

CH. 8 – POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Political participation encompasses the various activities that citizens employ in their efforts to influence policy making and the selection of leaders. People participate in politics in many ways. They may write their representative or senator, or work for a candidate or political party. Or they can make presentations to their local school board or city council, or call the police to complain about the neighbor's dog. Partly because of our federalist system, people have many opportunities to participate in our democracy on national, state, and local levels. Some forms of participation are more common than others and some citizens participate more than others. Americans in general are comparatively active in politics, but the United States is notorious among modern democracies for its low voter turnout rates, although the rates went up significantly in the election of 2004. However, the turnout for the previous two U.S. presidential elections was just about 50%. By contrast, most western democracies in Europe have vote rates well above 70%.

TYPES OF PARTICIPATION

Researchers have found for years that American citizens most commonly participate in national politics by following presidential campaigns and voting in the presidential election. According to the National Election Studies from the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan, Americans reported the following types of political participation during the campaign for the election of 2000:

- 82% watched the campaign on television
- 73% voted in the election
- 34% tried to influence others how to vote
- 10% put a sticker on their car or wore a button
- 9% gave money to help a campaign
- 5% attended a political meeting
- 3% worked for a party or candidate

These statistics can be deceptive because they reflect how people *say* they participate. For example, despite the fact that 73% said they voted in the 2000 election, less than 50% actually did. One explanation is that people know that they should vote and don't want to admit it if they didn't.

WHO PARTICIPATES?

Experts have found several demographic characteristics to be strongly associated with high levels of political participation

- **Education** - The single most important characteristic of a politically active citizen is a high level of education. Generally, the more education an individual has, the more likely he or she is to vote. Why? Perhaps because the well educated better understand complex societal issues, or maybe they better understand the importance of civic responsibility. Or it could just be that their occupations are more flexible in allowing them to take time to go to the polls.
- **Religious Involvement** - As religious involvement increases, so does political participation. Regular churchgoers are more likely to vote than those that do not attend. Why? Some possibilities are that church involvement leads to social connectedness, teaches organizational skills, and increases one's awareness of larger societal issues.
- **Race and Ethnicity**- If only race and ethnicity are considered, whites have higher voting rates than do blacks and Latinos. However, that tendency is somewhat deceptive. Some studies that control for income and education differences have found that the voting rates are about the same for whites, blacks, and Latinos.
- **Age** - Despite the big push in the early 1970s to allow 18 year olds to vote, voting levels for 18-24 year olds are the lowest of any age category. Older people are more likely to vote than are younger people. The highest percentages of eligible voters who actually vote are in those groups 45 and above.
- **Gender** - For many years women were underrepresented at the voting booths, but in recent elections, they have turned out in at least equal numbers to men. In fact, since 1992, turnout among women

voters has exceeded that of men. However, this trend is relatively new, so in general we can say that men and women vote at about the same rates.

- **Two-party competition** - Another factor in voter turnout is the extent to which elections are competitive in a state. More competitive elections generally bring higher turnouts, and voter rates increase significantly in years when presidential candidates are particularly competitive.

It is important to note that an individual is affected by many factors: his or her age, social class, education level, race, gender, and party affiliation. Thus factors form **cross-cutting cleavages**, making it very important to control for other factors that may produce a counter influence. For example, in order to compare gender differences in voting rates, a researcher would have to compare men and women of similar ages, education level, race, and party affiliation. Otherwise, the voting behavior may be caused by a factor other than gender.

VOTING

Voting is at the heart of a modern democracy. A vote sends a direct message to the government about how a citizen wants to be governed. Over the course of American history, voting rights have gradually expanded, so that today very few individuals are excluded. And yet, expanding suffrage is countered by a current trend: that of lower percentages of eligible voters in recent presidential elections actually going to the polls to cast their votes. For example, less than 50% of eligible voters actually voted in the 2000 presidential election. The trend did reverse itself in the election of 2004, when record numbers of Americans turned out to vote. Both parties worked hard to get new voter registrations and to encourage their base to actually get to the polls to vote.

EXPANDING SUFFRAGE

Originally the Constitution let individual states determine the qualifications for voting, and states varied widely in their laws. All states excluded women, most denied blacks the franchise, and property ownership was usually required. The expansion of the right to vote resulted from constitutional amendment, changing federal statutes, and Supreme Court decisions. Changes in suffrage over American history include:

- **Lifting of property restrictions** - At first, all states required voters to be property owners, with varying standards for how much property a man had to own to merit the right to vote. During the 1830s when Andrew Jackson was president, most states loosened their property requirements to embrace **universal manhood suffrage**, voting rights for all white males. By the end of Jackson's presidency, all states had lifted property restrictions from their voting requirements.
- **Suffrage for Black Americans and former slaves** - After the Civil War three important amendments intended to protect civil rights of the newly freed former slaves were added to the Constitution. The last of the three was added in 1870 - the 15th Amendment, which 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. Despite the amendment, many states passed **Jim Crow laws** - such as literacy tests, poll taxes, and the grandfather clause - that prevented many blacks from voting until well past the mid-20th century. During the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s, the Supreme Court declared various Jim Crow laws unconstitutional. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 and other federal laws prohibited states from using discriminatory practices, such as literacy tests.
- **Women's Suffrage** - In contrast to black Americans, women were kept from the polls by law more than by intimidation. An aggressive women's suffrage movement began before the Civil War, but it brought no national results until social attitudes toward women changed during the Progressive Movement of the early 20th century. The result was the passage of the **19th Amendment**, which extended the vote to women in 1920. The 19th Amendment doubled the size of the electorate.
- **18-21-year-olds** - A final major expansion of voting rights occurred in 1971 when the **26th Amendment** changed the minimum voting age from 21 to 18. A few states - such as Georgia, Kentucky, Alaska, and Hawaii - had allowed younger people to vote before 1971. The increased political activism of young people, particularly on college campuses during the 1960s, almost certainly inspired this expansion of voting rights.

