

impact, attempting as it does to influence public policy directly through extensive personal contacts and the dispensation of favors, the need for a democratic counterweight to special interest participation seems crucial. Widespread nonvoting makes it less likely that electoral participation by ordinary citizens will be that counterweight.

Of course, other reasons could be advanced in favor of increasing turnout. For example, participation by itself may help people develop personally, so more participation is good for that reason. Or somewhat more abstractly, real democracy may call for participation, so more participation must mean more democracy, which is good.

But I believe these reasons are subordinate to concerns about the quality of the link between policymakers and citizens. Low and declining voter turnout threatens this link and compromises the type of democracy the United States is today and will become in the future. Provided the costs of reform are not too great, these concerns should be enough to merit action to increase voter turnout without invoking either the specter of a rotting political system in which the affluent dictate election outcomes or the utopian vision of a democracy in which all citizens participate all the time.

I am convinced therefore that increased voter turnout would indeed be a social good. But in the pages that follow, I seek to separate fact from fiction so that efforts to attain this goal will proceed clear-eyed and without pretense.

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Leighley

# Why Is American Voter Turnout So Low?

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Voter turnout levels are now quite low in the United States compared both with those of other advanced industrial democracies and with those of earlier periods in U.S. history. Here I analyze the main reasons that lie behind the phenomenon of generally low U.S. voter turnout. First, the extent to which U.S. voter turnout lags behind international and historical standards is described. Second, the main factors that appear to underlie relatively low U.S. voter turnout, both cross-nationally and historically, are discussed. Finally, responsibility for generally low U.S. voter turnout is partitioned among several sets of factors uncovered by these analyses.

## How Low Is American Voter Turnout?

Table 1-1 shows voter turnout in the United States in the last three decades, both for on-year (presidential) and off-year elections. The first thing that jumps out from these data is that turnout has been going down steadily over three decades.<sup>1</sup> But the second striking feature of these data is that turnout levels were not high at any time in this period. For example, the high-water mark of presidential turnout in these three decades was 62.8 percent in 1960. That is barely more than three-fifths

1. Local election turnout has apparently declined in a similar manner (see Leighley 1992). On the other hand turnout in presidential primaries has remained fairly stable (Committee for the Study of the American Electorate 1992; Rothenberg and Brody 1988), whereas participation in certain political activities outside of voting (such as contributing money and contacting officials) has actually gone up (Brady and others 1988).

TABLE 1-1. Turnout in U.S. National Elections, 1960-90<sup>a</sup>

Year	Presidential election		Year	U.S. total
	U.S. total	South <sup>b</sup>		
1960	62.8	42.9	1962	47.5
1964	61.9	47.0	1966	48.4
1968	60.9	51.6	1970	46.8
1972	55.2	44.9	1974	38.3
1976	53.6	46.8	1978	37.3
1980	52.8	47.0	1982	40.5
1984	53.1	48.3	1986	36.3
1988	50.2	44.9	1990	36.4

SOURCE: Committee for the Study of the American Electorate 1989, 1990.

a. Based on the voting-age population.

b. Based on highest statewide turnout—that is, turnout in a given state was set equal to the highest turnout for a statewide office in that year (or to the summed congressional turnout if there was not a statewide race).

c. Includes Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

of the voting-age population (VAP).<sup>2</sup> Similarly the highest off-year turnout was 48.4 percent in 1966, less than half the electorate.

Now of course levels of turnout are even lower. Turnout was just over one-half the VAP (50.2 percent) in the presidential election of 1988, while turnout in the 1990 off-year election was little more than one-third (36.4 percent). But clearly the United States has not become a low-turnout society simply because of declining turnout. Rather a *low* turnout society (1960s) has been turned into an *even lower* turnout society (1990s) by these trends.

Table 1-1 also provides some important regional detail on this story by breaking down presidential turnout trends between the South and the rest of the country (the non-South). As these data make clear, the overall decline in turnout is really the result of two different trends. Southern turnout went *up* 2 percentage points over the 1960-88 pe-

2. The voting-age population is the standard base (denominator) for estimating turnout rates in the United States. This is both because the voting-age population is a good approximation of the actual number of eligible voters and because adjusting the voting-age population to remove legally ineligible voters (that is, aliens) is a difficult and imprecise process. Furthermore—though this is little known—citizenship is not a constitutional requirement for voting in the United States. Both the time it takes to become a citizen (national) and the actual restriction of suffrage to citizens (state) are matters of legislation. Thus at the most basic level of the system, the voting-age population is the eligible population. For all these reasons the term “turnout” in this book generally refers to turnout of the voting-age population.

riod,<sup>3</sup> while nonsouthern turnout declined faster than the national rate (down 17 points).<sup>4</sup> In a sense what has happened is the South has remained a very low turnout area despite a slight increase, while the rest of the country has *become* a very low turnout area as a result of a steep decline.

