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As *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960: 89) stated, "The act of voting requires the citizen to make not a single choice but two. He must choose between rival parties or candidates. He must also decide whether to vote at all." Yet, this classic work devoted only about 5 percent of its attention to analyzing the choice of whether or not to vote. In light of the political realities of 1960, this relative neglect of the turnout question seems quite understandable. Based on what was known about the factors influencing turnout rates, there was good reason to expect that American turnout would gradually increase to around the high levels then experienced in most established democracies.

When *The American Voter* was published there was still a good excuse for the relatively low voter turnout in the United States: the aftermath of the Civil War. The states of the old Confederacy were long a major drag on the nation's turnout rate, owing to racial discrimination, the poll tax, and lack of party competition. In the contest between John Kennedy and Richard Nixon only 40 percent of adults in those southern states voted, whereas turnout in the rest of the nation was a respectable 70 percent. Philip Converse (1963) hypothesized shortly thereafter that Southern turnout rates should eventually converge with those of the North due to dwindling educational differences between the regions and the ongoing urbanization of the South. Furthermore, as education was on the increase throughout the entire country, the expectation was surely that turnout in the North would also rise (though not as rapidly as the Southern rate). As Converse (1972: 324) wrote, in analyzing "engagement in any of a variety of political activities from party work to vote turnout itself: education is everywhere the universal solvent, and the relationship is always in the same direction."

Had scholars in the early 1960s been able to foresee other major societal and legal developments, they would have been even more confident that America's turnout problem would be short-lived. The vast influx of women into the workforce, if foreseen, would surely have led to an expectation of higher turnout. As Seymour Martin Lipset (1963: 206) wrote in explaining women's lower turnout rate in the 1950s: "The sheer demands on a housewife and mother mean that she has little opportunity to gain politically relevant experiences." In 1960, only 38 percent of women were in the workforce compared to 83 percent among men; by 1996, 59 percent of women were working compared to 75 percent of men. In addition, value-laden issues such as abortion and equal rights have entered the political arena, thereby politicizing many women who are not employed. These factors have indeed wiped out any noticeable difference in the turnout rates of men and women.

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The major unanticipated legal development over the last four decades has been the profound loosening of registration procedures. Registration hurdles were long considered to be one of the primary reasons for America's low turnout, especially in the South where they were historically most restrictive. Since the 1960s, however, registration procedures have become far more user-friendly throughout the entire country -- most notably via the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Motor Voter Act of 1993. Such a development would certainly lead one to expect an increase in turnout since 1960, *ceteris paribus*.

All of these reasons why turnout should have increased in recent decades make perfect sense and there is little reason to believe that the underlying theories have proved to be wrong. For example, the convergence of Northern and Southern turnout rates predicted by Converse (1963) has taken place, with the 1996 turnout rate in the former Confederate states falling just 4 percent below that for the rest of the country. Nevertheless, the national turnout rate has plunged almost continually over the last four decades, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 National Turnout Percentages: 1960-1998**

Presidential		Congressional	
1960	62.8	1962	45.4
1964	61.9	1966	45.4
1968	60.9	1970	43.5
1972	55.2	1974	35.9
1976	53.5	1978	34.9
1980	52.8	1982	38.0
1984	53.3	1986	33.5
1988	50.3	1990	33.1
1992	55.1	1994	37.4
1996	48.9		

*Note and Source:* Congressional data represent the percentage of the voting age population voting for U.S. Representative. Data are taken from the *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1998*, p. 289.

In 1996, the turnout of just 49 percent of the voting age population (VAP) marked the first time that participation in a presidential contest had fallen below the 50 percent mark since the early 1920s -- when women had just received the franchise and not yet begun to use it very frequently (see Merriam and Gosnell, 1924). In 1997, not a single one of the eleven states that called its citizens to the polls managed to get a majority to vote. The best turnout occurred in Oregon, where a heated campaign took place on the question of whether to repeal the state's "right to die" law. The worst turnout of 1997 was a shockingly low 5 percent for a special election in Texas. This occurred even though Governor Bush stumped the state for a week, urging people to participate and promising that a "Yes" vote would result in a major tax cut.

Such abysmal turnout figures present a challenge for students of voting behavior that could hardly have been dreamed of when the field was founded. The classic 1960s studies of voting were concerned primarily with ascertaining whether citizens could make wise decisions enabling their preferences to be faithfully translated into public policy. In the early 21st century, one of the major questions seems likely to be whether they will bother to cast ballots in the first place.

This paper examines the factors that explain who votes in the United States at present, and as compared to the early 1960s. These factors will be broken down according to the three chief disciplinary approaches to political behavior: economic, psychological, and sociological. In addition to addressing the question of why so few Americans are voting, this paper also examines the impact of low turnout on electoral results and representation. Contrary to much of the standard wisdom on the subject, recent data show that turnout patterns can indeed make a substantial difference in electoral outcomes. The scope of the analysis will then be expanded to the entire set of established OECD democracies, demonstrating that falling participation rates are no longer just an American phenomenon. Almost every OECD country has seen its participation rates drop in recent years, thereby making the question of "who votes" a major one throughout the advanced industrialized world. A comparative perspective sheds further light on the factors influencing turnout, and potential ways to increase America's relatively low participation rate can be derived from comparative analysis.

### **The Costs and Benefits of Voting**

The fundamental axiom of economic theory as it applies to voting is that citizens act rationally as they make their decisions about whether or not to vote (Downs, 1957). Just like any consumer purchase, people are hypothesized to consider both the costs and the benefits. If the benefits outweigh the costs, then the rational choice is to vote. Thus, if turnout is declining it must be because the benefits no longer outweigh the costs for many people.

Although this theory is simple and straightforward, in practice every voter probably weighs the various costs and benefits somewhat differently. A benefit for which one person might trudge through a blizzard in order to vote may not be considered a significant benefit by another person. Similarly, a cost that might seem incredibly burdensome to one individual might be only a minor annoyance to another. Nevertheless, it is quite useful to outline the major costs and benefits that citizens must consider in deciding whether to vote. If the costs and benefits that Americans encounter are markedly different than those encountered by citizens of other countries, then that should help explain why the U.S. turnout rate is so low. How these factors differentially impact various groups will be addressed in subsequent sections on psychological and sociological theories.

### **The Costs of Voting**

More attention has been given in the literature to the costs than the benefits of voting. This is probably because one cost of voting in the United States has drawn overwhelming attention—that of registration. The governments of most established democracies take the

responsibility for registering as many eligible voters as possible. In the U.S., by contrast, the responsibility for registration lies solely with the individual. To make matters worse, some state registration laws in the past clearly sought to restrict rather than facilitate voter turnout. This was the case in the South, with its well-known provisions to prevent African-Americans from voting, but also in much of the North - where the potential political power of immigrants threatened the early 20th century political establishment (Piven and Cloward, 1988). Some of these obstacles, such as the poll tax or literacy tests, were transparent attempts to keep particular types of people from registering; others, such as requiring citizens to appear at a county courthouse that was open just several hours a week, were not user-friendly for anyone.

