902 presidential election.

American voting habits are particularly striking when compared with those of other democratic nations, like Japan and Germany, where 89 percent of the potential voters go to the polls. In fact, most democracies have about 80 percent voter participation. Of the 153 democracies in the world, the United States ranks near the bottom for voter involvement.

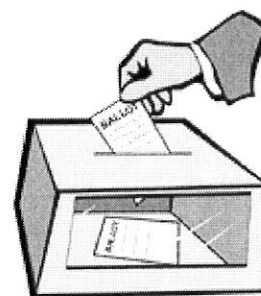
When 100 million people fail to vote in a presidential election, as they did in 1996, and as they did again Tuesday, the reason is more than simply apathy. To tag half the voting age population with indifference, unconcern, passivity, lethargy, or simply laziness may describe behavior, but it doesn't explain it. And an explanation is needed, if one can be given for 100 million excuses.

### Why potential voters don't vote

For years, I've tried to understand why people don't vote. The problem first surfaced on my radar in 1971, when I was working at the White House. Newly enfranchised 18-20 year old voters would be eligible to vote for the first time in the 1972 election under the 26th Amendment to the Constitution. The question was: Would they? And in what numbers? I was asked for my thoughts.

After examining voting data for the periods following the adoption of the 15th Amendment in 1870 (giving slaves and people of color the right to vote) and the adoption of the 19th Amendment in 1920 (giving women the right to vote), I realized that receiving the right to vote did not mean people would, in fact, vote.

To understand this complex issue, at one point I turned to Alexis de Tocqueville's classic study of the American character, "Democracy in America" (the 1966 Lawrence translation). Tocqueville didn't do anything for my predictive skills, but he did provide insight and understanding.



A few days ago, I again pulled from the shelf that worn edition of Tocqueville. The young Frenchman's observations of political participation were made in 1830 following the 1828 election of President Andrew Jackson, who did more to encourage political participation than any of his predecessors. Still, more than 150 years later, Tocqueville's examination of human nature in a democratic context remains revealing.

Alexis de Tocqueville decided that self interest would "become the chief if not the only driving force behind all behavior" of the American character, observing that:

[i]t is difficult to force a man out of himself and get him to take an interest in the affairs of the whole state, for he has little understanding of the way in which the fate of the state can influence his own lot. But if it is a question of taking a road past his property, he sees at once that this small public matter has a bearing on his greatest private interests, and there is no need to point out to him the close connection between his private profit and the general interest.

In this answer, reflective of the feelings of many nonvoters, can be heard echoes of Tocqueville's self-interest analysis -- albeit here expressing disinterest, since no road was passing his property.

Can self-interest explain why 100 million voters don't show up at the polls? Generally, yes. Although the concept of "self-interest" lumps together such basic and specific voter aversions as cynicism, distrust of politicians, disgust with mud slinging, and a multitude of other turnoffs, while failing to separate out voters who don't vote because they are happy with the way things are. Clearly, the particular reasons for not voting are many and often compound.

### **The search for solutions**

The closeness of the November 7 presidential race should have drawn not only the faithful, but also their friends, family, and fellow sympathizers to the polls. However, high voter turnout did not materialize.

To call attention to this disquieting situation and to look for solutions, Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government has launched the Vanishing Voter Project. The project's goal is broadening and deepening citizens' involvement in the presidential selection process.

But as the project's polls show, not only are voters not interested in elections, but also they are ill informed about the candidates and their issues. The project's data documents the seriousness of the problem.

There are no simple solutions. But one cause, not tied to pure self-interest, may be the difficulty in registering to vote, notwithstanding recent improvements like "motor voter" laws, and mail, fax, and Internet registration laws.

Because of my interest, I was delighted to discover an extremely perceptive study of these laws by a lawyer, Jason P.W. Halperin, in New York University's Journal of Legislation and Public Policy. The article entitled "A Winner At The Polls: A Proposal For Mandatory Voter Registration" analyzes plummeting voter turnout, broadly comparing the 19th and 20th Centuries; surveys several proposals that address the problem; shows the negative impact of 20th Century registration laws on voting participation; and makes a compelling case for mandatory (and simplified) registration for federal elections.

The key to the study is the evidence that high percentages of registered voters, in fact, vote. Halperin persuasively argues that if America were to make registration the government's responsibility, as other democracies does, it would revitalize the American electorate.

Though the closeness of this election at least halted the downward drift in voter turnout, there are still too few voters participating. With only about half the potential voters participating, it indicates that our election system is seriously flawed.

"The right to vote freely for the candidate of one's choice is the essence of a democratic society," Chief Justice Earl Warren noted in *Reynolds v. Sims*. Editorial writers, like those of Ohio's *Columbus Post Dispatch*, should not have to remind voters of the stakes. "Political Inaction -- Voter Apathy is Dangerous to Democracy," the *Post Dispatch's* headline exhorted.