And just how low is overall U.S. voter turnout at this point? As the data in the table suggest, it depends, to some extent, on whether the on-year or off-year election series is examined. The off-year election figures certainly paint the worst picture, averaging only 37.7 percent in the 1982-90 period. But given the preeminent importance of the presidency in American politics, it would not be fair to measure general U.S. turnout levels by elections that do not include a presidential contest. For this reason, U.S. presidential turnout levels will be used to compare the contemporary United States with other countries and with earlier eras in American history. But presidential elections represent only the upper bound of U.S. voter participation. Beneath these “flagship” elections lurks an entire substratum of much lower turnout off-year and local elections.<sup>5</sup>

### U.S. Turnout Compared Internationally

Even when presidential turnout is used as the yardstick, U.S. voting participation is quite low by international standards (table 1-2). Among twenty advanced industrial democracies, the average U.S. turnout rate of 53 percent in the 1980s ranks next to last (only Switzerland has a lower turnout rate).

Moreover, the size of the gap between the United States and other democracies is huge. Because the highest ranked democracies (Belgium, Austria, Australia) have turnouts of 90 percent or more, the gap between the United States and these democracies approaches or exceeds 40 percentage points. And even if one compares the U.S. rate

3. Changes in southern turnout are, themselves the result of two different trends among white southerners and black southerners (see chapter 2).

4. It is worth noting that nonsouthern turnout at the beginning of this period was on a par with current national turnout levels in such democracies as the United Kingdom, France, and Canada (see table 1-2). There is a problem with this comparison, however, in that one is comparing only part of the United States (the high-turnout part) with these other nations. Presumably these nations also have relatively high- and relatively low-turnout areas, in which case a fairer comparison would be between the U.S. non-South and the high-turnout parts of these other nations. This comparison is unlikely to be as favorable.

5. A good rule of thumb is that off-year turnout is about 15 percentage points lower than presidential turnout, whereas local turnout is another 15 points lower than off-year turnout (thus the spread between local and presidential turnout is about 30 points).

TABLE 1-2. Average Turnout in Twenty Democracies, 1980-89

Nation	Turnout	Nation	Turnout
Belgium	94	Israel	79
Austria	92	Greece	78
Australia	90	Finland	74
New Zealand	89	United Kingdom	74
Sweden	88	Ireland	73
West Germany	87	Canada	72
Denmark	86	France	70
Italy	84	Japan	68
Netherlands	84	United States	53
Norway	83	Switzerland	49

source: Duch 1990 cited in Erikson, Luthberg, and Redin 1991, table 1-1. Data are from national legislative elections, except in the United States, where data are from presidential elections. The base is the legally eligible electorate.

with the *average* across all twenty democracies (78 percent), the gap is still 25 points. By these data then the contemporary United States is an exceptionally low-turnout society.

### U.S. Turnout Compared Historically

Historical comparisons tell a similar story. The United States was a much higher-turnout society throughout much of the nineteenth century than it is today (table 1-3).<sup>6</sup> Between 1840 and 1900, turnout averaged 77.7 percent, about 23 points higher than the 1972-88 average of 54.9 percent and virtually identical<sup>7</sup> to the current average among the twenty industrial democracies listed in table 1-2.

Again these data show the contemporary United States as an unusually low turnout society. The data also show very clearly that low turnout is not just a phenomenon of the last several decades. Through-

6. The data in table 1-3 use the *eligible* electorate as a denominator, rather than the voting-age population. This reflects the fact that meaningful historical comparisons of turnout rates are not possible without taking into account the large proportions of the population that could not vote at different times in U.S. history (for instance, almost all women could not vote before 1920). Thus despite the data problems that bedevil estimates of the eligible electorate, it is preferable to use these estimates, rather than the voting-age population, when making historical comparisons.

Note that because of the differing denominators, turnout rates for elections reported in both tables 1-1 and 1-3 are slightly larger in table 1-3. This reflects the fact that the turnout rates in table 1-3 use the slightly smaller, eligible electorate denominator (for the 1960-90 period, this essentially means the voting-age population minus aliens).

7. Though the international turnout average would be slightly higher if the United States were excluded from that average (this would bring the international average up to 80 percent).

TABLE 1-3. Turnout in U.S. Presidential Elections, 1824-1988<sup>a</sup>

Year	Turnout	Year	Turnout
1824	26.7	1908	65.7
1828	57.3	1912	59.0
1832	56.7	1916	61.8
1836	56.5	1920	49.3
1840	80.3	1924	48.9
1844	79.0	1928	56.9
1848	72.8	1932	57.0
1852	69.5	1936	61.0
1856	79.4	1940	62.5
1860	81.8	1944	55.9
1864	76.3	1948	53.4
1868	80.9	1952	63.8
1872	72.1	1956	61.6
1876	82.6	1960	65.4
1880	80.6	1964	63.3
1884	78.3	1968	62.3
1888	80.5	1972	57.1
1892	75.9	1976	55.2
1896	79.7	1980	54.3
1900	73.7	1984	55.2
1904	65.5	1988	52.8

SOURCE: Burnham 1987, table 5-3; and author's computations.

<sup>a</sup> Based on legally eligible electorate (This excludes most blacks before 1870, most women before 1920, and most or all aliens throughout).

out most of the twentieth century, in fact, turnout rates have lagged far behind the standard set by the previous century.