G. Bingham Powell's (1986) comparative analysis estimated that America's unique registration laws accounted for roughly half the difference between U.S. turnout rates and those of other advanced industrialized democracies in the 1960s and 1970s. Raymond Wolfinger and Steven Rosenstone (1980) examined variation in 1972 state registration laws on 3 crucial dimensions: closing date, office hours for registration, and laws for absentee registration. They found that if the most liberal registration laws had been in effect throughout the country, turnout would have been 9 percent greater. Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980: 88) go on to "confidently" infer that if America adopted European-style registration then voter turnout would increase by substantially greater than this estimate.

A quarter of a century after this classic analysis, aggregate data continue to show that state registration laws are related to turnout at any single point in time. Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980: 72-73) noted that their 1972 data did not allow them to assess the impact of the most liberal of all registration laws - election day registration. Since 1972, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Wyoming, Idaho, Maine, and New Hampshire have adopted this procedure. In addition, North Dakota has no formal registration at all, having abolished it in 1951.<sup>1</sup> Each of these 7 states ranked among the top 15 in terms of turnout of its voting age population in 1996, as demonstrated by Table 2. The importance of their registration procedures is further illustrated by data from the two election-day registration states that report when people registered. In Minnesota, 15 percent of the state's voters registered on election day, and in Idaho the figure was 13 percent. Therefore, without the voters who registered at the polls, these states would have had just slightly better than average turnout rates.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, the causality between registration laws and high turnout may not be so simple. It is possible that states which have adopted the most liberal registration laws are also states where citizens have traditionally been the most predisposed to go to the polls in the first place. More telling than whether these states have high turnout rates compared to other states is whether the existence of user-friendly registration procedures has helped to keep their turnout from declining. The answer is that they clearly have not. Since 1960, presidential election turnout in North Dakota has declined from 78 to 56 percent in spite of the fact that they have had no registration requirements. Minnesota and Wisconsin, which in 1976 were the first two states to implement election day registration, had lower turnout rates in 1996 than when they had tight registration laws.

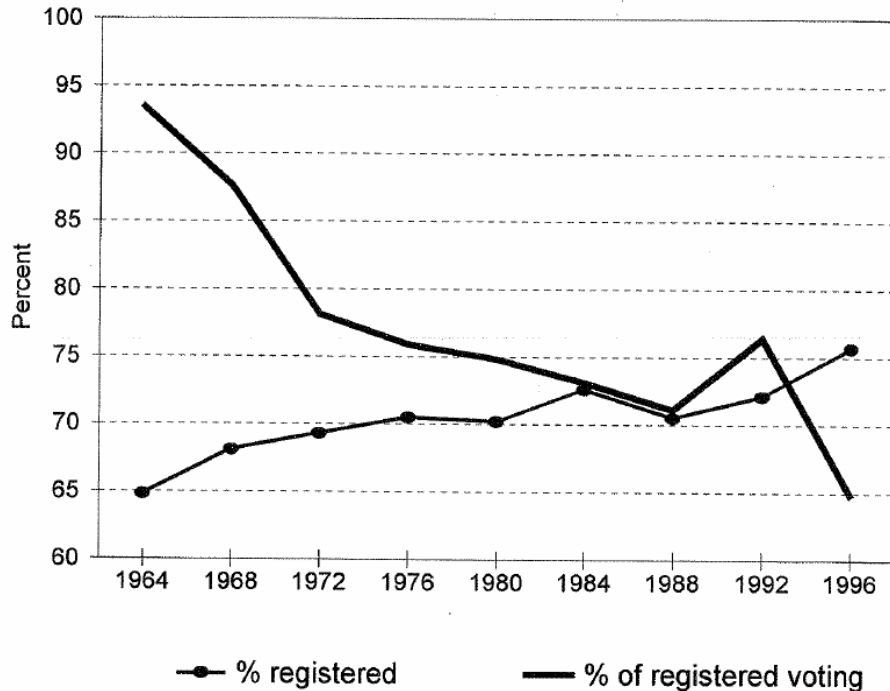
**Table 2 State Turnout Percentages in 1996**

<i>Maine</i> 65	Massachusetts 55	Kentucky 47
<i>Minnesota</i> 64	Washington 55	Tennessee 47
Montana 63	Missouri 54	Virginia 47
South Dakota 61	Ohio 54	Maryland 47
<i>Wyoming</i> 60	Michigan 54	New York 47
Vermont 59	Colorado 53	North Carolina 46
<i>Idaho</i> 58	Rhode Island 52	Mississippi 46
<i>New Hampshire</i> 58	New Jersey 51	New Mexico 46
Iowa 58	Utah 50	West Virginia 45
Oregon 58	Oklahoma 50	Arizona 45
<i>Wisconsin</i> 57	Delaware 50	Georgia 43
Louisiana 57	Pennsylvania 49	California 43
Kansas 57	Illinois 49	District of Columbia 43
Alaska 57	Indiana 49	Texas 42
<i>North Dakota</i> 56	Alabama 48	Hawaii 41
Nebraska 56	Florida 48	South Carolina 41
Connecticut 56	Arkansas 48	Nevada 39

*Note and Sources:* Calculated by the author on the basis of election results and U.S. Census estimates of the voting age population in each state. States with election day registration or no registration are in italics.

Nationwide data are even less supportive of the importance of registration in explaining changes in turnout. As shown in Figure 1, since 1964 the registration rate among the voting age population has risen substantially while the percentage of registered voters who actually go to the polls has declined. This pattern is particularly visible between 1992 and 1996. The National Voter Registration Act of 1993, commonly known as the "Motor Voter Act" required states to permit people to register to vote when they apply for or renew drivers' licenses, and also mandated that the states make postal registration forms available at a variety of social service offices. Although the Motor Voter Act led to the largest four-year increase in registration ever recorded, the turnout rate of registered voters fell sharply--indicating that many of the new registrants did not make it to the polls in 1996. This can be demonstrated by examining changes at the state level, as some states felt the impact of the new law more than others.<sup>3</sup> The correlation between the percentage of change a state experienced in registration from 1992 to 1996 and the change in the proportion of registered voters actually voting was .81. This indicates that as the registration rolls swelled, the participation rate of those on them dropped.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the Census Bureau actually found fewer people saying they were registered in 1996 than in 1992. The Motor Voter procedures apparently made registering so easy that many forgot that their names had been placed on the voting ledgers.

Figure 1



Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980, p. 80) argued that, "The more permissive the registration laws, the lower the time, energy, and information costs of voting." The data discussed here do not necessarily contradict this theory. What they do show is that registration is probably a relatively minor factor in calculating the cost of voting for most citizens. The general factors that Wolfinger and Rosenstone cite of time, energy, and information costs, are presumably of greater significance in and of themselves.

