Underutilization of the Most Fundamental Political Act in a Democracy: An Analysis of Voter Turnout in the United States

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Underutilization of the Most Fundamental Political Act in a Democracy: An Analysis of Voter Turnout in the United States
The most fundamental political act in a democracy is voting. The United States has long been a pioneer and leader in many different fields from science to business. Nevertheless, despite all of America’s achievements, we have fallen to the bottom when it comes to voter turnout. The term voter turnout refers to the percentage of eligible voters who cast a ballot in an election. Only Switzerland falls below the United States in turnout rates. Numerous factors have contributed to the low turnout in the United States, including difficult voter registration, lack of a viable third party, weak political parties, voter apathy, and a complex political system. Various policies (such as the Motor Voter Act) have attempted to bolster turnout, but have ultimately failed to have a dramatic effect. There are various ways to calculate voter turnout, but all computations reveal that voter turnout is extremely low compared to other industrialized countries. Figure 1 displays the voter turnout decline since 1960. In 1960, voter turnout was 64.9 percent. By 1996, it had fallen to 51.5 percent. Even with the competitive elections in 2000 and 2004, it has only increased to 54.3 and 59.6 percent (CSAE, 2004, p. 12). This increase over the last few elections is a positive sign, but voter turnout remains low compared to turnout in the 1960s and compared to other western democracies.
Midterm elections have even worse percentages. These elections have turnout rates of about 10 to 15 percent lower than presidential elections. In 2006, voter turnout rose slightly over 40 percent. In 2002, it was a dismal 39.7 percent. In fact, the highest recent midterm turnout was 42.1 percent in 1982. There is also a big difference in who votes. Research has shown that those more likely to vote tend to be more educated, wealthy, and older. In the election of 2004, voting rates of those over 55 were much higher (72 percent). Those with a bachelor’s degree had a voting rate of 78 percent while those who had not completed high school voted at a 40 percent rate. With these rates it is not surprising that the United States ranked 20 out of 21 democracies in a voter turnout study by Fairvote, the Voting and Democracy Research Center (Associated Press, 2006, p. 1). With these numbers in mind, I will address these two questions: (1) Why is voter turnout so low? and (2) What can we do to increase turnout?
**Does Voting Even Matter?**

There has been an abundant amount of research on the issue of voter turnout. Yet, some argue that voter turnout does not matter because there is no difference between voters and nonvoters. For instance, Wolfinger and Rosenstone claim that nonvoters are demographically different than voters, but “these demographic biases do not translate into discernible overrepresentation of particular policy constituents” (Wolfinger, 1980, p. 11). They conclude that turnout rates do not affect election outcomes, so we should not be concerned about an unrepresentative electorate. However, the closely contested elections since 2000 cast doubt on this conclusion. A few changes in group turnout rates could have changed the election results in Gore or Kerry’s favor because many states were decided by a few percentage points. So if this is a case, why is there such a multitude of research that claims it would make no difference if nonvoters went to the polls? As Martin P. Wattenburg points out, “one of the major problems with the current literature on turnout is that is has been too focused on elections for just one office” (Wattenburg, 2002, p. 106). By focusing on presidential elections, the literature generalizes to all elections. Indeed, turnout bias must be viewed in elections with substantially lower turnout such as midterm elections and primaries. An analysis of these lower level elections demonstrates that the lower the turnout, the more likely there will be turnout bias. Even recent presidential election contests reveal that turnout bias can affect the election outcome (Wattenburg, 2002, p. 106). In his analysis of the decline of social capital, Robert D. Putnam argues that voting is the most common form of political activity, and that it embodies the democratic principle of equality. He asserts that compared with nonvoters, “voters are more likely to be interested in politics, to give to
charity, to volunteer, to serve on juries, to attend community school board meetings, and to cooperate with fellow citizens on community affairs” (Putnam, 2000, p. 35). Arend Lijphart argues that the academic studies themselves are flawed. Nonvoters who are asked about policy and partisan preferences typically have not given the questions much thought or have been politically mobilized. If they were mobilized to vote, it is likely that their vote would be different (Lijphart, 1997, p. 2).

Unequal Voting Rates Mean Unequal Influence

We already know that not everyone votes. However, there are those who are more likely to vote, which includes wealthy, older, and more educated adults. Figure 2 highlights this phenomenon (Lijphart, 1997, p. 2). In the election of 2004, we can see that those with who were older and had more education had higher voting turnout rates. A surprising result is the voter turnout differences among age groups and education level. The elderly have always had higher turnout rates, but the results from Figure 2 reveal that those aged 65 years and older with some college or associate’s degree are about 30 percent more likely to vote than those of the same age who have not graduated high school. Even the difference between 18-24 year olds is quite astounding. Those who have completed some college or associate’s degree have voting rates of 57.2 percent while only 24.8 percent of people without a high school degree vote. When the national average is around 60 percent, we can see that there is a great variation among different educational groups. (US Census, 2006, p. 6).
In our system, this inequality in voter turnout has led to unequal participation, which leads to unequal influence. This creates a challenge to our representative democracy, which requires citizen participation. As earlier stated, the smaller the election, the fewer participants who will vote. This leads to a greater inequality in smaller elections. Who votes and who does not has significant consequences for who gets elected and their subsequent policies (Lijphart, 1997, p. 2).

Various socioeconomic groups generally have different political opinions and support different political parties. Thus, elected officials disproportionately represent those who participate. Policies become biased against non-voters; those who are minorities, the poor, and less educated. In 1972, Verba and Nie conducted a study, which demonstrated that local elected officials and their policy priorities were more consistent with priorities of the politically active. More recently, in 2003, a study conducted by John Griffin and Brian Newman found "Senators to be consistently more responsive to voters when making roll-call decisions...this is so because voters select like-minded
senators…and only voters can reelect Senators.” (Griffin, 2005, p. 1207). They also suggest that voters are more conservative than non-voters. An officeholder is elected because a majority of voters tend to have similar views to the official, which may not be the same of non-voters. Voters also hold an advantage over non-voters because they are more likely to communicate their opinion to lawmakers. If an elected official does not know the view of a non-voter, there is no reason to consider that view in their decision-making process. In addition, politicians understand the system. They know that they must focus on constituents’ preferences and demands in order to get re-elected (Griffin, 2005, p. 1205-1208).

Some have argued that election results would be no different if non-voters came to vote. Nonetheless, evidence has shown that voters differ from non-voters because they tend to be younger, less educated, poorer, and less partisan. Studies that reveal election outcomes would remain the same fail to take into account public reactions if the candidates’ issues and messages were different. If everyone was expected to vote, candidates would change the issues and strategies they focus on for elections. The study by Griffin and Newman has shown that Senators do not respond to all their constituents equally. Moreover, the voting behavior of politicians possibly would change if more non-voters were put into the equation. Campaigns might focus on health care for poor children or child care for working mothers instead of prescription drugs for the elderly and tax cuts (Kogay, 2000, p. 1-4).
Does Voting Even Matter?-Wrapping it Up

So the answer is that voting does matter. Research has shown that some voters are more likely to vote. Elected officials know their constituencies and those who are more likely to vote. They cater to their voters’ interests and their voting records reflect this influence. Participation rates differ widely among different socioeconomic groups and ages resulting in a disproportionate influence for some voters. Unequal voting leads to unequal representation, which threatens the very foundation of our representative democracy.

