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## **Why We Don't Vote: Low Voter Turnout in U.S. Presidential Elections**

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Daniel Roberts  
Political Science 488  
Dr. Nownes

*Why We Don't Vote: Low Voter Turnout in U.S. Presidential Elections*

I. Introduction

The United States is a self-proclaimed beacon of hope and freedom for the world. And perhaps this designation is not altogether unwarranted. The central reason for this is that the U.S. holds itself up as the model for how democratic nations should be run. As most people know, democracy is a system of government where the people are responsible for determining the course action their nation will take. This can in theory occur through direct democracy where the people vote on nearly every issue that arises. However, as no pure direct democracy exists in the world, the other alternative is indirect democracy, where people vote to elect representatives, who then in turn make the majority of decisions for the country.

Since its infancy, the United States has been the latter type of democracy, and has taken pride in the fact that its citizens are able to vote for its leaders, particularly the President. However, a problem exists for the United States. The proportion of its citizens that actually vote in national elections has decreased dramatically over the past several decades. How can a country claim to be the role-model for democracies around the globe, and yet have declining participation in one of the key elements of democratic rule, namely voting?

The purpose of this thesis will be to examine the declining voting trends in the United States. The question to be answered here is, "Why is voter turnout so low in the United States?" To answer this question, this paper is divided into several separate

sections. This first section serves as an introduction to the major question that this thesis will address. Section II will serve to give background information on the general topic of low voter turnout. That section will define key terms that are essential to this paper, it will provide statistical information about voter turnout in U.S. elections, and will give reasons why high voter turnout would be a good thing if it were to occur. Section III will move past the simple recitation of facts and figures that prove that turnout is low. Instead, the section will analyze the various individual factors that contribute to low voter participation in the United States. Samples of topics that will be discussed in Section III include voter registration methods, the U.S. electoral system, and the various voting procedures that exist across the country, just to name a few. Section IV will discuss my various proposals for resolving the problem of low voter turnout. This section will take the most important factors leading to low turnout and seek out ways to either resolve those issues, or at least improve the situations surrounding them. Finally, Section V will serve as a conclusion, summing up the findings of the thesis, as well as the proposals for solving the problem of low voter turnout in national elections in the United States.

Before proceeding, it should be noted that many different types of elections take place within the U.S. political system as a whole. These would include local, state, national midterm elections, and national Presidential elections. While low or decreasing voter turnout may be an important issue in all of these types of elections, this paper will focus almost exclusively on national Presidential elections. This topical restriction will allow for an in-depth look at one particular type of election in the United States, while preventing the subject matter from becoming too broad to be covered in a thesis of this

length. With that being said, it is now possible to examine the factual background information pertaining to low voter turnout.

## II. Background

### A. Definitions

Before diving into all of the data concerning voting numbers in the United States, it is important to arrive at a solid definition of what exactly “voter turnout” is. In other words, what is voter turnout? On its most basic level, the term simply refers to the total number of people that voted in a given election, sometimes given as a percentage. However, things are rarely that simple. Controversy arises about turnout because several methods exist for determining the number or percentage of voters.

The first and most basic way of determining voter turnout is so simply count the total number of votes cast. For obvious reasons, this is known as the Total Vote. While this seems to be the most straightforward way of measuring turnout, this method has several shortcomings. First, this method includes not only correctly cast votes, but also includes ballots later found to be invalid (Pintor et al 120). Another apparent problem with this method is that it provides no comparative component. The Total Vote method gives a raw number, but provides no self-contained comparison to the number of people that did not choose to vote.

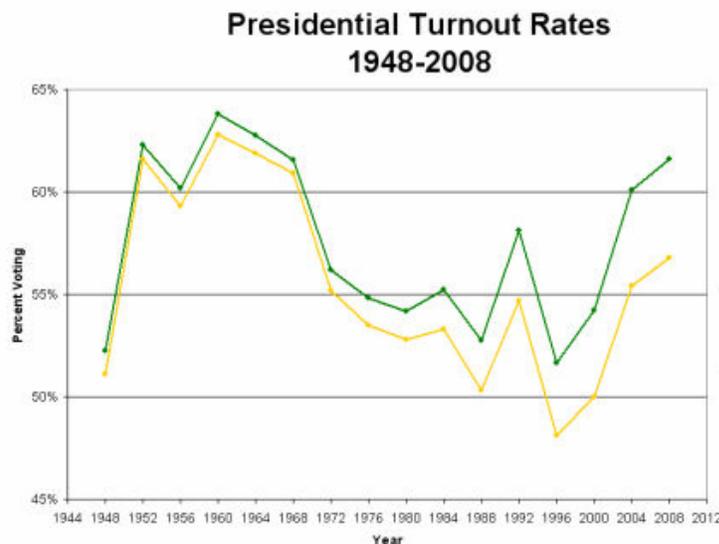
One variation of this method seeks to give some comparative element. It takes the number from the Total Vote method, and then divides that number by the total number of registered voters. This procedure yields a percentage of the registered voters who actually chose to vote (Pintor et al 120). However, because this variation relies on the

Total Vote numbers, it still counts those votes which may be found to be invalid. Also, just because someone is eligible to vote, does not necessarily mean that they are a registered voter.

There is yet another means to determine voter turnout, this one used by the United States Census Bureau. This technique relies on what is known as the Voting Age Population, or VAP. As the name implies, the Voting Age Population is the total number of people in a given area older than the area's stated voting age. For the United States, this would include any and all persons 18 years of age and older. To arrive at a voter turnout figure, the number of votes cast is divided by the Voting Age Population, which will obviously yield a percentage. While this method attempts to account for imperfect voter registration roles, it is not without its own problems. For instance, the VAP numbers are not strictly limited to only those over 18, and are also eligible to vote. The VAP also takes into account noncitizens, those who have been convicted of felonies, and those currently incarcerated. While some states do let felons vote, the above categories account for roughly 10% of Americans who would be included in the VAP, but are nonetheless ineligible to vote. Critics argue that for this reason, the VAP method artificially deflates voter turnout numbers (Patterson 8).

To deal with the apparent problems in the VAP method of calculating voter turnout, some political scientists and other organizations have developed yet another means of determining turnout. This new means is the Voter Eligible Population, or VEP. Professors like George Mason University's Dr. Michael McDonald utilize the data gathered from the VAP calculations and then subtract an estimate of the amount of people ineligible to vote, such as noncitizens and felons. He then adds to that number the

amount of eligible voters located overseas, which the VAP does not take into account (McDonald). This new figure is what is known as the Voting Eligible Population, and is then divided by the number of people who actually voted in order to arrive at a voter turnout percentage. Proponents of the VEP claim that this method virtually eliminates the apparent decline in voter turnout recognized by other methods (Nonprofit Vote). Consider the following chart which displays the difference between VAP turnout data and VEP turnout (McDonald):



A glance at the above chart clearly shows that VEP voter proportions are consistently somewhat higher than VAP proportions. While proponents of the VEP method state that it proves that declining voter turnout is a myth, one can clearly see that even VEP turnout is only at roughly 62%. Even assuming that the VEP calculations are correct, and that turnout is actually not decreasing, a 62% turnout rate could still be considered relatively low. That still leaves roughly 40% of the population out of the voting process.

While other organizations and individual political scientists may have slightly differing ways of measuring voter turnout, the several methods listed above are some of the most prominent. Unless otherwise stated, the voter turnout numbers listed throughout the rest of this thesis will be based on the VAP numbers. This is because the subject of this paper is U.S. voter turnout, and the VAP is the method generally used by the United States Census Bureau.

### B. Data

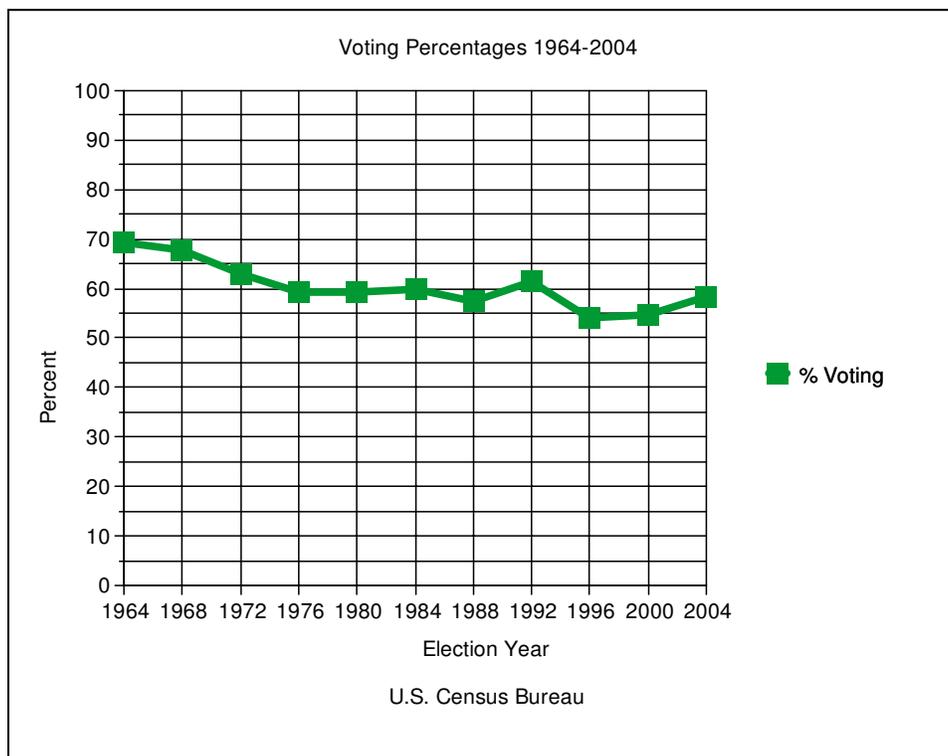
Having established the basic terminology and methodology for determining voter turnout, it is now possible to examine the actual voter turnout numbers for the United States over the past several decades. An interesting and sometimes frustrating phenomenon regarding turnout figures is that few sources give identical turnout numbers, even for the same years. In some instances, one source will give differing turnout numbers for a single year depending on the study it is conducting. While the numbers may be slightly different depending on who does the actual measuring, one fact remains: with few exceptions, all of the figures point to a decrease in overall voter turnout in the United States.