In particular, the information costs that Americans typically encounter as they decide whether or not to vote are often overwhelming. As I look at what I am being asked to vote on in California this year, I find that even as a Political Science professor my level of political information is inadequate to deal with the many questions at stake. For example, I have voted for state Controller in four elections but I have yet to learn what the holder of this office actually does. When I ask my university students, the answer I always get back is, "He (or she) controls." Usually, I can prod someone into saying that the Controller deals with money. But students are stumped when I ask how this position differs from state Treasurer, which is also an elected office. I then pose further rhetorical questions, such as what are the issues in the campaigns for state Insurance Commissioner, Superintendent of Schools, or Secretary of State, and whether they know anything about the judges we have to decide whether to retain. Finally, I read off a few obscure California propositions, such as a 1994 vote on whether to abolish justice courts. By the time I am done, I think I have made my point: All these demands on citizens probably discourages many people from voting in the first place.

Unlike America's unique registration system, there is one other established democracy in which voters are faced with similarly high information costs. This country is Switzerland, and the similarities it shares with the United States in this respect may well account for the low turnout rates in each. First, the Swiss and American electoral

systems are unusual among the established democracies in that they call upon their citizens to vote for offices too numerous to list here. Second, Switzerland, like many American states, regularly employs referenda to decide specific policy issues that are left to the parties to work out in most other countries (Steinberg, 1996; Kobach, 1994). Third, Switzerland's Federal Council is a unique executive branch that involves a form of permanent power sharing between the parties—a system that is functionally equivalent to divided party government in the United States.

All of these features add up to elections being far more complex in the United States and Switzerland than in other established democracies. Political power is very decentralized, thereby making it extremely difficult for people to assess responsibility for governmental performance. At the same time, their citizens are called upon to make many decisions at the polling booth. In short, an examination of the American and Swiss cases leads to the following basic proposition about turnout: Build a user friendly electoral system and voters will come; build an overly complex system and they will stay away. Reforms like the recent Motor Voter Act may have made it easier to register, but voter turnout remains low because the key problem is the high information costs posed by America's non-user-friendly political system.

A final important cost that must be considered is the time it takes to get to the polls and go through the physical process of voting. As shown in Table 3, the most frequent response given by non-voters in the 1996 Census Bureau survey was that they could not take time off from work or school that day. The fact that elections are traditionally held in the United States on Tuesday is another reason why the American voting process is not user-friendly. It is true that people who know they are going to be busy all day can usually vote ahead of time. Yet, many people can not predict how much free time they will have on a given Tuesday. Were elections to be held on the weekend, as in 70 percent of established democracies, people would at least have more free time that day to allow for voting. Indeed, Mark Franklin's (1996) comparative analysis demonstrates that countries which vote on a weekend or holiday have 6 percent higher turnout than would otherwise be expected.

### **The Benefits of Voting**

In civics classes, most Americans are taught that they should vote because every vote can make a difference. Realistically, when over 95 million people vote in a presidential election, as they did in 1996, the chance that one vote will affect the outcome is very, very slight. Once in a while, of course, an election is decided by a handful of votes. In 1948, Lyndon Johnson won a race for the U.S. Senate by a total of 87 votes—very suspicious votes, earning him the nickname "Landslide Lyndon." In 1960, John Kennedy carried the state of Hawaii by a mere 115 votes. It is more likely, however, that an individual will be struck by lightning at some point in his or her lifetime than participate in an election decided by a single vote.

This raises one of the great paradoxes in the literature on turnout: why should anyone bother to vote given the sheer improbability of a single vote making a difference? William Riker and Peter Ordeshook's (1968) classic answer to this question was that some people vote out of a sense of civic duty, knowing full well that they have no chance to influence the outcome. Rather than enjoying the short-term gain of electing one's

favorite candidates, the benefit from doing one's civic duty is the long-term contribution made toward preserving democracy.

The problem with the notion of civic duty is that virtually all Americans express these values regardless of whether they themselves vote. When posed with the statement that "so many other people vote in national elections that it doesn't matter much to me whether I vote or not," 92 percent disagreed in 1960 and 91 percent did so in 1980. In 1960, 93 percent rejected the statement that "it isn't so important to vote when you know your party can't win," whereas in 1980 the figure was barely changed at 92 percent. With these results, it is hard to imagine that feelings of citizen duty explain why so few Americans vote or why turnout has been going down.<sup>5</sup>

A final type of benefit that voters receive is the value of expressing their support for various positions, candidates, and groups. In other words, many people vote simply because for one reason or another they care who wins. Such participation can be likened to spectators at sporting event. Just like with voting, the involvement of any particular fan is hardly crucial to the outcome. While democracy would not exist without some citizens going to the polls, without fans at a game there wouldn't be a home field advantage. Individually, sports spectators get the selective benefits of being able to root in person for their team, enjoy the spectacle, and see who wins. Similar benefits can be posited for voters. People who have an interest in who should govern and what government should do are thus more likely to feel that there is a benefit to voting, just like people with a favorite team are more likely to attend a sporting event. As shown in Table 3, two of the major reasons respondents chose for not voting in 1996 were a lack of interest and the fact that they did not prefer any of the candidates.

**Table 3 Reasons for Not Voting in Percents**

Could not take time off from work/school	21.5
Not interested	16.6
Sick/disabled/family emergency	14.9
Did not prefer any of the candidates	13.0
Out of town	11.1
Other reasons	10.3
Forgot to vote	4.4
Had no way to get to the polls	4.3
Don't know; refused	2.3
Lines too long at the polls	1.2

*Source:* 1996 Census Bureau Survey.

An overall reduction in the benefits of political expression provides the most plausible source for turnout decline. After all, the benefits of influencing the election and doing one's civic duty have not changed, and the costs of voting have either decreased or stayed about the same. As expressive benefits are primarily psychological, it becomes crucial to examine the relationship between turnout and various attitudes that provide incentives to vote.



## Psychological Predictors of Voting Turnout

As Angus Campbell et al. (1960: 90) wrote, "the decision to vote, no less than the decision to vote for a given party, rests immediately on psychological forces." The major forces they identified were strength of party identification, political interest, caring about the outcome, and political efficacy - all of which continue to be quite relevant today. Indeed, in line with the argument that expressive benefits are most important in understanding why turnout has declined, three of these four psychological variables are more related to turnout in the 1990s than in the 1960s. The exception is political efficacy, which is an attitude that taps resources (i.e., perceptions that one can make a difference in politics) much more than benefits.

Table 4 presents data from the 1960 and 1996 National Election Studies (NES) which illustrate how these psychological factors affected reported turnout. These numbers are standardized according to the average turnout rate for the entire sample in each year. For example, if 77 percent of a particular group said they voted as compared to an overall rate of 70 percent, then the standardized turnout would be 10 percent above average, as represented by +10 in the table notation. The focus of the analysis is thus on the relative impact of the independent variables rather than the raw NES turnout numbers, which consistently overestimate participation and also underestimate the magnitude of turnout decline.