Why is Voter Turnout so Low?

We have already established that although voting turnout has increased somewhat in the past few elections, the percentage of the voting age population that votes remains exceedingly low. Numerous theories try to explain this. I believe that the following four are the most valid reasons for low voter turnout.

1) Institutional arrangements

2) Length and number of campaigns Compulsory voting

3) Party weakness

4) Media bias

I will examine these factors one at a time.

1) Institutional Arrangements:

Legal Barriers and Registration Requirements

The United States has fair and open elections in the world. However, inherent in the system are institutional arrangements designed to suppress the vote. Over the years,
the right to vote has been extended to African Americans, women, and persons over the age of 18. However, certain legal barriers to vote continue to exist. Although there is no constitutional requirement of citizenship for voting, states have limited the right to vote to citizens of the United States. Since 1970, the surge in both legal and illegal immigration has resulted in a great increase in the voting-age population. Yet, they are unable to vote because they are not citizens. Another barrier to voting remains for felons. In most states, people who have been convicted of felonies are barred from voting. “While most Americans probably take felon disenfranchisement laws for granted, these policies are much harsher than those found in the vast majority of the world’s democracies” (Abramowitz, 2004, p. 106). The United States has the largest number of incarcerated residents in the industrialized world and in turn a large number of felons.

In addition, voters are misdirected through a mischaracterization of registration requirements. “Registration itself remains an obstacle to participation” (Patterson, 2002, p. 131). Most people are unaware of registration requirements and timetables. For instance, many Americans do not realize that some states require re-registration if one moves, even if only down the street. And the closing date for registration remains an even bigger obstacle. Federal law allows a state to choose its closing date as long as it is not more than 30 days before a presidential election. However, more than 85 percent of states do not allow registration one week before a presidential election. Many people do not decide to actually vote and for whom until the last few weeks of the election. By this time, it is too late to register to vote in most of the states (Patterson, 2002, p. 130-133).
Electoral College

The history of the Electoral College dates back to the framers of the Constitution. Yet, many Americans had little knowledge of the procedure until the contested election of 2000, in which Al Gore defeated George Bush in the popular vote, but lost in the electoral vote. The purpose of the Electoral College was to protect the presidency from direct popular control. Every four years, state legislatures chose presidential electors. These electors met in each of the state capitols to deliberate and vote for a presidential candidate. "The framers assumed that the electors would be drawn mainly from the educated, landowning elite, and would vote for presidential candidates who came from similar backgrounds" (Abramowitz, 2004, p. 17). They also assumed that, at times, a presidential candidate would be unable to amass the necessary electoral votes for president. In such an instance, the President would be chosen by the House of Representatives; each state with one vote. By 1824, most states passed laws giving their citizens the right to vote for presidential electors. A two-party system had also emerged producing a change in the role of the electors. After George Washington's presidency in 1796, parties began to nominate electors in each state who were committed to voting for its presidential candidate. The electors became agents of the political parties and were no longer independent political actors. Thus, voters in each state were really choosing the president (Abramowitz, 2004, p. 16-18).

Today, the winner of the electoral vote still ascends to the presidency. Each state's number of electoral votes is determined by the number of members in the House of Representatives and two senators. Therefore, less populated states carry disproportionate weight in the Electoral College. Most states further award all their
electoral votes on a winner-take-all basis. The candidate who wins the majority of the votes in the state (no matter how small) wins all the electoral votes (Abramowitz, 2004, p. 19). Those, such as Thomas Patterson, believe that “the Electoral College was an artful eighteenth-century compromise that no longer makes sense” (Patterson, 2002, p. 138).

Because of the system for presidential elections, the principle of one person, one vote no longer applies. The Electoral College remains attractive to many members of Congress because they believe it helps their state. However, the Electoral College is only advantageous for a few competitive states, which changes each election cycle. These states determine the issues and campaign strategies for each party. In the election of 2004, Ohio was a key state. In 2000, Florida and Pennsylvania played an integral part in the election. The Electoral College produces a bias that is random more than systematic.

Nevertheless, proponents of the Electoral College argue that it only infrequently distorts the voice of the people. Yet, only states that are competitive count in a close election. Every available resource is moved into these toss-up states. News coverage is focused solely on these states and the majority of the American electorate is ignored. As Figure 3 demonstrates, residents of battleground states (competitive states) received much more attention during the election of 2000 from mail, phone calls, and news stories. (Patterson, 2002, p. 137-144).
As a result of the Electoral College, candidates must spend most of their time in these competitive states. Moreover, Americans are also cognizant of the fact that their state is being ignored. Whenever a state is ignored, citizens participate at lower rates. Although voter turnout has been higher in recent elections, it has declined in some non-competitive states. In the election of 2000, turnout rose by 3.4 percent in closely contested states while it declined in nine non-competitive states. The Electoral College lowers voter turnout overall because only a handful of states are competitive in a given election. Voters lose interest and do not go to the polls when their state is ignored (Patterson, 2002, p. 137-144).
Polling hours and stations

Another institutional problem is associated with polling hours. In 2000, there was a large controversy about television networks calling Florida for Al Gore before polls had closed in all parts of the state. Nevertheless, polls closed at 7:30 pm. Florida and 25 states close their polls by 7:30 pm or earlier. Research has shown that turnout was three percentage points lower in these states than in states that did not close their polls until after 8 pm. Early poll closings discourage participation by lower-income workers who work during the day. By the time they get home, they are unable to vote (Patterson, 2002, p. 130-31).

Even if one is able to get to these polling locations, long lines at voting stations is also repressive. Since long lines mean more time to vote, it deters voters in high-population areas. In 2004, many places had excessively long lines because precincts were not given enough ballots or voting machines. For example, Ohio was the site of many voting problems. In Mahoning County, Ohio, machines recorded Kerry votes for Bush. In Cuyahoga County, there was improper purging (Dunn, 2005, p. 1-4). In minority communities, there were reports that voters were told that they were to vote two days later, on November 4 (Morano, 2004, p. 1). The repression of votes was not limited to Republicans. Republicans in Marion County, Ohio, claimed the local Democratic Party called registered Republicans and informed them their polling locations had changed. A temporary restraining order was subsequently issued (Moore, 2004, p. 3).
Ballots and Gerrymandering

The ballot itself can be a major obstacle to voter turnout. The United States has a non-user friendly voting system. The complexity and length of ballots contributes to low voter turnout. One of the reasons the ballot is non-user friendly is that it does not allow the option of voting a straight party ticket. Instead, the ballot is designed to vote for individual candidates as opposed to the party ticket. Martin P. Wattenburg compares voting to taking a standardized test because of the difficulties of the ballot. He argues that “many are overwhelmed with more questions on the ballot than they can answer” (Wattenburg, 2002, p. 142-3). When Americans are confronted with a large number of decisions to make, they become intimidated and choose not to answer them. This incompletion of ballots is referred to as ‘rolloff’ or ‘voter fatigue.’ Most voters skip questions that they have little or no information about (Wattenburg, 2002, p. 123).

