

# Why is American Voter Turnout Going Down?

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Not only are American voter turnout levels low, but they have been going down steadily for the last three decades. From a high of around 63 percent of the voting-age population in 1960, turnout in presidential elections has declined to just barely half (50.2 percent) of the VAP in 1988 (table 1-1). That figure is below the low-turnout mark set by the 1948 Dewey-Truman election and is the lowest level since 1924.

Here I analyze the basic reasons behind this phenomenon of declining U.S. voter turnout. First the magnitude and extent of U.S. voter turnout decline are described. Second the main factors that appear to lie behind this decline in voter turnout are analyzed and discussed. Finally responsibility for declining voter turnout is allocated among several sets of factors uncovered by these analyses.

## How Serious Is the Decline in American Voter Turnout?

Voter turnout in the United States went down 13 percentage points between 1960 and 1988 (table 1-1). Moreover the decline was steady, with the sole exception of 1984, when turnout ticked upward a slight half point (from 52.6 to 53.1 percent). Otherwise, each election has had a lower turnout than the one preceding it. On the face of it the decline seems to reflect a substantial and serious decrease in the will-

ingness of citizens to participate in the easiest and most elementary way in their society: by casting a ballot.

Some object, however, that trend data based on the voting-age population are deceptive. These data are not corrected for the large numbers of voting-age individuals who cannot vote because they are not eligible. The implication is that, if these data were "corrected" to reflect the proper base of eligible citizens, turnout trends would look quite different.

This does not prove to be the case. Comparing table 1-1, based on the VAP, with table 1-3, where aliens are removed from the population base, shows the trends are identical. Both tables show a decline in turnout between 1960 and 1988 of 12.6 percentage points (62.8 to 50.2 in table 1-1, 65.4 to 52.8 in table 1-3).<sup>1</sup> The figures suggest that the decline in turnout is quite robust and does not depend on the data source used to examine the trend.<sup>2</sup>

Another objection to standard turnout trend data is it cloaks the real problem: the decline in *registration*. According to this line of analysis, presented most forcefully by Piven and Cloward,<sup>3</sup> the turnout rate of registrants is extremely high and quite stable across elections (that is, once people are registered, they vote). Thus if fewer people are voting over time, this simply reflects the fact that fewer people are registering. The focus therefore should be on registration trends, the real source of the observed decline in turnout levels.

This view is flawed, both logically and empirically. First even if falling registration is the source of falling turnout, it is not clear that turnout data are therefore irrelevant. Because voting is essentially a two-step process in the United States—*first* one registers, *then* one votes—it hardly seems surprising that many of those lacking the motivation to vote would stop at the first step in the process and simply fail to register. By this logic it would be surprising to see falling turnout *without* falling

1. This partially reflects the fact that, although the proportion of aliens has been going up in recent years, the differences in alien concentration between 1988 and 1960 are smaller than generally supposed. This in turn reflects the fact that alien concentration actually *dropped* in the 1960s before it started its trend upward to current levels. See Carson, Hueliskamp, and Woodall 1991 for data on alien concentration as proxied by percentage foreign born.

2. Even a comprehensive effort to remove all those ineligible to vote from the denominator (that is, not just aliens, but also felons, those in mental institutions, and those who moved within thirty days of the election) and add all those who voted to the numerator (that is, adding those who voted in the election but not for president) does not change the trend line significantly. The estimated turnout decline is still close to 12 points.

3. Piven and Cloward 1988.

registration. But such a relationship hardly makes data about turnout trends useless or somehow deceptive.

More serious, the assertion that only registration rates have been declining over time is not supported by available data. Although it is true registration rates have been falling since 1960,<sup>4</sup> the turnout rates of those registered to vote *have also been falling* over this same time period.<sup>5</sup> In other words, not only have people become less inclined to register, they have become less inclined to vote once they are registered.

Exactly how much the turnout rate of registrants has been going down is, however, a matter of some dispute, with estimates ranging from 5 to 13 percentage points. The high estimate comes from aggregate data kept by the secretaries of state. These data say that the turnout rate of registrants has declined by about 13 points since 1960 (from 83.4 to 70.5 percent).<sup>6</sup> But as Piven and Cloward have forcefully argued,<sup>7</sup> these statistics are suspect because official registration rolls contain deadwood—that is, voters who have died or moved away, but whose names have not been removed from the rolls. Because of this the number of registrants is overestimated in these data and therefore their turnout rate is underestimated.

But although these figures understate the total turnout rate of registrants *in any given year*, it is by no means clear that the deadwood factor has grown enough over time—that is, through loosened purging procedures—to be responsible for the declining turnout *trend* observed in these data. In fact some states have actually tightened their purging procedures. It appears quite unlikely such mixed procedural change could have produced *increased* inflation of the registration rolls on a large enough scale to account for the very large turnout decline observed.<sup>8</sup> In fact if one assumes a *constant* inflation rate of 10 percent

4. According to official statistics kept by the secretaries of state, registration dropped 4.3 percentage points between 1960 and 1988 (Committee for the Study of the American Electorate 1989); according to Bureau of the Census surveys, registration dropped 7.7 points between 1968 and 1988 among the voting-age population and 5.6 points among the citizen-eligible population (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1969, 1989).

5. Note that turnout in North Dakota, where there is no registration at all—so every one is, in effect, "registered"—has fallen sharply over the 1960–88 period (down 17.4 percentage points).

6. See Committee for the Study of the American Electorate 1989, p. 3.

7. The point was originally made in Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass 1987.

8. It would be quite difficult to be any more precise than this in assessing the net effect of these mixed changes in purging procedures on registration rolls. A precise estimate would have to take into account not only changes in the length of the purging period for nonvoting, but also changes in (1) whether and how much purging is conducted for other reasons (for instance, general address verification to eliminate those

in the registration rolls (that is, at any given point, reported registration has been 10 percent higher than "true" registration), the decline in the turnout rate of registrants is actually slightly larger (down 14 points, from 92.7 to 78.4 percent).<sup>9</sup> All of this suggests that a substantial portion of the 13-point decline in the official statistics is probably real, not just an artifact of the data involved.

The low estimate comes from survey data collected by the Bureau of the Census in November of election years.<sup>10</sup> According to the census data, the turnout rate of registrants has gone down about 5 points since 1968<sup>11</sup> (from 91.3 to 86.2 percent).<sup>12</sup> These data do not suffer from a deadwood problem because they rely on survey respondents' self-reporting of their registration and voting status, not on the official rolls. This, however, creates the problem of *overreporting*,<sup>13</sup> because a substantial number of respondents say they voted—and, therefore, registered—when they actually did not (over 57 percent of respondents claimed to have voted in the 1988 election, compared to the estimated 50 percent who actually voted in that election). This makes the census data overestimate turnout and registration rates.

The extent to which overreporting skews the turnout rate of registrants computed from these data is difficult to say because no one knows how many of the nonvoters who claimed to have voted were registered. However, it can be shown mathematically that the census-based rate could be inflated by as much as 10 points. Moreover, depending on changes over time in the true registration status of these misreporting nonvoters, it is possible this overestimate is getting pro-

who have moved, died, and so on); (2) the frequency with which these purges—for nonvoting or otherwise—are conducted; and (3) changes in notification procedures. All of these factors potentially affect the rigor of purging procedures and therefore the amount of deadwood removed. I know of no study that attempts to estimate the effects of these different sets of changes.

9. Committee for the Study of the American Electorate 1989.

10. A basic description of this data source is in appendix A along with descriptions of other surveys used in this study.

11. This is the first year for which data on both registration and turnout are available. Unfortunately this means that the census data cover a shorter time period (twenty years) than the secretaries of state data (twenty-eight years), which makes the comparison between the two data sources somewhat difficult. One way of compensating for this is to extrapolate the rate of decline found in the census data back to 1960, so that the two data sources cover the same period. The result is an additional 2-percentage-point decline in the turnout rate of registrants, for an estimated total decline of 7 points over the 1960–88 period. This narrows, but by no means eliminates, the differences between the two data sources.

12. U.S. Bureau of the Census 1989.

13. Overreporting is discussed in more detail in appendix A.

gressively worse, resulting in an *underestimate* of the decline in the turnout rate of registrants. This is not to say that such an underestimate *does* exist, but simply to suggest that the census data cannot be regarded as the last word on this very complicated subject.

Thus neither the data from secretaries of state nor the census can be reliably said to capture the true turnout rate of registrants.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, neither data source can be said necessarily to capture the true trend line for the last twenty to twenty-eight years. In light of all this, my own view is the turnout rate of registrants has dropped substantially over time, with the exact magnitude of this drop probably falling somewhere in between the official and census figures.<sup>15</sup>

### Explaining the Decline in Turnout since 1960

The data in the previous section established that the decline in voter turnout since 1960 is indeed substantial and serious, not just an artifact of the data involved. Nor is the decline in turnout simply a matter of fewer people negotiating the relatively onerous U.S. registration system, because even those registered are showing less of a propensity to vote. Americans, for whatever reasons, are defecting in increasing numbers from the voting process at *both* steps of the two-step process.

The question then becomes: What are these reasons? What factor or set of factors is responsible for the increasing defection of Americans from the voting process? The analytical framework introduced in chapter 1 provides a useful method for approaching this question.

This framework may be summarized as follows. For a citizen to vote, he or she must find the benefits<sup>16</sup> of voting high enough to merit absorbing the costs of participation. Therefore any attribute of U.S. society

14. In fact no one will know the true rate until a large-scale validation study is done on a sample of sufficient size and representativeness, such as the census sample. Until such data are available I am inclined to think that the true rate lies somewhere in between the inflation-adjusted official rate (78 percent) and the census rate (86 percent).