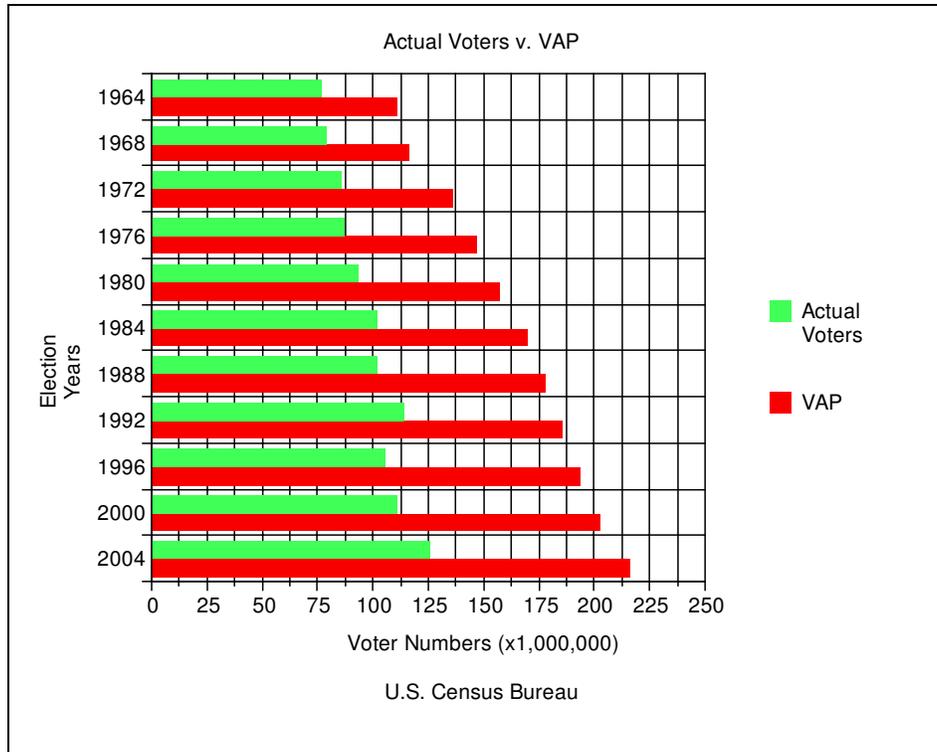
Before delving into all of the figures that point to decreasing voter turnout, let us turn our eyes to one of the apparent exceptions. A 2005 study found that in every U.S. Presidential election since at least 1964 and continuing on at least until 2004, more people voted in each successive election than did in the previous one. For example, the study found that in the 1980 election slightly more than 93 million people voted, more than 101 million voted in 1984, and just over 102 million voted in 1988. The study

showed the trend continuing into 2004, the last year for which the study was conducted (U.S. Census Bureau).

Such numbers are reinforced by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, or the IDEA. This group conducted a similar study to the one mentioned above. However, their study focuses on the years from 1964 until 2000. With the minor exceptions in the years 1988 and 1996, the actual number of people who voted increase with each successive year (Pintor et al 168).

If the actual number of people who are voting is increasing in almost every successive election, the why all of the concern over falling voter turnout? The concern has to do with percentages. More specifically, the concern is that the actual percentage of people voting is decreasing. Since the United States' population is growing every year, one could assume that the total number of voters would also increase. However, the increase in voters does not seem to be keeping pace with the overall increase in U.S. population. For a more visual representation of the data, consider the following charts:





The first chart in the above section simply shows the percentage of the VAP that voted in each presidential election since 1964 and continuing on into the 2004 election. Admittedly, the chart does not show that the percentage of voters decreases with each successive election. Some years the percentages go down, some years they stay roughly the same, and in some cases the percentage of voters actually goes up. However, it is the overall trend that should be considered. Despite its ups and downs, the graph clearly shows an overall decrease in the percentage of Americans that are voting in presidential elections. Even with a slight uptick in the percentage of voters in both 2000 and 2004, the chart still presents a decline of roughly 11%, from about 70% to slightly lower than 59% voter turnout, from 1964 to 2004. Furthermore, this decline took place during a time when the Voting Age Population nearly doubled. In 1964 the VAP was around 110 million people. By 2004, that number had increased from 110 million to more than 215

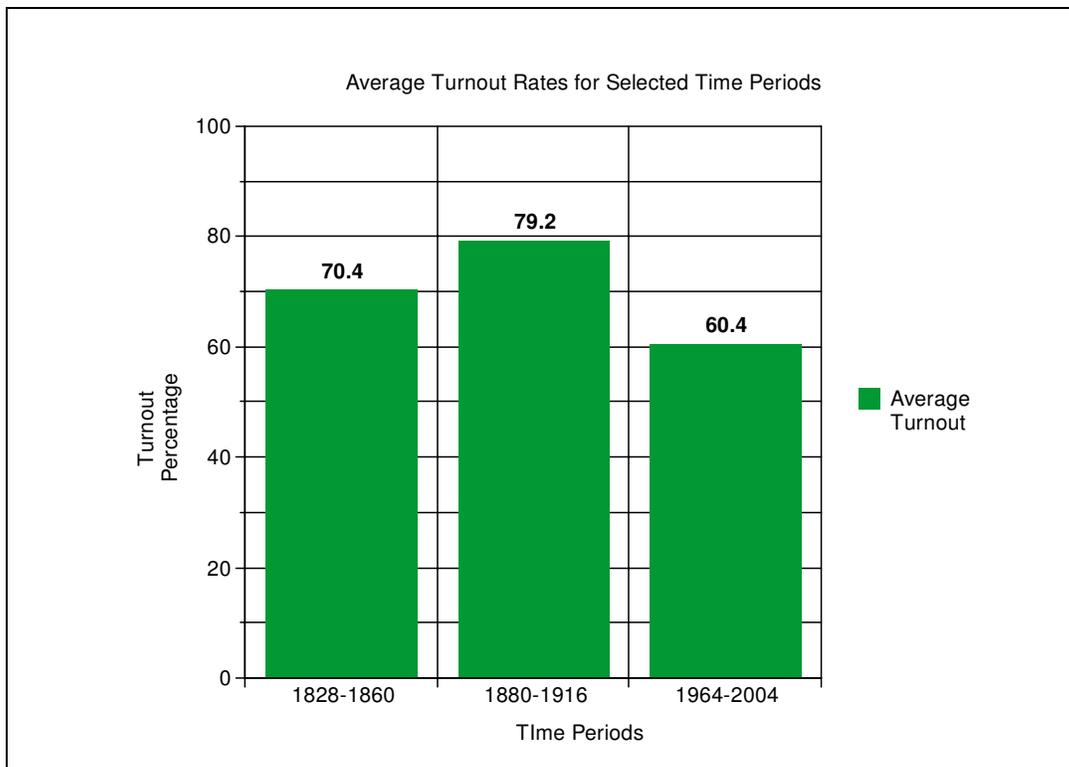
million (U.S. Census Bureau). Stated another way, during a time period where the VAP increased by 96%, the percentage of people who voted actually decreased by 11%.

The second chart in the above section shows the yearly difference between the Voting Age Population and the actual voters in presidential elections from 1964 to 2004. The green bar in the chart represents the amount of voters in each election. As discussed earlier, the number of voters has generally increased with each successive election. However, the Voting Age Population has also, without exception, increased with each successive election. The problem arises in the fact that the red bar (VAP) is increasing faster than the green bar (actual voters). Such a graph merely reinforces the data presented in the first chart: that the percentage of voters is decreasing with each new election.