Yet, a candidate’s district is not determined by independent reviewers. In most states, district boundaries are drawn by partisan elected officials. Every 10 years, according to the census, redistricting occurs throughout the country. “Most redistricting plans seek to accomplish one of two basic goals-maximizing the number of seats held by the majority party or protecting incumbents [those already elected and currently in office] of both parties (Abramowitz, 2004, p. 45). Many times, oddly shaped districts are constructed to protect the interests of both parties in a process referred to as gerrymandering. Therefore, most state legislative and U.S. House districts remain in the hands of the same party (Abramowitz, 2004, p. 46). Some point to the number of incumbents who lost in the previous election as evidence that gerrymandering in not a big problem. In the mid-term elections of 2006, approximately 94 percent of House
incumbents and 79 percent of Senate incumbents won re-election. Although these numbers were down from re-election rates in 2004, Figures 4 and 5 demonstrate that the 2006 rates mirror results in previous elections (Center for Responsive Politics, 2004). These graphs demonstrate the power of incumbency. When state lines are redrawn, elected officials will draw them to their own advantage.

Combined with personal popularity and the financial advantage of incumbents, most state legislative and House races are not competitive. This discourages turnout as voters
perceive their vote as irrelevant. Redistricting and gerrymandering are institutional arrangements that depress turnout throughout the country.

*Institutional Arrangements—Wrapping it Up*

It is difficult to estimate the exact percentage that institutional arrangements affect voter turnout. Nevertheless, I am certain that they are one of the greatest causes for low voter turnout. Registration requirements limit those who are eligible to vote. Convicted felons are unable to vote even though states differ in what crimes constitute a felony. Legal immigrants who are not citizens face the same problem. Even citizens are confused by the registration process. If someone moves to a house next door, they are required to re-register. But why would someone bother to vote if, like most citizens, they live in a state where it is not competitive? The Electoral College ensures that only a handful of states remain competitive. If one decides to vote, then they must be sure to get off from work in time before the polls close. That is if they are not faced with long lines. Once at the voting booth, we are faced with voting for too many positions and referendums that cause us to become fatigued. Yet, many Americans might not even vote for a representative for the House or Senate because it is highly probable they will win the election regardless thanks to the state legislatures. With all these different institutional arrangements, it is no wonder that many people choose to stay home on Election Day.

2) Length and Number of Campaigns
It seems that the next election begins the morning after the results that have become announced. It is as though we are in a never ending cycle of campaigns for local, state, and national elections. “The United States has by far the largest number of elected officials of any nation” (Abramowitz, 2004, p. 9). According to the 2002 census of governments, there are over 87,000 local governments in the United States (US Census Bureau, 2005, p. 1). At the state level, voters are faced with voting for the governor, upper and lower houses of the state legislature, a lieutenant governor, an attorney general, a secretary of state, and various commissioners (Abramowitz, 2004, p. 10). Presidential elections usually span a full year from primaries, debates, and conventions. Nevertheless as Thomas Patterson points out, “Having the time and taking the time are two different things” (Patterson, 2002, p. 101). The problem with today’s campaigning is that it has a numbing effect on the general public. Instead of becoming more informed about candidates and the issues, voters become dulled and lose interest. The general voter does not have as much time as candidates do to pay attention to the campaign (Patterson, 2002, p. 101). Americans are being asked to not only vote more often, but for more candidates. Elections take place so frequently that voters experience fatigue and become averse to voting altogether (Abramowitz, 2004, p. 10).

Candidates are choosing to move onto the campaign trail months earlier than ever before. Some attribute this active campaigning to a chance in the nominating process. The 1968 convention changed the party-centered nominating system to one where the voters were in charge. By giving the voters the option to choose the nominees, the candidates have to aggressively court the public (Patterson, 2002, p. 105).
Length and Number of Campaigns—Wrapping it Up

After all the votes are tabulated and the winners are announced, Americans expect to be free from the solicitation from candidates. However, this is no longer the case. I believe that voters are becoming fatigued from the ongoing campaign season, which is causing low voter turnout. The perception that candidates never stop campaigning is in many cases true. In addition, the amount of campaigns we have from the local, state, and national level have turned Americans away from the voting booth.

3) Party Weakness

Providing Cues

In 2006, a Gallup Poll measured party identification. The results showed that 34.3 percent identified themselves as Democrats, 30.4 percent as Republicans, and 33.9 percent as independents (Cook, 2007, p. 1). This large number of independents would have been unheard of in the heyday of political machines. Over the years, political parties’ influence and power have diminished significantly. The main function of political parties has been to mobilize voters. The parties also provide cues to voters by formulating positions. Traditionally, their most important task was to nominate candidates. By the 1968 campaign, party leaders lost control of nominations, as a primary-based system was established. As already noted, candidate-centered elections mean less focus on loyalty to the party. By the 1960s, television news furthered this divide. These news programs were much longer and included visual images. “Journalists became central players in campaigns. To get to the candidates, people would have to go through the press” (Patterson, 2002, p. 48). The press had begun to take the
place of the parties. As voters began choosing their party’s nominee, candidates within
the same party began squabbling and trying to discredit one another. As a result, parties
no longer provided valuable cues to voters. Today, people know less about parties, so
they do not vote because they feel there is less at stake in the elections. People no longer
look to parties for answers to their problems (Patterson, 2002, p. 60). Originally, parties
also played a great role in registering people to vote. Both parties still attempt to
mobilize their base. But their ability to expand their base has diminished. In fact, as
Figure 6 displays, since 1962, the Democrats have declined sharply in partisan
registration while the Republicans have climbed somewhat. Nevertheless, the largest
increase by far is that of the “other” category. This indicates the parties’ inability to
register voters for their party. It further indicates a greater number of people not
registering under the name of one of the two main parties (CSAE, 2004, p. 7).

Figure 6:
Traditionally, parties had raised most of the money for campaigning. Today, candidates receive most of their funds from private contributions. The United States is one of the few major democracies in which candidates receive most of their campaign funds from private organizations (Abramowitz, 2004, p. 5). However, in the election of 2004 new groups emerged that further showed the weakness of parties. These 527 groups, named for a section of the federal tax code, are political organizations not regulated by the Federal Election Commission and are not subject to the same contribution limits as PACs. In 2004, controversies arose as both the Republican and Democratic Parties accused one another of illegally working with these 527 groups. John Kerry’s campaign filed a complaint against the infamous Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. Meanwhile, the Republican National Committee filed a complaint against moveon.org among others. Regardless of the validity of the Swift Boat ads, they undeniably had an effect on the elections as did the moveon.org ads (CNN.com). These 527 groups further suggest the weakness and influence of the parties on the electorate.

The increase in the number of split ticket voters people who vote for different parties for Congress and President, also points to the weakening of political parties. As Figure 7 shows, the number of split ticket voters has declined somewhat recently, but overall it has risen by 5 percent. In fact, since 1952, the percentage voting split ticket has increased by 42 percent. This is, in part, due to the inability of political parties to provide
good cues. Their influence and power have diminished and so people no longer look to them for guidance on the issues (Drum, 2006, p. 1).