And the newspaper concluded its editorial with an dire admonition from Robert Hutchins, the former dean of Yale Law School and later president of the University of Chicago, who warned: "The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference and undernourishment."

The words of the no-nonsense former U.S. Senator from Maine, Margaret Chase Smith, sum up the vanishing voter situation perfectly: "Freedom unexercised may become freedom forfeited."

*John Dean, a Findlaw columnist, is a former Counsel to the President of the United States. The following sites contain source material and additional information relating to Mr. Dean's comments: [Census Bureau \(voting data\)](#); [Federal Election Commission \(voting data\)](#); [Tocqueville's "Democracy In America" \(Reeve transl.\)](#); [Harvard's Vanishing Voter Project](#); [Jason P. W. Halperin's article, "A Winner at the Polls: A Proposal for Mandatory Voter Registration"](#).*

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# 5 Myths About Turning Out The Vote

By Michael McDonald  
Sunday, October 29, 2006; B03

If you're an upstanding U.S. citizen, you'll stand up and be counted this Election Day, right? Well, maybe not. Just because Americans can vote doesn't mean they do. But who shows up is what decides the tight races, which makes turnout one of the most closely watched aspects of every election -- and one that has fostered a number of myths. Here are five, debunked:

## 1. Thanks to increasing voter apathy, turnout keeps dwindling.

This is the mother of all turnout myths. There may be plenty of apathetic voters out there, but the idea that ever fewer Americans are showing up at the polls should be put to rest. What's really happening is that the number of people not eligible to vote is rising -- making it *seem* as though turnout is dropping.

Those who bemoan a decline in American civic society point to the drop in turnout from 55.2 percent in 1972, when 18-year-olds were granted the right to vote, to the low point of 48.9 percent in 1996. But that's looking at the total voting-age population, which includes lots of people who aren't eligible to vote -- namely, noncitizens and convicted felons. These ineligible populations have increased dramatically over the past three decades, from about 2 percent of the voting-age population in 1972 to 10 percent today.

When you take them out of the equation, the post-1972 "decline" vanishes. Turnout rates among those eligible to vote have averaged 55.3 percent in presidential elections and 39.4 percent in midterm elections for the past three decades. There has been variation, of course, with turnout as low as 51.7 percent in 1996 and rebounding to 60.3 percent by 2004. Turnout in the most recent election, in fact, is on a par with the low-60 percent turnout rates of the 1950s and '60s.

## 2 Other countries' higher turnout indicates more vibrant democracies.

You can't compare apples and oranges. Voting rules differ from nation to nation, producing different turnout rates. Some countries have mandatory voting. If Americans were fined \$100 for playing voter hooky on Election Day, U.S. participation might increase dramatically. But in fact, many people with a ballot pointed at their head simply cast a blank one or a nonsense vote for Mickey Mouse.

Moreover, most countries have national elections maybe once every five years; the United States has presidential or congressional elections every two years. Frequent elections may lead to voter fatigue. New European Union elections, for instance, seem to be depressing turnout in member countries. After decades of trailing turnout in the United Kingdom, U.S. turnout in 2004 was on a par with recent British elections, in which turnout was 59.4 percent in 2001 and 61.4 percent in 2005.



Americans are asked to vote more often -- in national, state, local and primary contests -- than the citizens of any other country. They can be forgiven for missing one or two elections, can't they? Even then, over the course of several elections, Americans have more chances to participate and their turnout may be higher than that in countries where people vote only once every five years.

### **3 Negative ads turn off voters and reduce turnout.**

Don't be so sure. The case on this one is still open. Negative TV advertising increased in the mid-1980s, but turnout hasn't gone down correspondingly. The negative Swift boat campaign against Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.) apparently did little to depress turnout in the 2004 presidential race.

Some academic studies have found that negative advertising increases turnout. And that's not so surprising: A particularly nasty ad grabs people's attention and gets them talking. People participate when they're interested. A recent GOP attack ad on Rep. Harold E. Ford Jr. (D-Tenn.), a Senate candidate, has changed the dynamic of the race, probably not because it changed minds or dissuaded Democrats, but because it energized listless Republicans.

We'll have to wait to see whether the attack on Ford backfires because voters perceive it as unfair. That's the danger of going negative. So campaigns tend to stick to "contrast ads," in which candidates contrast their records with those of their opponents. When people see stark differences between candidates, they're more likely to vote.

### **4 The Republican "72-hour campaign" will win the election.**

Not necessarily. You can lead citizens to the ballot, but you can't make them vote.

