CHAPTER

8

Political Participation

WHO GOVERNS?

1. **Who votes, who doesn't?**
2. **Why do some people participate in politics at higher rates than others?**

TO WHAT ENDS?

1. **How did the Framers of the Constitution think average citizens should participate in America's representative democracy?**
2. **Should today's college-age citizens participate more in politics?**

Every American loves democracy, but a lot of them do not do much about it. Think about the simplest action: voting. In much of Europe, about 80 percent of all citizens vote, but in the United States the turnout is only about half as great. In 2004 more than 60 percent of Americans voted, but that was an unusual year. Some observers are embarrassed by our low turnout rate, blame it on voter apathy, and urge the government and private groups to do something about it.

There are three things wrong with this advice. First, it is not an accurate description of the problem; second, it is an incorrect explanation of the problem; and third, it proposes a remedy that probably won't work.

★ A Closer Look at Nonvoting

First, let's look at how best to describe the problem. The conventional data on voter turnout here and abroad are misleading because they compute participation rates by two different measures. In this country only two-thirds of the voting-age population is registered to vote. To understand what this means, look at Table 8.1. In column A are several countries ranked in terms of the percentage of the **voting-age population** that voted in 1996–2001 national elections. As you can see, the United States, where 47.2 percent voted, ranked near the bottom; only Switzerland was lower. Now look at column B, where the same countries are ranked in terms of the percentage of **registered voters** who participated in these national elections. The United States, where 63.4 percent of registered voters turned out at the polls, is now fifth from the bottom.[1]

Second, let's consider a better explanation for the problem. Apathy on election day is clearly not the source of the problem. Of those who are registered, the overwhelming majority vote. The real source of the participation problem in the United States is that a relatively low percentage of the adult population is registered to vote.

Third, let's look at how to cure the problem. Mounting a get-out-the-vote drive probably wouldn't make much difference. In a study published in 2004, political scientists Donald P. Green and Alan S. Gerber analyzed evidence on a wide variety of voter mobilization strategies: door-to-door canvassing, leaflets, direct mail, phone banks, and electronic mail.[2] In most cases, the effects on voter turnout were small or nil. Neither reminding voters that election day is near nor supplying them with information seems to make much difference. But in low-turnout elections (for example, midterm congressional elections), people who normally vote anyway "are especially receptive to get-out-the-vote appeals, particularly when contacted face-to-face."[3]

voting-age population *Citizens who are eligible to vote after reaching the minimum age requirement.*

registered voters *People who are registered to vote.*

Table 8.1 Two Ways of Calculating Voter Turnout, 1996–2001 Elections, Selected Countries

A Turnout as Percentage of Voting-Age Population		B Turnout as Percentage of Registered Voters	
Belgium	83.2%	Australia	95.2%
Denmark	83.1	Belgium	90.6
Australia	81.8	Denmark	86.0
Sweden	77.7	New Zealand	83.1
Finland	76.8	Germany	82.2
Germany	75.3	Sweden	81.4
New Zealand	74.6	Austria	80.4
Norway	73.0	France	79.7
Austria	72.6	Finland	76.8
France	72.3	Norway	75.0
Netherlands	70.1	Netherlands	73.2
Japan	59.0	UNITED STATES	63.4
United Kingdom	57.6	Japan	62.0
Canada	54.6	Canada	61.2
UNITED STATES	47.2	United Kingdom	59.4
Switzerland	34.9	Switzerland	43.2

Source: From the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), *Voter Turnout: A Global Survey* (Stockholm, Sweden, 2001). Reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press.

Still, it's not frequent voters, but nonregistered voters, who must be mobilized if turnout rates are to rise significantly. What might make a difference is a plan that would get more people to register to vote. But doing that does not necessarily involve overcoming the "apathy" of unregistered voters. Some people may not register because they don't care about politics or their duty as citizens. But there are other explanations for being unregistered. In this country the entire burden of registering to vote falls on the individual voters. They must learn how and when and where to register; they must take the time and trouble to go someplace and fill out a registration form; and they must reregister in a new county or state if they happen to move. In most European nations registration is done for you, automatically, by the government. Since it is costly to register in this country and costless to register in other countries, it should not be surprising that fewer people are registered here than abroad.

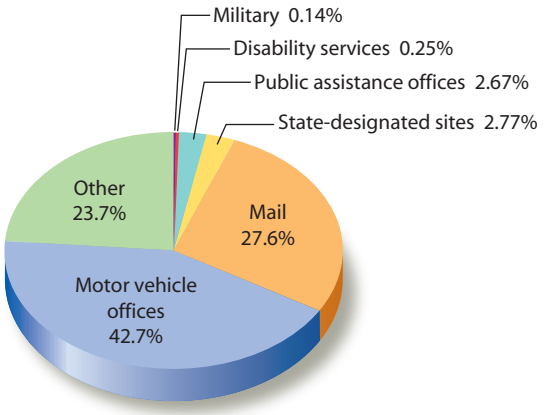
In 1993 Congress passed a law designed to make it easier to register to vote. Known as the motor-voter law, the law requires states to allow people to register to vote when applying for driver's licenses and to provide registration through the mail and at some state offices that serve the disabled or provide public assistance (such as welfare checks). The motor-voter law took effect in 1995. In just two months, 630,000 new voters signed up in twenty-seven states. Even so, the results of the law so far have been mixed. By 1999, registration in motor vehicle offices accounted for a third of all voter registration applications, and in 2001–2002 over 16 million people, representing over 40 percent of all voter applications, registered in motor-vehicle offices (see Figure 8.1). Still, there is scant evidence that the motor-voter law has had much of an impact on either voter turnout or election outcomes. A 2001 study found that turnout of motor-voter registrants was lower than that of other new registrants and concluded "that those who register when the process is costless are less likely to vote."[4]

A final point: voting is only one way of participating in politics. It is important (we could hardly be considered a democracy if nobody voted), but it is not all-important. Joining civic associations, supporting social movements, writing to legislators, fighting city hall—all these and other activities are ways of participating in politics. It is possible that, by these measures, Americans participate in politics *more* than most Europeans—or anybody else, for that matter. Moreover, it is possible that low rates of registration indicate that people are reasonably well satisfied with how the country is governed. If 100 percent of all adult Americans registered and voted (especially under a system that makes registering relatively difficult), it could mean that people were deeply upset about how things were run. In short, it is not at all clear whether low voter turnout is a symptom of political disease or a sign of political good health.

The important question about participation is not how much participation there is but how different kinds of participation affect the kind of government we get. This question cannot be answered just by looking at voter turnout, the subject of this chapter; it also requires us to look at the composition and activities of political parties, interest groups, and the media (the subjects of later chapters).

Nonetheless, voting is important. To understand why participation in American elections takes the form that it does, we must first understand how laws have determined who shall vote and under what circumstances.