Figure 7:

Party Weakness-Wrapping it Up

Traditionally, the party played a much greater role in the political process. They no longer provide cues to voters because they no longer formulate positions. They are no longer in charge of the nominating process so candidates do not feel the same loyalty to their party. Candidates also do not receive most of their money from parties so it gives them less incentive to follow the party line. Party registration reflects the decline of parties and the rise of independent voters. More Americans are also voting a split-ticket. Political parties’ power and influence has weakened. Voters no longer use party identification to determine stands on issues. Without party identification, it increases the cost of voting. The party identification provides a perpetual screen to view politics. Without it, voters are less likely to know who and what to vote for. In addition, there is no longer the psychological attachment so this party weakness has lowered voter turnout.
4) Media Bias

In 1952, the University of Michigan interviewed eligible voters for the National Election Studies survey. Respondents had no difficulty deciding the attributes they liked and disliked about the Republican and Democratic parties. Only 10 percent had nothing to say about either party. By 1972, only 54 percent could comment about both parties. By the 1980s, more than half had no comment. The point is that American’s capability to talk about politics has diminished. Yet, why has our ability to discuss politics decreased with the immense number of media outlets and the internet?

Media Coverage

The answer lies partly in the media coverage. If we were to go back in time and ask Americans about President Bush during the election of 2000 or 2004, many would be able to discuss his drunken driving incident or supposed cocaine use. Few would be able to discuss his plan for Social Security or Medicare. What about former Vice-President Gore? Many might be able to tell you he had a ‘lockbox,’ but nothing about its contents or plan. It is no secret that the media coverage of Bush, Gore, or Kerry was less than flattering. In fact, in the election of 2000, Bush’s coverage on network news was 63 percent negative in tone and 37 percent positive. Major newspapers gave him more than a 2 to 1 percent negative coverage. On the nightly news, Gore’s coverage was 60 percent negative during the primaries and general election. The evidence reveals that the media did not have a bias towards one candidate or ideology, but towards the negative (Patterson, 2002, p.64). However, this negative media coverage is not limited to presidential elections or candidates. A study by Tim Groeling and Samuel Kernell when
it rises. This also holds true when policy programs fail or when candidates or politicians misbehave (Groeling, 1998, p. 1063-66). Nevertheless, some argue that the media have always focused on the negative. But they overlook that these early media outlets included as many partisan journals that included praise as well as criticism. By the 1960s, political coverage became more negative (Patterson, 2002, p. 65).

Although there have times of patriotism such as after 9/11 and the Iraq War, the long-term tendency has been negative. “The media supply most of the raw material that goes into people’s thinking about their political leaders and institutions…But if it’s disheartening, they will maintain their distance and disengage (Patterson, 2002, p. 65).

**Television and Voter Turnout**

In the 1960s, television ownership and news coverage had become widespread in the United States. In fact, by 1960, 87 percent of American households had television and they were watching an average of five and a half hours per day. The television provided a new medium for political information, thus providing a more informed electorate in theory. However, consumers had other channels and entertainment to occupy their leisure time. Furthermore, the American public was not receiving a large amount of political news from the television. Until 1963, NBC and CBS evening news programs were only 15 minutes long. Meanwhile, ABC did not have a 30 minute news program until 1967 (Gentzkow, 2006, p. 19).

George and Waldfogel even argue that the growth of the national media creates substitution of local news sources. The political coverage on national media outlets did not focus on local politics thereby decreasing participation in local elections. In a study
by Matthew Gentzkow, he demonstrates that television has caused large declines in consumption of newspapers and radio and citizens’ knowledge of politics as measured in election surveys. The effects have been most prominent in local elections. His study concluded that “not only has television failed to increase information and turnout, it is an important cause of the decline, explaining half of the drop in off-year turnout since 1950, and possibly a quarter of the drop in presidential years” (Gentzkow, 2006, p. 25).

Robert D. Putnam also identifies television as one of the culprits in the decline of civic engagement in the United States. Putnam argues that the news and entertainment have become individualized. As the number of options has increased for entertainment, newspaper readership has declined substantially. Although more of us are turning to the television for the news, news viewership is also on the decline. Some might counter with the argument that now there are so many more news organizations now including CNN, MSNBC, FOX News, NBC, ABC, CBS, C-SPAN, etc. Yet, “the newer media are mainly drawing on the steadily shrinking traditional audience for news, not expanding it” (Putnam, 2000, p. 221). Basically, the television programs we watch are usually not political in nature. The more television we watch, the less we participate in civic participation and social involvement. Putnam actually identifies the television as the single most consistent predictor of civic disengagement (Putnam, 2000, p. 216-231).

*Media Bias-Wrapping it Up*

Although some argue that negative ads are to blame for lower turnout, the research has shown that they do not cause voter turnout decline. In fact, media bias towards the negative is partly to blame for low voter turnout. The media focus on the
negative causing voters to lose interest and disengage. The evolution of the television caused the media to focus on the horse race aspects of elections rather than the issues. With cable networks and more entertainment channels, news coverage has focused on sensationalist details. This all leads to an ill-informed electorate who are turned off by the candidates and elections.

Is there really a problem with voter turnout?

A Question of Calculation

There are some that believe that there is no problem with voter turnout. Samuel Popkin and Michael McDonald claim that the decline of voter turnout is merely an illusion. “Instead, voter participation has remained essentially the same since the 1972 presidential elections.” Their claim relies on the way voter turnout is calculated. Traditionally, the turnout rate is determined by dividing the number of actual voters by the number of eligible voters. The statistics are based on the US Census Bureau’s voting age population (VAP), which is those 18 years or older in the United States. However, they argue that the VAP numbers are inaccurate because of several factors. The most important factor is the large wave of immigration in the past decade. They recalculated the turnout rate for national elections since World War II. To determine the voting eligible population (VEP), they used government data on the number of non-citizens and ineligible felons to subtract from the VAP. Their research indicated that the percentage of non-citizens went from 2 percent of VAP in 1966 to 7.5 percent of VAP in 1998. The percentage of ineligible felons changed from 0.5 percent before 1982 to 1.6 percent in 1998. They identify “the only startling change since 1972 is greater turnout in
competitive Southern congressional elections” (McDonald, 2000, p. 2). The 26th amendment, which lowered the voting age to 18, also was passed before the 1972 election. They argue that the inclusion of these new voters accounts for one-fourth of the drop in voter turnout since the 1960s. After recalculating the rates for those eligible to vote, their figure (as shown below in Figure 8) shows no decline since 1972 (McDonald, 2000, p. 1-5).

Figure 8: Presidential Turnout Rates (1948-2004)

Is the decline of voter turnout only an illusion?

The research by McDonald and Popkin is important because it points out some inconsistencies in the way voter turnout is calculated. However, their research does not show that the decline of voter turnout is a myth. As Martin P. Wattenburg points out, “the voting age population for non-citizens does not greatly change the pattern since 1960” (Wattenburg, 2005, p. 1). As Figure 9 demonstrates, only about 61 percent voted
in the Non-South compared to 71 percent in 1960. In the South, there is still a significant increase accounting for non-citizens as the rate jumps from 41 percent to 57 percent. The significant change outside of the South is hardly a myth.