For example, in the New Deal period (1932-44), seemingly an era of high political mobilization, turnout of the eligible electorate averaged only 59 percent. And in the 1952-60 period, the three contiguous elections with the highest average turnout since 1912, the rate of voter participation was just 64 percent—still 14 points less than in 1840-1900.

### Are Conventional Turnout Figures Unfair?

The data just summarized indicate that the contemporary United States is a very low turnout society, both by international and historical standards. Some say that U.S. turnout data are *fatally* flawed, however—that conventional turnout figures unfairly exaggerate the seriousness of the problem.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, turnout rates based on the voting-age pop-

ulation are said to include too many people who cannot vote (aliens, felons, those in mental institutions, those who moved within thirty days of the election) and exclude some people who do vote (those who voted but did not vote for president).

But the data for the 1960-88 presidential elections reported in table 1-3 (where aliens are excluded) generally differ by only about 2 percentage points from the corresponding data in table 1-1 (where aliens are not excluded). As a further check I performed a specific calculation for the 1988 election<sup>9</sup> that removed not only aliens but also felons, mental institution residents, and recent movers from the denominator (Americans abroad were added, however, because they can vote) and then added nonpresidential voters to the numerator. The final result: an estimated turnout for the 1988 election of roughly 54.3 percent, about 4 points higher than the turnout shown in table 1-1. This is a difference but manifestly not enough to take the United States out of the low-turnout category (compare with table 1-2).

Another objection to conventional turnout figures centers on the role of registration. Because only those registered can vote, it is sometimes argued that U.S. turnout should be assessed and compared on the basis of turnout of the registered (which is actually fairly high—current estimates range from 78 to 86 percent in presidential elections).<sup>10</sup> But such an approach ignores the fact that registration in the United States is voluntary, not automatic as in most other democracies. Because of this difference turnout of the registered in the United States amounts to turnout among a self-selected *subset* of the eligible electorate, whereas turnout of the registered in other countries approximates turnout of the entire eligible electorate. Clearly it will not do to compare countries on the basis of a statistic whose meaning fluctuates so dramatically. The best measure of voter participation remains turnout among the eligible electorate, typically approximated by turnout of the voting-age population.

### Explaining Cross-National and Historical Variation in Turnout

The data in the previous section have established that the United States is, indeed, a very low-turnout society by cross-national and historical standards. I now investigate why, broadly speaking, this is so.

9. I am indebted to Curtis B. Gans of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate for showing me his very similar calculation.

10. The issue of turnout of registered voters is covered in detail in chapter 2. See U.S. Bureau of the Census 1989; and Committee for the Study of the American Electorate 1989.

The first step is to develop an analysis of why some people vote and other people do not. Such an analysis provides a theoretical framework for selecting attributes of societies that should logically affect voter turnout. Then if these societal attributes also vary cross-nationally and historically, they should provide at least part of the explanation for observed variation in turnout levels.

### Why People Vote

Looked at from one perspective the amazing thing about voting is that everyone does not do it. It is after all a relatively low-cost activity, requiring little more than fulfilling some minor bureaucratic requirements and traveling to the polling place. On the plus side the voter helps determine the policies affecting his or her life by participating in the selection of policymakers. Yet everyone does not vote. Even in 1960, the recent high-water mark of American voter turnout, more than one in three eligible voters did not bother to cast a ballot. And in other democracies, where turnout is typically much higher than in the United States,<sup>11</sup> turnout rates are by no means 100 percent, but vary widely between a little under 70 percent to somewhat over 90 percent (table 1-2).

The perspective sketched above does not tally with the facts for two good reasons. First, voting, while a low-cost activity, is not a zero-cost activity. The costs of registering, finding out where the polling booth is, and taking the time and effort to travel to it on election day are tangible, nonzero ones. In addition, information costs may exist, because not everyone will have easy access to the minimal number of facts necessary to distinguish between candidates. For some people, this set of costs may seem large and not worth the trouble of absorbing.

The second reason has to do with the benefits obtained from balloting. Although the outcome of an election may strongly affect a person's life, the individual citizen does not have to participate in the election to obtain these benefits. The benefits are available to everyone, voter and nonvoter alike.<sup>12</sup> Theorists of voting have therefore pointed out that the worth of a citizen's vote is not equal to the benefits derived

11. Switzerland is an obvious exception. See Lange, Ridout, and Cooney 1978, pp. 93-99, 145-46, and Powell 1982, chapter 6 for discussions of the factors underlying low Swiss voter turnout.

12. This is an example of the problem of provision of "public goods" by large groups (Olson 1965, pp. 9-15), with the outcome of the election as the public good. Nonvoters in this sense become "free riders" on the group of voters participating in the election.

from a given election outcome but to the product obtained by multiplying the value of these benefits by the probability that the citizen's individual vote will produce that outcome.<sup>13</sup> This "expected value" is the real outcome-related benefit of voting, and in most elections it will be small, because the probability of a lone individual's vote affecting an election outcome is minuscule.