**Table 4 Standardized Turnout Figures by Psychological Variables: 1960 and 1996**

	<u>1960</u>	<u>1996</u>
Strong party identifiers	+8	+24
Weak party identifiers	+2	-3
Independent leaners	-1	-8
Pure Independents/Apoliticals	-28	-42
Very much interested in campaign	+14	+32
Somewhat interested in campaign	+3	+1
Not much interested in campaign	-29	-33
Care who wins	+9	+9
Don't care who wins	-18	-33
High efficacy	+15	+8
Medium efficacy	+5	-1
Low efficacy	-21	-9

*Note and Sources:* Each entry is calculated by taking the turnout rate of the group and comparing it to the average for all the survey respondents in that year. For example, if a group had a turnout rate of 50 percent and the national average was 55 percent it would receive a score of -10. Data are from the 1960 and 1996 National Election Studies.

At the heart of the psychological approach to turnout is party identification. As Warren Miller (1976: 22) writes, the concept was designed to be similar to religious affiliation, and the term "identification" was "used quite intentionally to express the assumption that the relationship often involves an extension of ego." As such, people with a stronger party identification are bound to think they have more at stake on election day. If one identifies with a party, then when that party wins he or she wins along with it. Furthermore, the perceptual screening function of partisanship enables one to easily interpret the complex political world and thus lessens the informational costs associated with voting.

Ironically, the decline of American political parties in recent decades has made strength of partisanship even more important in predicting who votes. Table 4 shows that strong identifiers are now voting at substantially greater levels compared to the national average whereas pure Independents have become even less likely to vote than in the past. The rise of candidate-centered politics and the decline of partisanship (Wattenberg, 1991) may well explain this phenomenon. When the focus of campaigns was on the two parties rather than many candidates for many offices, everyone gained at least somewhat from lower information costs. In addition, when even many Independents cast a straight ticket, the benefits were much clearer to see than those derived from picking and choosing one's favorite candidates from both parties. Thus, even those who did not identify with a party in 1960 could benefit from the partisan manner by which campaigns were conducted. In the candidate-centered environment of the 1990s, by contrast, the mobilizing effects of party competition have been felt more disproportionately according to one's level of party identification. The result has been rising inequality of turnout rates according to partisan strength.

Identifying with a party also makes people more likely to find campaigns interesting and to care who wins. Each of these variables makes its own contribution to the turnout decision. Miller and Shanks (1996: 39) bluntly state that, "It is not hard to understand why most non-voters don't vote: they are uninterested, uninformed, and uninvolved." Table 4 shows that this state of affairs was substantially more evident in 1996 than in 1960. In other words, turnout has declined because people who are indifferent about the outcome and uninterested in the campaign are no longer being as effectively mobilized. These sorts of people have always been on the periphery of American politics, but are now more so.

The failure to mobilize peripheral voters appears to be more of a problem of motivation than resources, as evidenced by the fact that political efficacy was less related to turnout in 1996 than in 1960. When registration barriers were difficult to overcome, feeling that one had the ability to make a difference in politics was more crucial in determining turnout. With registration now being much more user-friendly, a low sense of political efficacy is naturally less of an impediment to voting. The fact that efficacy has declined in recent decades has certainly played some role in the decline of turnout (see Abramson and Aldrich, 1982), but it has apparently been overestimated in previous research.

Thus far, the economic approach has shown that decreasing benefits rather than rising costs are at the roots of America's turnout problem. The psychological approach has further identified the problem to be primarily one of a lack of motivation to vote,

particularly stemming from party decline. These conclusions are further confirmed by an examination of sociological factors related to turnout.

### **Sociological Predictors of Voting Turnout**

Immediately following an election, politicians want to know what sort of people did or did not vote. In particular, newly elected office-holders need to assess the make-up of the coalition that elected them in order to start working on keeping these people satisfied and ready to reelect them. Losing politicians, by contrast, want to know if their biggest supporters did not make it to the polls, and hence whether their failure was more of a problem of mobilization than of message.

The best source of data on the demographics of who votes can be found in the biennial surveys conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau as part of the Current Population Survey since 1964. These surveys have the great advantages of: 1) a huge sample size of at least 50,000 individuals; and 2) a very high response rate of approximately 95 percent (Brehm, 1993: 16). However, because only age, education, race and gender are available in Census data going back to 1964, NES data will be added for other relevant demographic variables. The data presented in Table 5 allow comparisons of the relative impact of variables from different data sources because they are all standardized according to the overall turnout rate in each particular survey.

Universal suffrage means that everyone should have an equal opportunity to vote, regardless of social background. But over the last three decades, Table 5 shows there have been increasing biases in turnout. In particular, people who have not made their way into college have become less likely to make it into the polling booth. People with lower levels of education voted less often in the mid-1960s, and since then their turnout rates have declined the most sharply. Several decades ago, people with lower levels of education were often mobilized to vote on behalf of their political party. With the weakening of partisanship since then, it is the least educated individuals who have been set adrift in the ebbs and tides of today's political world without an anchor that would help them realize the benefits of voting. As a result, by 1996 people without any college education made up 52 percent of the adult population but only 41 percent of the voters.

In addition to educational experience, turnout is now strongly related to life experiences. Young people have always had the lowest turnout rates, perhaps the reason why there was little opposition to lowering the voting age to 18 in the early 1970s. But even the most pessimistic analysts could not have foreseen the record low participation rates of Generation X. The 1996 turnout rate for people under 25 was about 40 percent below the national average.

The low voter turnout of young people today is paradoxical given that they are one of the best educated generations in American history. However, even those who have made it into college are expressing remarkably little concern for politics. Chelsea Clinton's class of 2001 recently set a new low for political apathy among college freshmen. Only 27 percent said that keeping up with politics was an important priority for them, compared to 58 percent among the class of 1970, with whom Bill and Hillary Clinton attended college.

**Table 5 Standardized Turnout Figures for Demographic Groups: 1964 and 1996**

	<u>1964</u>	<u>1996</u>
No High School	-15	-45
Some High School	-6	-38
High School Graduate	+10	-11
Some College	+18	+12
College Graduate	+26	+34
Age 18-20	NA	-42
21-24	-26	-38
25-44	0	-9
45-64	+10	+19
65+	-4	+24
White	+2	+3
Black	-16	-7
Hispanic citizens	NA	-19
Asian citizens	NA	-17
Male	+2	-3
Female	-3	+2
Married	+1	+12
Unmarried	-5	-18
< than 4 years in residence	-9	-11
> than 4 years in residence	+8	+9
Union household	+7	+15
Non-union household	-2	-3
Attend religious services regularly	+7	+18
Attend religious services often	+3	+6
Seldom attend religious services	-6	-3
Never attend religious services	-18	-19

*Note and Sources:* Each entry is calculated by taking the turnout rate of the group and comparing it to the average for all the survey respondents in that year. For example, if a group had a turnout rate of 50 percent and the national average was 55 percent it would receive a score of -10. Data on age, education, race, and gender are from the Census Bureau Studies; data on marital status, residential mobility, union membership, and religious attendance are from the National Election Studies.

