

## CHAPTER 6 - Individual Participation

### OVERVIEW

In spite of the importance of political participation in a democracy, most American women and men don't bother to vote, with turnout being less than most other democracies. Although the difference from other countries is somewhat easy to explain, the decline in the United States in recent years is more difficult to interpret. Even though those who tend to vote are better educated and wealthier than those not voting, it is not clear that American politics would look much different if more people voted.

### OUTLINE

#### I. A Brief History of the Franchise in the United States

- In 1824, six of the 24 states had not provided for popular election of presidential electors. Having lost the presidency in 1824, Andrew Jackson took his election to the people. The result was that by the 1828 presidential election only two states still did not elect presidential electors and three times as many men voted for electors as had voted in 1824.

- Just prior to the Civil War, voting was restricted in most states to white males who owned property. By 1860, all adult white male citizens had the franchise. The Fifteenth Amendment (1870) extended the franchise to black males. The Nineteenth (1920) gave women the right to vote in all states.

- Another extension of voting came with ratification of the Twenty-third Amendment in 1961. It gave those residing in Washington, D.C. a vote for president and vice president. The Twenty-sixth Amendment (1971) then lowered the voting age to 18.

- The evolution of voting rights in America reflects the decision made at the Constitutional Convention to not specify voting requirements, but to leave them for each state to establish.

- Today, every law-abiding, mentally-competent U.S. citizen over the age of 18 has the right to vote in the United States.

#### II. Voting Rights

- Numerous factors influence whether a citizen votes.
- One broad factor has been called **individual motivation**. This means that people weigh the costs (economic, psychological, etc.) and benefits (mostly psychological today) of voting.
- If you vote, you bear the costs of voting no matter what the outcome, but the odds of your vote making the difference in national elections are quite slim. Thus, unless a voter has a strong sense of duty, or takes considerable satisfaction in expressing a preference, the personal benefits of voting generally do not exceed the costs.
- Another factor explaining voting is **mobilization**. People are encouraged or mobilized by others who have personal incentives to turnout the vote.

#### III. International Comparisons of Voter Turnout → What explains why Americans vote less than citizens in other democracies?

- One explanation is based on how turnout is calculated. Official turnout in the United States is calculated by dividing the number of people in the United States of voting age into the number of people voting for president. Other democracies are more

exact in the calculation of turnout. This difference in calculation makes about a 5 percentage point difference.

#### A. Personal Costs and Benefits: Registration

- More than 30 percent of the American voting-age population is unregistered.
- In most of the world, registration is automatic. In the United States it is entirely the responsibility of the individual. In 1993, the “motor-voter” law (National Registration Act) was passed in an attempt to increase voter registration and hence, voting. Statistics suggest that if every state used the most liberal registration procedures, national turnout would be about 9 percent higher.

#### B. Personal Costs and Benefits: Compulsion

- Voting is “compulsory” in many countries. Americans consider voting a right they are free to exercise or not.

#### C. Other Personal Costs and Benefits

- Unlike other countries, elections in America are usually on a workday (Tuesday). In addition, Americans are asked to vote much more frequently. Even the risk of being called for jury duty using voter registration lists is enough to keep some people from registering to vote.

#### D. Mobilization and Turnout

- American voters also have less help than citizens in other democracies in overcoming the costs of voting. Political parties have declined as mobilizing agents. Organizations are plentiful in the United States but they are not as deeply rooted here as in other countries.

### IV. Why Has American Turnout Declined?

- Turnout is not only lower when compared with other democracies, it has fallen in the United States during the past generation.
- Research has shown that the decline was not due to falling trust in government. More puzzling is that while turnout has declined, several factors associated with increasing turnout have gone up, such as legal reforms making it easier to vote and socio-economic changes.

#### A. Declining Personal Benefits

- Part of the explanation is the fact that Americans don’t believe that government is as responsive as in times past. Thus, voters do not see as much riding on their decisions as they once did.

- Another explanation is that elections have become less competitive. When elections aren’t close, voters do not see as much importance in voting.

#### B. Declining Mobilization

- The change in style from labor-intensive to media-concentrated campaigning may have indirectly contributed to declining turnout.

### C. Declining Social Connectedness

- Turnout may be lower because of what social scientists call a compositional effect. Turnout rates of younger Americans were low when they became voters and remain low still.

- Finally, another researcher has suggested that turnout is lower because of a lowering in social connectedness. Interestingly, although turnout is not related to trust in government, it is significantly related to trust in people. This explanation treats voting not as a political act but as a social act.

### V. Who Votes and Who Doesn't

- Turnout rates differ considerably across social and economic groups. Highly educated people vote more than those with little formal education. The wealthy are far more likely to vote than the poor. The older a person gets the greater the tendency to vote until very old age.

### VI. Is Low Turnout a Problem?

#### A. Three Arguments for Why Low Turnout Is Not a Problem

1. Low turnout indicates contentment, not estrangement. Therefore, it indicates a healthy polity and contributes to political stability.

2. If turnout were encouraged, those less informed, as well as less interested in, and less concerned about, politics would be voting.

3. Voting is a sham and encouraging more citizens to vote is asking more to participate in the sham.

#### B. Three Arguments for Why Low Turnout Is a Problem

1. Low turnout produces election results that are unrepresentative (voters are more Republican and more conservative) of the entire electorate, resulting, ultimately, in biased public policy. Research suggests that this argument is overstated. Typically, the preferences of nonvoters vary little with those of voters.

2. Low turnout reflects a "phony" politics. Nonvoters do not vote because mainstream politicians who are backed by the two major parties do not address the real issues that concern nonvoters such as jobs, health care, housing, income distribution, and education.

3. Low turnout discourages individual development. Only by participating in politics can a person develop fully as a citizen and human.

### VI. Beyond the Voting Booth?

- Well-intentioned and well-informed people disagree and offer persuasive arguments for both sides of the issue. There is some validity in each argument. The only argument that is false is that elections do not matter.