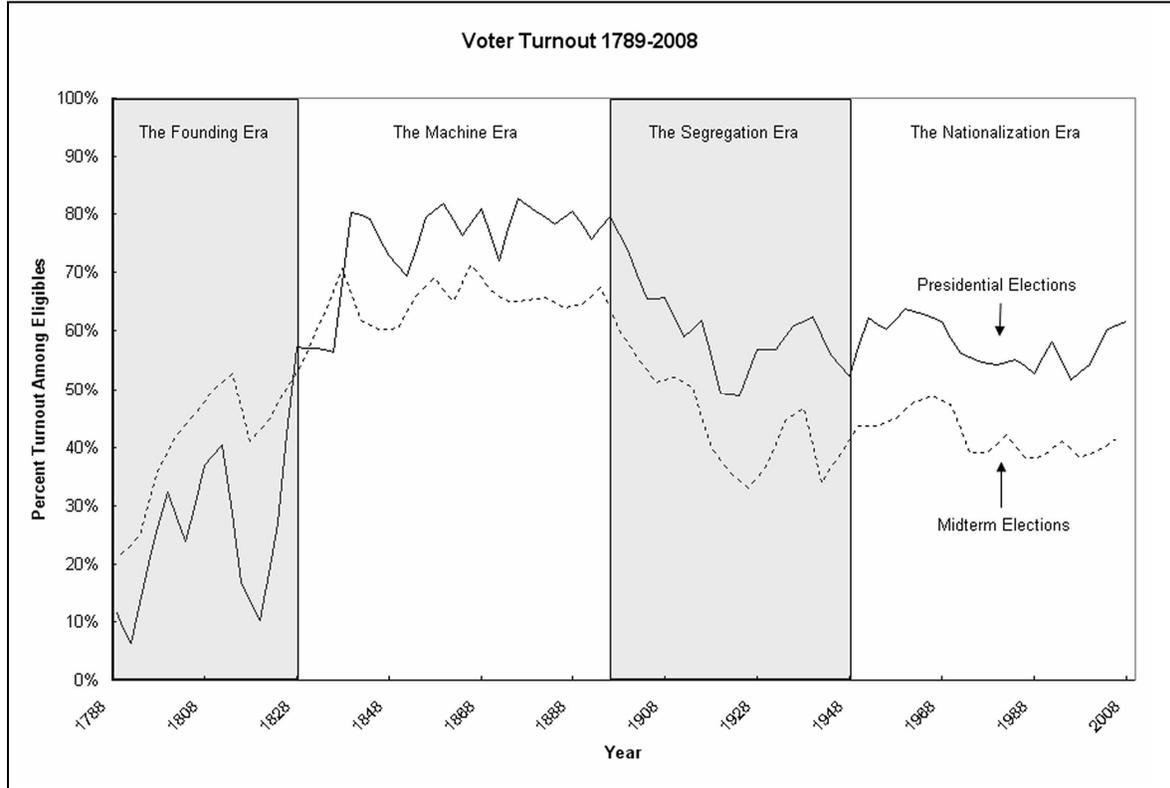
The data presented thus far has merely concerned the past forty years. Only presented with the above data, one could assume that the higher turnout levels in the 1960s were merely a fluke in history, and that the more recent turnout levels were perhaps a return to historical regularity. However, the facts do not support such an assumption. It is true that the lowest levels of voter turnout did not happen within the roughly 40 year period that the above data discusses. Within relatively recent history, the lowest level of voter turnout occurred in the year 1924. This contest between Calvin Coolidge, John W. Davis, and Robert M. La Follette drew less than half of the VAP. More generous estimates for the 1924 presidential race place turnout at around 49%, while more conservative estimates average around 43% turnout (Berke).

While 1924 may have had extremely low voter turnout, it tends to be an exception rather than the rule. To demonstrate this fact, the following section will give a sampling

of turnout rates from several historical periods. For example, from the 1828 presidential election until the 1860 election voter turnout averaged 70.4%. During that period turnout reached, or came close to reaching, 80% on several occasions (Hrebendar et al 20). Some time later, from 1880 until 1916, turnout managed to increase. During that time period, average nationwide turnout for presidential elections averaged 79.2% of the VAP (Kornbluh 90). From the data presented earlier, from 1964 through 2004, turnout only averaged 60.4% (U.S. Census Bureau). That means present turnout is 10 percentage points lower than it was from 1828-1860, and 18.8 percentage points lower than it was from 1880-1916. The data from the three above sources has been combined below:



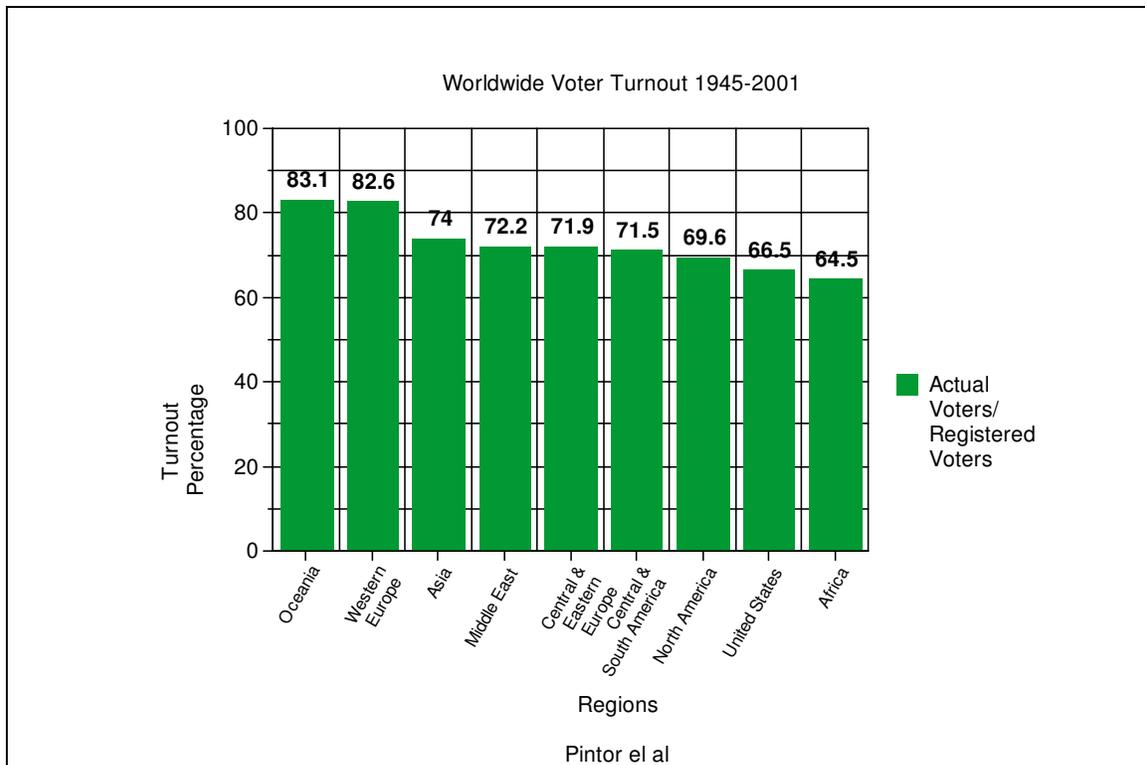
For an even more comprehensive look at voter turnout throughout American history, consider the following graph:



An important note about the above graph is that it comes from the research of Dr. Michael McDonald, who is a strong proponent of the VEP method of determining voter turnout. As such, the percentages indicated in the graph are VEP data, but nonetheless give a relatively accurate picture of turnout over the course of American history. Regardless of the method used, it should be quite obvious that early U.S. history had the lowest levels of voter turnout. In fact, this chart estimates that the election on 1792 had only 6.3% turnout, which is in fact the lowest recorded turnout figure for a U.S. presidential election. While such low turnout seems almost shameful, a variety of explanations have been suggested for that time period. Several explanations are that federal elections were seen as less important than state elections, voting often required

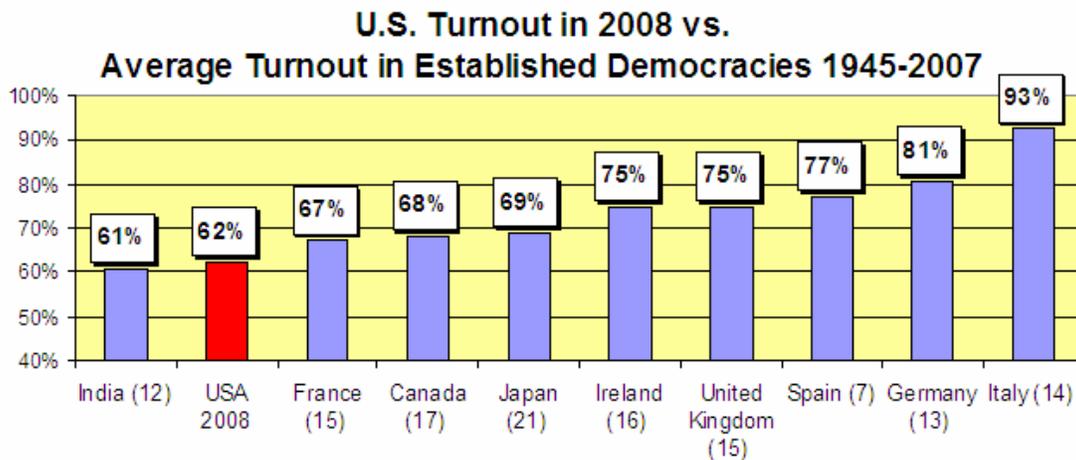
long and difficult travel, turning the voting process into an entire day event, and that in 1792 George Washington had no opponent (McDonald). Excluding the low turnout in the beginning of U.S. history, it can be clearly seen that modern turnout rates are nowhere near as high as the turnout rates seen from the 1830s until the early 1900s. While the possible reasons for such high turnout rates will be discussed later, it should suffice here to say that recent turnout is much lower than it was in many other time periods in U.S. history.