Why is Generation X so unconcerned with politics? One unique generational distinction they have is being the first cohort to grow up in the age of narrowcasting as opposed to broadcasting. When CBS, NBC, and ABC dominated the airwaves, their blanket coverage of presidential speeches, political conventions, and presidential debates left little else to watch on TV at those times. As channels have proliferated, though, it has become much easier to avoid exposure to politics altogether. Whereas President Nixon got an average rating of 50 for his televised addresses to the nation, President Clinton averaged only about 30 in his first term (Kernell, 1997). Political conventions, which once received more TV coverage than the Summer Olympics, have been relegated to an hour per night that draws abysmal ratings. The 1996 presidential debates drew a respectable average rating of 28, but this was only half the typical level of viewers drawn by debates held between 1960 and 1980. In sum, young people have never known a time when most citizens paid attention to major political events. As a result, most of them have yet to get into the habit of voting.

Of course, Chelsea's generation has not seen government impinge on their lives like the draft affected her parents' cohort. Nor has any policy impacted them the way their grandparents have benefited from Medicare. It is noteworthy that senior citizens are actually voting at higher rates today than when Medicare was first starting up. Political Scientists used to write that the frailties of old age led to a decline in turnout after age 60; now an examination of the Census survey data shows that such a decline occurs only after 80 years of age. The greater access to medical care provided to today's seniors must surely be given some of the credit for this change. It is therefore much easier for Senior citizens to believe that politics does indeed make a difference.

Integration into the community is another crucial factor in making people aware of the benefits of voting. Several sociological variables examined in Table 5 bolster this point. First, it is evident that ethnic groups which have a high percentage of recent immigrants have quite low turnout rates—even if one removes non-citizens from the analysis. Both Hispanic and Asian citizens have yet to be fully assimilated into American political life. Consequently, their turnout lags the national average by roughly the same degree as African-Americans did in 1964. As more African-Americans have run for office, their turnout rate has approached that of the White population, particularly in areas where African-Americans have won political offices (Bobo and Gilliam, 1990).

Two other important factors that promote integration into one's community are marriage and maintaining a stable residence for at least a period of one presidential term. In the case of residential mobility, Pevrill Squire et al. (1987) argued that movers have low turnout rates because of the need to re-register. The Motor Voter bill has done away with much of the hassle of re-registering, yet even after controlling for age, mobility remains a significant factor in predicting turnout. Such a finding indicates that movers' low turnout is mostly due to a lack of what Teixeria (1992: 36-37) terms "social connectedness"—ties that "provide external encouragement to vote, as well an enhanced sense of an election's meaningfulness." One might theorize that being married doubles social connectedness. By 1996, a significant marriage gap had opened up with respect to turnout. Because of the substantial decline in marriage rates, this is one of the chief demographic correlates of the decline of turnout.

Two other sociological factors that have contributed to declining turnout are the declines in union membership and religiosity. Belonging to social groups that are

involved in politics increases one's likelihood of voting. Both unions and churches have long been active in the political process and often devote group resources to turning their members out to vote. Though both have experienced membership declines in recent decades, the data indicate that such group incentives have actually become more effective in today's low turnout environment.

In sum, the resource rich have become richer when it comes to demographics and voting. Groups that are likely to see the benefits of voting are consequently being increasingly overrepresented by the electoral process. Whether this increase in inequality of participation makes a difference thus becomes an important question to be examined.

### **Why Turnout Matters**

Some analysts welcome, rather than fear, the decline of turnout rates in America. If people do not vote, they say, this means that citizens must be satisfied with the government. There is a certain logic to this view, for if nonvoters were extremely disgruntled with our leaders they would undoubtedly take some action--perhaps even head down the path of revolution. However, to argue that nonvoters are content with government just because they are not actively opposing it is stretching the logic way too far. When the 1996 National Election Study asked a national sample to rate their satisfaction with how democracy works in the United States, nonvoters were *less* positive than voters. Furthermore, rather than young people's low turnout indicating contentment, they were more than twice as likely as senior citizens to be dissatisfied with American democracy.

Of course, why should young adults be satisfied with government given how few benefits they receive from it compared to their grandparents? Yet, until they start showing up in greater numbers at the polls, there will be little incentive for politicians to focus on programs that will help them. Politicians are not fools; they know who their customers are. Why should they worry about nonvoters any more than the makers of denture cream worry about people with healthy teeth?

Although politicians widely accept the premise that who votes makes a difference, three of the most widely read books on turnout and participation reach the conclusion that non-voting does not produce an unrepresentative electorate in presidential elections. Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980: 111) demonstrate that non-voters are demographically different than voters, but argue that "these demographic biases do not translate into discernible overrepresentation of particular policy constituencies." The lack of policy differences between voters and non-voters led Wolfinger and Rosenstone to conclude that elections are not decided by who turns out on election day.

Ruy Teixeira (1992: 95) asks the question of "what if they gave an election and everybody came?" and arrives at an answer of "not much." He also places much weight on the finding that demographic factors are not closely enough related to policy preferences to result in substantial differences in the political attitudes of voters and non-voters. Indeed, Teixeira's analysis of the 1988 NES reveals the same pattern that Wolfinger and Rosenstone found with the 1972 NES. Furthermore, his analysis of the presidential candidate preferences of non-voters reveals that their preferences have closely paralleled those of voters.

Most recently, Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady's (1995) comprehensive review of participation in the U.S. updates Wolfinger and Rosenstone's analysis by examining how people who regularly vote in presidential elections (as ascertained in 1987) compare to the population on the issues of jobs and government services. They write that, "our data support the conclusion that voters and non-voters do not seem to differ substantially in their attitudes on public policy issues." (p. 205)

Such a conclusion may well be an over-generalization resulting from a focus on the least typical of all American elections. The majority of electoral choices are made not on the day every four years when presidents are selected, but instead at times when turnout is invariably lower. Looking at an election with substantially lower turnout, the chances are greater that evidence of a turnout bias will be found. This is a simple extension of the basic principle of sampling: the more people that participate, the more likely the results will reflect what would be found if everyone were included. Thus, the impact of turnout is more likely to be found during a mid-term campaign than a presidential race. Beyond the fact that turnout is lower for mid-term congressional elections, there are also many districts with close contests where a difference of a few percent could be critical.