Figure 8.1 Sources of Voter Registration Applications, 1999–2004



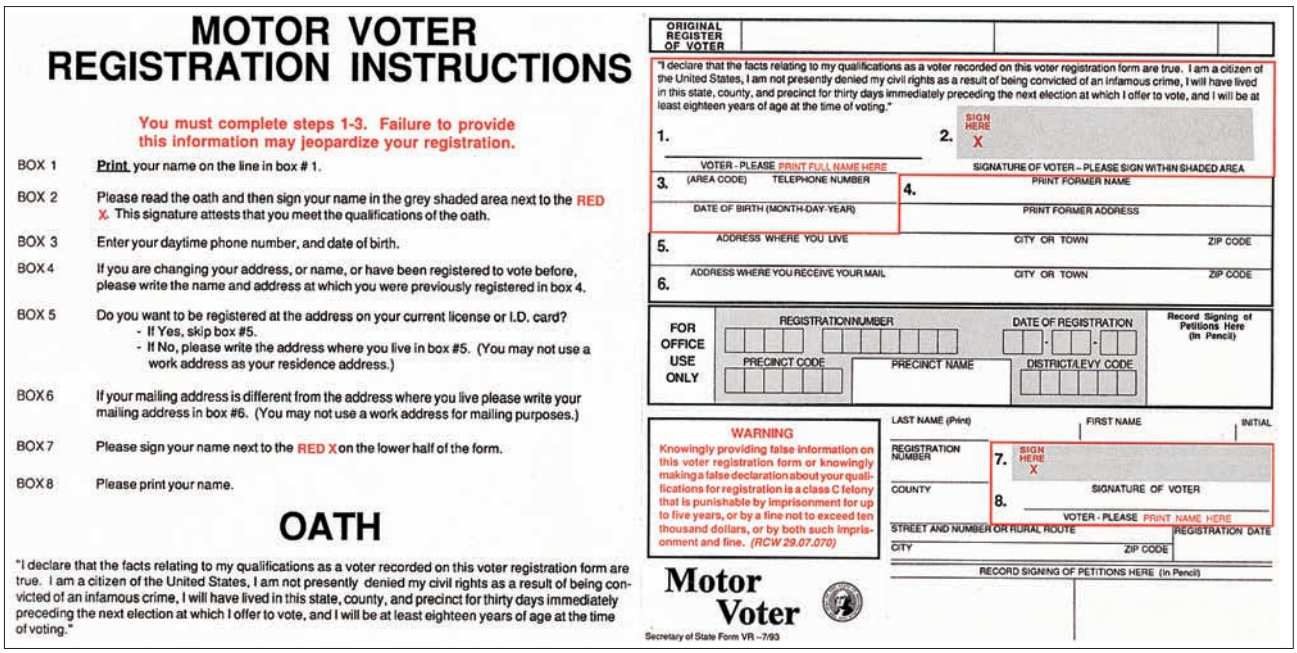
Source: Federal Election Commission, *Executive Summary—Report to the Congress,* 2004.

★ The Rise of the American Electorate

It is ironic that relatively few citizens vote in American elections, since it was in this country that the mass of people first became eligible to vote. At the time the Constitution was ratified, the vote was limited to property owners or taxpayers, but by the administration of Andrew Jackson (1829–1837) it had been broadened to include virtually all white male adults. Only in a few states did property restrictions persist: they were not abolished in New Jersey until 1844 or in North Carolina until 1856. And, of course, African American males could not vote in many states, in the North as well as the South, even if they were not slaves. Women could not vote in most states until the twentieth century; Chinese Americans were widely denied the vote; and being in prison is grounds for losing the franchise even today. Aliens, on the other hand, were often allowed to vote if they had at least begun the process of becoming citizens. By 1880 only an estimated 14 percent of all adult males in the United States could not vote; in England in the same period about 40 percent of adult males were disfranchised.[5]

From State to Federal Control

Initially it was left entirely to the states to decide who could vote and for what offices. The Constitution gave Congress the right to pick the day on which presidential electors would gather and to alter state



MOTOR VOTER REGISTRATION INSTRUCTIONS

You must complete steps 1-3. Failure to provide this information may jeopardize your registration.

BOX 1 Print your name on the line in box # 1.

BOX 2 Please read the oath and then sign your name in the grey shaded area next to the RED X. This signature attests that you meet the qualifications of the oath.

BOX 3 Enter your daytime phone number, and date of birth.

BOX 4 If you are changing your address, or name, or have been registered to vote before, please write the name and address at which you were previously registered in box 4.

BOX 5 Do you want to be registered at the address on your current license or I.D. card?
- If Yes, skip box #5.
- If No, please write the address where you live in box #5. (You may not use a work address as your residence address.)

BOX 6 If your mailing address is different from the address where you live please write your mailing address in box #6. (You may not use a work address for mailing purposes.)

BOX 7 Please sign your name next to the RED X on the lower half of the form.

BOX 8 Please print your name.

OATH

"I declare that the facts relating to my qualifications as a voter recorded on this voter registration form are true. I am a citizen of the United States, I am not presently denied my civil rights as a result of being convicted of an infamous crime, I will have lived in this state, county, and precinct for thirty days immediately preceding the next election at which I offer to vote, and I will be at least eighteen years of age at the time of voting."

ORIGINAL REGISTER OF VOTER

"I declare that the facts relating to my qualifications as a voter recorded on this voter registration form are true. I am a citizen of the United States, I am not presently denied my civil rights as a result of being convicted of an infamous crime, I will have lived in this state, county, and precinct for thirty days immediately preceding the next election at which I offer to vote, and I will be at least eighteen years of age at the time of voting."

1. VOTER - PLEASE PRINT FULL NAME HERE
2. SIGN HERE X — SIGNATURE OF VOTER – PLEASE SIGN WITHIN SHADED AREA
3. (AREA CODE) TELEPHONE NUMBER — DATE OF BIRTH (MONTH-DAY-YEAR)
4. PRINT FORMER NAME — PRINT FORMER ADDRESS
5. ADDRESS WHERE YOU LIVE — CITY OR TOWN — ZIP CODE
6. ADDRESS WHERE YOU RECEIVE YOUR MAIL — CITY OR TOWN — ZIP CODE

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY: REGISTRATION NUMBER; DATE OF REGISTRATION; PRECINCT CODE; PRECINCT NAME; DISTRICT/LEVY CODE

Record Signing of Petitions Here (In Pencil)

WARNING
Knowingly providing false information on this voter registration form or knowingly making a false declaration about your qualifications for registration is a class C felony that is punishable by imprisonment for up to five years, or by a fine not to exceed ten thousand dollars, or by both such imprisonment and fine. (RCW 29.07.070)

LAST NAME (Print) FIRST NAME INITIAL
REGISTRATION NUMBER
7. SIGN HERE X
COUNTY
8. SIGNATURE OF VOTER
VOTER - PLEASE PRINT NAME HERE
STREET AND NUMBER OR RURAL ROUTE — REGISTRATION DATE
CITY — ZIP CODE
RECORD SIGNING OF PETITIONS HERE (In Pencil)

Motor Voter

Secretary of State Form VR –7/93

When you apply for a driver's license in the state of Washington, you are given this form so that you can register to vote at the same time. This "motor voter" idea became the basis of a federal law passed in 1993.

Landmark Cases

Right to Vote

- ***Smith v. Allwright* (1944):** Since political parties select candidates for public office, they may not exclude blacks from voting in their primary elections.