The expected-value factor makes it clearer why everyone does not participate in elections. The costs are not zero, and the benefits, in the expected-value sense, may be so small as to be indistinguishable from zero. By this logic it is surprising that anyone bothers to vote. This problem—the "paradox of voting"—has been duly noted by theorists.<sup>14</sup> The solution to the problem, at least on a general level, is clear enough. By participating in an election, individual voters must be deriving benefits that are not dependent on directly influencing the outcome of that election. Such benefits are fundamentally *expressive* and depend on the extent to which a citizen finds his or her vote *meaningful* in the context of the election. A wide range of such benefits can be imagined, but they generally fall into two categories.

In the first category a citizen votes in an election to express his or her general commitment to a party, reference group (blacks, women, workers), cause, or even to society as a whole. These expressive benefits are primarily *symbolic*<sup>15</sup> because the citizen derives meaning from expressing this general commitment and is relatively detached from the specific issues and dynamics of the election.

In the second category a citizen votes in an election to express his or her specific concern about that election and its relation to government policy and personnel outcomes. These expressive benefits are basically *instrumental*<sup>16</sup> because they are driven fundamentally by a desire to see certain "real world" outcomes that depend on the election

13. Downs 1957, chap. 14.

14. Riker and Ordeshook 1968; Cyr 1975.

15. Sometimes these symbolic benefits are thought of as the only real expressive benefits relevant to voting (see Lange, Ridout, and Cooney 1978, pp. 164–67; and, to a lesser extent, Conway 1991, pp. 8–11). But clearly given the improbability of directly influencing election outcomes, even votes motivated by concern about the outcome are fundamentally expressive.

16. Sometimes the term "instrumental benefits" of voting is reserved for situations in which the individual casts a vote and receives an immediate benefit from an external source (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, pp. 6–10)—most crudely, money in the pocket or a job; more subtly, approval (or lack of disapproval) from others. This is certainly a defensible use of the term. However because I believe expressive benefits are generally more important to the act of voting, I reserve this term for distinguishing among types of expressive benefits.

result.<sup>17</sup> Of course there is no hard and fast line between symbolic and instrumental expressive benefits. And no doubt individual citizens are typically motivated by a mix of symbolic and instrumental considerations. The basic point remains, however, that without an adequate level of these expressive benefits, however categorized,<sup>18</sup> citizens will not be motivated to participate.

In general then for a citizen to vote, he or she must find these symbolic or instrumental benefits high enough to merit absorbing the costs of participation.<sup>19</sup> Clearly any societal attribute that affects the average level of symbolic or instrumental expressive benefits the electorate can obtain or the average level of costs the electorate must absorb should have an effect on average societal turnout levels. It then follows that, to the extent this attribute varies cross-nationally or historically, it constitutes part of the explanation for observed variation in turnout levels.

### *Explaining Cross-National Variation in Turnout Levels*

One set of relevant attributes that varies cross-nationally is the legal structure of voting. These attributes primarily affect the costs of voting (or nonvoting) by attaching legal obstacles or penalties to the voting process.

The most obvious factor here is the U.S. system of voter registration.<sup>20</sup> This system, based on registration through voluntary, individual initiative, makes it exceptionally difficult by international standards for U.S. citizens to qualify to vote. In most other countries registration is automatic,<sup>21</sup> performed by the state without any individual initia-

17. This helps explain how expressive benefits can be "election-specific" and therefore help drive election-to-election variation in turnout. See Aldrich (forthcoming) for more discussion.

18. Or wherever they come from. For arguments that *mobilization*, broadly defined, underlies the realization of expressive benefits in elections, see Rosenstone and Hansen (forthcoming) and Uhlaner 1989. See Knack 1991a for a critique of Uhlaner's strong emphasis on the role of groups.

19. For a more formal treatment of the turnout decision, which is basically consistent with the position sketched here, see Aldrich's excellent review essay (forthcoming) on turnout and rational choice.

20. I have a great deal more to say about the U.S. voter registration system in chapter 4.

21. Technically speaking, Canada and the United Kingdom do not have automatic registration. They build their registration lists through an enumeration process before elections. But since the enumeration process is organized and conducted by the state, registration can be termed automatic in these countries without violating the spirit of the term.

tive.<sup>22</sup> The registration process therefore raises the costs of voting in the United States and should, as a consequence, depress U.S. turnout levels relative to those of other democracies.

Another aspect of the legal structure of voting is compulsory voting laws. Such laws are on the books in several countries, including Italy,<sup>23</sup> Belgium, and Australia.<sup>24</sup> Although by and large these laws appear to be lightly enforced, even the threat of enforcement should act to raise the costs of not voting (which is the same thing as raising the benefits of voting, because cost avoidance is technically a benefit). Hence compulsory voting laws should enhance turnout levels in these countries relative to the levels in other democracies (including the United States).

Several other aspects of the legal structure of voting could potentially have an effect on the costs or benefits<sup>25</sup> of voting and therefore turnout levels. These aspects include the frequency with which the electorate is expected to vote; the ease with which absentee, postal, and other special ballots can be cast; and whether election day is a holiday or rest day or not.<sup>26</sup> These characteristics of the legal structure are usually considered to be of minor significance when compared with registration systems and compulsory voting, a viewpoint that makes good sense theoretically.<sup>27</sup> To the extent these characteristics have an impact, how-

22. An exception is France, where registration is also voluntary. However even here the situation differs in a critical respect from that in the United States. French citizens are required to register in their community and obtain identification cards, a process that tends to promote concomitant voter registration (reflecting this, the French registration rate has averaged over 90 percent in the recent past [Powell 1986, appendix 1]). No such community or other registration requirement exists in the United States, of course.