Up to this point, this paper has established that modern voter turnout is low compared to forty years ago, and is low on the whole when compared to the rest of American history. But what about the rest of the democracies around the globe? Is voter turnout in the United States really all that low when compared to the rest of the world? Unfortunately for the United States, the data does not bode well for it when it is compared to other countries worldwide. Before delving into the data from specific countries, the first set of data concerns how the U.S. compares with other, general geographical regions of the world.



The above graph compares the United States with the eight major geographical regions of the world. As can be plainly seen, when U.S. voter turnout is compared with turnout from other areas, the only place that the U.S. can consistently claim to do better than is Africa (Pintor et al 80). However, on its own, this graph is not enough to completely put U.S. turnout to shame. A major issue with the above chart is that it does not measure voter turnout using the standard VAP method. Instead, turnout is measured by dividing the number of people who actually voted by the number of registered voters. Such a measurement tactic allows for several possible problems. For example, if a country (or region in this case) has oppressive voter registration standards so that only a relative few may vote, voter turnout may appear to quite high while the majority of citizens may be prohibited from voting.

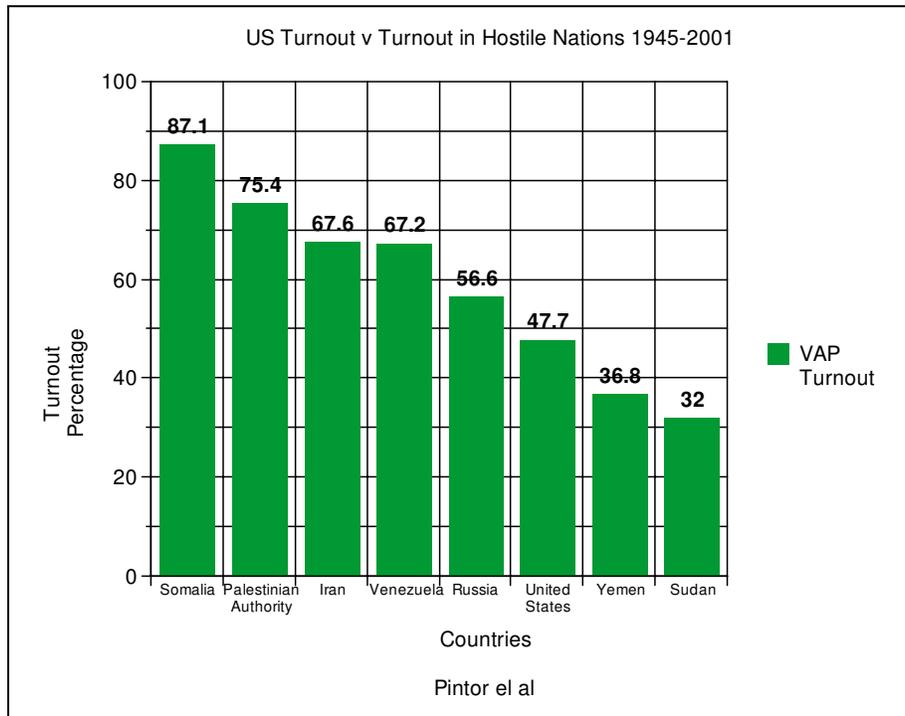
Aside from general geographic regions of the globe, how does the United States fare when compared to specific, established democracies? The following graph will shed some light on that issue.



The above graph comes from the Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network. When compared to nine other established democracies, the only country that voter turnout in the United States surpasses is that of Indian turnout by 1%. As a note of clarification, the number in parenthesis besides each country represents the number of national elections that each country has had since 1945. It should also be noted that this graph contains VEP data rather than VAP, at least as far as the United States is concerned (Nonprofit Vote). One possible problem with this graph is that it gives an unfair comparison. Each country listed above had its turnout averaged over a span of more than 60 years. However, the U.S. turnout figure only applies to the VEP data for 2008. To even the playing field, the United States' turnout should also be averaged for the same time period as the other countries. Utilizing McDonald's VEP estimates, the actual number for the U.S. turnout above should be somewhere in the neighborhood of 57% rather than 62%

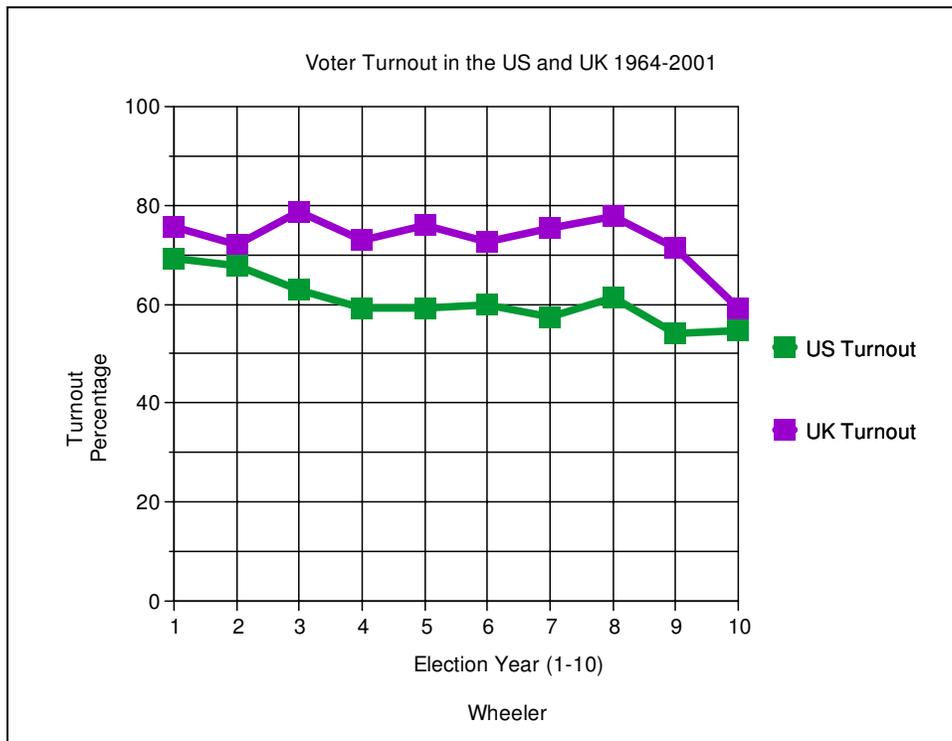
(McDonald). Unfortunately for the United States, this new figure places it in last place compared to the other nations in the graph.

However, the bad news does not stop there for the United States. Although there is no set upon number of nations in the world, on average sources place that number at around 190 separate countries. A 2002 study by the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance compared voter turnout in 169 countries that had at least some degree of voting rights. Unfortunately, that study ranked the United States 138 out of 169 in voter turnout rates (Pintor et al 83). Moreover, this study used VAP data, the same method used by the U.S. Census Bureau. From this list, an interesting comparison could be made. How does the U.S. fare when its turnout is compared with that of some of the nations that the U.S. has had some tense relations with both in the past and present day?



There is and should be an obvious caution with the above graph. First, some of these countries have shown themselves to be somewhat less than honest in certain circumstances. As such, it is possible that they may have found a way to artificially inflate their turnout data. Second, several of the countries listed above are known to either have oppressive governments or opposition parties. As a result, normal citizens may be forced to vote through force of violence either by the government or some other group. These several cautions should not be construed as concrete fact, but merely as possible explanations for such high voter turnout.

Moving away from comparisons with hostile nations, how does the United States fare when compared to the United Kingdom, arguably the closest ally to the U.S.? The chart presented below gives a good picture.



The data used above is a combination of facts from the U.S. Census Bureau and BBC journalist Brian Wheeler. Before analyzing the data from the above chart, a few explanatory notes are in order. It should be noted that the election systems in the U.S. and United Kingdom are different. In the United States, the people have a chance to vote for the President every four years without exception. While the option exists on U.S. ballots for people to vote on other elected offices, it is not required. On the other hand, in Britain there is no set election cycle. What's more, the people do not actually vote on the head of their executive branch, but instead vote on the legislature who then decides upon the chief executive. For these reasons, the election years do not always match up between U.S. and UK elections. As such, the graph above simply attempts to show turnout data from the ten past elections from 1964-2001 in both the United States and United Kingdom. Explanatory notes aside, it can be clearly seen that in national elections during the time period specified that the United Kingdom has consistently outperformed the U.S. in voter turnout percentages. In fact, only in elections 1, 2, and 10 did the UK fall to within less than 10 percentage points of U.S. turnout. Overall, turnout in Great Britain averaged 12.96% higher during the ten elections than voter turnout in the United States.

While none of the graphs in the above section which compared the United States to other countries has been perfect, a definite pattern has emerged. In each of the graphs, despite differing turnout measurement techniques and different nations, the United States has ranked towards the bottom in each comparison. While it was not the intended effect of the above data to say that the United States ranked last in turnout worldwide, the point was made that voter turnout in the U.S. is low, even when compared to the rest of the world.

### C. So What?

One of the basic premises of this paper will be that high voter turnout is a good, desirable thing. To be certain there are some both inside and out of the academic community that would disagree with such a premise. However, while some of their views may be discussed later, this paper will side with the majority of scholars, and perhaps Americans in general, who believe that high voter turnout is something which should be sought after.