15. This viewpoint is supported by data from the National Election Study (NES), a survey taken in every election year by the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan. In contrast to the census survey, the NES has periodically attempted to verify self-reported registration and turnout by consulting election records in local offices. Despite the many problems with the NES sample (small size, possible selection bias) and with the methods used to verify these self-reports (see Traugott 1989 and Presser, Traugott, and Traugott 1990), these data are still worth considering in this context. According to this validated NES data, the turnout rate of registrants fell from 94.9 percent in 1964 (the first year it was done) to 87.3 in 1976, 83.9 in 1980, 85.7 in 1984, and 84.9 percent in 1988, a decline of 10 points from 1964 to 1988 (Bennett 1990b).

16. Defined as the symbolic or instrumental expressive benefits of voting or both. See the discussion in chapter 1.

that affects, first, the average level of benefits the electorate can obtain or, second, the average level of costs the electorate must absorb should have an effect on average U.S. turnout levels. It then follows that, to the extent this attribute has varied since 1960, it may constitute part of the explanation for the observed decline in U.S. voter turnout.

As seen in chapter 1, a variety of characteristics of U.S. society affect the average costs and benefits of voting. If these characteristics have changed in such a way as to increase the costs, decrease the benefits, or both, these changes could provide part or all of an explanation for post-1960 turnout decline. First I consider changes that may have affected the costs of voting.

### Changes in the Voter Registration System

The chief factor affecting the costs of voting in the United States is the voter registration system. And in fact substantial changes have been made in the voter registration system since 1960. These include: (1) the abolition of poll taxes; (2) the abolition of literacy tests; (3) the formal prohibition of discrimination within the registration process; (4) the increased availability of bilingual registration materials; (5) the large increase in the number of states permitting registration by mail; (6) the sharp decline in the length of state residency requirements, from a year or more in most states in 1960 to the current, almost uniform level of a month or less; (7) the movement of closing dates—that is, the last date one can register to vote in a given election—closer to the date the election is held; and (8) the implementation of minimum national standards for absentee registration.

Clearly these are significant changes in the voter registration system that must have affected the average costs of voting for citizens in the United States. However, from the standpoint of explaining declining voter turnout, these changes present a serious problem: *all of them go in the wrong direction*. Each of these changes acted to liberalize the system—to make it *easier* to register, not harder—and therefore reduced the costs of voting. This means that, had nothing else changed after 1960 save the voter registration system, turnout would actually have gone *up*, not down as shown by the data.

This is part of the reason the post-1960 decline in U.S. voter turnout is frequently termed “the puzzle of participation.”<sup>17</sup> Although turnout has trended steadily downward election after election, certain well-

17. Brody 1978, pp. 287–324.

known societal changes, such as the easing of registration requirements, should logically have produced the opposite result: an *increase* in turnout.<sup>18</sup> Solving the puzzle of participation, therefore, entails not only accounting for the observed decline in turnout, but also explaining how countervailing forces *promoting* voter turnout failed to have an observable effect.

The analysis of voter registration presented here certainly suggests this puzzle will not be solved on the level of costs. The voter registration system appears to have been a source of reduced costs to the U.S. voter, and no other changes in the legal structure of voting seem plausible as a significant source of increased costs (if anything, other changes, such as easier absentee balloting, probably *reduced* the costs). It follows that the changes in U.S. society responsible for declining turnout must be changes that affected the *benefits* of voting, not the costs. I now turn to a consideration of these changes.

Two obvious candidates present themselves, one of which can be immediately ruled out, whereas the other deserves serious consideration. The one that can be ruled out is changes in the basic structure of electoral competition. Since 1960 this basic structure has remained intact: neither the type of electoral districts, nor the proportionality of seat allocation in Congress, nor the number of legislative bodies, nor the number of parties in those legislative bodies has changed much, if at all, in the last three decades. Therefore although the structure of electoral competition is a general factor in *low* U.S. voter turnout, it cannot possibly be a factor in *declining* U.S. voter turnout.

#### *Changes in the Individual-Level Characteristics of U.S. Voters*

Changes in the individual-level characteristics of U.S. voters, on the other hand, present quite a different picture. As shown in chapter 1, a series of individual demographic and attitudinal characteristics of U.S. citizens actually *promote* voter turnout (for example, education levels, levels of civic duty, following politics in the media, and so on), in contrast to most other aspects of the U.S. system. But the last three decades have witnessed dramatic change in the demographic<sup>19</sup> and

18. Another example is the dramatic increase in educational attainment, a point discussed in detail later in the chapter.

19. I use the term "demographic" in the loose sense of meaning objective (not attitudinal or behavioral) individual characteristics. Thus demographic characteristics by this definition include characteristics such as occupation and income that by virtue of their changeable status (one can change jobs or lose or gain income, whereas one's race cannot be changed) are sometimes not considered to be true demographic categories.

attitudinal profile of Americans.<sup>20</sup> If these changes have included the various turnout-relevant characteristics of Americans and if these changes have been in the "right" direction, then one of the few turnout-promoting aspects of the U.S. system may have eroded, causing turnout to fall.

I next investigate this possibility by looking at characteristics that experienced changes in distribution over the period in question (1960–88)<sup>21</sup> and have at least surface plausibility as predictors of turnout.

**POLITICAL CYNICISM.** The first cluster of characteristics to look at are those tapping political cynicism. The data in table 2-1 make it clear that there has been an astonishing increase in political cynicism over the last several decades. In 1964 a little more than one-fifth of the electorate (22 percent) felt the government could be trusted only some (or none) of the time. By 1980 this figure had skyrocketed to almost three quarters of the electorate (74 percent). Although by 1988 this figure had declined somewhat to a little under three-fifths (59 percent) of the electorate, the percentage of the population feeling mistrustful of the government was still nearly three times as high at the end of this period as at the beginning. This change is quite substantial by any standard.

A similar pattern obtains for views on whether the government is dominated by "big interests." In 1964 under one-third of the electorate (31 percent) endorsed this assessment, whereas by 1980 over three-quarters (77 percent) felt big-interest domination *did* characterize the government. Again there is some drop-off in this view during the 1980s, but in 1988 two-thirds (67 percent) of the electorate still believed that

20. For a useful general compendium of information on both demographic and attitudinal change, see Miller and Traugott 1989. For more detail on demographic change (Miller and Traugott's demographic data are limited by their reliance on the relatively small-sample National Election Studies), see the various publications put out by the Bureau of the Census that summarize Current Population Survey data (series P-20 through P-25 and P-60). The census monograph series sponsored by the Russell Sage Foundation also contains a wealth of relevant information (see, for example, Levy 1987). For useful summaries of some of the key data on attitudinal change, see Lipset and Schneider 1983, Gant and Luttbeg 1991, and Conway 1991.

21. If levels of a given characteristic were stable over this time period, it makes it quite unlikely that that characteristic is part of the turnout decline story—lacking distributional change, the *effect* of that characteristic would have had to change substantially across time (see Teixeira 1987). Interestingly, however, relatively few relevant characteristics did exhibit flat trend lines across this entire period. The ones that came closest were citizen duty and personal trust, which exhibited flat trend lines in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s, however, the NES did not retain most of these items, so it cannot be said with any confidence that levels of these characteristics were truly stable over the entire 1960–88 period. (In fact reasonably good evidence, both from one item retained in the NES and from other surveys, exists that citizen duty, in particular, *did* decline in the 1980s. See the final section of this chapter for further discussion.)

TABLE 2-1. *Political Cynicism, by Indicator, 1964-88*<sup>a</sup>

Question and answer <sup>b</sup>	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	Change 1964-88 <sup>c</sup>
Can government be trusted?								
Never <sup>d</sup> or only some of time	22.3	37.3	45.8	65.3	74.3	55.1	58.8	36.5
Most of time	63.2	55.3	48.8	31.3	23.6	41.2	36.9	-26.3
All the time	14.5	7.5	5.4	3.4	2.1	3.7	4.2	-10.3
Is government run by big interests?								
Run by big interests	30.9	43.6	58.6	73.7	76.9	58.6	67.3	36.4
Run for benefit of all	69.1	56.4	41.4	26.3	23.1	41.4	32.7	-36.4
Does government waste tax money?								
A lot	48.1	60.6	67.0	76.3	80.0	66.2	64.0	15.9
Some	45.2	35.2	30.6	20.6	17.9	30.1	33.5	-11.7
Not very much	6.7	4.2	2.4	3.1	2.0	3.7	2.5	-4.2
Is government competent?								
Doesn't know what it's doing	27.8	39.2	42.2	52.7	65.0	n.a.	n.a.	37.2
Run by smart people	72.2	60.8	57.8	47.3	35.0	n.a.	n.a.	-37.2
Is government crooked?								
Many are	30.0	26.3	37.7	44.3	48.5	33.4	41.8	11.8
Not many are	51.0	54.0	47.5	42.1	42.7	51.6	46.6	-4.4
Hardly any are	19.0	19.6	14.8	13.6	8.8	15.0	11.6	-7.4

SOURCE: Author's tabulations from National Election Study data.

n.a. Not available

a. Data for all questions are only available from 1964. For one of the questions, data stop in 1980. To facilitate comparisons across time, "don't know" answers have been removed from tabulations.

b. Full question wordings are in appendix C.

c. 1960-80 only for "Is government competent?"

d. Volunteered answer.

big interest domination of government was a fact of life—over twice the proportion at the beginning of the period.