To explore these landmark cases further, visit the *American Government* web site at college.hmco.com/pic/wilsonAGlle.

regulations regarding congressional elections. The only provision of the Constitution requiring a popular election was the clause in Article I stating that members of the House of Representatives be chosen by the "people of the several states."

literacy test *A requirement that citizens show that they can read before registering to vote.*

poll tax *A requirement that citizens pay a tax in order to register to vote.*

grandfather clause *A clause in registration laws allowing people who do not meet registration requirements to vote if they or their ancestors had voted before 1867.*

white primary *The practice of keeping blacks from voting in the southern states' primaries through arbitrary use of registration requirements and intimidation.*

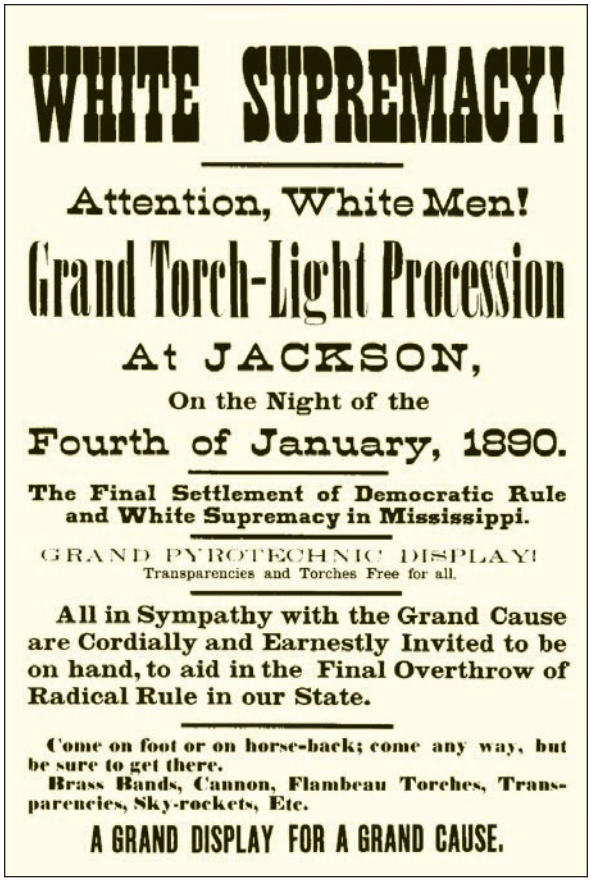
Because of this permissiveness, early federal elections varied greatly. Several states picked their members of the House at large (that is, statewide) rather than by district; others used districts but elected more than one representative from each. Still others had their elections in odd-numbered years, and some even required that a congressional candidate win a majority, rather than simply a plurality, of votes to be elected (when that requirement was in effect, runoff elections—in one case as many as twelve—were necessary). Furthermore, presidential electors were at first picked by state legislatures rather than by the voters directly.

Congress, by law and constitutional amendment, has steadily reduced state prerogatives in these matters. In 1842 a federal law required that all members of the House be elected by districts; other laws over the years required that all federal elections be held in even-numbered years on the Tuesday following the first Monday in November.

The most important changes in elections have been those that extended the suffrage to women, African Americans, and eighteen-year-olds and made mandatory the direct popular election of U.S. senators. The Fifteenth Amendment, adopted in 1870, said that the "right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." Reading those words today, one would assume that they gave African Americans the right to vote. That is not what the Supreme Court during the 1870s thought they meant. By a series of decisions, it held that the Fifteenth Amendment did not necessarily confer the right to vote on anybody; it merely asserted that if someone was denied that right, the denial could not be explicitly on the grounds of race. And the burden of proving that it was race that led to the denial fell on the black who was turned away at the polls.[6]

This interpretation opened the door to all manner of state stratagems to keep blacks from voting. One was a **literacy test** (a large proportion of former slaves were illiterate); another was a requirement that a **poll tax** be paid (most former slaves were poor); a third was the practice of keeping blacks from voting in primary elections (in the one-party South the only meaningful election was the Democratic primary). To allow whites who were illiterate or poor to vote, a **grandfather clause** was added to the law, saying that a person could vote, even if he did not meet the legal requirements, if he or his ancestors voted before 1867 (blacks, of course, could not vote before 1867). When all else failed, blacks were intimidated, threatened, or harassed if they showed up at the polls.

There began a long, slow legal process of challenging in court each of these restrictions in turn. One by one the Supreme Court set most of them aside. The grandfather clause was declared unconstitutional in 1915,[7] and the **white primary** finally fell in 1944.[8] Some of the more blatantly discriminatory literacy tests were also overturned.[9] The practical result of these rulings was slight: only a small proportion of voting-age blacks were able to register and vote in the South, and they were found mostly in the larger cities. A dramatic change did not begin until 1965, with the passage of the Voting Rights Act. This act suspended the use of literacy tests and authorized the appointment of federal examiners who could order the regis-



WHITE SUPREMACY!

Attention, White Men!

Grand Torch-Light Procession

At JACKSON,

On the Night of the

Fourth of January, 1890.

The Final Settlement of Democratic Rule and White Supremacy in Mississippi.

GRAND PYROTECHNIC DISPLAY!
Transparencies and Torches Free for all.

All in Sympathy with the Grand Cause are Cordially and Earnestly Invited to be on hand, to aid in the Final Overthrow of Radical Rule in our State.

Come on foot or on horse-back; come any way, but be sure to get there.
Brass Bands, Cannon, Flambeau Torches, Transparencies, Sky-rockets, Etc.

A GRAND DISPLAY FOR A GRAND CAUSE.

After Reconstruction ended in 1876, black voting shrank under the attacks of white supremacists.

After the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, blacks and whites voted together in a small Alabama town.

tration of blacks in states and counties (mostly in the South) where fewer than 50 percent of the voting-age population were registered or had voted in the last presidential election. It also provided criminal penalties for interfering with the right to vote.

Though implementation in some places was slow, the number of African Americans voting rose sharply throughout the South. For example, in Mississippi the proportion of voting-age blacks who registered rose from 5 percent to over 70 percent in just ten years (see Table 8.2). These changes had a profound effect on the behavior of many white southern politicians: Governor George Wallace stopped making pro-segregation speeches and began courting the black vote.

Women were kept from the polls by law more than by intimidation, and when the laws changed, women almost immediately began to vote in large numbers. By 1915 several states, mostly in the West, had begun to permit women to vote. But it was not until the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified in 1920, after a struggle lasting many decades, that women generally were allowed to vote. At one stroke the size of the eligible voting population almost doubled. Contrary to the hopes of some and the fears of others, no dramatic changes occurred in the conduct of elections, the identity of the winners, or the substance of public policy. Initially, at least, women voted more or less in the same manner as men, though not quite as frequently.