The benefits of high voter turnout and the reasons which the U.S. should strive for it take a variety of paths. The first reason why high turnout is a good thing comes not from some emotional appeal that the United States is the model for democracy across the globe, but instead comes from a mathematical theory that can be traced back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The theory in question comes from a Frenchman, Marquis de Condorcet, who professed himself to be both a philosopher and mathematician. In 1785 Condorcet introduced what has become known as the jury theorem. This theorem has two premises: there is a choice to be made with only two options (one right and one wrong), and each person has at least a slightly better chance at choosing correctly instead of incorrectly. If these two conditions are met, then it stands to reason that the majority will more often than not choose the correct choice. For example, assume that each person in a group only has a 51% chance of picking the correct option out of two choices. Doing the math according to Condorcet, a majority of only 51 of the 100 will have a 52% chance of being correct. Condorcet said that if the majority increases to 55 out of the 100, then the probability that the majority has made the correct choice increases to 60%. In short, the

more people that participate and are in the majority, the greater the odds that the correct decision has been made (Dahl 142).

This same theorem could be applied to U.S. presidential elections. Assume that each citizen has at least some degree of knowledge as to the correct direction the country should go in. In fact, each citizen needs only to be correct about 51% of the time on average. In a U.S. presidential election, there are really only two choices, which is a condition of Condorcet's theorem. With these two conditions met, the theorem states that the more people who participate in the voting process, the more likely that the "correct" choice will be made as to who is best to lead the country for the next four years. Such a theory clearly makes a good case for desiring high voter turnout.

Admittedly, there are several possible problems with Condorcet's theorem as it applies to the United States. First, there are some who would claim that the average American does not in fact have a 51% chance of deciding correctly between two alternatives. However, such a view is perhaps overly pessimistic. Also, it is possible that there are some citizens who have greater knowledge and are therefore better able to get such questions right, say 60% or 70% of the time. Their higher percentages could help to balance out the total voter average to at least 51%. A second possible problem with the theory is that Condorcet's theorem fails to work when there are more than two rational choices (Dahl 145). For this reason, the theorem could not be used to justify high turnout at presidential primaries where there are often more than two choices. However, the theorem could still be used in the actual presidential election because there exists only two real choices in the American political system, since third parties are often of little to no influence.

While Condorcet's theorem is based in mathematics, it is perhaps the most abstract justification for desiring high voter turnout. The next reason why high voter turnout is needed has to do with the principles of democracy, and how the system actually works. It is common knowledge that the United States is not actually a pure democracy. Instead, it would be more correct to call the United States a democratic republic. In this type of system, the people vote to elect representatives. These elected representatives are supposed to make the decisions about how the country is to be run, in accordance with the wishes of those they represent. In theory, if a representative fulfills the wishes of those he represents, the people may then reelect that person. However, if the elected official fails to be responsive to the positions of the electorate, they may choose to elect another representative in his stead.

If all those eligible to vote do so on a relatively regular basis, then the system functions as it was designed to do: the representatives express, to the best of their ability, the views of the people. However, as has been established earlier, not all those citizens who are able to vote actually do so. In fact, some groups of citizens routinely vote in lower proportions than other groups. The implication from this fact is that government is no longer responsive to the views of the populace as a whole, but instead only responds to the groups of citizens who are most likely to vote.

The logical question from the above inference is "What groups are the most likely to vote, and consequently to have their views heard?" In the most general sense, the groups that are most likely to vote are those that are older, whiter, and in higher socio-economic classes. First, the age factor in voting will be explored. The following data demonstrates that the two older age groups, those people from 45-65 and 65 and older,

have the highest rate of voter turnout. In presidential elections from 1964-2004 the age group of 18-24 year olds had an average voting rate of roughly 41.8%. For the same time period 25-44 year olds voted at a rate of 57.9%. Those 45-64 years of age voted nearly 69.3%, and those citizens over the age of 65 had a voting rate of 66.6% (U.S. Census Bureau). Taken at face value, these numbers hardly seem surprising. Most people assume that the older generation is more likely to vote. However, a closer look at the math reveals why this is a potential problem. A study during the 1990s found that the age group of 18-24 year olds was approximately 14% of the U.S. population. However, this group only comprised 6% of voters. Moreover, those over the age of 65 made up 16% of the population at the time, yet were responsible for 22% of all votes cast (“Statistical Brief”). From this type of data it is easy to see that older Americans are overrepresented during elections.

Another factor that accounts for unequal representation is that the races do not vote in equal proportions. Although the United States is a nation of many different races, the two most studied races in regards to voting would be Caucasians and African Americans. A sad section in the history of the United States would have to be the discrimination against black voters, especially in the South up until the 1960s. For this reason, many studies tend to separate black voter participation into two regional categories: South and Nonsouth (Patterson 6). This being clarified, it is now possible to take a look at the differences between black and white voter turnout over the years. In the South, from 1952-1960, whites voted 44.9% more often than did their African American counterparts. From that same time period, white voters were also 20.2% more likely to vote in Nonsouth regions of the country. However, the next several decades

showed a great deal of improvement among African American voter turnout. From 1964-1980, whites only voted 4.9% more than black voters in the South. In Nonsouth regions, the gap between white and black voters shrank to 5.6% during that same time frame (Kleppner 117). By the early 1990s, it was determined that white voters were only about 8% more likely to vote than their black neighbors (“Statistical Brief”). Since that time, the gap has slightly increased to about 9.3% (U.S. Census Bureau). Nevertheless, single digit gaps between the voting percentages of blacks and whites are a huge improvement over the 40% and 20% differences that were present during the 1950s.

Another factor which seems to differentiate between those more likely to vote and those who are not is socio-economic standing. Basically, the higher one’s status, the more likely he or she is to vote. Determining factors of socio-economic class would include things such as education and income. It has been a longstanding theory that the higher one’s education level, the more likely that person is to vote. In fact, this view was articulated in 1967 by the political scientist V.O. Key who wrote that, “Education not only tends to imbue persons with a sense of citizen duty, it also propels them into political activity” (Patterson 5). In fact, this education theory about voting is substantiated by actual data. By the 1990s, it was found that, on average, people who graduated college voted 63% of the time, high school graduates voted 42% of the time, and those who had not completed high school only voted 28% of the time. Moreover, while college graduates only made up 20% of the entire population, their votes accounted for 27% of the total number of votes. It should also be noted in this section that data shows higher income levels can also predict higher likelihood of voting. Those who earn

\$10,000 or less only tend to vote 31% of the time, while those that earn at least \$50,000 have a 59% voting rate (“Statistical Brief”).

Surprisingly, one factor that no longer appears to determine the likelihood of one going to the polls is sex. When women gained the right to vote in the year 1920 with the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, one would have expected for turnout to drastically improve with an influx of new women voters. However, this was not the case. Many women were reluctant to use their voting rights, and overall voter turnout decreased for almost a decade after women gained the right to vote (Patterson 6). This lack of voter turnout by females was not to last, however. Turnout among women has gradually increased over the years. Over the past forty years, men have had a voter turnout rate of about 60.2% while turnout among women averaged 60.6% (U.S. Census Bureau). Such close turnout rates in the modern era suggest that the turnout rate between the genders is no longer a political issue.

Despite gender no longer being a dividing factor in voter turnout, the above data has shown that there is a strong correlation between social factors and likelihood of voting. It has been shown that those over the age of 45 are much more likely to vote than their younger counterparts. Although the gap between black and white voter turnout has shrunk considerably over the past several decades, the white population of the United States still consistently votes at a higher rate than the black population. Moreover, those that are higher educated and have a higher income are more inclined to vote than their less educated, poorer neighbors.

The reasons for being concerned about low voter turnout are clear. In theory, democracy functions best when more people participate. Condorcet’s theorem states that

the more people who participate in voting, the more likely that the best decision will be reached. Aside from that, the current, participating electorate is not representative of the entire population. There seem to be several racial and socio-economic dividing lines between those who vote and those who do not. Without a fully representative electorate, there is little hope that the views of all citizens will be expressed or taken seriously. A democracy in which the views of all citizens are not conveyed cannot seriously be said to be a healthy democracy.

In 2008, two scholars at Stanford University created a formula explaining a person's likelihood of voting. Their formula is as follows: "Likelihood of voting = (Motivation to vote x ability to vote) / Difficulty of voting" (Harder and Krosnik 257). It can be plainly seen from the above formula that the motivation and ability factors would have a positive effect on a person's likelihood of voting. However, what decreases a person's odds of voting would be the difficulty factor. To help remedy these difficulties, it is necessary to address some of the most commonly stated reasons why people do not vote. The following section will attempt to deal with several of those factors.

### III. Why?

#### A. Voter Registration

In the United States, voter registration is often touted as one of the most significant factors keeping people away from the polls. However, before delving into the specific factors of the U.S. registration system, one should have a basic understanding of what voter registration actually is and the purpose behind it. To begin with, the basic concept of voter registration is almost universal. Nearly all countries which hold elections require that voters be registered. The main purpose for this is each country's

interest in preventing voter fraud, either through ineligible people voting or through eligible voters voting more than once. While there is not set international standard, most countries would agree that voter registration should be open to most people within a country, with exceptions for those who do not meet age or citizenship requirements, or have been convicted of serious criminal offenses (“Voter Registration”).