The patterns for other aspects of political cynicism—that the government wastes tax money, doesn't know what it is doing, and is crooked—are basically the same, if somewhat less pronounced. Cynical assessments of the government rose between 1964 and 1980, subsided somewhat during the 1980s,<sup>22</sup> but wound up substantially higher in 1988 than in 1964.<sup>23</sup>

22. The data for government competence, however, stop in 1980. Therefore it is not known whether this aspect of political cynicism experienced the same partial recovery in the 1980s observable for the other attributes in the table.

23. The latest data indicate that cynicism about politics is higher in 1992 than it was in 1988 (Schneider 1992). This continues a trend toward increased cynicism that dates

On the face of it these changes seem tailor-made for explaining declining voter turnout. Cynicism has obviously increased dramatically over time, and because more cynical citizens are presumably less motivated to vote, the result should be precisely the observed sharp decrease in turnout. The intuitive plausibility of this story has lent it both journalistic and popular currency ("You can't get people to vote, they're too cynical"; "Why should people vote—the government's full of crooks"; and so on).

There is one serious problem with this story, however. Analysis has shown that feelings of political cynicism have *no significant, independent effect* on an individual's likelihood of voting. It follows that, because cynicism has little to do with turnout, an increase in cynicism will have little effect on turnout levels. Thus the dramatic rise in cynicism, despite its intuitive plausibility, cannot be part of the turnout decline story.

**SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS.** Another cluster of characteristics that experienced substantial change over the 1960-88 period was that tapping different aspects of socioeconomic status (SES): education, occupation, and income. Each of these characteristics is believed to affect turnout.<sup>24</sup> Education, for example, increases cognitive skills, which presumably makes it easier to learn about a complex and abstract subject like politics. It also increases the ability to handle bureaucratic obstacles such as those entailed by registration. For both reasons more education should make individuals more likely to vote.

Occupation affects voter turnout in a different way. Nonmanual occupations are believed to provide more mental stimulation, access to information, and opportunity for insight into complex social mechanisms. Therefore individuals in those occupations should be more likely

back to the mid-1980s (the decrease in cynicism that took place in the 1980s was mostly confined to Reagan's first term).

24. Based on models estimated by the author on NES data covering the 1964-88 period. See also Citrin 1974, Shaffer 1981, and Abramson and Aldrich 1982 for discussions about the lack of relationship between political cynicism or trust and turnout.

25. By "independent" I mean that that characteristic's effect on voter turnout is not because of its relationship with some other characteristic that affects turnout. If lack of independence does obtain, the characteristic may appear to have a significant relationship to turnout on the *bivariate* level, but when inserted in a properly specified *multivariate* model, that significant effect will disappear (see appendix B for a discussion of model specification and the role of multivariate analysis).

26. See Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, and Conway 1991 for more detailed discussion of how different aspects of SES affect turnout.

to vote than those in manual occupations and especially housewives, who are out of the labor force entirely.

Finally a higher income is said to allow a citizen to "lift his head" from the preoccupations of daily life and take the time and emotional energy necessary for a nonessential such as voting. In addition a higher income may increase an individual's felt stake in the system and therefore in the outcome of the election, making it more likely the individual will vote.

All these effects may be summed up by saying that higher SES makes it more likely that individuals will find elections meaningful and will be motivated to vote,<sup>27</sup> whereas lower SES makes it less likely. Hence a trend toward lower SES could conceivably be part of the explanation for declining voter turnout.

The problem of course is that the exact opposite has taken place. There has been a massive upgrading of socioeconomic status since 1960 (table 2-2). The most dramatic change has been the tremendous increase in educational attainment. Although almost half of the electorate (49 percent) had less than a high school education in 1960, by 1988 less than one-quarter (22 percent) of the electorate had this low a level of education. And on the other end of the scale, the percentages of both those with some college (thirteen to fifteen years of education) and college graduates about doubled (from 12 to 23 percent and from 10 to 20 percent, respectively).

These changes in educational attainment are the most salient changes in the SES distribution, both because the education distribution has changed the most and because education is, by far, the strongest promoter of voter participation among the SES characteristics.<sup>28</sup> However, the occupation and income distributions also changed fairly substantially (table 2-2).

The most significant change in occupation distribution by far was the large decrease in the proportion of housewives. Housewives were just about one-quarter of the electorate (26 percent) in 1960, but only a little more than one-tenth (12 percent) in 1988. Other upgrading changes included a decline (4 points) in the blue-collar category and increases in all white-collar categories, both low (clerical-sales up

27. To the extent education acts to facilitate negotiation of the registration process, it may play a direct, cost-cutting role.

28. See appendix B, especially the model summarized in table B-1. Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980 and Teixeira 1987 also contain detailed discussions of education, occupation, and income and their relative importance to voter participation.

TABLE 2-2. *Socioeconomic Status, by Indicator, 1960-88\**  
Percent

Characteristic	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	Change 1960-88
Education (years)									
0-8	30.0	24.8	23.1	19.9	16.7	12.0	10.8	9.9	-20.1
9-11	19.0	19.9	17.7	17.8	14.9	15.0	12.1	12.1	-6.9
12	29.0	31.4	31.8	33.0	35.1	36.2	35.7	35.7	6.7
13-15	12.0	12.7	14.2	16.1	18.5	20.6	24.7	22.5	10.5
16 or more	10.0	11.1	13.1	13.1	14.7	16.2	16.7	19.8	9.8
Occupation									
Housewives	26.4	31.2	29.0	26.9	21.6	16.5	13.2	11.9	-14.5
Out of the labor force, except housewives	15.9	11.9	14.3	18.1	24.3	24.6	26.8	25.2	9.3
Blue collar	20.0	19.3	19.8	18.9	16.5	17.9	14.1	16.2	-3.8
Service	7.3	7.3	5.7	5.2	7.0	6.9	8.8	7.9	0.6
Farm	4.6	3.4	2.5	1.6	1.4	1.1	2.2	1.5	-3.1
Clerical-sales	12.0	11.1	11.7	12.5	12.5	13.3	16.9	16.5	4.5
Professional-technical and managerial- administrative	14.0	15.9	17.0	16.7	16.7	19.6	18.0	20.8	6.8
Family income (1988 dollars)									
Less than 7,500	16.0	19.1	11.6	12.1	12.7	10.8	13.4	13.9	-2.1
7,500-19,999	38.9	28.4	28.0	27.6	28.0	26.7	28.6	27.5	-11.4
20,000-39,999	34.6	35.9	42.4	39.2	36.7	35.4	32.8	33.3	-1.3
40,000 or more	10.5	16.6	18.0	21.1	22.5	27.1	25.1	25.4	14.9

SOURCE: Author's tabulations from National Election Study data.

a. Details on coding of categories are in appendix C.

about 5 points) and high (professional-technical and managerial-administrative up about 7 points).

Turning to family income levels, the income distribution shifted basically upscale during the overall time period. In 1960, 55 percent of the electorate had family incomes of less than \$20,000 (1988 dollars). By 1988 the percentage with family incomes this low had fallen to 41 percent (this figure was actually down to 38 percent in 1980, but crept back upward during the 1980s). Conversely at the upper end of the income scale, percentages increased. Only 11 percent had family incomes of more than \$40,000 in 1960, compared to one-quarter with incomes this high in 1988.

Across the board then and particularly in terms of educational attainment, socioeconomic status was substantially *upgraded* between 1960 and 1988. This means that the changing distribution of socioeconomic status cannot possibly be responsible for the decline in U.S. voter turn-

out, because the direction of change has been entirely wrong. In fact the changing SES distribution should have promoted *higher* voter turnout, not lower.

Model estimations in fact strongly support this assessment.<sup>29</sup> All other things equal, turnout in 1988 would have been 3.9 percentage points higher than in 1960 simply on the basis of the changing distribution of income, occupation, and education (especially the latter; over two-thirds of this effect is from educational upgrading alone). But of course all other things have *not* been equal, hence the observed decline in turnout, rather than the 4-point increase one would predict on the basis of socioeconomic upgrading.

But what are the other factors that have not been equal, that have actually been acting to *depress* turnout? So far two sets of seemingly relevant distributional changes have not provided much clarity on this issue. The substantial increase in political cynicism turns out not to affect turnout levels, and the substantial upgrading of socioeconomic status has actually been a countervailing force, providing an upward "push" on turnout.

Thus the "puzzle of participation" alluded to in the section on changes in voter registration has only been deepened by the changes examined so far in this section. Specifically turnout-depressing factors must now be found that not only account for the observed decline in turnout, but also for the neutralization of the upward push on turnout provided by socioeconomic upgrading.<sup>30</sup> Put another way "more" turnout decline must now be accounted for than when this investigation was begun. I shall refer to this augmented decline in turnout as the "SES-adjusted" decline in turnout.

**SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS.** Another widely commented on set of changes in U.S. society during this period has to do with the social "connectedness" of individuals. The idea is that interpersonal, community, and general social ties provide a substantial proportion of an individual's motivation to vote, because these ties can provide external encouragement to vote, as well as an enhanced sense of an election's meaningful-

29. This model estimate and others presented in this chapter are, unless otherwise noted, based on model B1 in appendix B. This model is based on self-reported, not validated vote because only self-reported vote covers the entire 1960-88 time period. In addition, other problems with the validated vote (see appendix A) make it undesirable to use in this context.

30. Not to mention the upward push on turnout of unknown magnitude provided by post-1960 liberalization of the registration system.

ness.<sup>31</sup> Therefore if social connectedness has trended downward, this may help account for some or all of the SES-adjusted turnout decline discussed above.