After the historic GOP takeover of the Congress in 1994, I happened to see a bumper sticker that read "Newt happens when only 37 percent of Americans vote." Besides expressing the popularly held perception that turnout matters, this slogan poses an important research question: Would Gingrich and the Republicans have won the majority of House seats if turnout had been greater?

A simple way to address this question is to assess the difference it would have made if voters had mirrored the adult population in terms of education. As shown in Table 6, 30 percent of 1994 voters who lacked a High School diploma voted for GOP House candidates compared with 62 percent for voters with college degrees. Therefore, just increasing the turnout rate of the least educated citizens would surely have made some difference. Overall, it can be calculated from the information in Table 6 that if turnout rates had been equal among all education categories the Republican share of the vote would have fallen from 52.0 to 49.2 percent.

**Table 6 Turnout Bias by Education in 1994 and its Consequences**

	% of population	% of voters	% voting Republican for the House
Less than High School	18.6	10.7	29.7
High School diploma	34.1	30.8	49.6
Some college	26.5	29.1	52.1
College degree	14.1	19.0	63.8
Advanced degree	6.6	10.4	60.1

If turnout rates match the Census Bureau findings, then the national Republican vote = 52.0%; if turnout rates are representative, then the national Republican vote = 49.2%

Sources: 1994 Census Bureau study for columns 1 & 2; 1994 National Election Study for column 3.

Although it is unlikely that people of differing education levels would ever vote at exactly the same rate, this is only one of many biases in electoral participation. A more comprehensive method of estimating the impact of higher turnout is to gauge the likely behavior of registered nonvoters, as Craig Brians and I did with 1994 NES data (see Wattenberg and Brians, 1998). We examined voters' attitudes on the key factors that they employed to make their choices in 1994: party identification, approval of Clinton, issue stands, and incumbency. The results were that registered nonvoters would have favored Democratic candidates by an even greater margin than actual voters supported the Republicans. Overall, had all registered citizens gone to the polls, the GOP vote share would have been reduced by 2.8 percent--exactly the same estimate as found above. Applying this loss uniformly to all districts yields an estimate of only 206 seats won by the Republicans, which is 24 less than they actually won and 12 short of a majority. Thus, it appears unlikely that Newt Gingrich would have become Speaker of the House if turnout had been substantially greater in 1994.

Such findings regrettably make it less likely that anything will be done to increase turnout rates in America. Few Republicans will want to correct a situation that has benefited them in the past. Yet, until something is done the House of Representatives will not truly be representative of the electorate but rather of only the minority that actually votes.

### **Turnout Decline in Comparative Perspective**

Arend Lijphart (1997) argues that the problem of inequality of representation is no longer just an American problem, but rather one that can be seen throughout most of the advanced industrialized world. The fact that turnout has gone down most everywhere is indeed readily apparent. Table 7 compares the percentage of valid votes cast by the voting age population<sup>7</sup> in the first two elections of the 1950s with that of the two most recent elections for the 20 established OECD-member democracies. In 18 out of these 20 countries, recent turnout figures have been lower than those of the early 1950s. It is rare within comparative politics to find a trend that is so widely generalizable.

Throughout the democratic world, one of the most important functions of political parties is to mobilize people to the polls. It should thus come as little surprise that notoriously weak party systems have seen the most pronounced drops in electoral participation, whereas the presence of strong political parties appears to have dampened turnout decline. Voting rates have fallen most precipitously in Switzerland, where parties hardly perform their usual functions because of the nation's reliance on referenda to decide important policy questions (Kobach, 1994). In the candidate-centered presidential systems of France and the United States very substantial turnout declines are also apparent. And in Japan, where political loyalties revolve around ties to leaders of internal party factions rather than to the party itself (Flanagan et al., 1991), turnout has also declined markedly. In contrast, in Scandinavia, where political parties that mobilize the working classes have traditionally been strong, recent turnout rates compare fairly well with those of the early 1950s. Sweden and Denmark are the two countries in which turnout has actually increased. Finland, Iceland, and Norway are all near the bottom of the list in terms of participation decline--along with Australia and Belgium, both of which have had compulsory voting throughout this period.



As party identification has declined throughout most of the OECD (Dalton, 1998), there is good reason to believe that partisan decline has spurred this worldwide trend. An examination of the timing of turnout decline in the G7 nations will serve to illustrate this point, as a discussion of turnout decline in each of the OECD nations would be unwieldy. In most of these countries, it is possible to identify an election in which turnout fell more than five percent below the average for the first two 1950s elections and has never since risen back above this threshold. The commonalities in these elections are readily apparent. Turnout first began to decline markedly when the party systems of these countries experienced a major upheaval. Though the nature of partisan change differs, in each case the decline in the relevance of long-standing party cleavages--or the major parties themselves--led to a smaller percentage of the population being mobilized to go to the polls. A chronological review of these critical points in the decline of turnout in the G7 will serve to flush out this key point.

**Table 7 Change in Turnout in OECD Countries Since the 1950s**

	First 2 1950s <u>Elections</u>	2 Most Recent <u>Elections</u>	Percentage <u>Change</u>
Switzerland	60.8	36.9	-39
France	69.7	56.4	-19
New Zealand	92.6	75.0	-19
Luxembourg	70.1	58.6	-16
United States	61.7	52.2	-15
Japan	73.0	62.7	-14
Austria	87.8	75.9	-14
United Kingdom	81.5	72.3	-11
Germany	81.1	72.0	-11
Netherlands	85.2	76.4	-10
Canada	65.9	60.5	-9
Ireland	73.8	67.8	-9
Italy	89.5	82.0	-8
Finland	76.8	71.1	-7
Belgium	82.7	78.1	-6
Iceland	90.3	86.7	-4
Norway	77.9	75.5	-3
Australia	81.1	80.4	-1
Denmark	77.5	80.4	+4
Sweden	76.9	81.1	+5

*Note:* Turnout rates are calculated based on the percentage of the voting age population casting valid votes for a party or a candidate. With the exception of the United States, where presidential elections are used, all elections are for the lower House of the legislature.

The first of the G7 countries to experience significant turnout decline was the United States, beginning in 1972. A portion of this decline was no doubt due to the expansion of the franchise to 18-20 year-olds in that year. However, 1972 also marked a serious splintering of the Democratic Party. As Arthur Miller et al. (1976) wrote, the majority Democratic Party was in "disarray," and hence unable to mobilize the electorate as effectively as before. On the other side, Nixon won what many analysts termed a "lonely landslide" by running a candidate-centered campaign. The personalization of politics that was evident in this year marked the beginning of a sea-change in American politics which resulted in a long-term dealignment (see Wattenberg, 1996).

Other countries in the G7 did not begin to follow the American pattern of dealignment and declining turnout for quite some time. It was not until 1987 in West Germany that turnout decline was apparent for another of the largest democracies. This election followed the historic events of 1982-1983 in which the Free Democrats' change of coalition partners led to a turn (*die Wende*) from a socialist to a non-socialist government. After this shift had itself played out, the consequences of whether the CDU or SPD held power probably seemed far less to many citizens, thus reducing incentives to vote in the future.