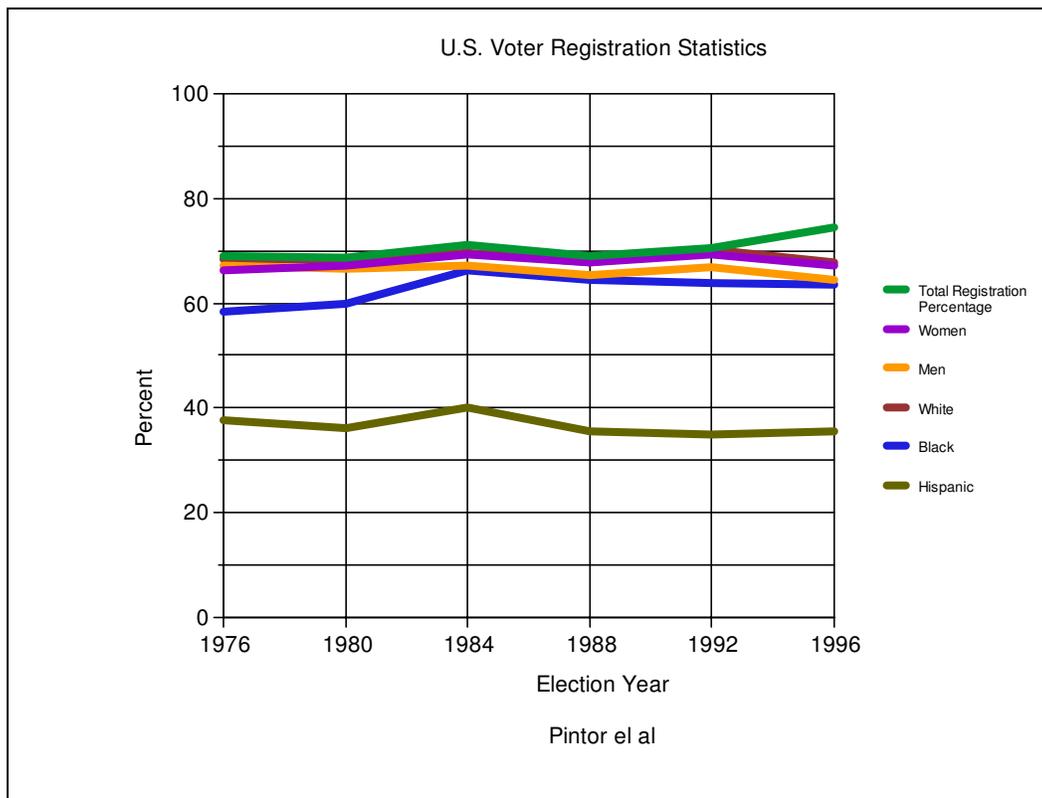
Despite the fact that virtually all countries register their voters, they may not do so under the same circumstances. In fact, there exist two broad systems in which voters may become registered: self-initiated systems and state-initiated systems. As the name suggests, self-initiated systems require that individual voters take responsibility for getting themselves registered to vote. One advantage of this type of registration system is that the voter lists generated will be specifically used in electoral proceedings. There is no need to provide other private information, which may be required by some other forms of government paperwork. As such, privacy is protected in self-initiated systems. However, such systems do tend to leave otherwise eligible voters out of the process. For a variety of reasons, people may not know how to register or may find registering inconvenient, and therefore not register and never vote. On the other hand, state-initiated systems have their own benefits and limitations. In state-initiated systems, voter registration is virtually automatic. Through a variety of methods the local or national government takes responsibility for ensuring that all eligible voters are registered. The advantage here is that virtually all of those who are eligible to vote may do so since they are automatically registered. However, the problem with this system presents itself when lists of voters are not maintained properly by the appropriate authorities (“Voter Registration”). It should be noted that in Europe and Oceania, where most of the world’s

established democracies are located, the majority of countries have automatic voter registration (Fisher). However, in the United States, voter registration is anything but automatic.

It has been a longstanding theory that easing voter registration requirements would result in higher voter turnout percentages. In the southern United States during the 1960s, this theory seemed to be validated. In 1960, only 29% of African Americans were registered to vote in the South. In Mississippi, for example, the registration rate was only 5%. The reason for such low registration rates among the black population was what were collectively known as Jim Crow laws. Such laws required African Americans to pay a poll tax, pass impossible literacy tests, or be subjected to intimidation by the local courts (Patterson5).

Thankfully, such racist practices were not to last. In 1964, the 24<sup>th</sup> Amendment was ratified and added to the U.S. Constitution. The amendment prohibited any type of poll tax requirement before one was allowed to vote in federal elections. Also, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 banned the use of literacy tests before voting, and threatened to send federal supervisors to elections where voter registration had been suppressed. Such legislation had a profound effect. Black voter registration in the South went from 29% in 1960 to nearly 60% in 1970. As a result of this doubling of registration numbers, black voter turnout also nearly doubled during the same time period (Patterson 6).

However, the validity of the theory that increased voter registration meant increased voter turnout was soon called into question. Consider the following data compiled by Pintor and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.



The above graph shows that each of the studied groups, its registration percentage either increased or remained nearly the same over the period from 1976 to 1996. In fact, overall voter registration went from 69% of the VAP to 74.4% of the VAP in 1996. However, voter turnout percentages did not follow a similar pattern. While registration may have increased 5.4%, turnout actually decreased by a full 5% (U.S. Census Bureau).

As time has progressed, the claim that turnout increases along with registration has continued to show its weaknesses. Even after the 1960s, there continued to exist quite strict voter registration laws. For example, some states required that people live at the same address for one year before they could register, registration offices had inconvenient hours or had inconvenient locations, purges of the voter rolls were common, and some areas required registration a full year in advance of an election. However, most

of these regulations are now defunct. For example, it is now illegal for a state's residency requirement to be more than 30 days before an election. Moreover, some states allow registration on Election Day. These states are Maine, Idaho, New Hampshire, Minnesota, Wyoming, and Wisconsin. But perhaps the most significant piece of legislation affecting voter registration has been the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, or the Motor Voter Act. This law had a variety of effects. It required that voter registration materials be offered to people at public assistance facilities or when people apply for or renew their driver's license. The law also requires that states offer voter registration by mail, and prohibits the purging of voters from the rolls without just cause (Patterson 7). Although passed in 1993, the law did not go into effect until the beginning of 1995. By almost any standard, the law was an outstanding success at registering new voters. In just over a year and a half, more than 12 million new voters had registered to vote under the legislation (Pintor et al 65). However, it is worth noting that between 1996, the year after the law was enacted, and the next election in 2000, actual voter turnout dropped by more than 5 million voters (Patterson 8).

The above data has shown that there is no direct cause and effect relationship between high voter registration and higher voter turnout. However, this does not mean that the two are completely unrelated. Lax registration requirements may not lead to higher turnout, but strict registration rules certainly has the possibility of constricting overall turnout.

As has been stated above, the United States has a self-initiated voter registration system, where U.S. citizens must actively sign up to vote. This runs contrary to the methods of many other countries across the globe including Mexico, Japan, Pakistan,

Botswana, and Switzerland just to name a few (“Voter Registration”). The fact that the U.S. lacks automatic voter registration concerns many scholars and political scientists. According to Eric Plutzer, a professor at Penn State University, the lack of automatic registration is the reason why more than a third of eligible adults are not registered to vote. Of most concern to Plutzer is the fact that most of the unregistered citizens fall into the young age group of 18 to thirty years old. He claims that when these young people move residences for college, marriage, or their careers, that their focus is not on registering to vote. Instead they are more concerned with the new and exciting details of their lives, often pushing voter registration to the wayside. Also, these young people may not be familiar with the voter registration process, or know where their polling place is located when they move to a new geographical location (Fergus).

The issue of relocating brings up another registration requirement present in the United States. Earlier it was mentioned that most states have a residency requirement time period before new citizens are allowed to vote. As of 2003, 44 states had a residency requirement for new residents. Today, these residency requirements limited to no more than 30 days prior to a federal election, but this still has the possibility of keeping a good many otherwise eligible voters from going to the polls (Patterson 7).

Finally, there is another, although less talked about, reason why the U.S. voter registration process may keep some people away from the polls. This last reason is jury duty. In most places within the United States, registering to vote also places that person’s name into the jury pool for that location. The argument here is that many of the poor within society cannot afford to take time off from work in order to serve on a jury.

Rather than risk being unable to pay their bills, some of the underprivileged may simply forgo voter registration and therefore their ability to vote (Glen).

The lack of automatic registration, residency requirements, and the possibility of jury duty are all reasons why the current U.S. voter registration system may reduce voter turnout. It is just one piece of the low voter turnout puzzle. However, the obvious caution here is that fixing the registration system would not necessarily fix the problem of low turnout as well. As was described above, registration requirements have become more lax over the years, and yet turnout has continued to decline, or at the very least it has continued to stay relatively low. Registration requirements may help to explain why turnout is low, but it does not help to explain why turnout is low compared to forty years ago.

#### B. Electoral System

Another factor that contributes to low voter turnout in the U.S. is the electoral system as a whole. In the vast majority of local and state elections, and certainly all federal elections, the United States has a plurality voting system. What this means is that the candidate with the most votes wins the election outright (Hrebenar 74). Simply stated, it is a winner-take-all system. In contrast, many other countries use what is known as proportional voting. In these systems, the winner does not take all. Instead, each group that manages to get a somewhat substantial percentage of the vote receives some form of representation (Hrebenar 73).