The political impact of the youth vote was also less than expected. The Voting Rights Act of 1970 gave eighteen-year-olds the right to vote in federal elections beginning January 1, 1971. It also contained a provision lowering the voting age to eighteen in state elections, but the Supreme Court declared this unconstitutional. As a result a constitutional amendment, the Twenty-sixth, was proposed by Congress and ratified

Table 8.2 Voter Registration in the South

		Percentage of Voting-Age Population That Is Registered											
		Ala.	Ark.	Fla.	Ga.	La.	Miss.	N.C.	S.C.	Tenn.	Tex.	Va.	Total
1960	White	63.6%	60.9%	69.3%	56.8%	76.9%	63.9%	92.1%	57.1%	73.0%	42.5%	46.1%	61.1%
	Black*	13.7	38.0	39.4	29.3	31.1	5.2	39.1	13.7	59.1	35.5	23.1	29.1
1970	White	85.0	74.1	65.5	71.7	77.0	82.1	68.1	62.3	78.5	62.0	64.5	62.9
	Black	66.0	82.3	55.3	57.2	57.4	71.0	51.3	56.1	71.6	72.6	57.0	62.0
1986	White	77.5	67.2	66.9	62.3	67.8	91.6	67.4	53.4	70.0	79.0	60.3	69.9
	Black	68.9	57.9	58.2	52.8	60.6	70.8	58.4	52.5	65.3	68.0	56.2	60.8
1996	White	75.8	64.5	63.7	67.8	74.5	75.0	70.4	69.7	66.3	62.7	68.4	69.0
	Black	69.2	65.8	53.1	64.6	71.9	67.4	65.5	64.3	65.7	63.2	64.0	65.0
2002	White	73.7	62.9	60.7	62.7	74.2	70.7	63.1	66.2	62.3	57.7	64.1	62.6
	Black	67.7	62.0	47.9	61.7	73.5	67.9	58.2	68.3	54.1	65.1	47.5	60.2

*Includes other minority races.

Source: Voter Education Project, Inc., of Atlanta, Georgia, as reported in *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1990 and 1996*. Figures for 2002 compiled from U.S. Bureau of Census data by Marc Siegal.

by the states in 1971. The 1972 elections became the first in which all people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one could cast ballots (before then, four states had allowed those under twenty-one to vote). About 25 million people suddenly became eligible to participate in elections, but their turnout (42 percent) was lower than for the population as a whole, and they did not flock to any particular party or candidate. Since then voter turnout by eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds has fallen both in absolute terms and relative to rates among senior citizens. For instance, 22 percent of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds, versus three-fifths of citizens older than sixty-five, voted in the midterm congressional elections of 1986, and just 17 percent of them voted, versus the same three-fifths of citizens older than sixty-five, in the midterm congressional elections of 1998.[10] In the 1996 presidential election turnout among eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds was about 30 percent, rising to about 38 percent in the 2000 presidential election, then dipping slightly below 20 percent in the 2002 midterm congressional elections.[11] At the same time, however, young Americans' rates of participation in civic activities such as community service have hit all-time highs. Several studies find that both the fraction of adults under thirty who volunteer and the average number of hours they volunteer per year have increased significantly over the past generation.[12] The late Senator Paul Wellstone of Minnesota, a liberal Democrat who taught political science and who was a campus political protester during the 1970s and 1980s, believed that among young people today, "community service is viewed as good, and political service is viewed as disreputable."[13]

The campaign to win the vote for women nationwide succeeded with the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.

Systematic studies of the subject are few, but the senator was probably right.[14]

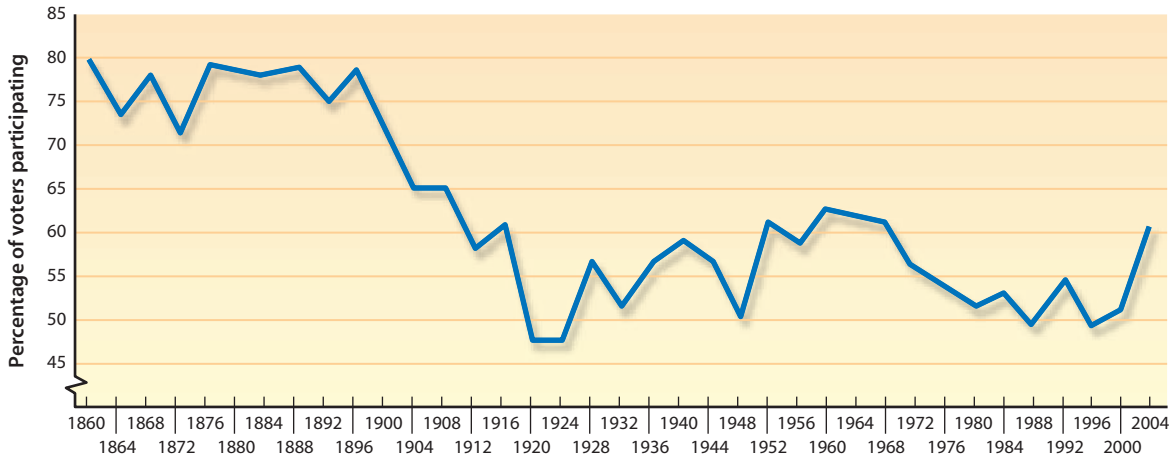
National standards now govern almost every aspect of voter eligibility. All persons eighteen years of age and older may vote; there may be no literacy test or poll tax; states may not require residency of more than thirty days in that state before a person may vote; areas with significant numbers of citizens not speaking English must give those people ballots written in their own language; and federal voter registrars and poll watchers may be sent into areas where less than 50 percent of the voting-age population participates in a presidential election. Before 1961 residents of the District of Columbia could not vote in presidential elections; the Twenty-third Amendment to the Constitution gave them this right.

Voter Turnout

Given all these legal safeguards, one might expect that participation in elections would have risen sharply. In fact the proportion of the voting-age population that has gone to the polls in presidential elections has remained about the same—between 50 and 60 percent of those eligible—at least since 1928 and appears today to be much smaller than it was in the latter part of the nineteenth century (see Figure 8.2). In every presidential election between 1860 and 1900, at least 70 percent of the eligible population apparently went to the polls, and in some years (1860 and 1876) almost 80 percent seem to have voted. Since 1900 not a single presidential election turnout has reached 70 percent, and on two occasions (1920 and 1924) it did not even reach 50 percent.[15] Even outside the South, where efforts to disfranchise African Americans make data on voter turnout especially hard to interpret, turnout seems to have declined: over 84 percent of the voting-age population participated in presidential elections in nonsouthern states between 1884 and 1900, but only 68 percent participated between 1936 and 1960, and even fewer have done so since 1960.[16]

Scholars have vigorously debated the meaning of these figures. One view is that this decline in turnout, even allowing for the shaky data on which the estimates are based, has been real and is the result of a decline of popular interest in elections and a weakening of the competitiveness of the two major parties. During the nineteenth century, according to this theory, the parties fought hard, worked strenuously to get as many voters as possible to the polls, afforded the mass of voters a chance to participate in party politics through caucuses and conventions, kept the legal

Figure 8.2 Voter Participation in Presidential Elections, 1860–2004



Note: Several southern states did not participate in the 1864 and 1868 elections.
Sources: For 1860–1928: Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970,* part 2, 1071; 1932–1944: *Statistical Abstract of the United States,* 1992, 517; 1948–2000: Michael P. McDonald and Samuel L. Popkin, "The Myth of the Vanishing Voter," *American Political Science Review* 95 (December 2001): table 1, 966.