23. Though in Italy the compulsion to vote is particularly light, being limited to the notation of nonvoting on individuals' documents.

24. See Crewe 1981; Powell 1982, chap. 6; and Jackman 1987 for discussions of different types of compulsory voting laws and levels of enforcement.

25. The ease of special balloting and the election day holiday are clearly cost-related characteristics, whereas election frequency is generally thought of as a benefit-related characteristic. This is because frequent elections are thought to attenuate the meaningfulness of any individual election, especially where balloting for important offices is spread across a number of elections instead of being concentrated in one general election.

26. See Crewe 1981 for a good discussion of these aspects of the voting system and how they vary across countries.

27. For example, the frequency with which elections are held should not have a large effect on turnout for major offices in major elections (such as presidential turnout in the United States) because people can choose to vote only in important elections and ignore the minor ones. Thus the impact of frequently held elections should be felt mostly in high "dropout" from major to minor elections, rather than in a lack of participation in major elections. (But see Boyd 1981, 1986, 1989 for an argument that election frequency in and, more generally, election calendars are of some salience. See also the discussion in chapter 2 of the possible role of changing election calendars in declining turnout.)

The election day holiday is also of problematic value. Will people use the holiday for

ever, systems such as Sweden's, in which election day is a rest day, special balloting arrangements are fairly easy, and elections are infrequent, should have somewhat lower costs and higher benefits, and thus higher turnout, than systems such as that in the United States where election day is a workday, special balloting arrangements are generally difficult, and elections are very frequent.<sup>28</sup>

Another set of relevant attributes that varies cross-nationally is the structure of electoral competition.<sup>29</sup> These attributes primarily affect the instrumental expressive benefits of voting by increasing (or decreasing) the voter's sense that his or her vote will be "represented" in the government.

One such attribute is the extent to which districts are nationally competitive. The idea here is that, where electoral districts are single-member or winner-take-all, voters supporting the minority side in an unbalanced (lopsided) district will have reduced incentives to cast a ballot (as will party organizations to mobilize these voters). This reflects the fact that, as far as the ultimate formation of a government is concerned, the ballots of these voters essentially do not count (for example, Democratic presidential voters in a heavily Republican state in the United States or Labour voters in a heavily Conservative district in the United Kingdom).

In contrast, in an electoral system with a simple direct presidential vote (France) or national election proportional representation (the Netherlands),<sup>30</sup> minority voters in lopsided districts still have an incentive to vote (as do parties to mobilize them). Therefore the benefits of voting should be higher in countries with such systems, leading to, all else equal, higher turnout levels.

Another aspect of the structure of electoral competition is the extent of electoral disproportionality, that is, the amount of disparity between the votes cast for a minor party and the number of seats that party

voting or for doing other things (like going out of town) that may preclude voting? And does having more free time available really make the expenditure of time for voting less onerous? The answers to these questions are not obvious.

28. The United States appears to lead the world by a wide margin in this category. 29. See Jackman 1987 for a lucid discussion of the relationship between factors structuring electoral competition and national turnout levels. He discusses each of the factors mentioned here, both theoretically and empirically.

30. Proportional representation (PR) may also permit the existence of a broader range of parties, so that there is a closer match between voters' beliefs and party principles than in non-PR systems. This should also enhance the expressive benefits of voting. However, the entry of multiple parties into coalition governments—also associated with PR—probably depresses voter turnout. This potential turnout-depressing effect of multi-partyism is discussed later in this section.

receives in the legislature. Where a high degree of disproportionality exists (most common in countries with majority-plurality systems, such as France and the United States<sup>31</sup>), minority-party voters are more likely to consider their votes "wasted." In contrast, where a relatively proportional seat-vote relationship exists (most common in countries with proportional representation systems, such as Denmark and Israel), minority-party voters are less likely to believe their votes do not count. As a result benefits for voters should be higher in countries with little electoral disproportionality, thereby enhancing turnout levels.

Another part of the structure of electoral competition is whether voters vote for one (unicameralism) or two (bicameralism) legislative bodies and, if they vote for two, how much these bodies must compromise to pass legislation. Voters are likely to feel their views most directly represented in a unicameral situation (for example, in Israel or Denmark), in which no interlegislative compromises are necessary, and least directly represented in a strong bicameral system (for example, in Germany or the United States), in which such interlegislative compromises are an essential part of government. Thus benefits for voters should be higher in countries that tend toward the unicameral situation, producing as a result higher turnout levels.

The final relevant aspect of how electoral competition is structured is the extent of multipartyism (that is, the number of parties that enter into forming the national government) where many parties can and do form coalition governments (for example, Finland). In countries with high multipartyism, voters are more likely to feel their votes have been diluted by the necessity to compromise with other parties. In contrast in strong two-party systems like the United States, voters can be assured their votes will not be diluted by coalitional compromise necessary to form a government. Because of this, benefits to voters should be higher—all else equal—in these strong two-party systems, thereby tending to promote higher turnout levels.