There is a push from some within the United States that the U.S. needs to adopt a proportional representation scheme for its elections. These people argue that proportional representation will bring out many new voters. They claim that some potential voters

stay home on Election Day now because there is little hope of their party winning. In a plurality system, there is little practical reason for someone to vote if their candidate or party has little chance of winning a majority of the vote. In fact, plurality systems tend to work best in two-party systems because the system itself prevents third parties from becoming too influential. By contrast, supporters of proportional representation claim that the possibility of more parties being represented will increase voter turnout. The more differences between parties, the more the electorate tends to vote, and there will presumably be more difference with an increase in the number of political parties. (Dalton 909).

However, it is unclear how proportional representation could increase voter turnout when only presidential elections are concerned. There can only be one President of the United States, so it is unlikely that minority representation could be included into the presidential election without a major overhaul to the entire executive branch of government. Perhaps the saving grace for proportional representation advocates is the fact that the presidential election is always accompanied by Congressional elections as well. An argument (however tenuous) could be made that more voters would show up to vote in proportional Congressional elections, and would therefore also show up to vote for the president as well.

In any case, another facet of the U.S. electoral system which some claim keeps people away from the polls is the presence of the Electoral College. In the early days of the United States, the Framers of the Constitution had a rather difficult time deciding on how the President was to be elected. Some suggested a strict popular vote, some wanted Congress to handle the task, and others wanted to delegate the task to the state

legislatures. To compromise between these competing ideas, the compromise of the Electoral College was set up. Under this system, each state is able to choose a number of electors equal to the number of representatives that state has in Congress (Patterson 138). Such a compromise was successful in the Constitutional Convention because it kept the states as an important part of the selection process, it kept the federal government from becoming too entangled with the election process, and it allowed for local elites (the electors) to make the ultimate decision about the President rather than relying on a potentially uninformed public (Hrebenar et al 87).

However, the successful compromise which led to the creation of the Electoral Compromise was not to last long. Technical problems arose with the Electoral College in the year 1800. In that election, it was unclear who was to become President and who would be relegated to Vice President due to the way the electors cast their votes. To solve this problem, an amendment had to be added to the U.S. Constitution (Felchner 6). Again, in the election of 1824, disputes over the Electoral College arose when Andrew Jackson ran against John Quincy Adams. In this election, Jackson was outraged when he won the popular vote, but did not gain the Presidency because Adams received more votes in the College. The same apparent problem has been present in several other U.S. Presidential elections throughout the nation's history. The one in most recent memory, of course, is the election of 2000, where George W. Bush lost the popular vote but won the vote in the Electoral College, thereby making him President (Patterson 138).

The above historical examples show the technical problems that arise from the mere presence of the Electoral College. Those examples do not show what, if any, effect the College has on potential voters. However, to be sure, the Electoral College does have

an effect on voters and voter turnout. First, consider that under the current set-up, a candidate could win the election by winning a particular set of 11 states. That means a candidate could become President by carrying only 22% of the states in the nation. Obviously, those states are greatly overrepresented in the Electoral College. However, it is also the case that the states with the smallest populations are also overrepresented. This would include states like Alaska, North Dakota, and Wyoming. The reason for this is that each state is guaranteed a minimum of three electors in the Electoral College, whether or not their populations would normally warrant so many representatives (Hrebennar et al 90).

Because the Electoral College reduces each state to a set number of electoral votes, candidates are able to perform a little bit of voter calculus during the election. Depending on the number of votes the candidate feels he still needs to win, he or she may decide to spend more time in a state in hopes of getting its electoral votes. This also means that some states see little competition between candidates because they are seen as being of little value to the candidate. This does tend to have an effect on voter turnout. In 2000, voter turnout was up more than 2% over 1996. However, turnout decreased in nine states which were not contested. In contrast, turnout was up in states that were deemed worth of contesting for their electoral votes (Patterson 142).

In many cases, what is not studied is the psychological effects of the electoral college on the average nonvoter. What purpose is their in voting in the election is not decided by the people? Moreover, assuming that electors are supposed to show the will of the people, there is the problem of faithless electors. These electors, although historically rare, do not vote the will of their state's population, but rather cast their vote

for another candidate. So, not only do the people not choose the President, but those who are supposed to show the will of the people sometimes do not live up to that standard (Felchner 10). All of these reasons are possible factors that keep people away from the polls because of the Electoral College.

Another proposed reason for low voter turnout that can be blamed on the U.S. electoral system is the possibility of what is known as voter fatigue. This phenomenon can reference several phenomenons. One form of voter fatigue happens when people are called to the polls too often. As a result, people get tired of voting, and tend to participate less often. However, this form of voter fatigue seems to play only a minimal role in U.S. elections. Presidential elections are held only every four years, and local elections would call voters to the polls only about once per year, possibly even less often. Also, since the U.S. is not a direct democracy, there are no constant calls to vote on national referenda. Instead, the more probable form of voter fatigue to be found in the U.S. has to deal with the length of Presidential campaigns. It seems hard to believe, but Labor Day, the first weekend in September, was the traditional start to the Presidential election season in the United States for much of its history. That gave the candidates only a few short months to run their campaigns (Patterson 121). However, in recent elections, campaigns have started more than a year in advance of the actual election. The hope is that by starting so early, the candidate will be able to expound on all of his positions, gain momentum, and generate lasting interest. However, the actual effect of this long campaign seems only to be voter annoyance. Such stretched-out campaigns “dull citizens’ interest and taxes their attention...rather than stimulating interest, the long campaign blunts it” (Patterson 101).

### C. Low Social Capital

The term “social capital” has been subject to various definitions over time. Basically, what this term refers to is the variety of social ties between individuals, and the differing connections that arise between individuals as a result of participating in various activities (Putnam 19). The most prominent researcher of social capital today would have to be Robert Putnam, author of the book *Bowling Alone*, where he argues that social capital is one of the great goods of society, but that social capital is sadly in the decline. This decline in social capital means that people participate in group activities less, trust others less, and are generally more cynical, just to name a few of the symptoms.

While Putnam only briefly deals with voting in his book, it cannot be denied that the effects of low social capital have a depressing effect on voter turnout. Bringing together findings from differing sources will establish this link. Some scholars have found that the more civic organizations a person is involved in, the more he or she is likely to vote (Harder and Krosnick 535). However, it should be noted that membership in civic organizations has steadily declined since the late 1950s (Putnam 54). Interestingly enough, a relatively steady decline can be seen in voter turnout data from the late 1950s on into today (U.S. Census Bureau). One cautionary note here is that there is no claim that voting and membership in civic organizations have any sort of causal relationship with one another, but that there at least seems to be the appearance of a correlation. Another social factor that helps to determine the likelihood that an individual will vote is how trusting an individual is. Simply stated, the more trusting a person, the more likely that he or she is to vote (Harder and Krosnick 536). However, surveys from 1960-1999 found that Americans today are far less trusting than they were only forty

years ago (Putnam 140). Again, it should be noted that a similar decline in voter turnout happened during this same time period. However, scholars are relatively quick to point out that they do not believe that low trust alone could account for lowering voter turnout. Low trust in others could by itself motivate people to go to the polls in order to correct the damage done by others (Harder and Krosnick 535). Moreover, in 2005 the BBC conducted a study about politics and mistrust. They found that in Britain (where they are also experiencing low voter turnout), citizens have always been mistrustful of their government, even during prosperous times. If citizens have always been mistrustful of government, it would make no sense for them just to stop voting within the past several decades because of that mistrust (Wheeler).

#### D. Voting Procedures

Another piece of the low turnout puzzle is the variety of methods in which people may vote. As will be demonstrated, some voting methods are more effective than others. The methods that will be discussed here are voting by mail, early voting, same-day voter registration, and mandatory voting. So far, only one state allows its citizens to vote via the mail. This state is Oregon. Due to a high number of absentee ballots in a 1994 election, the state legislature voted in 1996 for all of the state's elections to be conducted through the mail. Supporters of such a measure claimed that voting through the mail would greatly reduce the cost of elections because there would be no need for polling places, it makes it easier on people who would otherwise have difficulty getting to the polls on Election Day, and that it would increase voter turnout (Felchner 110). The results of voting through the mail have been somewhat mixed. It has been found that for traditionally low-turnout elections, voting by mail tends to increase turnout. However,

the same cannot be said for the high profile elections. Any gains in turnout in Presidential elections were modest at best. This is because voting by mail does not seem to attract new voters, but instead helps to ensure that people usually vote actually do so. Finally, experts warn that voting through the mail is more susceptible to fraud than normal, polling place elections, and that the slight increase in voter turnout may just be a result of the practice's relative newness (Fortier 42).