Voting participation is very low among young people, and this campaign hopes to change that.

barriers to participation (such as complex registration procedures) low, and looked forward to close, exciting elections. After 1896, by which time the South had become a one-party Democratic region and the North heavily Republican, both parties became more conservative, national elections usually resulted in lopsided victories for the Republicans, and citizens began to lose interest in politics because it no longer seemed relevant to their needs. The parties ceased functioning as organizations to mobilize the mass of voters and fell under the control of leaders, mostly conservative, who resisted mass participation.[17]

There is another view, however. It argues that the decline in voter turnout has been more apparent than real. Though elections were certainly more of a popular sport in the nineteenth century than they are today, the parties were no more democratic then than now, and voters then may have been more easily manipulated. Until around the beginning of the twentieth century, voting fraud was commonplace, because it was easy to pull off. The political parties, not the government, printed the ballots; they were often cast in public, not private, voting booths; there were few serious efforts to decide who was eligible to vote, and the rules that did operate were easily evaded.

Australian ballot *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.*

Under these circumstances it was easy for a person to vote more than once, and the party machines made heavy use of these "floaters," or repeaters. "Vote early and often" was not a joke but a fact. The parties often controlled the counting of votes, padding the totals whenever they feared losing. As a result of these machinations, the number of votes counted was often larger than the number cast, and the number cast was in turn often larger than the number of individuals eligible to vote.

Around 1890 the states began adopting the **Australian ballot**. This was a government-printed ballot of uniform size and shape that was cast in secret, created to replace the old party-printed ballots cast in public. By 1910 only three states were without the Australian ballot. Its use cut back on (but certainly did not eliminate) vote buying and fraudulent vote counts.

In short, if votes had been legally cast and honestly counted in the nineteenth century, the statistics on election turnout might well be much lower than the inflated figures we now have.[18] To the extent that this is true, we may not have had a decline in voter participation as great as some have suggested. Nevertheless, most scholars believe that turnout probably did actually decline somewhat after the 1890s. One reason was that voter-registration regulations became more burdensome: there were longer residency requirements; aliens who had begun but not completed the process of becoming citizens could no longer vote in most states; it became harder for African Americans to vote; educational qualifications for voting were adopted by several states; and voters had to register long in advance of the elections. These changes, designed to purify the electoral process, were aspects of the progressive reform impulse (described in Chapter 9) and served to cut back on the number of people who could participate in elections.

Strict voter-registration procedures tended, like most reforms in American politics, to have unintended as well as intended consequences. These changes not only reduced fraudulent voting but also reduced voting generally, because they made it more difficult for certain groups of perfectly honest voters—those with little education, for example, or those who had recently moved—to register and vote. This was not the first time, and it will not be the last, that a reform designed to cure one problem created another.

Following the controversy over Florida's vote count in the 2000 presidential election, many proposals were made to overhaul the nation's voting system. In 2002, Congress passed a measure that for the first time requires each state to have in place a system for counting the disputed ballots of voters whose names were

left off official registration lists. In addition, the law provides federal funds for upgrading voting equipment and procedures and for training election officials. But it stops short of creating a uniform national voting system. Paper ballots, lever machines, and punch-card voting systems will still be used in some places, while optical scan and direct recording electronic equipment will still be used in others. Following the 2004 national elections, however, calls to overhaul the nation's voting system were more muted, partly because the popular vote for president was not terribly close (President Bush received 51 percent, John Kerry received 48 percent), and partly because in most states there were few reported problems.

Even after all the legal changes are taken into account, there seems to have been a decline in citizen participation in elections. Between 1960 and 1980 the proportion of voting-age people casting a ballot in presidential elections fell by about 10 percentage points, a drop that cannot be explained by how ballots were printed or how registration rules were rewritten. Nor can these factors explain why 1996 witnessed not only the lowest level of turnout (49 percent) in a presidential election since 1924 but also the single steepest four-year decline (from 55 percent in 1992) since 1920.

There is, however, one alternative theory: voter turnout has not, in fact, been going down. As we saw earlier in this chapter (refer back to Table 8.1), there are different ways of calculating voter turnout. Turnout means the percentage of the voting-age population that votes; an accurate measure of turnout means having an accurate count of both how many people voted and how many people could have voted. In fact, we do not have very good measures of either number. Eligible voters are derived from census reports that tell us what the voting-age population (VAP) is—that is, how many people exist who are age eighteen and over (or before younger people were allowed to vote, the number age twenty-one and over). But within the VAP are a lot of people who cannot vote, such as prisoners, felons, and aliens.

Political scientists Michael P. McDonald and Samuel L. Popkin have adjusted the VAP to take into account these differences.[19] They call their alternate measure of turnout the voting eligible population (VEP). Tables 8.3 and 8.4 show how turnout percentages differ depending on which measure, VAP or VEP, is used. Calculated by the VEP, national voter turnout in presidential elections has *not* fallen since the early 1970s. Calculated by the VAP, California's turnout rate in the 2000 presidential election was 44 percent, but calculated by the VEP, it was nearly 56 percent. Whichever measure one uses, however, two things are the same: the days when turnout routinely exceeded

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Table 8.4 Two Methods of Calculating Voter Turnout in Selected States, 2000

State	Voting Age Population (VAP)	Voting Eligible Population (VEP)
California	44.09%	55.78%
Florida	50.65	59.75
New York	49.42	57.72
Texas	43.14	50.33
New Jersey	51.04	58.24
Connecticut	58.35	64.25
Arizona	42.26	48.48
Nevada	43.81	49.86
Oregon	60.50	66.60
D.C.	48.99	54.61

Source: Data from Michael McDonald as reported in Louis Jacobson, "Recalibrating Voter Turnout Gauges," *National Journal* (January 1, 2002).

60 percent (1952–1968) in presidential elections are gone, and post-1970 turnout in midterm congressional elections has been anemic, averaging only 38 to 40 percent, however it is calculated.[20]

Actual trends in turnout aside, what if they gave an election and everyone came? Would universal turnout change national election outcomes and the content of public policy? It has long been argued that because the poor, less educated, and minorities are overrepresented among nonvoters, universal turnout would strongly benefit Democratic candidates and liberal causes. But a careful study of this question found that the "party of nonvoters" largely mirrors the demographically diverse and ideologically divided population that goes to the polls.[21] In 1992 and 1996, for example, the two most common demographic features of nonvoters were residential mobility and youth: "fully 43 percent of nonvoters had moved within two years of the election and one third were under the age of thirty."[22] If everyone who was eligible had voted in those elections, Bill Clinton's winning margin over George Bush the elder and Bob Dole, respectively, would have been a bit wider, but there would have been "no Mother Lode of votes for Democratic candidates or pressure for liberal causes."[23]

★ Who Participates in Politics?

To understand better why voter turnout declined and what, if anything, that decline may mean, we must first look at who participates in politics.