Another important attribute that varies cross-nationally is the level of party mobilization—that is, the extent to which parties have direct links to voters through social groups, community institutions, or orga-

31. Interestingly enough, the United States fares relatively well among majority/plurality systems in terms of its amount of electoral disproportionality (Lijphart 1984, table 9-1). However Lijphart's measure does not capture the extent to which minority parties simply disappear (or fail to appear at all) because of the exceptional difficulties posed by the U.S. electoral structure. Presumably this feature should contribute to a sense among certain voters that their ballots are wasted.

nizational networks. This attribute primarily affects the expressive benefits of voting—both symbolic and instrumental—through its impact on voters' sense of the meaningfulness of partisan choice.<sup>32</sup>

Party mobilization has a number of different aspects, from the density and penetration of party organizations to the strength of alignment between parties and social groups. All affect turnout in the same basic manner, however. By giving the voter strong, consistent cues—frequently on a personal level—about how to interpret the significance of a given election, party mobilization enhances the benefits of voting in that election. Thus a country like Austria, where party organization is quite strong and parties have sharply defined links to social groups, should have higher turnout, all else equal, than a country like the United States where party organization is very weak (especially at the local level) and party-social group links are relatively blurry.

A wide variety of systemic attributes have been examined that vary cross-nationally and should, through their effects on the costs and benefits of voting, have an impact on turnout levels. A clear pattern is beginning to emerge. On virtually every characteristic examined,<sup>33</sup> the U.S. system is structured in such a way as to *increase the costs and decrease the benefits* of voting.

Given this overwhelmingly high-cost, low-benefit system, it seems much less surprising that U.S. turnout levels lag so far behind other democracies. In fact the U.S. environment seems so uncongenial to voter participation, one might wonder why turnout levels are not even lower than they are.

One reason they are not has to do with the individual-level characteristics of U.S. citizens. These characteristics include, surprisingly enough, the general attitudes of individuals about politics. As pointed out in numerous studies,<sup>34</sup> U.S. citizens have relatively high levels of a number of politically oriented characteristics believed to facilitate voter turnout: interest in politics, political efficacy,<sup>35</sup> civic duty, following politics in the media, and party identification. All these characteristics

32. Party mobilization may also play a role in reducing the costs of voting. Most directly parties may physically assist voters in getting to the polls. Less directly, party mobilization may reduce information costs by reducing the amount of information the voter has to gather independently to make a voting decision.

33. The one exception is multipartyism.

34. Almond and Verba 1963; Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978; Wolfinger, Glass, and Squire 1985; Powell 1986.

35. Roughly this means a sense that the government is responsive to the wishes of ordinary people.

should serve to enhance expressive benefits for U.S. voters and therefore lead to higher turnout than one might expect strictly on the basis of U.S. systemic attributes.<sup>36</sup>

Similarly U.S. voters are comparatively advantaged by their individual demographic characteristics.<sup>37</sup> Most significantly U.S. voters are on average much more educated than their counterparts in other democracies.<sup>38</sup> Because higher education levels are believed to produce increased capacity to handle election-relevant information, this characteristic of U.S. voters should also serve to make U.S. turnout higher than it otherwise would be.

In summary the U.S. political system is, on virtually all counts, a high-cost, low-benefit system that tends to depress turnout levels. The individual-level characteristics of U.S. citizens, however, serve as a countervailing force (virtually the *only* countervailing force<sup>39</sup>) within this intrinsically low turnout system. As a result U.S. turnout is very low—as would be expected from the systemic influences—but not as low as it probably would be without the favorable attitudinal and demographic profile of the U.S. electorate.

### *Explaining Historical Variation in Turnout Levels*

The examination of cross-national variation in turnout levels provides some clues for understanding historical variation in turnout levels. Specifically this examination implies that if turnout levels have changed

36. Some analysts (Wolfinger, Glass, and Squire 1985) have stated that because low American voter turnout cannot be explained on the basis of a relatively unfavorable ("alienated") attitude structure, attitudinal considerations are not relevant to an explanation of U.S. turnout levels. That seems unreasonable, because the U.S. attitude structure does not have to be offered as an explanation, *in and of itself*, for low U.S. voter turnout. More reasonably, the turnout-enhancing attitudes of U.S. citizens can be viewed as a countervailing force to other turnout-depressing (primarily systemic) influences and, therefore, as *part* of an overall explanation for observed U.S. turnout levels.

37. Powell 1986, pp. 18–20.

38. The critical role of education in voter turnout is discussed in chapter 2. For an extensive and very clear treatment of this relationship, see Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980.

39. Indeed it may be that some of these characteristics—for example, following politics in the media—are actually adaptations on the part of U.S. voters to the difficulties of voting in a high-cost, low-benefit environment. The U.S. voter after all is not embedded in an electoral system that makes the significance of vote choice obvious, nor enmeshed in a social web of party-based linkages that constantly underlines the significance of that choice. One way of compensating for this lack of structural and collective cues may be for individuals to give themselves their own cues through low-level forms of political involvement.

substantially in U.S. history, it is because of changes in one or more of the turnout-influencing factors just discussed.