Some characteristics believed at least partially to reflect social connectedness are marital status, church attendance, and age. Those who are married and live with their spouses have the interpersonal tie with their partner; those who attend church relatively often have the interpersonal and community ties generated by such attendance;<sup>32</sup> and those who are older tend to be more "settled down,"<sup>33</sup> with deeper roots in communities and society and more stable, long-established ties with other individuals.<sup>34</sup> Individuals with these attributes should therefore have a higher level of social connectedness and be more likely to vote.

The data in table 2-3 show that social connectedness, as measured by these characteristics, has indeed trended downward over the 1960-88 period.<sup>35</sup> Marital status shows the most dramatic change, with

31. On the role of social connectedness in turnout, see Knack 1991a; Popkin 1991a, chap. 10; Pomper and Sernekos 1989; and Strate and others 1989.

32. It is also possible that those who attend church frequently develop political skills that facilitate voting. See Verba and others 1991, especially pp. 30-44, for some evidence relating church attendance to skills that facilitate participation (though their evidence is about political participation in general, not the specific act of voting).

33. It is also possible that aging promotes acquisition of bureaucratic skills that facilitate registration and voting, as argued by Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, especially chap. 3 (though note that their evidence about the diminishing marginal effect of age at higher educational levels neither proves nor disproves this contention, but simply reflects the shape of the probit curve (see Nagler 1991 and appendix B)). This analysis seems most applicable to young people who have just entered the electorate and have little experience with the political system. However, I am skeptical that skill acquisition (at least bureaucratic skill acquisition) can satisfactorily explain why age continues to promote turnout up to the age of seventy-five, because the skills involved are not that complex and should be relatively easy to acquire.

34. Of course some age-related variation in turnout is explained by age-related variation in political attributes that affect turnout (for example, political involvement, sense of government responsiveness, partisanship), as well as age-related variation in more concrete aspects of community attachment, such as home ownership and length of time in current home (which also affect turnout) (see Strate and others 1989). The fact remains, however, that age continues to have a strong effect on turnout, *even with all these other characteristics controlled for*. My interpretation is that this controlled effect of age (that is, the effect of age that is *not* explained by its relation to other characteristics) at least partially reflects the relationship of age to social connectedness.

35. It is important to note that table 2-3 does not exhaust the roster of characteristics pertinent to social connectedness. Other clearly relevant characteristics include residential mobility, home ownership, and union membership. All of these characteristics, however, do not seem particularly useful for looking at declining turnout.

For example, residential mobility, although a very strong predictor of turnout, has not been uniformly measured by the NES over the time period in question. As a result, apparent increases in residential mobility between 1960 and 1988 may be artifacts of the differential NES coding procedures. Moreover where NES coding can be made most uniform (under or over four years in same home), the distribution shows little change.

TABLE 2-3. *Social Connectedness, by Indicator, 1960-88*

Percent	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	Change 1960-88
<b>Marital status</b>									
Single <sup>a</sup>	21.0	24.1	29.2	33.1	37.2	39.6	43.2	45.2	24.2
Married, spouse present	79.0	75.9	70.8	66.9	62.8	60.4	56.8	54.8	-24.2
<b>Church attendance<sup>b</sup></b>									
Never	12.4	9.9	12.8	19.0	20.0	23.3	22.4	21.1	8.7
Seldom	30.5	30.2	34.4	32.0	28.4	28.7	28.7	28.5	-2.0
Often	16.4	16.8	15.2	23.0	26.5	23.1	24.9	25.2	8.8
Regularly	40.7	43.1	37.6	26.0	25.0	24.9	24.0	25.2	-15.5
<b>Age</b>									
18-28 <sup>c</sup>	11.6	16.3	16.4	25.2	25.6	24.3	22.3	19.5	7.9
29-36	18.1	15.9	14.0	14.2	16.0	17.7	20.1	20.9	2.8
37-44	19.5	18.2	17.9	13.6	11.7	12.9	14.4	17.2	-2.3
45-64	35.2	34.5	34.8	31.0	28.5	27.7	25.3	24.6	-10.6
65-74	11.1	10.1	11.7	10.2	11.7	11.4	10.6	10.5	-0.6
75 or older	4.4	5.1	5.3	5.8	6.6	6.1	7.3	7.4	3.0

SOURCE: Author's tabulations from National Election Study data.

a. Includes divorced, separated, and widowed.

b. Question wording for church attendance changed between 1960 and 1988. For discussion of this problem and

attendant coding decisions, see appendix C.

c. Category does not include 18- to 20-year-olds until 1972.

slightly more than one-fifth of the electorate (21 percent) being single in 1960, compared to almost half (45 percent) in 1988. Church attendance also dropped substantially with the proportion never attending church rising from 12 to 21 percent and the proportion attending regularly falling from just over two-fifths (41 percent) to about one-quarter (25 percent).<sup>36</sup> Finally the electorate became

Finally census data suggest that residential mobility (measured as under or over one year, and including children) was no higher in 1985 than in 1960. See U.S. Bureau of the Census 1985.

Home ownership, also a fairly strong predictor of turnout, was simply not measured by the NES in 1960, so home ownership levels in the base year of the period are not known. More important, home ownership declined only slightly during the years covered (1964-88).

Union membership (actually measured as having a union member in the family) has declined somewhat over the 1960-88 time period (down 8 points), but I do not find a significant effect of union membership on turnout, once other demographic and political variables are controlled for. However, even if union membership was treated as significant, the relationship would be weak and the contribution to turnout decline marginal.

36. Coding ambiguity in the church attendance measure can be partially eliminated by combining the "regularly" and "often" categories (see appendix C). In this case frequent church attendance still falls, though less sharply, from 57 to 50 percent.

younger,<sup>37</sup> with the proportion under 29 increasing about 8 percentage points (from 12 to 20 percent; much of this is because of the enfranchisement of eighteen- to twenty-year olds by the Twenty-Sixth Amendment in 1971), whereas, at the other end of the age spectrum, the proportion in the forty-five- to sixty-four-year-old group fell 10 points (from 35 to 25 percent).

The decrease in social connectedness indicated by these data seems substantial and a plausible source of downward pressure on turnout in the 1960-88 period. Model estimations<sup>38</sup> suggest that this downward pressure did indeed exist—that, all else equal, turnout would have fallen during this time period as a result of a decrease in social connectedness. However, the *magnitude* of this turnout-depressing effect—though fairly close—is actually somewhat smaller than the magnitude of the turnout-elevating effect of socioeconomic upgrading. Because of this the *decrease* in levels of social connectedness combined with the *increase* in levels of socioeconomic status would still have produced, all else equal, a modest *increase* in turnout of about 0.7 percent over the 1960-88 period.

Clearly declining turnout in this time period has still not been explained adequately, though some progress has been made in accounting for SES-adjusted turnout decline (that is, at least the countervailing force provided by socioeconomic upgrading has been largely canceled out and thereby accounted for by the decrease in social connectedness just identified). Therefore, distributional trends on other characteristics must be examined as possible explanations for turnout decline.

One possible source of downward pressure on turnout is suggested by the discussion of decreasing social connectedness. If general social connectedness is relevant to turnout, it makes sense that *political* connectedness would also be relevant, because voting is inescapably a political act. The idea here is that the various ways individuals tend to be connected to politics in the United States—through their identification with or knowledge about parties, through their psychological and media-based involvement in public affairs, and through their sense of a responsive link between individuals and government<sup>39</sup>—determine

37. The trend toward a younger electorate applies to the overall 1960-88 period. During the 1980s, however, the electorate actually got *older* (see table 2-3) and will continue to do so in the future as the baby boom generation moves through the life cycle.

38. Detailed in appendix B.

39. This sense of government responsiveness is different from the feelings of cynicism toward the government discussed earlier. Both negative (cynical) and positive (not cynical) feelings constitute a sort of attachment or link to the government. The sense that



to a significant extent how meaningful these individuals find elections and therefore how likely they are to vote. If political connectedness has trended downward, this may help account for some, or all, of the SES-adjusted turnout decline that remains unexplained.

Given the many analyses of America's declining political parties<sup>40</sup> and the widespread perception of popular disenchantment with the parties, the connections between Americans and political parties seem a particularly plausible place to look for a relevant decline in political connectedness. Table 2-4 displays the changing distributions of some key characteristics tapping Americans' feelings about, and knowledge of, their political parties. Those who identify relatively strongly with a political party, those who are concerned about which party wins an election, those who see important differences between the parties, and those who have relatively high levels of knowledge about the parties and their candidates should all be relatively likely to find an election meaningful and therefore relatively likely to vote.

These data do not suggest a massive disconnection of Americans from their political parties, but rather a modest overall downward trend. Party identification, for example, shows the independent category<sup>41</sup> stable over the time period, with the weak partisan or leaner category going up 5 points (from 52 to 57 percent) and the strong partisan or leaner category going down 5 points (from 36 to 31 percent). This is a downward trend in partisanship, but not a large one (the drop between 1960 and 1980 was larger, but, as the data show, levels of partisanship recovered somewhat in the 1980s).

The trend in concern over which party will win the election also shows a downward trend, but again a fairly modest one. About 65 percent of the electorate said they cared a great deal which party won the election in 1960, compared to 61 percent in 1988, a drop of only 4 points. (Again the drop was larger between 1960 and 1980, but concern over the election outcome picked up in the 1980s).

The other two indicators, which are more on the level of perception and understanding of the parties, present a mixed picture. The proportion of the electorate seeing important differences in what the parties

the government just does not listen or care, on the other hand, suggests a lack of attachment, positive or negative, to the government.