Forms of Participation

Voting is by far the most common form of political participation, while giving money to a candidate and being a member of a political organization are the least common. Many Americans exaggerate how frequently they vote or how active they are in politics. In a study by Sidney Verba and Norman Nie, 72 percent of those interviewed said that they voted "regularly" in presidential elections.[24] Yet we know that since 1960, on average only 56 percent of the voting-age population has actually cast presidential ballots. Careful studies of this discrepancy suggest that 8 to 10 percent of Americans interviewed misreport their voting habits: they claim to have voted when in fact they have not. Young, low-income, less-educated, and nonwhite people are more likely to misreport than others.[25] If people misreport their voting behavior, it is likely that they also misreport—that is, exaggerate—the extent to which they participate in other ways.

activists *People who tend to participate in all forms of politics.*

Antiwar activist Cindy Sheehan leads a protest against the war in Iraq near the Pentagon.

Indeed, most research shows that "politics is not at the heart of the day-to-day life of the American people."[26] Work, family, church, and other voluntary activities come first, both in terms of how Americans spend their time and in terms of the money they donate. For example, a study by Verba and others found that a higher proportion of citizens take part in nonpolitical than political activities: "More citizens reported giving time to church-related or charitable activities than indicated contacting a government official or working informally on a community problem, two of the most frequent forms of political participation beyond the vote."[27]

In an earlier study Verba and Nie analyzed the ways in which people participate in politics and came up with six forms of participation that are characteristic of six different kinds of U.S. citizens. About one-fifth (22 percent) of the population is completely inactive: they rarely vote, they do not get involved in organizations, and they probably do not even talk about politics very much. These inactives typically have little education and low incomes and are relatively young. Many of them are African American. At the opposite extreme are the complete **activists,** constituting about one-ninth of the population (11 per-

Young women volunteers work rebuilding an area in Katrina-damaged New Orleans.

cent). These people are highly educated, have high incomes, and tend to be middle-aged rather than young or old. They tend to participate in all forms of politics.

Between these extremes are four categories of limited forms of participation. The *voting specialists* are people who vote but do little else; they tend not to have much schooling or income and to be substantially older than the average person. *Campaigners* not only vote but also like to get involved in campaign activities. They are better educated than the average voter, but what seems to distinguish them most is their interest in the conflicts, passions, and struggle of politics; their clear identification with a political party; and their willingness to take strong positions. *Communalists* are much like campaigners in social background but have a very different temperament: they do not like the conflict and tension of partisan campaigns. They tend to reserve their energy for community activities of a more nonpartisan nature—forming and joining organizations to deal with local problems and contacting local officials about these problems. Finally, there are some *parochial participants*, who do not vote and stay out of election campaigns and civic associations but are willing to contact local officials about specific, often personal, problems.[28]

The Causes of Participation

Whether participation takes the form of voting or being a complete activist, it is higher among people who have gone to college than among those who have not and higher among people who are over forty-four years of age than among those who are under thirty-five. (The differences in voting rates for these groups are shown in Figure 8.3.) Even after controlling for differences in income and occupation, the more schooling one has, the more likely one is to vote. Of course, it may not be schooling itself that causes participation but something that is strongly correlated with schooling, such as high levels of political information.[29]

In fact the differences in participation that are associated with schooling (or its correlates) are probably even greater than reported in this figure, since we have already seen that less-educated people exaggerate how frequently they vote. An excellent study of turnout concludes that people are more likely to vote when they have those personal qualities that "make learning about politics easier and more gratifying."[30]

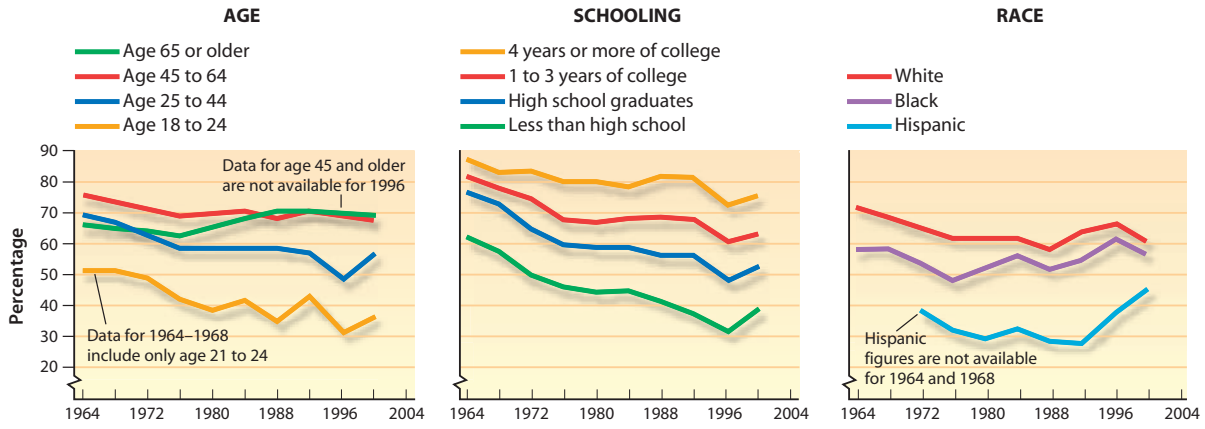
Religious involvement also increases political participation. If you are a regular churchgoer who takes your faith seriously, the chances are that you will be more likely to vote and otherwise take part in politics than if you are a person of the same age, sex, income, and educational level who does not go to church. Church involvement leads to social connectedness, teaches organizational skills, increases one's awareness of larger issues, and puts one in contact with like-minded people.[31]

Men and women vote at about the same rate, but blacks and whites do not. Although at one time that difference was largely the result of discrimination, today it can be explained mostly by differences in social class—blacks are poorer and have less schooling, on average, than whites. However, among people of the same socioeconomic status—that is, having roughly the same level of income and schooling—blacks tend to participate *more* than whites.[32]

Because the population has become younger (due to the baby boom of the 1960s and 1970s) and because blacks have increased in numbers faster than whites, one might suppose that these demographic changes would explain why the turnout in presidential elections has gone down a bit since the early 1960s. And they do—up to a point. But there is another factor that ought to make turnout go *up*—schooling. Since college graduates are much more likely to vote than those with less educational experience, and since the college-graduate proportion of the population has gone up sharply, turnout should have risen. But it has not. What is going on here?

Perhaps turnout has declined despite the higher levels of schooling because of the rising level of

Figure 8.3 Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections, by Age, Schooling, and Race, 1964–2000



Sources: Updated from Gary R. Orren, "The Linkage of Policy to Participation," in *Presidential Selection,* eds. Alexander Heard and Michael Nelson (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1987). Data for 1996 are from *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1998,* 296, as supplied by Christopher Blunt. Data for 2000 are from *Statistical Abstract of the United States 2002,* 6, as supplied by Marc Siegal.

distrust of government. We saw in Chapter 4 that, well into the 1990s, more and more people were telling pollsters that they lacked confidence in political leaders. Rising distrust seems a plausible explanation for declining turnout, until one looks at the facts. The data show that there is *no correlation* between expressing distrust of political leaders and not voting.[33] People who are cynical about our leaders are just as likely to vote as people who are not.