As shown in table 1-3, turnout levels have fluctuated throughout U.S. history. Most relevant to the issue of low U.S. voter turnout, however, is the general drop in voter participation from the relatively high levels of the middle and late nineteenth century to the relatively low levels of the twentieth century.<sup>40</sup> This implies that potentially relevant changes should be looked for in the period marking the transition to the twentieth century (that is, in the Progressive era, roughly 1896–1916).

The first set of attributes to be examined is the legal structure of voting. Substantial changes did occur here, the most important of which was the widespread institution of personal registration requirements.<sup>41</sup> The imposition of these requirements must have substantially increased

the costs of voting for the average citizen and, therefore, should have affected turnout levels during this period.

The second set of attributes concerns the basic structure of electoral competition. Generally speaking the basic structure of electoral competition did not change in this period in any major way that would have affected turnout levels. The one possible exception was changes in official ballot laws to prevent multiple listings of candidates' names and therefore major-minor-party fusion arrangements. To the extent this reform had an impact, it may have increased electoral disproportionality, and therefore decreased the benefits of voting. But fusionism was probably too specific to certain states and certain elections to make it much of an influence on general turnout levels.

The third attribute to be considered here is party mobilization. The Progressive era did in fact witness a variety of changes that affected the links between parties and voters. To begin with, several legal changes dampened down the intense relationship between parties and the electoral process. These included the replacement of party-provided ballots

40. Detailed explanations for many of the more specific turnout fluctuations displayed in table 1-3 may be found in Kleppner 1982, and Burnham 1982. In addition the most recent change in turnout levels—the sharp decline since 1960—is discussed in detail in chapter 2.

41. It is sometimes argued that personal registration and other changes around this time had another important effect on turnout levels—basically by reducing the number of fraudulent ballots cast. By this account, relatively high nineteenth century voter turnouts reflect, to a large extent, the high number of fraudulent ballots cast and are therefore artifactual (Converse 1972). Undoubtedly fraudulent ballots had some effect on recorded turnout levels in the nineteenth century, but Kleppner 1982 and Burnham 1982, 1986, argue persuasively that this effect was relatively minor (see, particularly, Burnham 1986).



with officially provided ballots distributed at polling places; the replacement of party-dominated caucus or convention candidate selection with direct primaries; and the introduction of nonpartisan balloting for many local offices and on referenda.

In addition—and probably related to the legal changes—the alignment between parties and social groups weakened, the level of party competition decreased, and the intensity with which parties organized for elections declined.<sup>42</sup> All these changes served to weaken substantially the links between parties and voters, which had been quite strong during most of the nineteenth century. As a result the benefits of voting must have declined, thereby affecting turnout levels.

A clear pattern has emerged from this examination of various attributes affecting the costs and benefits of voting. On every characteristic examined, historical changes in the U.S. system have acted to *increase the costs* and *decrease the benefits* of voting. Given this secular tendency toward a high-cost, low-benefit system, the question may be not why U.S. turnout is so low but why U.S. turnout is not even lower.

Part of the answer to this puzzle may lie—as it did in the cross-national analysis—with the individual characteristics of U.S. voters. Now admittedly virtually nothing of the *attitudinal* characteristics of citizens in this particular era of American history is known with any certainty, since modern survey data only date back to the 1930s. Thus it cannot be determined whether the attitudes of U.S. voters changed in such a way as to affect turnout—or, if they changed at all.

However something is known about the demographic characteristics of eligible voters and how they changed, primarily from census data. In general most of these demographic changes—chiefly, increasing education levels, but also a somewhat older population—appear to be changes that would have facilitated voting participation.<sup>43</sup> This suggests that changes in the individual-level characteristics, to the extent that they are known, may have served as a countervailing force within a generally turnout-depressing historical trajectory. As a result contemporary U.S. turnout levels are indeed very low, but not as low as they probably would be absent historical changes in the demographic composition of the electorate.

42. Kleppner 1982 and Burnham 1982 cover these changes in detail.

43. It should be noted that Kleppner's data suggest education and age were much weaker predictors of turnout in the nineteenth century than they are today (Kleppner 1982). If true, however, education and age trends could be even more of a countervailing force, because both distribution and effect changes could act to keep up turnout levels.

### Relative Weight of Factors Explaining Low American Voter Turnout

The preceding section has established that, whether compared cross-nationally or historically, the costs of voting in the United States are exceptionally high and the benefits exceptionally low. Because of this, turnout levels in the United States tend to lag far behind international and historical standards.

A more specific allocation of responsibility for low turnout would be desirable, however. For example, is it mostly the high costs of voting or the low benefits that keep U.S. citizens from the polls? And to the extent benefits are important, is it lack of benefits from party mobilization or from the structure of electoral competition that has the most impact?

One way to answer these questions is to partition U.S. nonvoting into components stemming from different causes. Such an exercise is necessarily rough because of limitations of both data and method.<sup>44</sup> However, available studies do contain much suggestive information, which if treated cautiously allows some limited conclusions to be drawn.