Figure 9: Voter Turnout Rates in 2004 and 1960 by Region

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<thead>
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<th>2004</th>
<th>1960</th>
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<tr>
<td>Voting age population</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-South</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen voting age population</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-South</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
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</table>

McDonald also takes issue with the numbers showing the percentage of the population that is disenfranchised due to felony convictions. Yet, these are currently about 1.6 percent and are not likely to change the pattern either (Wattenburg, 2005, p. 1).

McDonald and Popkin even concede that determining the percentage of ineligible felons is difficult. It “is a tricky statistic to determine because the eligibility of convicted felons varies from state to state, based on a patchwork of different laws” (McDonald, 2000, p. 2).

Personally, I believe that the research of McDonald and Popkin is important. I agree with Wattenburg that the inability of non-citizens and convicted felons is also significant.

Nevertheless, non-citizens are counted in the Census and therefore, the apportionment of political districts includes them. We must take into account that some people are not voting today. Likewise, those who were disenfranchised by the Jim Crow laws in the 1960s were also accounted for in the voting age populations (Wattenburg, 2005, p. 4).
Voter turnout in the elections of 2000 and 2004

Much has been made about the increase in voter turnout in the past few elections. In fact, in 2004, about 122 million voters participated in the presidential elections. In terms of raw numbers, this figure was well above the 105 million in 2000. Yet, voter turnout was around 55 percent. This rate was an increase from 2000, but about the same as in 1992 and far short of the 63 percent of 1960. Although turnout rates have increased somewhat, they are nowhere near the high rates of the 1960s. Voter turnout continues to remain low despite the competitive elections (Wattenburg, 2005, p. 4). Only time will tell whether turnout will continue to increase.

Is there really a problem with voter turnout?-Wrapping it Up

Popkin and McDonald have argued that voter turnout is not really a problem because we have incorrectly calculated the statistics by not using Voting Eligible Population (VEP). Although their research is useful, I do not believe that his findings reveal that there is no problem with voter turnout. The voting-age population does not greatly change the pattern since 1960. Whichever calculation is used to determine voter turnout, even McDonald and Popkin can agree that a rate around 50 and 60 percent is not good. They can further agree that greater voter participation benefits the country (McDonald, 2000, p. 3). We must then turn our focus to the possible ways that we can increase voter turnout.
What can we do?

Now that we have established that voter turnout is a problem, we can move on to the bigger problem of finding a solution. Throughout my research, there have been varying solutions to the problem of voter turnout. I have identified the three most viable options, which are:

5) Election Day registration (EDR)
6) Designating Election Day as a national holiday
7) Compulsory voting

I. Election Day Registration

In 27 states, voters must at least register 25 or more days before Election Day in order to vote. The United States or individual states should adopt a law allowing eligible citizens to register and vote on Election Day. Some states have already taken a proactive approach and offer same-day registration. The results are astounding. In the 2004 presidential election, the six states that offered same-day voter registration had, on average, voter turnout 12 percentage points higher than those states without same-day registration. Census data demonstrates that the six states with EDR at the time of the election of 2004 (Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, and Wyoming) had an average voter turnout of 75.1 percent. The average for states without same-day registration was 63.2 percent (Demos, 2007, p. 1). Registration rates were also much higher. States with EDR had rates of 86.4 percent while states without EDR had registration rates of about 79.1 percent. (Alvarez, 2007, p. 2). The adoption of EDR allows more eligible citizens the opportunity to vote because it allows citizens to vote
even if they have been incorrectly removed from voter lists or were not added in time for
the election. In 2000, there were nearly 3 million people who did not have their votes
counted because of registration problems. Millions more had registration problems in
2004. These could have been prevented with the adoption of same-day registration.

Early registration deadlines in many states suppress the vote because many voters
have neither made a decision nor seriously focused on the candidates or the issues before
this time. In the election of 2000, a survey by the Gallup Poll (Figure 10) revealed that
the percentage of people paying close attention to the election rose significantly weeks
before the election. In fact, in the final four weeks, there was a difference of 13 percent,
which is about the same difference between the states that have adopted same-day
registration and those that have not.

Figure 10:

One of main problems EDR would address is the abysmal turnout percentages of young
voters. Many of these young people are not engaged until the final weeks of the election.
Figure 11 exhibits the differences between the higher rates of participation of younger
voters in states that have same-day registration. Since the implementation of the 26th
amendment that changed the minimum voting age to 18, 18-24 year olds have remained
at the bottom of voter turnout percentages. Figure 11 further reveals that states with EDR have exactly an 18 percent increase advantage among young voters. Similarly, the 25-44 range difference is about 18 percent (Demos, 2006, p.2). A multitude of research has reiterated that voting and civic engagement are habitual acts. “Once they [young voters] cast that first vote, the odds increase greatly that they will participate in subsequent elections” (Putnam, 2000, 181). By increasing the participation of young voters, it virtually ensures that those voters will continue to vote when they become older. Thus, the voter turnout rates would remain at a steady percentage (Demos, 2006, p. 2).

The EDR also enfranchises those who are geographically mobile. When an individual moves, they may lose their right to vote by missing the registration deadline. As discussed earlier, even if one moves across the street, they must re-register. Same-day registration allows people to vote whenever and wherever they go. Between 2002 and 2003, the US Census showed that 40.1 million Americans moved. This percentage constitutes a large number of potential voters who possibly lose their opportunity to vote. Moreover, the approval of same-day registration also encourages those with disabilities or transportation issues to vote. Sometimes, those with disabilities or transportation issues are unable to register prior to Election Day. The EDR reduces the burden placed on voters (Demos, 2006, p. 2). The bottom line is that registration increases with EDR.

In fact, as Figure 12 displays, in states with EDR, registration at the polls on primary or Election Day is the most common way people registered to vote in 2004. Typically, most voters registered through a government registration office as evident from states without EDR. The fact that so many more people are registering at the polls on Election Day in
states with EDR suggests that the ability to register on the day of the election enfranchises new voters, thereby increasing voter turnout (Alvarez, 2007, p. 2).

Figure 12: How people report registering to vote in states without and with EDR, 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Without EDR</th>
<th>With EDR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Department of Motor Vehicles</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Assistance Agency</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mail-in Registration</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School, Hospital, or Campus</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government voter registration office</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>42.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registration Drive</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At polls on primary or election day</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>44.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Criticisms of Election-Day Registration

One of the most common complaints about the implementation of EDR is that the amount of voter fraud would increase substantially. Yet, there is no evidence to support this view. In fact, officials in EDR states take many, if not more, precautions against fraud as election officials elsewhere. Furthermore, in states that have EDR, there are almost no instances of illegal activities relating to fraudulent registration. Studies of fraud have been conducted in states with same-day registration. After the 2004 election, a study was conducted by the Attorneys General of New Hampshire and Wisconsin regarding the EDR voters in their states. The findings revealed no fraud correlated with same-day registration (Rappaport, 2007, p. 5).