As we have seen, turnout is powerfully affected by the number of people who have registered to vote; perhaps in recent years it has become harder to register. But in fact exactly the opposite is true. Since 1970 federal law has prohibited residency requirements longer than thirty days for presidential elections, and a Supreme Court decision in 1972 held that requirements much in excess of this were invalid for state and local elections.[34] By 1982 twenty-one states and the District of Columbia, containing about half the nation's population, had adopted laws permitting voters to register by mail. In four states—Maine, Minnesota, Oregon, and Wisconsin—voters can register and vote on the same day, all at once.

What is left? Several small things. First, the greater youthfulness of the population, together with the presence of growing numbers of African Americans and other minorities, has pushed down the percentage of voters who are registered and vote.

Second, political parties today are no longer as effective as they once were in mobilizing voters, ensuring that they are registered, and getting them to the polls. As we shall see in Chapter 9, the parties once were grassroots organizations with which many people strongly identified. Today the parties are somewhat distant, national bureaucracies with which most of us do not identify very strongly.

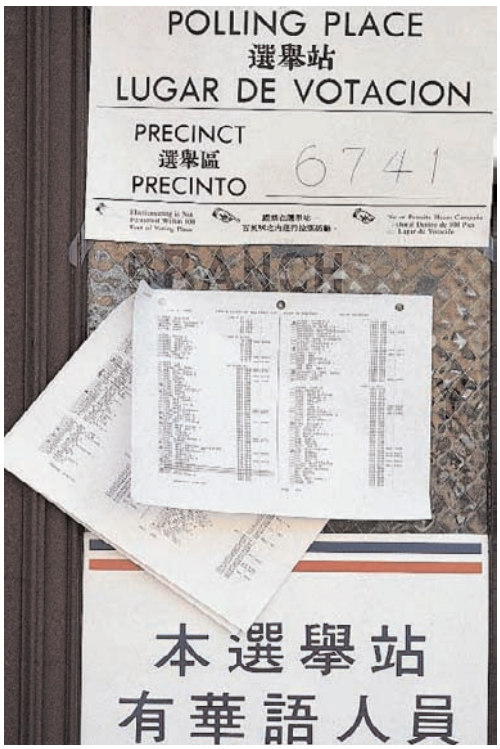
Third, the remaining impediments to registration exert some influence. One study estimated that if every state had registration requirements as easy as the most permissive states, turnout in a presidential election would be about 9 percent higher.[35] The experience of the four states where you can register and vote on the same day is consistent with this: in 1976, when same-day registration first went into effect, three of the four states that had it saw their turnout go up by 3 or 4 percent, while those states that did not have it saw their turnout go down.[36] If an even bolder plan were adopted, such as the Canadian system of universal enrollment, whereby the government automatically puts on the voter list every eligible citizen, there would probably be some additional gain in turnout.[37]

Fourth, if *not* voting is costless, then there will be more nonvoting. Several nations with higher turnouts than ours make voting compulsory. For example, in Italy a person who does not vote has his or her government identification papers stamped "*DID NOT*

VOTE."[38] In Australia and other countries fines can be levied on nonvoters. As a practical matter such fines are rarely imposed, but just the threat of them probably induces more people to register and vote.

Finally, voting (and before that, registering) will go down if people do not feel that elections matter much. There has been a decline in the proportion of people who feel that elections matter a lot, corresponding to the decrease in those who do participate in elections.

In short, there are a number of reasons why we register and vote less frequently in the United States than do citizens of other countries. Two careful studies of all these factors found that almost all of the differences in turnout among twenty-four democratic nations, including the United States, could be explained by party strength, automatic registration, and compulsory voting laws.[39]



In San Francisco, voting instructions are printed in English, Spanish, and Chinese.

The presence of these reasons does not necessarily mean that somebody ought to do something about them. We could make registration automatic—but that might open the way to voter fraud, since people move around and change names often enough to enable some of them, if they wanted to, to vote more than once. We could make voting compulsory, but Americans have an aversion to government compulsion in any form and probably would object strenuously to any plan for making citizens carry identification papers that the government would stamp.

Democrats and Republicans fight over various measures designed to increase registration and voting because one party (usually the Democrats) thinks that higher turnout will help them and the other (usually the Republicans) fears that higher turnout will hurt them. In fact no one really knows whether either party would be helped or hurt by higher voter turnout.

Nonvoters are more likely than voters to be poor, black or Hispanic, or uneducated. However, the proportion of nonvoters with some college education rose from 7 percent in 1960 to 39 percent in 1996. In addition the percentage of nonvoters who held white-collar jobs rose from 33 percent to 50 percent in the same period. Many of these better-off nonvoters might well have voted Republican had they gone to the polls. And even if the turnout rates only of blacks and Hispanics had increased, there would not have been enough votes added to the Democratic column to affect the outcome of the 1984 or 1988 presidential elections.[40]

Both political parties try to get a larger turnout among voters likely to be sympathetic to them, but it is hard to be sure that these efforts will produce real gains. If one party works hard to get its nonvoters to the polls, the other party will work just as hard to get its people there. For example, when Jesse Jackson ran for the presidency in 1984, registration of southern blacks increased, but registration of southern whites increased even more.

The Meaning of Participation Rates

Americans may be voting less, but there is evidence that they are participating more. Between 1967 and 1987 the percentage of Americans who voted regularly in presidential and local elections dropped, but the percentage who participated in ten out of twelve other political activities increased, steeply in some cases. Thus, although Americans may be going to the polls less, they are campaigning, contacting government officials, and working on community issues more. And while the proportion of the population that votes is lower in the United States than in many other democracies, the percentage of Americans who engage in one or more political activities beyond voting is higher (see Table 8.5).

Table 8.5 Political Participation Here and Abroad

Percent of People Who . . .	USA	Rank Among Twenty Democracies	Outranked By
Tried to persuade others to vote for a candidate	44%	2nd	Canada
Supported party by attending meeting, putting up poster	30%	2nd	Canada
Donated money to political group	21%	1st	None
Were contacted by party or candidate	47%	3rd	Canada, Ireland

Source: Professor Martin Wattenberg, University of California-Irvine, using data from the *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems.*

Public demonstrations such as sit-ins and protest marches have become much more common in recent decades than they once were. By one count there were only 6 demonstrations per year between 1950 and 1959, but over 140 per year between 1960 and 1967. Though the demonstrations of the 1960s began with civil rights and antiwar activists, public protests were later employed by farmers demanding government aid, truckers denouncing the national speed limit, people with disabilities seeking to dramatize their needs, parents objecting to busing to achieve racial balance in the schools, conservationists hoping to block nuclear power plants, and construction workers urging that nuclear power *not* be blocked.[41]

Although we vote at lower rates here than people do abroad, the meaning of our voting is different. For one thing we elect far more public officials than do the citizens of any other nation. One scholar has estimated that there are over a half million elective offices in the United States and that almost every week of the year there is an election going on somewhere in this country.[42]

A citizen of Massachusetts, for example, votes not only for the U.S. president but also for two senators, the state governor, the member of the House of Representatives for his or her district, a state representative, a state senator, the state attorney general, the state auditor, the state treasurer, the secretary of state, a county commissioner, a sheriff, and clerks of various courts, as well as (in the cities) for the mayor, the city councillor, and school committee members and (in towns) for selectmen, town-meeting members, a town moderator, library trustees, health board members, assessors, water commissioners, the town clerk, housing authority members, the tree warden, and the commissioner of the public burial ground. (There are probably others whom we have forgotten.)