Early voting is yet another voting procedure that many hoped would increase voter turnout in elections. The hope was that by giving citizens an opportunity to vote at their leisure, instead of on one specific day, that people would be more inclined to vote. Despite this hope, not all states have adopted early voting procedures. In fact, it is estimated that around half of the states do not have any form of early voting. The states with the highest early voter participation are Arkansas, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and West Virginia. Strictly from a numbers perspective, the outlook seemed positive for early voting. When early voting programs started in 1996, only about 2% of voters utilized the system. However, by 2004, almost 8% of voters used early voting. Such results looked promising. However, early voting cannot be said to increase voter turnout. The procedure raises turnout levels in some states, while actually decreasing turnout in others. Moreover, it was found that when early voting does raise turnout, it is not because of the presence of new voters. Instead, it ensures that all those who normally are able to do so (Fortier 45).

If voting by mail and early voting, do not work, then what type of voting procedure could raise turnout? The answer is compulsory voting, a process that is not used within the United States. Compulsory voting is used in a variety of countries around

the world, perhaps most notably in Australia. However, compulsory voting is also a feature of the political system in Peru, Belgium, Cyprus, Argentina, and about 30 other countries around the world. These governments argue that for democracy to be effective, the people must participate, and the best way of ensuring participation is to make it mandatory. To be sure, some nations have compulsory voting laws, but do not actually enforce them. However, some states do have penalties for nonvoters. These penalties include fines, the possibility of jail time, and the loss of citizenship for repeat offenders. To be sure, these penalties and the degree to which they are enforced differ from country to country (Pintor et al 107). However, one thing is clear: whether punishments are enforced or not, states with compulsory voting laws do have higher turnout rates. Nations with non-compulsory voting typically average a turnout of about 68%. That rate increases to almost 75% in states which have compulsory voting laws, but do not enforce them. Finally, states which do enforce their compulsory voting laws typically show turnouts of around 86% (Pintor et al 110).

#### E. Weak Political Parties

Another possible reason for low voter turnout in the United States can be linked back to the strength of the two major political parties. Evidence for a connection can be seen by referencing a graph on page 11 above. From 1828 until about 1900, voter turnout was at its highest historical levels in U.S. history. While there may be a variety of reasons for such high turnout during that time period, most scholars give most of the credit to political parties. During this time period, political parties were a great deal more competitive than they are today. Also, they tended to spend a great deal of time organizing at the local level, ensuring that all citizens had a chance to join in. However,

these strong political parties soon became too powerful, often being accused of illegal practices such as buying votes and voter intimidation. As the abuses by these huge parties became more apparent, the American voter became somewhat less tolerant of overly-powerful political organizations. As a result, party membership began to decline (McDonald).

While the decline in political party involvement eventually leveled off, involvement took another nose dive starting in the 1970s. To be fair, involvement in almost all types of political activities decreased during that time, but involvement with political parties decreased some 42% from 1973 until 1994. Also, during that time period, not only did party involvement decrease, but so did party affiliation. More and more people in the United States have stopped identifying themselves as either Democrat or Republican, and instead label themselves independents. (Putnam 45). The same problem seems to be plaguing the United Kingdom. Sources there report that a huge drop in party loyalty has taken place there since the 1980s. Interestingly enough, during that time since party loyalty has dropped, voter turnout has decreased almost 20 percentage points (Wheeler). Regardless of whether people see political parties as a force for good or ill, there is a strong correlation between the strength of political parties and higher voter turnout.

#### F. Psychological Issues

A number of psychological factors within the minds of voters may actually affect voter turnout. The biggest of these factors is what is known as political efficacy. When people believe that their vote has a chance of really making a difference within an election, their political efficacy goes up, and many times they believe that they will

become what is known as the pivotal voter. Simply stated, the higher one sees his or her political efficacy, the more likely that person is to vote. This theory is bolstered by the fact that turnout tends to increase in close elections. In such tight races, people believe that their individual vote really does count for something (Harder and Krosnick 536). Numerous psychological studies have confirmed that when people believe there is a high likelihood of their being the pivotal voter, they are more apt to vote. These studies found that while people's belief in being pivotal shrinks with age, most people still overestimate their actual effectiveness (Duffy and Tavits 603).

The fact that some people only desire to vote when there is a higher chance of their being pivotal can create problems, especially in a society where data is readily available. A 2008 Associated Press article stated that the odds of one person actually being the deciding vote in the Presidential race are actually about 60 million to 1, or the same odds as getting struck by lightning twice. To be sure, the odds of casting the deciding vote within a state are somewhat better. To cast the deciding vote in New Mexico the odds are only 1 in 6 million. However, the odds of an individual's vote making a difference in Oklahoma are 1 in 20.5 billion (Borenstein). While such data may be interesting to a degree, it is sure effect voters' perception of their efficacy. It's hard to see how such a report could do anything except lower efficacy beliefs, and therefore convince at least some would-be-voters to just stay home instead.

The above referenced Associated Press article is not the only one of its kind. A 2008 Los Angeles Times article told people to stay home on Election Day if they were still undecided about who to vote for. It stated that a person's vote was unlikely to make any real difference, and that voting should just be left up to the people who really know

what they are talking about (Stein). While media reports such as these may tend to discourage some members of the public from voting, it is unlikely that large numbers of people are dissuaded from going to the polls because they are told by the media that their vote will not count for very much. At most, negative reports like the ones referenced above are simply annoyances to those who desire high voter turnout.

#### H. Conclusion

It should suffice to say after going through all of the above material that there is no one, single cause for low voter turnout within the United States. Reasons for low voter turnout range from voter registration barriers to the psychological beliefs of potential voters. However, this is not to say that all of the factors contributing to low turnout are to be considered equal in their culpability. It seems as if the biggest reasons why turnout is low in the United States is that there are a variety of voter registration hurdles to be met by potential voters, and low social capital seems to be another big player in what is keeping turnout down. In fact, low social capital, it could be argued, is one of the reasons for weakening political parties in the United States. Remember, weakening political parties were identified as another potential answer to why turnout is low. However, while the two most seemingly important issues have been identified, it should be noted that it is the cumulative effect of all the material above, and probably some not discussed factors, that together make voter turnout in the United States low.

#### IV. Proposals

Thus far, many of the main causes for low voter turnout in the U.S. have been identified. While identification is a good first step, the next logical step is to discuss what can be done to rectify the situation. There are many possible solutions tackling various aspects of the turnout problem, and three will be discussed here. First, in order to help solve the voter registration problem in the U.S., voter registration should be automatic. In other words, the United States needs to become a state-initiated registration system. The U.S. would join the ranks of most other established democracies if it were to employ such a plan. There are various ways of going about such a registration scheme, but one possible way would be to tie voter registration in with Social Security numbers. Every citizen has a Social Security number, so why is it that every American is not automatically eligible to vote. While voter registration is easier today than ever before, removing the registration burden altogether could do no harm to turnout numbers. If anything, universal registration would make higher turnouts much more likely.

Second, in an effort to stop the disenfranchisement felt by some Americans, the electoral system in the United States needs an overhaul. To begin with, the Electoral College should be put to rest. Perhaps the institution served its purpose initially, but it has now become a relic. Instead of relying on electors, the United States should adopt a national popular vote, where the candidate with the most votes actually wins. In this way, each person has an incentive to go out and vote for the candidate of their choice. No longer would Democratic voters in Tennessee want to stay home on Election Day because of feeling that they could not make a difference in such a red state. The same could be said about Republican voters in traditionally blue states. In any case, abolishing

the Electoral College would at least make every potential voter feels as if his or her vote counted.

Third, perhaps the best way to solve the problem of low voter turnout would be to make voting compulsory. It was shown above that the nations which have compulsory voting, enforced or not, consistently have much higher voter turnout than those countries in which voting is optional. While perhaps the best way to fix the problem, this is also the solution least likely to come about in the United States. Americans value their freedoms greatly, including being free not to vote. Moreover, such a policy position would be extremely untenable, so no politician is likely to seriously endorse mandatory voting in the United States.

## V. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated several things. First, voter turnout in the United States is, by most accounts, on the decline. Even those who claim that voter turnout is not declining must admit that the percentage of eligible Americans who vote is not satisfactory. Second, this paper also determined several of the key causes for this low turnout. No one cause seems to be superior to the others, but several key causes were also identified. Moreover, this paper also gave several possible solutions to the problem of low turnout. While some of the proposed solutions may not be politically feasible within the United States, they at least give the possibility of hope for the future, a hope that voter turnout in the United States will be higher than any other democracy around the globe.

## VI. A Glimmer of Hope

While the majority of the above information has focus on the negative news about voter turnout, the Presidential election of 2008 gave a sparkle of hope that high turnout is still possible within the United States. Following the trend of most previous elections, the 2008 race once again produced more voters than ever before, an estimated 133.3 million Americans voted. This follows similar patters, even as turnout rates had declined in years previous. However, what is more exciting is the fact that turnout percentage actually increased a slight amount to 62.5% (“Expert”). Recall that in the last election in 2004, turnout was only estimated to be at 58.3%. Another exciting feature of the 2008 election was that the biggest voter growth was in African American women and Hispanics. In fact, African Americans voted at virtually the same rate as whites. The statistics show that 66% of whites voted, while 65% of blacks did so. Overall, one forth of the voters in the 2008 election were minorities, which is the highest rate ever (“Black Women...”). Statistics such as these are good news for voter participation in the United States. These figures show that individual races are beginning to vote at almost equal levels, or are at least making strides in that direction. Moreover, this last Presidential election showed an overall uptick in voter turnout figures. While the United States could still do much better than 62.5% turnout, such a figure is a step in the right direction.

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