40. A particularly useful account is provided by Wattenberg 1990.

41. By independents I mean only *pure* independents. Those who say they are independents, but admit they lean toward one or another of the parties, are best treated as weak partisans. See Keith and others 1986 for further discussion.

TABLE 2-4. Party-Related Characteristics, 1960-88\*

Characteristic	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	Change 1960-88
Party identification									
Independent, apolitical	12.3	8.7	11.9	14.6	15.3	15.1	12.7	12.2	-0.1
Weak partisan, leaner	51.7	53.4	58.5	60.4	61.1	58.7	58.0	56.6	4.9
Strong partisan	36.0	37.9	29.6	25.1	23.5	26.2	29.3	31.2	-4.8
Care which party wins election?									
Don't care very much	34.8	34.5	34.9	39.6	43.6	44.1	35.2	39.0	4.2
Care a good deal	65.2	65.5	65.1	60.4	56.4	55.9	64.8	61.0	-4.2
Are there important differences between parties?									
No	49.7	45.0	48.3	53.9	52.8	42.0	37.5	40.4	-9.3
Yes	50.3	55.0	52.3	46.1	47.2	58.0	62.5	59.6	9.3
Knowledge of parties and candidates									
Very low	4.8	2.9	3.4	6.4	6.1	4.6	7.4	11.3	6.5
Low	20.3	20.0	17.5	25.0	25.1	27.0	23.4	23.5	3.2
Medium	32.2	32.2	27.0	31.3	29.6	29.4	26.4	22.8	-9.4
High	26.1	26.4	26.0	21.6	19.0	21.4	17.9	17.9	-8.2
Very high	16.6	18.5	26.0	15.7	20.3	17.6	24.9	24.5	7.9

SOURCE: Author's tabulations from National Election Study data.

\*. Question wording and basic coding decisions are described in appendix C.

stand for has, contrary to some expectations, actually gone up. Just about half of the electorate felt there were important differences between the parties in 1960, whereas by 1988 this figure had risen to about three-fifths of the electorate—a gain of 9 percentage points.

Knowledge of parties and candidates,<sup>42</sup> on the other hand, shows what appears to be a general downward trend, but hardly an overwhelming one. The two lowest knowledge categories go up 10 points (from 25 to 35 percent), whereas the next two highest categories go down 17 points (from 58 to 41 percent). But partially counterbalancing these trends, the very highest knowledge category went up 8 points, from 17 percent to 25 percent. The counterbalancing shift at the upper

42. "Knowledge" is measured by a simple count of the number of statements of likes and dislikes a person could make about the parties and candidates. A summation of likes and dislikes in this manner worked far better (that is, it was more robust and statistically significant) than alternative specifications of a variable based on likes and dislikes (for example, net effect—likes minus dislikes—for respondent's preferred party). See appendix C for question wording and coding of the knowledge variable and appendix B for relationship of different levels of knowledge to turnout.

end of the scale means that the magnitude of the overall downward shift cannot be large.

The disconnection of Americans from their political parties thus appears to be a source of downward pressure on turnout but probably a modest one. Model estimations<sup>43</sup> confirm this assessment. Had nothing else changed between 1960 and 1988 save these connections—*affective and perceptual*—between Americans and their political parties, turnout would have dropped only 0.4 percent. (The drop is almost entirely because of *declining partisanship and concern over the election outcome*; a slight turnout-*elevating* effect from the increased perception of important differences between the parties was almost exactly counterbalanced by a slight turnout-depressing effect from decreasing concrete knowledge about those parties.)

Again the SES-adjusted decline in voter participation over the 1960–88 period has still not been explained. Once the effect of socioeconomic upgrading is taken into account, the combined effects of the decline in social connectedness *and* the erosion of Americans' ties to political parties would have produced, all else equal, virtual stability in voter turnout levels (more specifically, a very slight increase in turnout of about 0.3 percentage point). The answer must therefore lie beyond connections to the political parties in other common ways in which Americans maintain connections to the political system: through their psychological and media-based involvement in politics and through their sense of government responsiveness.

POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT AND SENSE OF GOVERNMENT RESPONSIVENESS. Data are shown here on the changing distribution of some key characteristics tapping involvement, as well as the most common measure of sense of government responsiveness (table 2-5).<sup>44</sup> Those who follow an election campaign in the newspapers or on television,<sup>45</sup> those who have a high

43. Model estimations are detailed in appendix B.

44. The literature is profoundly confusing about "efficacy"—internal and external, political and personal—with different names sometimes given to the same efficacy measure and vice versa. For the record the measure I am using is usually called "external political efficacy" (though it is sometimes called just "external efficacy" or just "political efficacy") and is derived from two common NES questions on whether ordinary people have a say in government and whether public officials care what ordinary people think (see appendix C, table C-3, for exact question wording and scale construction).

45. The contention that campaign newspaper reading and TV watching should be viewed as measures of campaign involvement has been disputed. For example, some argue that reading the paper about a campaign is really a form of political *behavior*—moreover, behavior that simply expresses intent to vote, rather than any psychological attribute

level of general interest in a campaign, and those who follow overall public affairs closely should all feel more involved in an election—and therefore more likely to find it meaningful and to vote—than those who lack these attributes. Similarly those who believe the government is responsive to the wishes of ordinary people are more likely to find an opportunity to cast a ballot meaningful and thereby be more likely to vote than those who are skeptical of government responsiveness. It follows that if these particular connections of Americans to politics have eroded over time, this may account for some or all of the turnout decline as yet unexplained.

The data in table 2-5 do suggest a substantial downward trend in these attributes over the 1960–88 period. In terms of political involvement, the most dramatic change is in the extent Americans follow campaigns in the newspapers. The proportion of Americans reading many articles about the campaign dropped from over half (55 percent) in 1960 to under one-fifth (18 percent) in 1988, whereas the proportion reading none at all increased from exactly one-fifth (20 percent) to over one-half (51 percent).<sup>46</sup> This is a tremendous decrease in a very

(Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1990, pp. 117–18).

However, analysis of NES data on whether respondents expected to vote in an upcoming election does not support the latter assertion: campaign newspaper reading cannot be reduced to an individual's expectation to vote, and trends in campaign newspaper reading do not track trends in individual voting expectation. The former assertion—that campaign newspaper reading is a form of political behavior—is reasonable as far as it goes, but does not logically contradict the notion that campaign newspaper reading is an indicator of campaign involvement.

In fact, there is good evidence (Bennett 1990b) that campaign newspaper reading (and other campaign media usage) is a critical part of what people mean when they indicate interest in the campaign or involvement in politics. That is people feel that if they are reasonably engaged with the election process, they will take the relatively simple and nontaxing step of reading an article or two in the newspaper. This in turn may lead to voting in the election—though not necessarily—making campaign newspaper reading a sort of *intermediate* form of political participation.

A more interesting question perhaps is whether campaign newspaper reading is simply a *manifestation* of involvement in the campaign or whether it actually engenders involvement in the campaign (through the very process of newspaper reading or the demanding nature of the print media or both). In all likelihood it is both, though it is difficult, if not impossible, to know for sure.

46. The magnitude of this drop was probably somewhat inflated by altered question placement in 1988 (the campaign newspaper reading question was asked pre-election, rather than post-election, as has been traditionally the case). Examination of 1988 campaign newspaper reading data by interview completion period, however, suggests that the extent of this inflation was only modest. For example, those respondents who were interviewed in the last week before the election had campaign newspaper reading levels only a little higher (4 points higher on "many articles"; 5 points lower on "no articles") than those interviewed in the middle of September. This leads me to believe that the exceptionally low levels of campaign newspaper reading reported in the 1988 NES data are largely a reflection of very low campaign involvement in 1988, rather than an artifact

TABLE 2-5. *Political Involvement and Sense of Government Responsiveness, by Indicator, 1960-88<sup>a</sup>*

Percent	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	Change 1960-88
Campaign newspaper reading <sup>b</sup>									
No articles	20.0	21.4	24.6	42.4	26.0	29.2	23.1	51.4	31.4
Some articles	25.1	24.9	26.7	21.6	35.3	45.4	52.4	30.7	5.6
Many articles	54.9	53.7	48.7	35.9	38.7	25.4	24.4	17.8	-37.1
Campaign TV watching <sup>b</sup>									
No programs	13.3	10.9	10.8	11.7	10.5	14.1	13.9	16.7	3.4
Some programs	40.0	47.8	47.7	58.1	55.1	62.5	60.8	42.8	2.8
Many programs	46.7	41.3	41.6	30.2	34.4	23.4	25.3	40.5	-6.2
Campaign interest									
Not much interested	25.1	25.1	20.8	27.4	21.3	26.0	24.8	25.0	-0.1
Somewhat interested	37.3	36.6	40.4	41.1	42.6	44.2	46.8	47.2	9.9
Very much interested	37.6	38.2	38.9	31.5	36.1	29.8	28.4	27.8	-9.8
Following government and public affairs									
Little of the time <sup>c</sup>	37.5	28.1	36.3	27.3	30.1	38.7	37.1	40.7	3.2
Some of the time	41.7	41.6	30.7	36.2	31.6	34.9	36.4	36.9	-4.8
Most of the time	20.8	30.3	33.0	36.6	38.3	26.4	26.4	22.4	1.6
Sense of government responsiveness (political efficacy) <sup>b</sup>									
Low	15.7	21.3	30.6	31.9	35.6	31.8	24.8	42.8	27.1
Medium	22.6	26.3	24.7	28.3	28.9	33.8	25.2	27.3	4.7
High	61.7	52.4	44.7	39.8	35.4	34.3	49.9	29.9	-31.8

SOURCE: Author's tabulations from National Election Study data.

a. Basic question wording and coding decisions are described in appendix C.

b. Question wording for these questions changed between 1960 and 1988. Question placement was substantially altered in 1988 for campaign newspaper reading and TV watching. For discussion of these problems and attendant coding decisions, see appendix C.

c. Combines "hardly at all" and "very now and then" (1964 on).

important aspect of campaign involvement and, as it turns out, a powerful predictor of turnout.<sup>47</sup>

Other aspects of political involvement also show decreases, though not as dramatic as with campaign newspaper reading. The proportion of the electorate watching many programs about the campaign on TV

dropped from 47 to 41 percent, the proportion that was very much interested in the campaign fell from 38 to 28 percent and the proportion that followed public affairs some or most of the time fell from 63 to 59 percent. These are hardly overwhelmingly decreases, but, combined with the drastic fall in campaign newspaper reading, they suggest a very substantial withdrawal of the American electorate from the electoral process.