In many European nations, by contrast, the voters get to make just one choice once every four or five years: they can vote for or against a member of parliament. When there is only one election for one office every several years, that election is bound to assume more importance to voters than many elections for scores of offices. But one election for one office probably has less effect on how the nation is governed than many elections for thousands of offices. Americans may not vote at high rates, but voting affects a far greater part of the political system here than abroad.

The kinds of people who vote here are also different from those who vote abroad. Since almost everybody votes in many other democracies, the votes cast there mirror almost exactly the social composition of those nations. Since only slightly over half of the voting-age population turns out even for presidential elections here, the votes cast in the United States may not truly reflect the country.

That is in fact the case. The proportion of each major occupational group—or if you prefer, social class—votes at about the same rate in Japan and Sweden. But in the United States the turnout is heavily skewed toward higher-status persons: those in professional, managerial, and other white-collar occupations are overrepresented among the voters.[43]

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

MEMORANDUM

To: *Senator Henry Gilbert*
From: *Peter Clark, legislative analyst*
Subject: *Voting reform legislation*

In the 1990s barely half of the electorate voted for president, and only a third or so cast ballots for congressional elections. In a few recent presidential primaries and statewide special elections, turnout has run 10 percent or below. Studies show that often citizens miss the opportunity to vote because of complications with work or child care. To address this problem, legislators from both parties support celebrating Veterans Day on Election Day, which would create a national holiday for voting. Eligible voters who do not go to the polls would be fined.

Congress Considers Voting Holiday to Honor Veterans, and Nonvoting Fines, to Increase Turnout

January 31 ANDOVER, MA

With bipartisan concern about maximizing voter turnout for the upcoming presidential election, both the House and the Senate are considering bills to combine Veterans Day with election day, and/or impose fines on nonvoters. Members of Congress declare that increasing turnout is vital to the continued health of American democracy . . .

Arguments for:

1. This proposal honors veterans by recognizing their service with the fundamental requirement of representative democracy, rule by the people through voting.
2. A voting holiday ensures that people who cannot take off time from work or other responsibilities to vote have the opportunity to exercise their democratic right.
3. Imposing a fine for nonvoting sends a moral message that voting is a civic duty in a democracy. More citizens will feel morally obliged to vote if all citizens are legally obliged to do so.

Arguments against:

1. Just as veterans volunteer their service, so, too, should citizens volunteer to exercise their democratic responsibilities.
2. Voting is a right, but citizens have a civic duty to exercise that right, and the government should not, in effect, exercise that duty on their behalf. Moreover, people can vote by absentee ballot at their convenience.
3. Compulsory voting does not guarantee informed voting. It is both unwise and undemocratic to legally oblige people to vote.

Your decision:

Vote for bill _____ Vote against bill _____

Although nonwhites and Latinos are the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population, they tend to be the most underrepresented groups among American voters. Little is known about the relationship between political participation and variables such as command of the language and involvement in nonpolitical institutions that provide information or impart skills relevant to politics (such as workplaces and voluntary associations). However, such factors could be quite important in explaining differences in political participation rates among poor and minority citizens. Blacks, though less involved than whites, participate in voting and political activities at higher rates than do Latinos. One excellent study suggests that these differences are due in part to the fact that blacks are more likely than Latinos to be members of churches that stimulate political interest, activity, and mobilization.[44] Language barriers also make it harder for many Latinos to get in touch with a public official, serve on local governing boards, and engage in other forms of political participation in which command of English is an asset. The lower participation rates of minority citizens are likely compounded by their being disproportionately of low socioeconomic status compared to white Americans.

Exactly what these differences in participation mean in terms of how the government is run is not entirely clear. But since we know from evidence presented in the last chapter that upper-status persons are more likely to have an ideological view of politics, it may suggest that governance here is a bit more sensitive not only to the interests of upper-status white people but also to their (conflicting) ideologies.

★ SUMMARY ★

The popular view that Americans don't vote as a result of apathy is not quite right. It is nearer to the truth to say that we don't all register to vote and don't always vote even when registered. There are many factors having nothing to do with apathy that shape our participation rates—age, race, party organization, the barriers to registration, and popular views about the significance of elections.

Compared to other nations, Americans vote at lower rates but more frequently and for many more offices, so elections make a bigger difference in the conduct of public affairs here than abroad. We also engage somewhat more frequently than do people abroad in various nonelectoral forms of participation.

RECONSIDERING WHO GOVERNS?

1. ***Who votes, who doesn't?***
   The most powerful determinants of voting are age (older people vote more than younger people) and education (college graduates vote more than high school graduates). Race makes a difference, but black participation rates approximate white rates once you control for socioeconomic status.
2. ***Why do some people participate in politics at higher rates than others?***
   Older people and college graduates have learned to have a greater interest in politics, in part because they see ways in which government policies will affect them, in part because they may have acquired a political ideology that makes politics intrinsically interesting. As we have seen, Americans vote less than people in most other democratic nations. That gap is in part the result of the failure of many Americans to register to vote; efforts to increase registration, such as the motor-voter law, have got more names onto the voting rolls, but these new additions often do not vote as often as do other registered voters.

RECONSIDERING TO WHAT ENDS?

1. ***How did the Framers of the Constitution think average citizens should participate in America's representative democracy?***

   The Framers believed that citizens should play an important but not the decisive role in the American Republic. They elect the House, but until the Constitution was amended in 1913, they did not elect the Senate; the president and senators, not ordinary people, select federal judges; and the president is chosen by electors. Over time the system has become much more responsive to public opinion. Voters now help pick party candidates through party primaries, and their views are regularly solicited by opinion polls.

2. ***Should today's college-age citizens participate more in politics?***

   We would say yes, but the fact is that many young adults seem less disposed to traditional forms of political activity, including voting, than they are toward other types of civic engagement, such as community service or volunteer work. One forecast to ponder: unless youth voting rates increase relative to those of senior citizens, then, on Election Day 2020, persons age sixty-five and older (about 22 percent of the general population) will cast a quarter of all ballots, while persons ages eighteen to twenty-nine (about 21 percent of the general population) will account for less than an eighth of the voting electorate.

WORLD WIDE WEB RESOURCES

Information for voters
DemocracyNet:
www.congress.org/congressorg/e4/
League of Women Voters: **www.lwv.org/**
Voter Information Services: **www.vis.org/**
Women's Voting Guide:
www.womenvote.org/resources

National Mail Voter Registration Form:
www.fec.gov/votregis/vr.shtml
The Vanishing Voter:
www.vanishingvoter.org/
Voter turnout statistics:
www.fec.gov/pages/electpg.htm

SUGGESTED READINGS

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Green, Donald P., and Alan S. Gerbec. *Get Out the Vote!: How to Increase Voter Turnout.* Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004. Excellent review of the evidence on what works—and what doesn't—to get more people to the polls.

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