A very similar argument can be made for France, where the key date for turnout decline was 1988. In 1986, right wing parties won control of the legislative assembly, thereby forcing President Mitterrand, a Socialist, into a power sharing arrangement (*cohabitation*) for the first time in the Fifth Republic. After two years of cooperation between the left and right, the parties could no longer as effectively call their supporters to the polls based on fears of letting the other ideological *tendance* have power.

In the early 1990s, Canada, Japan and Italy all crossed the threshold of noteworthy turnout decline as their traditional party systems collapsed. In Canada, the governing Progressive Conservative Party was reduced to a mere two seats in the historic 1993 election. Despite the emergence of Reform and the Bloc Québécois as new major players in the party system, turnout fell sharply and continued to slide in 1997. Similarly, in Japan turnout dropped off dramatically in 1993 when the Liberal Democrats lost their majority for the first time since 1955 and the Socialists began to wither away. The development of various new parties, including one actually called "New Party," did little to spur turnout, and by 1996 Japanese turnout had hit a post-war low. In Italy, the corruption scandals of the early 1990s led to the disintegration of the governing Christian Democratic Party, and to a reshaping of the left wing parties as well. Candidate-centered politics emerged with full force in Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* (see Mazzoloni, 1996) in the 1994 election, which marked the key downward turning point for turnout in Italy.

In contrast to the other G7 countries, the decline of turnout in the United Kingdom has preceded in a linear fashion ( $p < .01$ ). Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the largest drop in British turnout from one election to the next was recorded from 1992 to 1997. During this period, the Labour Party was transformed into a party much less tied to the union movement and socialist beliefs. Tony Blair repeatedly referred to the party as "New Labour." One cynical journalist asked Blair in 1997 whether he was going to officially change the party's name accordingly, or perhaps get rid of "Labour" entirely and call it the "New Party." Although easily laughed off by all at the campaign press conference, this question nicely summed up the widely held view that Labour was no longer just the party of unions and the working class. As such a reconstituted party, it was

far more successful in gaining a large vote share while at the same time less able to bring citizens of low socioeconomic status to the polls.

Significant shifts in party fortunes and the development of new parties have long been thought to be associated with increases in turnout (see Burnham, 1970; Beck, 1974). The fact that these partisan changes have occurred at the same time that turnout has plummeted in a number of countries suggests that dealignment rather than realignment is occurring. As Abramson et al. (1998: 260) have recently written about the United States, it is "difficult to consider any alignment as stable" when turnout is so low.

Given that the decline of turnout in most OECD nations has been a relatively recent phenomenon, one can only speculate as to whether we are witnessing a long-term trend or merely a momentary aberration. Perhaps as new parties and patterns of competition become institutionalized, turnout rates will recover. On the other hand, if turnout decline is due to changes in the nature of political parties, then we can expect today's low voting rates to continue, and possibly worsen. The candidate-centered mass media campaign is clearly here to stay. The United States may have been the first of the major industrial powers to experience declining turnout rates, but its turnout problem no longer appears to be unique.

### **Proposals for Change**

What can be done to reverse the decline of turnout in the United States? In his first press conference after the 1996 election, Bill Clinton was asked about the poor turnout and how voter participation could be increased in the future. The president clearly stumbled over this question. His bottom line was that he did not have an opinion on what could be done, and he concluded by asking the press corps whether they had any ideas. When he is in a more optimistic mood, President Clinton is said to occasionally remark that solutions to most public policy problems have already been found somewhere--we just have to scan the horizons for them. This is certainly the case for increasing turnout. Based on track records in other countries, a number of possible changes stand out as particularly apt to get Americans to the polls. They will be addressed in order of their likely effectiveness, which unfortunately is inversely related to their plausibility of ever being enacted in the United States.

If in an ideal democracy everyone votes, a simple way to realize this goal is to require people to participate. This is how Australians reasoned when they instituted compulsory voting after their turnout rate fell to 58 percent in 1922. Since then, Australia has consistently had one of the highest turnout rates in the world, even though the maximum fine for nonvoting is only about \$35 and judges readily accept any reasonable excuse. In a recent presidential address to the American Political Science Association, Arend Lijphart (1997) proposed that mandatory election attendance is the most appropriate solution to the inequalities of voting. He argues that besides increasing turnout, mandatory voting would also stimulate interest and participation in other political activities and decrease the role of money in politics.

In the United States, the first question regarding mandatory turnout would have to be whether it is constitutional. It seems inevitable that such a law would be challenged in the courts. A case of such magnitude would almost certainly reach the Supreme Court, and how the Court would rule is by no means predictable. Yet, there is good reason to

believe that mandatory attendance at elections would pass constitutional muster. Opponents would no doubt object that such a law violates 1st Amendment rights. On the other hand, compulsory attendance laws do not typically require one to actually vote, but rather merely show up at the polls. An individual's right to abstain would thus not be infringed, as there would be no sanction against casting a blank ballot.

A second legal question would be whether or not the Congress has the power to compel election attendance. Article I, Section IV of the Constitution states that "The Times, Places and Manner of holding Elections for Senators and Representatives, shall be prescribed in each State by the Legislature thereof; but the Congress may at any time by Law make or alter such Regulations." This broad power to make regulations concerning the manner of holding elections could well be stretched by the necessary and proper clause to give the Congress the right to compel attendance at elections. This would be similar to how the Congress asserted the right to draft people as essential in order to carry out its mandate to raise military forces.

The biggest obstacle that would have to be overcome to impose compulsory election attendance, however, stems from the country's political culture. American political culture based on John Locke's views of individual rights differs from Jeremy Bentham's concept of the greatest good for the greatest number, which shaped Australian culture. Regardless of the legal considerations, most Americans--including elected officials--would probably assert that they have an inviolable right to *not* vote. With such a prevailing attitude, it is hard to imagine the proposal ever getting off the ground in the U.S., even if other OECD countries start to adopt this procedure.

Beyond that, it is debatable whether we really want to force turnout rates in America up to 90 percent. People with limited political knowledge might deal with being compelled to vote by making dozens of decisions the same way they choose lottery numbers. In Australia, this is known as the "donkey vote," for people who approach voting like the old children's game. Given Australia's relatively simple electoral process, this is a small proportion of voters; in America it would likely be greater.

Of course, just simplifying the electoral process itself would be one way to increase turnout in America. In 1930, Harold Gosnell wrote in *Why Europe Votes* that one of the reasons for America's low turnout is because they are "given an impossible task to perform on election day" (quoted in Lijphart, 1997: 8). As Dalton (1996: 46-47) has recently written, residents of Cambridge, England were asked to make 4 choices at the polls between 1985 and 1990 whereas the citizens of Irvine, California were called upon to cast 44 votes in 1992 alone. The trend in recent years, however, has been for many democracies to move towards the US/Swiss model rather than the other way around. For example, the Blair government is promising referenda on various issues and creating more locally elected offices, such as a Mayor for London. In the face of growing worldwide acceptance of the principle that the cure for the problems of democracy is more democracy, it appears unlikely that America will soon reverse course, recognizing that there can indeed be *too much* democracy.