The sense of government responsiveness also shows a very substantial fall over this period. In 1960 over three-fifths of the electorate (62 percent) had a strong sense of government responsiveness (high "political efficacy"). By 1988 this had slipped to less than half of that figure (30 percent). On the other end of the scale, just 16 percent of the electorate in 1960 had a weak sense of government responsiveness (low "political efficacy"), whereas by 1988 this figure had more than doubled to over two-fifths (43 percent) of the electorate.<sup>48</sup> Again this suggests for 1988—during periods running from considerably before a given election (more than one month) to periods actually after that election (one week).

47. See appendix B for an empirical discussion of the strength of campaign newspaper reading as a predictor of turnout in a multivariate context. Exactly *why* campaign newspaper reading has a strong relationship to turnout is a more difficult issue to settle. It is possible that campaign newspaper reading is simply a "truer" measure of campaign involvement than a number of other indicators, because following the campaign in the papers requires some effort and therefore some genuine sense of involvement to foster the necessary motivation. Conversely, *lacking* such a sense of involvement, one of the first things people may neglect to do is follow the campaign in the papers.

Another possibility is that the very nature of campaign newspaper reading—the quality of the information, the active way it is absorbed (especially relative to other media)—substantially enhances people's feelings of involvement in the campaign. This would also lead to campaign newspaper reading being a strong predictor of turnout.

There is no clear way to choose between these two interpretations. My own feeling (supported by some focus group results—see Research Center, 1991a, pp. 1-34) is that both explanations play a role, with an initial sense of involvement helping motivate people to start following the campaign in the paper, and the process of following the campaign, once started, actually increasing people's sense of involvement.

In this context, it is also important to stress that campaign newspaper reading is *not* a proxy for *overall* newspaper reading. In fact, overall levels of newspaper reading have no independent effect on an individual's likelihood of voting. Nor can declining campaign newspaper reading be viewed as a simple product of generally declining newspaper readership. Declining daily newspaper readership tracks declining campaign newspaper reading very poorly. In addition, the proportion of the population that reads a newspaper at least once a week has remained stable (about 90 percent), so most people who are so motivated still have an opportunity to follow the campaign in the papers. Again, this suggests that the involvement factor is key.

48. The response categories to the efficacy questions were changed in 1988, from agree or disagree to a 5-point scale including a neutral, middle response. It is possible that people who might normally have given efficacious responses to these questions were drawn to the middle category, thereby exaggerating the proportion of low-efficacy citizens in this particular year and, hence, the overall drop in efficacy since 1960. Use of

of question placement. Further support for this interpretation is provided by data from surveys taken in Wichita, Kansas in 1990 and 1991 (Research Center 1990a, table VIII a-c; 1990b, questions 20A-27B; and 1991b, tables 16, 17) showing campaign newspaper reading going up by only modest amounts—that is, similar to the amounts quoted above

quite a significant break in the perceived link between government and ordinary citizens.

The erosion of political and campaign involvement and a sense of government responsiveness thus appears to have been a source of downward pressure on turnout levels during the 1960-88 period, perhaps a very strong one. Model estimations are consistent with this assessment. The decreases in political and campaign involvement and in a sense of government responsiveness have easily the strongest effect on turnout levels of any of the other groups of characteristics considered here. In fact when changes in levels of involvement and sense of responsiveness are included in model estimations, it is possible to account for a very respectable three-quarters (73 percent) of the turnout decline observed in the National Election Study (NES) data (table 2-6)<sup>49</sup> (71 of 9.7 percentage points).<sup>50</sup>

RELATIVE CONTRIBUTIONS OF CHARACTERISTICS. Table 2.6 also assesses the relative contributions of different factors to predicted turnout decline based on the probit model presented in appendix B. The first cluster of factors—education, occupation, and income (“socioeconomic status”)—are all negatively signed, indicating that these factors made negative contributions to turnout decline (that is, actually served to *increase*, rather than decrease, turnout levels). Education is far and away the crucial factor here, its influence being about three times as great as occupation and income put together. Combined, the three SES characteristics *increased* the predicted probit by .171, a figure almost

alternative scoring methods for the 1988 data, however, fails to bring levels of low efficacy below 37 percent, indicating that most of the observed drop in efficacy is real, not an artifact of question wording (see Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1990, pp. 118-19, for a confirmatory analysis).

49. The model performs about equally well in accounting for changes in turnout levels in the South and non-South. However, the model does not do particularly well in accounting for changing turnout levels among *black* southerners. (It severely underpredicts the large [25-point] increase in turnout in the NES data.) This suggests that black southerners were subject to highly specific cost and benefit changes not captured in the model that drove up their turnout levels. This is consistent with what we know about the tremendous reduction in registration barriers in the South in the 1960s, a phenomenon with impact primarily on southern blacks.

50. To decompose turnout decline into components attributable to different factors, it was necessary to assess turnout decline by comparing the probability of the predicted average (that is, of the average *probit*) across years, rather than the average of the predicted probabilities. Fortunately predictions of aggregate decline tend not to be sensitive to choice of method (here results are virtually identical in either case), so use of the predicted average method presents no serious problems.

TABLE 2-6. *Explaining the Differential in Turnout, 1960-88*

Characteristic	Predicted decline <sup>a</sup>	Percent of predicted decline <sup>b</sup>	Percent of SES-adjusted decline <sup>c</sup>
Socioeconomic status			
Education	-.118 <sup>b</sup>	-46.0 <sup>b</sup>	...
Occupation, income	-.053 <sup>b</sup>	-20.7 <sup>b</sup>	...
All socioeconomic status	-.171 <sup>b</sup>	-66.7 <sup>b</sup>	...
Social connectedness			
Age	.034	13.3	8.0
Marital status	.034	13.3	7.9
Church attendance	.077	29.9	17.9
All social connectedness	.145	56.5	33.9
Other demographic characteristics			
Race, region	.029	11.2	6.7
Party-related characteristics			
Partisanship, concern over outcome	.016	6.4	3.8
Difference between parties	-.013 <sup>b</sup>	-5.1 <sup>b</sup>	-3.1 <sup>b</sup>
Knowledge of parties and candidates	.013	4.9	2.9
All party-related characteristics	.016	6.2	3.7
Political involvement and efficacy			
Campaign involvement through media	.105	40.7	24.4
Campaign and political interest	.027	10.5	6.3
Political efficacy	.107	41.7	25.0
All political involvement and efficacy	.238	92.8	55.7
Total probit drop	.257	100.0	100.0
Percentage-point decline in turnout predicted by probit model		7.1	
Percentage-point decline in turnout reported in ANES survey		9.7	
Percent of turnout differential explained by model		73.2	

SOURCE: Author's computations based on model in appendix B.

a. Figures in columns may not sum exactly because of rounding.

b. Minus sign indicates factor acted to *increase* turnout.

two-thirds the magnitude of the entire probit decline predicted by the model.

The second group of characteristics—age, marital status, and church attendance (“social connectedness”)—all make positive contributions to turnout decline, with church attendance making the largest single contribution. Together, these social connectedness characteristics decrease the predicted probit by .145, about half of the overall decline predicted by the model. This predicted decline, combined with that

attributable to race and region"<sup>51</sup> ("other demographic"), just about counterbalances the upward push on turnout attributable to upgrading of socioeconomic status. Hence were the accounting procedure to stop at this point—with only social and demographic characteristics taken into consideration—very little change in turnout levels would be predicted over the 1960–88 period.

This is where changes in political connectedness come in, represented by the last two clusters of characteristics in table 2-6 ("party-related characteristics" and "political involvement and efficacy"). As the table shows, these factors together can account for almost all (99 percent) of the decline predicted by the model. Almost all of this effect, in turn, can be attributed to political involvement and efficacy factors (93 percent of predicted decline), rather than party-related characteristics, such as partisanship, and so on (only 6 percent of predicted decline). Finally of the involvement and efficacy factors, campaign involvement through the media<sup>52</sup> and political efficacy are of prime and roughly equal importance (each accounts for about two-fifths of predicted decline).

These results are rearranged in the third column. This rearrangement uses the concept of SES-adjusted turnout decline developed earlier. To reflect the fact that SES upgrading served to promote turnout and thus made the amount of turnout decline to be explained larger than that observed in the data, the predicted probit *increase* from these characteristics (.171) is added to the overall probit drop (.257) to produce the amount of probit decline actually explained by the other, non-SES variables in the model (.428). The probit drop from individual characteristics or sets of characteristics is then divided by .428 to find the proportion of adjusted decline accounted for by these variables. These proportions are shown in column three.