How much U.S. nonvoting has to be accounted for? Based on the last presidential election (1988), about 50 percent of the electorate did not bother to cast a ballot.<sup>45</sup> This compares to nonvoting levels as low as 5 percent in other democracies.

However, the fact that almost any election anywhere (in a genuinely democratic country) has at least 5 percent nonvoting suggests the first category. Probably some component of U.S. nonvoting (say, 5 percent) cannot be eliminated under any circumstances, no matter how low the costs of voting or how high the benefits. This component of nonvoting can be thought of as *frictional* nonvoting—nonvoting that should be ascribed not to the specific costs or benefits of the U.S. system but rather to the inevitable scattering of personal problems or idiosyncracies among the population that render participation infeasible in a given election (sickness, accidents, insanity, sudden travel, unusual work schedules, and so forth).

A second component of nonvoting may be ascribed to the unusually high costs of voting in the United States. Essentially, this is the effect of

44. For example, most of the cross-national regression analysis of turnout variation uses *N*'s lower than twenty and up to seven variables. With so few cases and so many variables, it is difficult to have complete confidence in the results produced by any particular model.

45. The figure would be slightly less if adjustments are made for aliens who cannot vote.

a personal (United States) versus automatic (most other democracies) registration system. Powell, using cross-national data, estimates this effect at about 14 percentage points—that is, U.S. turnout is 14 points lower than it would otherwise be because of the personal registration system.<sup>46</sup> This can be taken as an upper bound estimate, both because of Powell's methodology<sup>47</sup> and the existence of somewhat lower estimates based on U.S. data alone.<sup>48</sup> Thus even if other, minor aspects of the costs of voting in the United States are taken into account, it seems doubtful that the cost-related component of U.S. nonvoting could be much higher than this 14-point figure. Because 45 points of nonvoting still must be accounted for (50 points total minus 5 points for frictional nonvoting), it can be reasonably estimated that no more than one-third is attributable to relatively high U.S. voting costs.

The other two-thirds (30 points) must logically be attributable to the low benefits of voting in the United States.<sup>49</sup> Even with proper skepticism about the magnitude of this estimate,<sup>50</sup> it seems hard to avoid the conclusion that low benefits, rather than high costs, are the most potent influence on American nonvoting. Better data would no doubt change this estimate somewhat, but the estimate would have to change quite drastically to alter this conclusion.

The question now becomes: What are the most important influences within this benefit-related component of U.S. nonvoting? Here the waters are especially murky, partly because certain attributes have been poorly measured, partly because certain attributes have not been measured at all, and partly because the individual characteristics of U.S. voters are a complicating and countervailing force. The best that I can say is the following.

First, the influence of party mobilization appears to be substantial. Powell's estimate, based solely on the strength of alignment between parties and social groups, was that low party mobilization levels de-

46. Powell 1986.

47. Powell's 14-point estimate is essentially a residual, based on the turnout differential between the United States and the average democracy and the amount of this differential still unexplained when other (that is, nonregistration) factors are taken into account.

48. See Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, Burnham 1982, and Committee for the Study of the American Electorate 1987. I have more to say about the probable effect of eliminating personal registration in chapter 4.

49. It is interesting that this one-third—two-thirds cost-benefit split mirrors the split produced by decompositions of early twentieth century turnout decline between registration (cost) and political (benefit) factors (see Klepper 1982 and Burnham 1982).

50. It is based on assignment of the residual, always a risky, if unavoidable, procedure.

pressed U.S. turnout by 10 percentage points relative to an average democracy.<sup>51</sup> Given that party mobilization also includes such factors as the density and penetration of party organization, it is possible this estimated effect is somewhat low.

Second the influence of the structure of electoral competition also appears to be substantial. Based on Jackman's model,<sup>52</sup> the influence of the U.S. structure of electoral competition (single-member, winner-take-all districts; strong bicameralism; relative electoral disproportionality; the two-party system) appears to be roughly the same as that of low party mobilization: U.S. turnout is depressed almost 10 points relative to the average democracy.

Thus low party mobilization and the U.S. structure of electoral competition together probably account for a good part (as much as two-thirds) of the 30 points of benefit-related U.S. nonvoting. Whether these two factors are truly coequal in influence, and what other factors (if any) are involved here is difficult to say, given the limitations of available data. Despite the limitations, the estimates presented here do give some sense of which influences play major roles in benefit-related nonvoting in the United States.

### Conclusion

In this chapter it has been established that U.S. voter turnout is indeed low by international and historical standards. This generally low turnout is attributable to the high costs (primarily personal registration) and low benefits (primarily the turnout-inhibiting structure of electoral competition and weak party mobilization) of voting in the United States. Within this high-cost, low-benefit system, however, the individual characteristics of U.S. voters act somewhat as a countervailing force. Finally, low benefits are apparently more important than high costs in depressing U.S. voter turnout.

51. Powell 1986, p. 26.

52. As Jackman 1987 points out, his model does not technically apply to the United States because of the way the model was estimated. Lacking an alternative, I use the model anyway, with appropriate reservations.

# The Disappearing American Voter

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