Yet another unlikely possibility is that America could join the worldwide democratizing trend by adopting a more proportional electoral system. Evidence from around the world also indicates that our turnout rates could be increased if we adopted some form of proportional representation (Powell, 1986; Jackman, 1987; Franklin, 1996). In our winner-take-all system, many Americans rightly perceive that their vote is unlikely

to affect election outcomes. Proportional representation changes this perception by awarding seats to small voting blocs. The threshold for representation varies by country, but typically any party which receives over 5 percent of the national vote earns seats in the legislature. With a number of viable parties to choose from rather than only two, people tend to feel that their party truly embodies their specific interests, and hence they are more likely to vote.

If we were to adopt proportional representation, there would likely be new parties to directly represent the interests of groups such as African-Americans, Latinos, and supporters of the new Christian Right. Although this would give more incentive for members of these groups to vote, and particularly raise the low turnout rates of minority groups, there would be a price to be paid for this benefit. The current system brings diverse groups together under the umbrellas of two heterogeneous parties; a multi-party system would set America's social groups apart from one another. Therefore, proportional representation hardly seems practical on the American scene and has never received serious consideration at the federal level.

What has received much attention is the goal of strengthening the American party system. Nearly fifty years ago, a committee of distinguished political scientists concluded that America's party system was functioning poorly in sustaining well-considered programs and mobilizing public support for them (American Political Science Association, 1950). Numerous recommendations were compiled, all of which the scholars believed would facilitate a more responsible and effective party system--one that would be accountable to the public and able to deal with the problems of modern government. The APSA report (p. 76) argued that among the many tangible benefits of a strengthened party system would be an increase voter interest and participation. In line with this theory, when the party systems of the major industrial powers have withered in recent years, turnout rates have fallen.

The American case presents particular problems when it comes to reinvigorating the parties, however, because unlike parliamentary democracies the governmental structure is not organized around partisan politics. Even as the American parties have become more ideologically distinct, as the authors of the 1950 APSA report desired, their political role has been diminished. The rise of television broadcasting dramatically altered how politicians presented themselves, as well as how the public received political information. Many politicians have come to realize that they do not need the parties to get their message across, and voters who are no longer exposed to a partisan environment have become accustomed to focusing on the candidates (see Wattenberg, 1996).

The current narrowcasting revolution, epitomized by developments in cable television and the internet, is likely to have a major impact as well. The much-anticipated proliferation of TV channels and web sites will offer more information than ever before in an incredible array of formats. Some observers see these developments as offering "the prospect of a revitalized democracy characterized by a more active and informed citizenry" (Corrado, 1996: 29). However, the problem with such a rosy scenario is that it is questionable whether many citizens will actually take advantage of this new wealth of information. With countless available information sources for a wide variety of specific interests, it will be extremely easy for those who are not much interested in party politics to avoid the subject altogether. The result could well be a growing inequality of political

information, with a small group of committed partisans becoming more knowledgeable while the rest of the public slips further into apathy concerning the parties.

Lest one despair of any means for improving turnout in America, a simple yet effective change could be made in election timing. With an ordinary act of Congress, the date for federal elections could be moved to Saturday or made a holiday, thereby giving people more free time during election day to vote. An 1872 law established the first Tuesday after the first Monday of November as election day. At that point in history, it made little difference whether the election date was Saturday or Tuesday, as most people worked on Saturday anyway. Sunday would have been the only choice to enable people to vote on a leisure day, but with elections being occasions for drinking and gambling in the late-19th century, such an option was out of the question for such a religious country.

Americans have become quite accustomed to Tuesday elections, just as they have to other outdated practices such as the non-metric system for weights and measures. State after state continues to set primary election dates on Tuesdays--all decisions which have been made in the 20th century, and some of which have been quite recent. In fact, 46 out of the 50 states held their 1996 primaries on Tuesday.<sup>8</sup> With such a well-accepted tradition, it will be difficult to change this custom. Furthermore, there will probably be some resistance from Orthodox Jews to changing election day to their Sabbath.

As an alternative to weekend elections, another possibility would be to declare election day a national holiday. The major resistance to this would be the financial costs of yet another federally imposed holiday. One possible solution would be to move election day to the second Tuesday of November and combine it with Veterans' Day, which has traditionally been celebrated on November 11th. This would send a strong signal to everyone about the importance that the country attaches to voting. And what better way could there be to honor those who fought for democratic rights than for Americans to vote on what could become known as "Veterans' Democracy Day?"

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### Endnotes

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1. Actually, most precincts in North Dakota maintain a list of voters who have voted in previous elections. Someone who is not on the list may vote simply by swearing an affidavit affirming his or her residency status. Because of the rural character of the state and the numerous yet small precincts, workers at the polls usually recognize this newcomer to the polls in any case. See <http://www.state.nd.us/sec/> for more detailed information.

2. On the other hand, it is possible that many citizens in these states simply wait till election day to register because they know they can. Why register to vote a week or a month ahead of time, if you can just take care of this on election day?

3. Some states were unaffected by the new law because they already had most of these provisions in effect or used election day registration. Other states, such as California, offered legal challenges to the law and did not begin to implement it until ordered to do so by the courts. Vermont was unable to comply with the law at all due to a conflict with its state constitution.

4. This analysis excludes Oklahoma, which experienced a decrease in registration of 17 percent, no doubt because a long overdue purging of the rolls was carried out. Also excluded is North Dakota, which has no registration, and Wisconsin, which has no statewide registration system.

5. As a result of the lack of variation either cross-sectionally or over time, the National Election Studies discontinued such questions after 1980.

6. Political efficacy is measured through an index of the following three agree/disagree questions which were asked in both the 1960 and 1996 NES: 1) "Public officials don't care much what people like me think."; 2) "People like me don't have any say about what the government does."; 3) "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on."

7. VAP data offer the advantage of ensuring that all those who are eligible are counted, but have the disadvantage of including non-citizens and felons who are ineligible to vote. In contrast, registration lists offer the advantage of excluding ineligible members of the population but have the disadvantage that some who are able to vote may not be on the registration rolls. Although neither choice is optimal, the drawbacks associated with voting age population are more likely to be fairly constant over time whereas the problems with registration lists are clearly increasing in some countries. Therefore, this study follows the example of Powell (1986) and the recent International IDEA (1997) global participation report by employing VAP as the denominator in estimates of turnout.

8. The exceptions were Delaware, Hawaii, and Louisiana, which held their primaries on Saturday, and Tennessee, which held its primary on Thursday.