51. Race (black/nonblack) and region (South/non-South) were included as controls in the model (sex had such a weak effect on turnout, once other characteristics were controlled for, that I simply eliminated it from the final model). The effect on turnout levels *alluded to here stems from distributional shifts in race and region* (that is, more blacks and more southerners in the voting pool). Generally most hypothesized effects of race and region on turnout levels stem not from distributional changes, but from hypothesized *effect* changes. (For example, it is argued that being a southern black, by itself, no longer depresses turnout as much as it did in 1960.) Possible effects of such changes on turnout levels are discussed in the next section. The general issue of changing turnout differentials by region and, particularly, by race, is discussed in detail in the first part of chapter 3.

52. Declining campaign newspaper reading is by far the most important influence here.

These figures allow the findings from the decomposition to be presented more cleanly, with the positive contributions to turnout decline adding up to 100 percent (rather than well over, as in column two). By this accounting the contributions to turnout decline break down into more than one-half (56 percent) from decreases in political involvement and efficacy, about one-third (34 percent) from decreases in social connectedness, and the rest (10 percent) from the changing distribution of race, region, and various party-related characteristics.

The model findings suggest that the American electorate has been affected by three large-scale trends in the last thirty years, which together help explain a good part of the observed drop in turnout levels. The first big trend, socioeconomic (particularly educational) upgrading actually pushed turnout up. The other two big trends pushed turnout down: a substantial decline in social connectedness, as manifested in a younger, less married, and less church-going electorate; and a generalized *withdrawal from the political world*, as manifested by declining psychological involvement in politics and a declining belief in government responsiveness. (Interestingly, withdrawal or disconnection from the parties as particular political entities appears to be only a minor part of this story.) The latter two developments depressed the average benefits of voting sufficiently among the electorate to produce reduced turnout levels, despite the mitigating effects of the first development.

This is a relatively simple and compelling story that makes good intuitive sense. Several cautions, however, need to be kept in mind when interpreting these findings.

First, the analysis presented above is based on a statistical model that, like all models, is only an approximation of a very complicated reality.<sup>53</sup> It is possible, therefore, that there were (and are) other important factors affecting turnout levels that are not captured in this model.<sup>54</sup>

Second, even within the framework of the model, not all of the decline in turnout is accounted for. Specifically, as shown in table 2-6, the model cannot account for about one-quarter of the decline in turnout observed in the NES data. This means that although the model illumi-

53. As the statistician, Box, put it: "All models are wrong, but some are useful."

54. In fact it is assumed that turnout levels at any given time are a complex result of a variety of influences—some positive, some negative—there is no mathematical limit to the potential number of other factors there could be. The potential influence of a wide range of factors is particularly plausible, given the nature of voting as low-cost, low-benefit action (see Aldrich [forthcoming] for a fully developed argument along these lines).

nates a good part of the story behind declining turnout, it probably does not provide a complete explanation.

Third, looking outside the framework of the model, there appears to be an additional amount of turnout decline to be accounted for that was not captured by the NES data. This is because the aggregate ("real world") data show a decline in turnout of 12.6 percentage points (see table 1-3), about 3 points more than the NES data show. Although there are problems with directly comparing NES and aggregate data, there still seems to be some additional amount of turnout decline that the model presented here did not address and, therefore, does not account for. This underscores the point that the model, although providing a useful window into the processes affecting turnout decline, does not, in all likelihood, provide a complete explanation for that decline.

Finally the analysis presented above is really about identifying the factors that, in a *proximate* sense, have led to declining turnout levels. But this type of analysis does not reveal where these proximate factors came from or the extent to which they may be functioning as indicators of underlying social phenomena. For example, if declining psychological involvement in politics and sense of government responsiveness have led to declining turnout, what caused citizens to become less involved and believe less in responsive government? Unfortunately, poor data make it difficult, if not impossible, to develop a very detailed understanding of these underlying causes, but I do think this issue is worth keeping in mind when interpreting the research findings presented here (and as a subject for further research).

#### *Other Possible Sources of Turnout Decline*

This discussion suggests the desirability of looking for other sources of turnout decline that were not included in the model estimations. One possibility is changes in the *effect* of race (black) and region (South) on turnout, as opposed to changes in distribution of these characteristics (already included in the estimations summarized in table 2-6). As discussed earlier most hypothesized impacts of race or region on turnout levels stem not from distributional changes, but from hypothesized effect changes (for example, it is argued that being a southern black, by itself, no longer has the same effect on turnout as it did in 1960).

I did find some evidence of a change in the effect of being a southern black on turnout after 1965—that is, for presidential elections, 1968 and onward, being a southern black depressed a citizen's likelihood of

turnout substantially less than in 1960 and 1964. In addition I found some weak evidence of an effect change over the same time period for being a white southerner.<sup>55</sup> In either case, however, the estimated impact of the effect changes went in the wrong direction for explaining turnout decline. Specifically the estimated impact of these effect changes on turnout would have been, all else equal, to *increase* turnout 1 to 2 percentage points<sup>56</sup> over the 1960–88 period.<sup>57</sup>

Obviously then, changes in the effect of region or race do not go very far in accounting for the "missing" turnout decline. A possibly more fruitful source may be the decline in social connectedness discussed earlier in this chapter. At that point, I mentioned that the aspects of social connectedness included in the model did not exhaust the roster of social connectedness characteristics conceivably relevant to turnout decline (though a brief look at the data on these other characteristics did not suggest a high level of relevance). To test whether these other characteristics could be playing a role in turnout decline, I inserted them in models that included all the variables in table 2-6 and covered as many years as the characteristics tested would permit.<sup>58</sup> The results were not encouraging. Home ownership, for example, is a significant predictor of turnout, but changes so little over the 1964–88 time period that its impact on turnout levels is negligible.

Nor does union membership have much of an impact.<sup>59</sup> Although union membership declined more than home ownership, the relationship between union membership and turnout is so weak that the impact of this decline on turnout levels was also negligible. In fact I estimated the *combined* negative impact of declining home ownership and de-

55. No evidence whatsoever exists of an effect change for sex on turnout over this time period, contrary to a thesis that is occasionally advanced by political observers.

56. The estimate is closer to 2 points if the very weak white southern interaction term is included in the estimations, and closer to 1 point if this interaction term is excluded.

57. It seems likely that to some extent these estimates are capturing the effects of registration law changes from the 1960s, because these changes are believed to have had the most impact on southern blacks. Thus this finding, although not explaining turnout decline directly, does provide some evidence on the turnout-promoting effect of registration law changes, which, along with the turnout-promoting effect of socioeconomic upgrading, forms a critical part of the "puzzle of participation" alluded to earlier in the chapter.

58. Data on some of these characteristics were not collected in all presidential years, 1960–88. See appendix C for more information on data availability by year for different characteristics.

59. Actually the variable in the NES data is whether the respondent is in a union *family*, rather than a union member himself or herself. I do not believe this presents any particular problems for analysis.

clining union membership on turnout levels at only about 0.3 percent. This suggests that the impact of the decline in social connectedness, at least in any way that can be measured,<sup>60</sup> may already be captured fairly well by the model summarized in table 2-6.

Another possible source of additional downward pressure on turnout might be from the level of party mobilization. This could be a factor even if, as discussed earlier, the erosion of individual-level affective and perceptual connections between citizens and parties has played only a very minor role in declining turnout (see table 2-6). For example, it is theoretically possible that the role of parties themselves in actively organizing citizens—party mobilization—has fallen drastically, while individual citizens' sense of partisanship has declined only modestly (see table 2-4). Certainly much anecdotal evidence exists that generally speaking "parties aren't what they used to be," and, in many communities, are not the strong institutions they once were.

The problem with this line of argument is that it is relatively difficult to come up with hard evidence that supports it. For example, levels of direct contact by parties, as measured by an NES item that asks respondents whether anyone from one of the parties came around and talked to them about the election, changed relatively little over the 1960–88 time period and, to the extent they did, the change was in the "wrong" direction (that is, *up* slightly, not down).<sup>61</sup> Although one could raise questions about this item as an indicator of party mobilization,<sup>62</sup> it is nonetheless food for thought that respondents' self-reports of direct party contact have not decreased over time.

60. It is still possible of course that other aspects of social connectedness not well captured in the NES data—or any other time series data set—could be responsible for some or all of the "missing" turnout decline. This would be the argument, I would presume, of Knack and others who argue for the primary salience of declining social connectedness to falling voter turnout. (Knack 1991a, 1992a has even been involved in the piloting of some items for the NES that he believes could capture some of these missing aspects of social connectedness. The problem of course is that even if these items "pan out" in terms of their relationship to turnout, data will be lacking on their distributional change over time and, therefore, the extent to which they are truly salient to declining turnout levels.)

61. Party contact was actually 1.8 percentage points higher in 1988 than in 1960. Indeed 1960 was the low point for the entire period, so party contact was at least somewhat higher in all the intermediate presidential elections as well.

62. It is possible that citizens do not adequately distinguish between people from interest groups and people from the parties contacting them. If this is true, citizens might be reporting unchanged levels of party contact simply because decreased frequency of party contact has coincided with increased frequency of interest group contact, and citizens tend to conflate the two types of contact.

Another difficulty with the declining party mobilization argument is that, on a pure organizational level, parties are stronger than ever. That is, regardless of other ways in which American political parties may have declined, the structural strength of American parties as organizations has, if anything, actually increased.<sup>63</sup> Again, although organizational strength is probably not a particularly good indicator of mobilization, the trend on this indicator underscores the difficulties of finding hard evidence supporting the party demobilization argument.