Another common misconception is that the implementation of EDR would be costly. In 2004, the cost of adopting same-day registration in new locations ranged from zero to a maximum of only $250 per precinct. Based on information from election
officials in EDR states, the cost of registering someone on Election Day is no greater than registering that same person in a registration office. States that have adopted EDR use simple, cost effective mechanisms to register people and prevent fraud such as specialized workers for the days and poll-work education (Demos, 2007, p. 1).

There are many misconceptions about the implementation of EDR. The reality of the situation is that it increases the opportunity for all citizens to participate in American democracy. Although some believe that the law could favor the Democratic Party, there is no evidence of this. Many believed the same thing about the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (Motor Voter Act), which required state governments to make the voter registration process easier by providing uniform registration (US Department of Justice). The aftermath of the law saw no great increase in the registrants for the Democratic Party. Many other states are considering EDR laws. In 2006, Montana became the seventh state with same-day registration and saw an increase in mid-term turnout. Politicians from both sides of the aisle support the reform. It seems only a matter of time until more states will continue to adopt EDR and benefit from its advantages.

*Election Day Registration-Wrapping it Up*

I believe that Election Day Registration would be one the easiest ways to increase voter turnout. Most states require citizens to register at least 25 days in advance. This requirement discourages many voters from participating, especially younger voters. The results from states that implemented EDR speak for themselves. They continuously have higher registration and voter turnout rates. Evidence from states with EDR has shown
that the criticisms are unwarranted. The amount of voter fraud does not increase immensely. Nor does it increase the costs for the state. The only thing EDR does is to provide the opportunity for all citizens to participate in the electoral process.

II. Election Day as a National Holiday

The second most plausible recommendation to increase voter turnout focuses on the day in which elections are held. One of the most common reasons people state for not voting is that they do not have enough time. Nevertheless, there is no evidence of this phenomenon. In fact, there are even those such as John Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey who claim we have more leisure time. Either way, over the last three decades, “we have seen no general decline in free time in America that might explain civic disengagement” (Putnam, 2000, p. 190). However, many people still have to work or go to school on Election Day. Most often, Election Day is not a leisure day for most citizens. Since 1845, Election Day has been held for US presidential and congressional elections on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November. Originally, elections were held in November because of agriculture. In 1845, most Americans made their living from agriculture. Therefore, November was the most convenient time for farmers living in rural areas to get to the polls. Furthermore, in 1845, only the county seats had polling places. Most voters would have to take an overnight trip on horseback. Monday elections would require people to miss church on Sunday. Thus, elections were held on Tuesday. Congress did not want it on the first of the month because it is a Holy Day of Obligation in the Roman Catholic Church. In addition, many businesses calculated sales and expenses for the previous month on the first of each month (Longley, 2004, p. 1).
Many voters are unable to vote because of work or scheduling conflicts. In the election of 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that over 20 percent of eligible non-voters did not vote due to scheduling conflicts or inconvenient voting procedures. The proportion was higher for minorities including Asians and Latinos. The implementation of an Election Day national holiday would alleviate some of these problems. Other countries that have a voting holiday have much higher voter turnout rates in their national elections than the United States. The United States remains one of the few Western democracies without a voter holiday. Even Puerto Rico, a US territory, has a holiday for Election Day. In the election of 2000 for their governmental positions, their turnout was a little over 82 percent (Chen, 2004, p. 1). In 2004, Puerto Rico’s turnout declined, but was still over 70 percent (Richie, 2004, p. 1).

Making Election Day a national holiday is not a new idea in the United States. In 2000, following the closely contested election, the National Commission on Federal Election Reform was formed by the University of Virginia’s Miller Center of Public Affairs and the Century Foundation. Its purpose was to evaluate election reform and review policy proposals. The Commission was co-chaired by former Presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford. In 2001, they issued their report, which included the recommendation of making Election Day into a national holiday. They discredit the idea of longer polling hours because the evidence is unwarranted. “The idea of a national holiday is better founded. It would help working people vote without having to hire poll workers to staff added or longer shifts” (National Commission, 2001, p. 46). In addition, more public buildings would be available for polling places to handle the larger number of voters and longer lines. More poll workers would also be available to staff the
additional locations. Another effect of a national holiday would be to engage more eligible high school and college aged students. Moreover, “civic-minded high school and college students” would have the opportunity to work at the polls on Election Day (National Commission, 2001, p. 46). Similar to current holidays, teachers in various grades could develop lesson plans or activities celebrating ‘Democracy Day’ highlighting the importance of the day. By stressing the importance of civic engagement at an early age, younger citizens will become more likely to vote when they have the opportunity. In a survey conducted by Thomas Patterson, young adults stated they are twice as likely as older ones to say that an Election Day holiday would increase their chance of voting. In the same survey, nonvoters also said they would be more likely to participate if Election Day were a holiday (Patterson, 2002, p. 181).

The Commission also endorsed a plan that would, in even-numbered years, coincide the Veterans Day national holiday with Election Day to ease the costs of another federal holiday. Some have referred to it as ‘Democracy Day.’ Opponents have argued that it would take away from the ceremonies and time of remembrance of Veterans’ Day. Yet, most members of the Committee are Veterans themselves and found something very fitting to “reflect on the notion of holding the supreme national exercise of our freedom on the day we honor those who preserved it” (National Commission, 2001, p. 48). Moreover, there would be adequate time to celebrate the accomplishments and lives of Veterans while also having fair elections. Again, the change would only happen every two years (National Commission, 2001). More recently, on May 26, 2005, Senator Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), proposed a bill that would “treat the Tuesday next after the first Monday in November as a legal public holiday for purposes of Federal employment,
and for other purposes” (Library of Congress, 2007). Representative John Conyers (D-MI) proposed a similar bill in the House of Representatives with 110 co-sponsors. Unfortunately, both bills did not make it out of committee in the 109th Congress ensuring they would not be passed. Nevertheless, with a Democratic majority in the 110th Congress and Senator Clinton’s (D-NY) similar bill regarding Election Day as a federal holiday, it will be interesting to see if it suffers a similar fate.

**Criticisms of Election Day as a national holiday**

One of the criticisms regarding this election reform is that it would be too costly. By designating Election Day a federal holiday, the financial costs of closures, lost revenues, and other costs for employers would be too great. However, there is no evidence of such a phenomenon. As already discussed, an alternative would be to move Election Day to the second Tuesday of November and coincide it with Veteran’s Day, which is traditionally celebrated on November 11. Considering the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, combining both days would send a strong signal to citizens about the importance of voting. More citizens would be encouraged to vote either to honor those who have or currently are fighting for our right to vote (Wattenburg, 2002, p. 171).

Another common criticism is that voter turnout rates will not change because the gain in turnout would be offset by those going on vacation or participating in holiday activities. Nonetheless, these concerns are unwarranted. There is no evidence that a substantial number of people would engage in holiday activities rather than voting. We already have established that voting is a habitual act. Many citizens will not skip this routine and important duty because they have free time on Election Day (Wattenburg,
2002, p. 172). Furthermore, Election Day still would be held on a Tuesday. It officially would not be a long weekend so it would decrease the incentive to skip the extra day of work on Monday.

