

OVERVIEW

The popular view that Americans do not vote because of apathy is not quite right. It would be much closer to the truth to state that Americans don't register to vote—but once registered, Americans vote at about the same rate as citizens in other nations. Many other factors—having nothing to do with apathy—also shape participation rates. These include age, race, party organization, barriers to registration, and popular views about the significance of elections.

The most powerful determinants of participation are schooling and information, and the next most powerful is age. Race makes a difference, but black participation rates approximate white rates when controls are in place for socio-economic status.

Compared with citizens of other nations, Americans vote at lower rates, but more frequently and for many more offices. For these reasons, elections make a bigger difference in the conduct of public affairs in the United States than elsewhere. Americans also engage somewhat more frequently in various nonelectoral forms of participation, such as writing letters to officeholders, attending meetings, and other political activities.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. Introduction

- *Political participation* refers to the many different ways that people take part in politics and government: voting or trying to influence others to vote, joining a political party or giving money to a candidate for office, keeping informed about government or debating political issues with others, signing a petition, protesting a policy, advocating for a new law, or just writing a letter to an elected leader.

II. A Close Look at Nonvoting

- Two different ways to measure voter turnout yield different perspectives about nonvoting.
 - VAP—Voting age population— persons who have reached 18.
 - Many persons in this group are not legally eligible to vote including convicted felons and non-citizens.
 - In 2008, VAP numbered 231 million including 18 million non-citizens of disenfranchised convicted felons.
 - VEP—Voting eligible population only includes those 18 or older who are eligible to vote.
 - Measured by VAP— National voter turnout was 56.8 percent in 2008
 - Measured by VEP—National voter turnout was 61.7 percent.
 - Since 1948 the gap between VAP and VEP has grown.
- When asked, registered voters who did not vote gave three reasons for not voting:
 - About a quarter of registered voters stated they were too busy or had scheduling conflicts.
 - Family chores or obligations (12 percent)
 - They believed their vote would not matter (12 percent).

- Other proposals to the problem of nonvoting include making Election Day a national holiday or holding elections on weekends.
- Voting prior to elections by mail in ballots or no fault absentee voting has also failed to produce significant increases in voter participation.
 - Forty million registered voters failed to vote in recent elections.
 - Forty million voting-age citizens failed to register in either of the two elections.
- GOTV— Get out the Vote drives have had a limited impact on the problem.
 - Door-to-door canvassing and phone calls to voters were the most effective technique.
 - In 2008, these GOTV efforts only stimulated 38 percent of voters to actually vote.
- In Europe, registration is done by the government.
- In the United States, the burden falls on the individual.
 - Would reducing the cost of registrations increase the percentage of eligible voters who are actually registered?
 - In 1993, Congress passed the motor voter law, which allows people in all fifty states to register to vote when applying for driver's licenses and to register through the mail. Many did register but did not vote.
 - Data still show many have not registered.
- Voting is not the only way to participate; by other measures, Americans may participate in politics more than Europeans.
- Important question: How do different kinds of participation affect the government?

III. The Rise of the American Electorate (THEME A: EXPANDING PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIONS)

A. FROM STATE TO FEDERAL CONTROL

- Initially, states decided who could vote and for which offices.
- This led to wide variation in federal elections.
- Congress has since reduced state prerogatives through law and constitutional amendment.
 - By 1842 law, House members are elected by district.
 - Fifteenth Amendment (1870): Seemed to give suffrage to African Americans.
 - It opened the door to literacy tests, poll taxes, and grandfather clauses.
 - Voting Rights Act of 1965 finally guaranteed blacks the right to vote.
 - Women were given the right to vote by the Nineteenth Amendment (1920); participation rose immediately, but no major impact on electoral outcomes.
 - Eighteen-year-olds given suffrage by Twenty-sixth Amendment (1971); voter turnout among the newly eligible was low, and has continued to fall.
 - In 2008, 52 percent of the eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-old voting population voted.
 - This was higher than 2000 (41 percent) and 2004 (48 percent) but lower than 1972 (55 percent) or 1992 (52 percent).
 - From 1996 to 2004, under-thirty voters only accounted for 17 percent of the electorate; that figure rose to 18 percent in 2008.

B. VOTER TURNOUT

- Debate about declining percentages of eligible adults who vote; two theories:
 - Real decline caused by decreasing popular interest and decreasing party mobilization.
 - Apparent decline, induced in part by the more honest ballot counts of today
 - Parties once printed the ballots.
 - Ballots were cast in public.
 - Parties controlled the counting.
 - Rules regarding voter eligibility were easily circumvented.
 - Australian ballot (standard, printed by the government rather than parties; printed and cast in secret) was adopted throughout the country by 1910.
- Most scholars see some real decline, due to several causes:
 - Registration is more difficult: Longer residency requirements; educational qualifications; discrimination; and registration have to occur far in advance of elections.
 - Florida controversy in 2000 presidential election has provided for some changes to make voting more consistent nationally, but stops short of creating a uniform national voting system.
 - Continuing drop after 1960 cannot be easily explained, and may be a function of how turnout is calculated, rather than a substantial phenomenon.
- Some scholars believe that nonvoters mirror voters in their demographic and ideological composition, so their absence has little effect on electoral outcomes.

IV. Who Participates in Politics? (THEME B: REASONS FOR PARTICIPATION)**A. FORMS OF PARTICIPATION**

- Tendency to exaggerate participation
 - Voting is the commonest form of political participation, but 8 to 10 percent report having voted regularly when they have not.
 - If voting is exaggerated, other forms of participation are also likely to be exaggerated.
- Verba and Nie's six forms of participation characterize six kinds of U.S. citizens:
 - *Inactives*: Rarely vote, contribute to political organizations, or discuss politics (little education, low income, young, many blacks; 22 percent)
 - *Voting specialists*: Vote but do little else; not much education or income, older
 - *Campaigners*: Vote and get involved in campaign activities; more education, interested in politics, identify with a party, take strong positions
 - *Communalists*: Nonpartisan community activists with a local focus
 - *Parochial participants*: Don't vote or participate in campaigns or political organizations, but contact politicians about specific problems
 - *Activists*: Participate in all forms of politics (highly educated, high income, middle-aged; 11 percent)

B. PARTICIPATION: CAUSES AND MEANING

- Political participation of any form is greater among people who have gone to college and are employed. It is greater among white and blacks than Hispanics.
 - These differences are descriptive but make generalization problematic. Religion increasing political participation is too sweeping a statement. “Certain types of religious expression” can sometimes increase political participation.
 - Americans participate in nonvoting activities at higher rates than citizens of other democracies.
 - According to a groundbreaking book published in 2008 by Corwin E. Smidt, factors influencing political participation are complicated.
 - Americans vary by religious tradition but also by their level of public religious practice on a scale (high or low).
- Holding other variables constant (income, race, gender, age, marital status) mainline Protestants are more likely than members of other religious traditions to participate in voluntary associations.
- Regardless of religious tradition, those whose form of religious expression involves high levels of both public and private practice are more likely to join voluntary associations.
- What about religion in relation to political engagement? Religion is a significant factor in determining who votes but no more than education or income.
- One’s form of religious expression has a greater impact in shaping civic rather than political participation.
- The meaning of participation rates:
 - Americans elect more officials and have more elections.
 - Latinos doubled their participation rates in elections between 1996 (5 percent) and 2008 (9 percent).
 - Latino voters gain political information from church membership but also have politically relevant skills and attach quasi-religious meaning to civic engagement.