Does this lack of hard evidence mean that a decline in party mobilization should be completely ruled out as a possible contributor to turnout decline? I do not think so. First, changes over time have not been (and perhaps never will be) adequately measured for too many important aspects of party mobilization. These include the quality of contacts between party and citizen (that is, how well, if at all, do citizens know local party workers?); the nature of party organization in local communities (that is, how many links do local parties have with social groups, community institutions, and organizational networks, and how strong are those links?); and the quality and type of party outreach activities (that is, how much has television simply supplanted many of the ways parties used to reach out to ordinary citizens?). I believe enough anecdotal evidence exists that parties have demobilized—become weaker and more diffuse—in these ways so that a possible role for party demobilization in turnout decline should still be considered.

It is also possible that demobilization, if not a direct contributor to turnout decline, has played a role indirectly as an underlying cause of the disconnection from politics described in the previous section. Unfortunately the aspects of party mobilization enumerated above are the most plausible candidates for causing such disconnection, but because of the lack of hard data on these aspects, their possible role cannot be empirically evaluated. Still I think the theoretical plausibility of such a relationship (that is, between demobilization and political disconnection) suggests this possibility should be kept in mind.

Thus if available data do not allow party demobilization to be ruled out as a possible source of turnout decline, neither do they allow it to be ruled in.<sup>64</sup> Much the same might be said of the possible role of

63. See, for example, Gibson and others 1985; Huckshorn and others 1986; and Herrnsen 1988.

64. But see Rosenstone and Hansen (forthcoming) for an argument that demobiliza-

declining competitiveness of elections. Although it is certainly clear that elections for the House of Representatives have become substantially less competitive, it is less clear that elections for president, governor, and senator<sup>65</sup>—the elections that draw the heaviest turnouts—have declined seriously in competitiveness. And in at least one section of the country (the South) competitiveness has clearly increased, as the old one-party (that is, the Democratic party) system has been replaced with a two-party system. Available data, then, do not permit a clear judgment on whether changing electoral competitiveness has been a source of downward pressure on turnout levels.

I turn now to two possible sources for which available data *do* directly suggest that contributions to turnout decline have been made. The first is changes in election calendars.<sup>66</sup> As discussed in chapter 1, frequent elections are believed 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. Changes in election calendars since 1960 have in fact directly increased election frequency (for instance, the rise in presidential primaries from fifteen states in 1960 to thirty-two states in 1988) and shifted important offices away from the presidential general election ballot (such as the movement of governors' races to off-year elections by sixteen states, thereby dropping the number of states that hold gubernatorial elections during presidential years from twenty-eight in 1960 to twelve in 1988). Because both of these changes are in the "right" direction to depress turnout levels, the plausibility that changing election calendars are a factor in turnout decline is further suggested.

Model estimations<sup>67</sup> confirm that changing election calendars probably played a role—albeit a modest one—in turnout decline. I found that the combined impact of the rise in spring primaries and the decline

tion—though very broadly defined and not restricted to the direct role of parties—has been a central part of the turnout decline process.

65. Though it is true that the proportion of senatorial incumbents reelected with 60 percent or more of the vote has increased over time (Ornstein, Mann, and Malbin 1992, table 2-11).

66. This possibility was originally raised by Boyd 1981, 1986, 1989. See his articles for detailed discussion of the issue.

67. Based on the model in appendix B with variables added for gubernatorial elections and number of spring primaries. The coding for spring primaries follows the procedure used in Boyd 1989 (see appendix C for details). I also initially included a variable for number of fall primaries, but did not find a significant effect for that variable (but see Boyd 1981, 1986, 1989 for an alternative estimation).

in concurrent gubernatorial elections in presidential years should have been, all else equal, to depress turnout about 1.7 percentage points (most of this because of the decline in gubernatorial elections).<sup>68</sup> Thus changing election calendars are apparently another factor reducing the meaningfulness of presidential elections for citizens and thereby contributing to declining turnout.

The second source for which available data directly suggest a role in falling turnout is the decline in citizen duty, an aspect of political connectedness not previously included in model estimations. Citizen duty taps the extent to which citizens feel an obligation to participate in the political system (by voting), regardless of other factors that may militate against such participation. Citizen duty items have been asked only irregularly on the NES, and most of them were eliminated from the survey after 1980. Perhaps this was partially because the trend line on these data was so flat during the 1960s and 1970s—that is, whatever else was happening in American society, people's sense of citizen duty did not appear to be changing.

However, the NES did retain one citizen duty item on the survey through the 1980s, and it turns out that this item does show quite a lot of change over the decade. The specific item asked people whether they thought they should not bother to vote in an election if they did not care much about it. The proportion that thought they should bother to vote, even under these circumstances, has gone down from 59 percent in 1980 to 42 percent in 1988—a very substantial 17-point drop in eight years.<sup>69</sup>

Confirmatory evidence for this drop in citizen duty comes from *Washington Post/ABC* surveys in 1983 and 1991. On these surveys respondents were asked a somewhat different citizen duty item—

68. It is interesting to note that this turnout-depressing effect from changing election calendars roughly counterbalances the turnout-increasing effect from the changing influence of race and region on turnout. Assuming that this latter effect is also primarily structural in origin (that is, mostly stems from relaxation of registration laws in the 1960s, particularly in the South), this would mean that the two structural changes identified as influences on turnout levels (changes in election calendars and registration laws) tend to cancel one another out and make little net contribution to explaining turnout decline.

69. Abramson, Silver, and Anderson 1987 argue that this drop is probably artifactual because this item is now asked alone, while before it was asked after two other citizen duty items (which promoted a "dutiful" response to the third item). I am not persuaded that evidence from one relatively old (1952) NES is sufficient to disregard the 17-point drop in the proportion disagreeing with this item. Besides, even taking their evidence on a question-ordering effect at face value, the effect they show is not close enough to account for a decline of this magnitude.



whether they thought their own votes really mattered. Because a similar item was also asked on the 1980 NES, it is possible to assess the extent to which this aspect of citizen duty changed during the 1980s by using the 1980 NES as a benchmark.<sup>70</sup>

The results were astonishing. Although the earlier NES data show tremendously high proportions expressing the belief that their votes mattered, the *Washington Post/ABC* data show that this belief has eroded drastically in recent years. From 91 percent saying their vote mattered in 1980, the proportion expressing such a belief fell to 86 percent in 1983 and to 73 percent in the most recent poll in 1991. (Interpolating the latter two figures, this would put the level of this aspect of citizen duty at about 78 percent at the time of the 1988 election.) Once again this is a very substantial drop of about 18 points over an eleven-year time period.

Using the same technique described earlier in this section in connection with union membership and home ownership, I estimated models that included these citizen duty items to see if these declining levels of citizen duty could be playing a role in turnout decline. Turnout impact estimates<sup>71</sup> based on these models strongly suggest this was the case. Specifically the estimated impact of these decreases in citizen duty on turnout should have been, all else equal, to decrease turnout levels about 2 to 4 percentage points (almost all in the 1980s).<sup>72</sup>

Thus the model does not include at least two possible sources of turnout decline for which some reasonably hard evidence can be adduced. It is interesting that one of these sources—and the one with apparently the most impact—taps yet another connection of Americans to their political system, suggesting, once again, that a multifaceted decline in political connectedness has played a central role in bringing down U.S. turnout levels.

70. Note, however, that *Washington Post/ABC* did alter the item somewhat, changing it from "So many other people vote in the national elections that it doesn't matter much to me whether I vote or not" to "My own vote doesn't really matter in an election." I do not believe, however, that this change seriously damages comparability, because the basic thrust of the item was very similar and would appear to tap the same underlying citizen commitment (or lack thereof) to the political process.

71. See appendix B for a description of how the impact of specific variables on turnout levels is estimated.

72. The estimate is closer to 2 points, if the 1983 *Washington Post/ABC* citizen figure is used, closer to 4 points if the 1983 and 1991 *Washington Post/ABC* figures are interpolated to produce a 1988 figure.

## Conclusion

The following conclusions have been reached from this investigation of the decline in U.S. voter turnout since 1960.

First the decline in voter turnout since 1960 has been substantial and serious and is in no way merely an artifact of available data. Nor is the decline in turnout simply a matter of fewer people negotiating the onerous U.S. registration system, because even those registered are showing less of a propensity to vote.

Second this decline in voter turnout does not appear to be a matter of increased voting costs, because the registration system, the chief source of costs to U.S. voters, has actually become less stringent since 1960. It follows that the root cause of declining turnout has been a reduction in the perceived *benefits* of voting.

Third the turnout-reducing drop in the perceived benefits of voting may be traced in large part to trends in the individual-level characteristics of citizens. Specifically three big trends have affected the American electorate in the last thirty years that together explain a good amount of the observed drop in turnout levels. The first big trend, socioeconomic (particularly educational) upgrading actually pushed turnout up. The other two big trends pushed turnout down: a substantial decline in social connectedness, as manifested in a younger, less married, and less church-going electorate, and a generalized withdrawal or disconnection from the political world, manifested most dramatically by declining psychological involvement in politics and a declining belief in government responsiveness. These latter two trends depressed the average benefits of voting sufficiently among the electorate to produce substantially reduced turnout levels, despite the mitigating effects of the first trend.

Finally of the two turnout-depressing trends just mentioned—one social, one political—the ongoing process of political disconnection appears to have played by far the largest role. This role is underscored by indications that citizen duty may be yet another aspect of political connectedness that is eroding and pushing down turnout levels.