Whatever the specifics of an Election Day holiday, it seems like it would be the easiest solution to implement. The Constitution grants Congress the power to set the date of congressional elections and the time at which presidential electors are chosen. A federal statute indicates the date of Election Day. Therefore, it would be within Congress’s power to declare Election Day a national holiday (National Commission, 2001, p. 48).

_Election Day as a National Holiday-Wrapping it Up_

Election Day was originally held in November because of agriculture. It has remained the same day ever since. Nonetheless, Election Day has not been made a national day. I believe that Americans would be more likely to vote if Election Day were made a national holiday. The most common reason Americans do not vote is because of work or lack of free time. Election Day as a national holiday eliminates these reasons. It allows more people to participate in the electoral process and would increase voter turnout. It could even coincide with Veterans’ Day to increase the importance of the day and make it more patriotic. This would offset the costs of another federal holiday. I do not believe that the number of people who go on vacation or participate in other activities would be so great that voter turnout rates would not increase. A better alternative would be to change Election Day to a Wednesday to further decrease, if not completely deter, the possibility that citizens would make a long weekend of the holiday.
III. Compulsory Voting

The third and final recommendation I have to increase voter turnout is perhaps the most controversial in the United States, but could be the most effective. One of the most proven ways to increase voter turnout has been through compulsory voting. However, the term itself is a misnomer. A better name would be compulsory voting attendance. In places that currently have compulsory voting, there is a secret ballot so only registration and attendance at a polling place is compulsory (Hill, 2006, p. 208). One of the primary problems compulsory voting would alleviate is the socioeconomic gap between those who vote and those who do not. Studies conducted in the Netherlands and Belgium provide evidence, which demonstrates that socioeconomic status is effectively erased as a variable for non-voting. There is an expected norm of voting for educated, white, and older populations. This norm has failed to materialize among the poor, less-educated, and younger populations. For these groups of people, it is normal not to vote. As already discussed, we cannot truly have a representative democracy if only a certain group of people vote. With compulsory voting, it “removes the problem of insufficient information simply by virtue of its existence; knowing that voters with similar interests are going to vote overcomes any uncertainty about the value of a vote and frees a person from having to weigh opportunity costs against benefits in an environment where resources and information are scarce” (Hill, 2006, p. 214). As a result, traditional non-voters begin to play a bigger role in the electoral process.

Another advantage of compulsory voting is it reduces the role of money in politics and can be seen as a guard against internal corruption. When more people are involved, pork-barreling (a government bill that supplies funds for local improvements)
would be less rewarding for politicians because they would have to protect everyone’s interest regardless. Candidates are free to focus and fund programs that will provide benefits to all. For example, politicians understand that senior citizens vote in larger percentages than any age group. There is a correlation between voter turnout rates for senior citizens and the benefits they receive. In addition, universal voting decreases the role of money because parties and candidates no longer have to spend money to mobilize and register voters. Furthermore, the influence of wealthy, extremist, or certain interest groups deteriorates when universal suffrage is implemented. Thus, the democracy becomes more representative of the electorate (Hill, 2006, p. 214-217).

Mandatory voting laws have been around in other countries for many decades. Compulsory voting was introduced in Belgium in 1892, Argentina in 1914, and Australia in 1924 (IDEA, 2005, p. 2). In 1922, voter turnout in Australia fell to 58 percent. Subsequently, they decided to implement mandatory voting laws. As Figure 13 reveals, voter turnout in Australia has remained around 90 percent since the implementation of voter turnout laws (IDEA, 2005, p. 3).
Voter turnout remains high despite the fact that the maximum fine for nonvoting is only about 35 dollars US. Furthermore, voters have the option to submit reasonable excuses in court, which are typically granted (Wattenburg, 2002, p. 164). In Belgium, voter absenteeism dropped between 16 and 30 percent to only about 6 percent after the introduction of mandatory voting laws (Hill, 2006, p. 218).

_Criticisms of Compulsory Voting_

One of the most common complaints with mandatory voting laws in the United States is that people should have the right _not_ to vote. However, this criticism is unfounded. Compulsory voting keeps individual liberty intact. The system of compulsory voting only means that registration and attendance are compulsory. Voters always have the option to return blank or spoiled ballots since there is a secret ballot. In addition, there are many other obligations we perform on a daily basis. Every day, we
are required to pay taxes, serve on juries, and send children to school. The civic duty of 
voting is no different or an intrusion. There also could be an option to allow for 
conscientious objections or abstentions. The ballot itself could include more choices 
such as a choice for a ‘protest vote.’ The implementation of a mandatory voting law 
could be limited to certain elections such as federal elections since the United States has 
such a large number of elections, which would reduce voter fatigue (Hill, 2006, p. 221- 
223).

The other main criticism is that there would be a large number of votes by people 
with limited political knowledge. Australians refer to this behavior of thoughtlessly 
completing a ballot as ‘donkey voting.’ Yet, the level of this type of voting is estimated 
to be between 1 and 3 percent in Australia. This small percentage when compared to the 
90 percent turnout is definitively not large enough to threaten the outcome or legitimacy 
of an election. In fact, compulsory voting has the advantage of encouraging voters to 
become informed. If someone knows that they are required to vote, they are more likely 
to pay attention to election coverage or discuss the election with co-workers. In addition, 
compulsory voting teaches voters of the benefits of political participation. A related 
concern is that there would be more informal votes. An informal ballot is one that has 
been incorrectly completed or not filled in at all. Therefore, they are not counted and are 
set aside. The evidence shows that there is a higher percentage of invalid voting in 
countries with compulsory voting. Nevertheless, this increase is smaller than the gain in 
participation. In Australia, it is estimated to be about 2 percent (Hill, 2006, p. 219-221).

In spite of the current evidence, many people claim that our election system is too 
complex and the electorate too large. While the United States has well over 270 million
people, Australia and Belgium have 29 million combined. Yet, Brazil has about 170 millions and is still able to effectively administer compulsory voting. Moreover, Brazil is a developing nation with high levels of illiteracy and geographical barriers. It is hard to imagine that in an industrialized country such as the United States with integrated infrastructure and abundant resources that compulsory voting could not be managed. Others argue that the additional costs and resources of implementing a system would be extravagant. Yet, evidence from countries with compulsory voting demonstrates that the additional administrative costs do not serve as a large burden. Even though there are penalties for not casting a ballot, there are rarely fines or prosecutions. In Australia, abstainers are sent ‘please explain letters.’ If their reasons are justified, then no penalty is applicable. Only about 1 percent of voters have to pay fines or have to appear in court. The reason that abstentions are so low is that not-voting is more burdensome than voting. It is far easier to go to a polling place and vote then it is to go through the administrative procedures of failing to vote. Furthermore, people vote because universal participation is the norm since it is the law. We already know that voting is a habitual act, and a mandatory law reinforces the act. As in the case for other laws, many people comply because of respect for the law and belief that it is reasonable. One analogy is when people stop at red lights. People do not only stop since it is the law, but also because it is in their best interest (Hill, 2006, p. 217-221).