VOTER TURNOUT

Voter turnout can be measured in two different ways: by showing the proportion of the registered voters that actually voted in a given election, and by showing the percentage of the eligible voters that vote. According to recent figures, American statistics look much better if the first method is employed. If we take the proportion of registered voters, between 75 and 80% voted in recent presidential elections; if we take the percentage of the voting-age population, only about 50% actually voted in 1996 and 2000, a figure much lower than most other democracies. The figure increased significantly in 2004, but it still remained lower than those in many countries. For example, in Great Britain and Canada, about 3/4 of all eligible voters vote in major elections, and in Italy and Australia, approximately 90% vote.

Because the results of the two methods differ so widely in the U.S., many observers believe that the main problem with getting people to the polls is the cumbersome process of voter registration.

VOTER REGISTRATION

Laws vary according to state, but all states except North Dakota require voter registration. Until a few years ago some states required voters to register as much as six months before the election. In other words, if someone moved into the state, forgot to register, or passed their eighteenth birthday, he or she would be ineligible to vote in any elections for six months. These rigid requirements were the result of voting abuses of the early 20th century (ballot box stuffing, people voting twice, dead people voting), but in recent times, they are believed to be responsible for low voter turnout. Federal law now prohibits any state from requiring more than a 30-day waiting period.

Most recently, in 1993 Congress passed the National Voter Registration Act - the "motor-voter" bill - that allows people to register to vote while applying for or renewing a driver's license. The act also requires states to provide assistance to facilitate voter registration. Removal of names from voting rolls for nonvoting is no longer allowed. Supporters of the law claim that it will add some 49 million people to the voting rolls, but of course it remains to be seen whether or not the actual percentages will increase. In general, Democrats have been more supportive of the bills than Republicans because they believe that the demographics of new voters might favor the Democratic Party. However, the tremendous increase in voter registrations in 2004 did not particularly benefit the Democrats, as many of the new voters supported the Republicans.

Neither the 1996 nor 2000 presidential elections showed increases in voting percentages, with only some 50% of eligible voters actually voting, a figure even lower than those for most other recent elections. The voting increase in 2004 was generally attributed to hard work by the political parties to get people registered and to the polls, and not to the motor-voter bills.

OTHER REASONS FOR LOW VOTER TURNOUTS

Several other reasons are often cited for low voter turnout in the United States:

- **The difficulty of absentee voting** - Even if citizens remember to register ahead of time, they can only vote in their own precincts. If a voter is out of town on election day, he or she has to vote by absentee ballot. States generally have stringent rules about voting absentee. For example, some states require a voter to apply for a ballot in person.
- **The number of offices to elect** - Some critics argue that because Americans vote for so many officials on many different levels of government, they cannot keep up with all the campaigns and elections. As a result, they don't know who to vote for, and they don't vote. Americans vote for more public officials and hold more elections by far than any other modern democracy. In most states, primary elections, general elections, and special elections are held every year or two.
- **Weekday, non-holiday voting** - In many other democracies, elections take place on weekends. Others that hold elections on weekdays declared election day a national holiday so that no one has to go to work. By law, national general elections in the United States are held on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November in even-numbered years. Most state and local elections are also held during the week, and only a few localities declare election day a national holiday. Many people find it difficult to get off work in order to vote.
- **Weak political parties** - In many countries, parties make great efforts to get people to the polls. Even in earlier days in the United States, parties called their members to ensure that they register and that they vote. Parties also would often provide transportation to the polls. Although parties still stage

get-out-the-vote campaigns, parties today are not as strongly organized at the grass roots - or local - level as they used to be. However, this may be changing, since the parties did actively get out the vote in 2004, and they were aided by groups known as 527s (for the part of the tax code that allows them to be tax-free). These groups financed massive get-out-the-vote campaigns for both presidential candidates.

In some studies that compare political participation rates in the United States with other countries, Americans tend to engage more frequently in non-electoral forms of participation, such as campaign contributions, community involvement, and contacts with public officials.

Does it really matter that the U.S. has a low voter turnout rate? Some say no because they think it indicates that Americans are happy with the status quo. On the other hand, others say that a low voter turnout signals apathy about our political system in general. If only a few people take the time to learn about the issues, we are open to takeover and/or manipulation by authoritarian rule. The higher voter turnout in 2004 did not result in a change of presidents, but may have resulted from a two-sided struggle over whether or not a change should take place. Or, it may indicate that citizens are indeed becoming more interested in taking part in the political process.

Did the expansion of suffrage lead to lower voting rates by widening the voting base? Will the Motor-Voter Law eventually improve voting rates? Is voter registration still too difficult a process? Do we need to move elections to weekends? Do we need fewer elected positions? Or do low voter turnouts just indicate that people are happy with government and don't feel the need to vote? Do the higher voting rates in the election of 2004 indicate a turnaround in political participation, or do they simply reflect an enthusiasm for that particular presidential race? Whatever the reasons, the United States today still has a lower voting rate than most other modern democracies.