Republicans supposedly have a super-sophisticated last-minute get-out-the-vote effort that identifies voters who'll be pivotal in electing their candidates. Studies of a campaign's personal contact with voters through phone calls, door-to-door solicitation and the like find that it does have some positive effect on turnout. But people vote for many reasons other than meeting a campaign worker, such as the issues, the closeness of the election and the candidates' likeability. Further, these studies focus on get-out-the-vote drives in low-turnout elections, when contacts from other campaigns and outside groups are minimal. We don't know what the effects of mobilization drives are in highly competitive races in which people are bombarded by media stories, television ads and direct mail.

Republican get-out-the-vote efforts could make a difference in close elections if Democrats simply sat on the sidelines. But this year Democrats have vowed to match the GOP mobilization voter for voter. So it'll take more than just knowing whether a prospective voter owns a Volvo or a BMW for Republicans to eke out victory in a competitive race.

## **5 Making voter registration easier would dramatically increase turnout.**

Well, yes and no.

In 1993, the Democratic government in Washington enacted "Motor Voter," a program that allowed people to register to vote when they received their driver's license or visited a welfare office. Democrats thought that if everyone were registered, turnout rates would increase -- by as much as 7 percentage points.

But while many people registered to vote, turnout didn't go up much. Subsequent studies found only small increases in turnout attributable to Motor Voter, perhaps 2 percentage points.

Sizable increases in turnout can be seen in states with Election Day registration, which allows people to register when they vote. This may be related to the fact that lots of people don't make up their minds to vote until Election Day, rather than months in advance when they get a license.

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# The Competitive Problem of Voter Turnout

By Michael P. McDonald

Special to washingtonpost.com's Think Tank Town

Tuesday, October 31, 2006; 12:00 AM

On November 7, millions of Americans will exercise their civic duty to vote. At stake will be control of the House and Senate, not to mention the success of individual candidates running for office. President Bush's "stay the course" agenda will either be enabled over the next two years by a Republican Congress or knocked off kilter by a Democratic one.

With so much at stake, it is not surprising that the Pew Research Center found that 51 percent of registered voters have given a lot of thought to this November's election. This is higher than any other recent midterm election, including 44 percent in 1994, the year Republicans took control of the House. If so, turnout should better the 1994 turnout rate among eligible voters of 41 percent.

There is good reason to suspect that despite the high interest, turnout will not exceed 1994. The problem is that a national poll is, well, a national poll, and does not measure attitudes of voters within states and districts.

People vote when there is a reason to do so. Republican and Democratic agendas are in stark contrast on important issues, but voters also need to believe that their vote will matter in deciding who will represent them. It is here that the American electoral system is broken for many voters.

Voters have little choice in most elections. In 1994, Congressional Quarterly called 98 House elections as competitive. Today, they list 51. To put it another way, we are already fairly confident of the winner in nearly 90 percent of House races. Although there is no similar tracking for state legislative offices, we know that the number of elections won by less than 60 percent of the vote has fallen since 1994.

The real damage to the national turnout rate is in the large states of California and New York, which together account for 17 percent of the country's eligible voters. Neither state has a competitive Senate or Governor's election, and few competitive House or state legislative races. Compare to 1994, when Californians participated in competitive Senate and governor races the state's turnout was 5 percentage points above the national rate. The same year New York's competitive governor's race helped boost turnout a point above the national rate.

Lacking stimulation from two of the largest states, turnout boosts will have to come from elsewhere. Texas has an interesting four-way governor's race that might draw from infrequent voters to the polls. Ohio's competitive Senate race and some House races might also draw voters. However, in other large states like Florida, Illinois, Michigan and Pennsylvania, turnout will suffer from largely uncompetitive statewide races.

The national turnout rate will likely be less than 1994 and fall shy of 40 percent. This is not to say that turnout will be poor everywhere. Energized voters in Connecticut get to vote in an interesting Senate race and three of five Connecticut House seats are up for grabs. The problem is that turnout will be localized in these few areas of competition.

The fault is not on the voters; people's lives are busy, and a rational person will abstain when their vote does not matter to the election outcome. The political parties also are sensitive to competition and focus their limited resources where elections are competitive. Television advertising and other mobilizing efforts by campaigns will only be found in competitive races.

The old adage of "build it and they will come" is relevant. All but hardcore sports fans tune out a blowout. Building competitive elections -- and giving voters real choices -- will do much to increase voter turnout in American politics. There are a number of reforms on the table: redistricting to create competitive districts, campaign financing to give candidates equal resources, and even altering the electoral system to fundamentally change how a vote elects representatives. If voters want choice and a government more responsive to their needs, they should consider how these seemingly arcane election procedures have real consequences on motivating them to do the most fundamental democratic action: vote.

*Michael P. McDonald* is a Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Institution and an Assistant Professor at George Mason University. He calculates national turnout rates for academics and the media and he is co-editor of *The Marketplace of Democracy: Electoral Competition in American Politics*.