The possible biggest hurdle for compulsory voting in the United States would be the Constitution. Nevertheless, Article I, Section IV, 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 clause provides broad power to Congress in holding elections. The necessary and proper clause could also be used to assert their right to compel mandatory voting. This extension of power is similar to Congress’s power to draft people in order to carry out military operations (Wattenburg, 2002, p. 165).

**Compulsory Voting—Wrapping it Up**

I believe that compulsory voting can be implemented in the United States. Although there would be opposition to the mandatory law when it is established, support would grow as time ensued. Figure 14 displays a similar occurrence in Australia. The support for mandatory voting increased over time with about 75 percent supporting compulsory voting by 2005. As people became more accustomed to the law in the United States, it would become more accepted.

Figure 14: Australian support of compulsory voting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of poll</th>
<th>Pollster</th>
<th>In favour of compulsory voting (%)</th>
<th>Opposed to compulsory voting (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>Gallup</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Gallup</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Morgan</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Herald McNair</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Australian Election Study 2004</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Morgan</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Ipsos-Mackay</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compulsory voting means that only registration and attendance are mandatory. Americans would still have the right to not vote for any candidate. Compulsory voting ensures that Americans are better represented. Evidence from other countries with compulsory voting has shown that it does work. These countries have some of the
highest turnout rates in the world. The number of ‘donkey votes’ is not substantial and does not affect the outcome of an election. In a country as large as the United States, it can and should be implemented. We have various other obligations we are required to complete to remain law-abiding citizens of the United States. Voting is a civic duty that should fall within these obligations.

_Voter Turnout is low, but there is hope-The Final Wrap-up_

The obvious way to make voting more equal is to maximize voting turnout. The goal should not be just universal suffrage, but universal or near-universal turnout (Lijphart, 1997, p. 2). Recent elections have shown signs of improvement in voter turnout, but US turnout rates remain exceedingly low. Midterm elections are far worse with turnout percentages usually less than 40 percent. In local elections, turnout is sometimes even in the teens. With the old adage, ‘all politics is local,’ US turnout rates are a poor sign for our representative democracy. Research has proven that voting does matter. Certain groups of Americans have a higher probability of voting. Those who are more educated, wealthy, older, and more partisan have higher voter turnout rates. Candidates and politicians cater to their interests and vote accordingly. Therefore, unequal participation creates unequal influence.

Since evidence reveals there is unequal influence, then why is voter turnout low? I have identified the four main reasons for low voter turnout. Institutional arrangements are the single most important cause for voter turnout. There are various institutional factors, but combined they best explain the reason for low voter turnout. Legal barriers limit the people who are eligible to vote. In addition, registration requirements
discourage citizens from participating. Even the system of selecting a president reduces turnout rates. The Electoral College ensures that only a certain number of states remain competitive; virtually ignoring most citizens. The process of gerrymandering further decreases voter turnout since it diminished competition and interest. Polling hours and stations are another cause of low voter turnout. In many locations, polling stations close well before some people leave from work. The ballots itself are often lengthy and cumbersome proving that the voting system of the United States is quite unfriendly.

The length and number of campaigns are another explanation of low voter turnout. Candidates are choosing to campaign earlier and more often than ever before. Voters become fatigued and disinterested. Many of these voters no longer support one of the two main parties. This party weakness also helps to explain low voter turnout. Parties no longer provide cues or raise most of the money. Candidates do not have to rely solely on their party and can diverge from the party line. Moreover, the media has a bias towards the negative, which has diminished voter turnout. The advent of television has caused news coverage to transform. There is less focus on substantive issues and more on the horse-race of elections and sensationalist news. Voters have become disinterested and many choose to stay home on Election Day.

Yet, recent research contends that voter turnout has not declined. McDonald and Popkin argue that turnout rates have been incorrectly calculated. Although there investigation does reveal inconsistencies in the tabulation of turnout rates, it does not adequately prove voter turnout has not declined or is not a problem. It will be interesting to see if their theory remains intact after the post-9/11 period. Since, 9/11, there has been an increase in the amount of xenophobia and more scrutiny for immigration. Many
would-be immigrants feel that the American Dream is no longer attainable. It will be interesting to see if immigration continues to increase at earlier rates.

Despite arguments that low voter turnout is not a dilemma we need to face, we must aim to increase turnout for the sake of our representative democracy. Although I strongly believe in all three recommendations to increase turnout, some are more likely to be implemented than others. Election-Day Registration would be the most likely to be implemented. Seven states already have implemented same-day registration and their turnout rates have increased substantially. Many more states are considering implementing a similar law to help their states. EDR would have the most affect on the group that votes at the lowest rates-young voters. From my experience with young voters, we always wait until the last minute to complete most tasks. Voting is no different. EDR allows us and others to vote without having to be registered weeks before the elections. Most adults do not even become engaged until the final weeks of the elections. This late interest of many citizens is one of the main reasons I suspect turnout rates have increased in states with EDR.

The other recommendation that would be effective is designating Election Day a national holiday. It could possibly be the easiest to implement without much opposition. But there would be the greatest resistance from businesses because of the costs associated with another federal holiday. To alleviate this problem, I agree with the National Commission on Federal Election and their suggestion to coincide Election Day every two years with Veterans’ Day. However, this might be unlikely since many veterans’ groups believe it would take away from the significance and attention to veterans. Another
alternative I propose is to move Election Day to a Wednesday as a national holiday, thereby eliminating citizens from partaking in long weekends.

The third and most controversial recommendation to increase voter turnout is compulsory voting. This recommendation would have the greatest and most immediate impact on voter turnout. Currently, it does not have enough support in the United States. It is not to say that compulsory voting will never be implemented, but I do not see it occurring in the near future. The culture in the United States is a major factor. As Americans, we do not enjoy being obligated to do certain tasks. If we had the option, many of us would not pay taxes or register for the draft. Some of us would not even go to school. Nevertheless, these are all obligations that are in our best interests. Voting is no different. It is a civic-duty that all Americans should perform. The resistance to such a mandatory law would be powerful, but compulsory voting only requires compulsory attendance. It does not even require a citizen to vote.

The causes for low voter turnout and recommendations to increase voter turnout that I have identified are by no means an exhaustive list. After many hours of research, they are the ones I have found to best explain low voter turnout and most viable methods to increase it. Although the United States is far behind most of the other industrialized Western countries in voting rates, we do have abundant resources to address the situation. There is hope for the future as more citizens, scholars, and politicians are realizing that greater participation by the electorate creates a healthy and more vibrant democracy. The act of voting is a privilege that every American should exercise. Our elected officials should best represent all Americans. When we underutilize the privilege of voting, our government does not serve the American people, but only the ones who vote. It is a civic
duty that all Americans should exercise. More states are taking the issue into their own hands and implementing policies to increase turnout. Evidence from these states proves that the United States does have the resources to alleviate the problem. As states continue to implement policies and more voters go to the polls, we will soon be able to say that the most fundamental political act in a democracy is no longer being underutilized.
References


