

Increasing Voter Turnout Rates in the United States

Moving Forward from the National Voter Registration Act of 1993

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5/4/2010

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The United States tends to have low voter turnout in elections when compared with other established democracies. This research examines this trend through analyzing current voter turnout statistics, identifying which specific demographics are not voting, determining the major reasons why citizens are not voting and looking at the implications of not having the voices of these citizens heard. The paper looks at the last time Congress addressed this issue with the National Voter Registration Act of 1993. It evaluates the implementation and effectiveness of the act and finds that it did not have the desired effect of increasing voter turnout. Several more recent voter mobilization campaigns are then identified and their approaches to increasing voter turnout are discussed. The paper concludes with providing a seven step strategy developed from an analysis of the research to guide Congress when it next chooses to address the voter turnout issue legislatively.

Introduction

The act of voting is central to the functioning of a democratic government like that of the United States (Dalton 2008, Downs 1957, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, Shively 2005). As American Journalist Sydney J. Harris once said, “Democracy is the only system that persists in asking the powers that be whether they are the powers that ought to be (www.thinkexist.com).”

Accountability is the major strength of democracy, and the way to insist upon accountability from elected representatives is through voting. Voting in elections is commonly agreed to be one of the major forms of political participation. As James Adams, Jay Dow, and Samuel Merrill III say in an article published in *Political Behavior*, “Normative political theory stresses the intrinsic value of participation (Adams 2006, 67).” On November 19, 1863, in his Gettysburg address, Abraham Lincoln told the American people that the United States government was going to be a, “government of the people, by the people, for the people.” In order for this type of government to be realized it is imperative that the people have a say. As Lijphart says, “Unequal participation spells unequal influence (1997,1).” Walter Judd said that, “People often say that, in a democracy, decisions are made by a majority of the people. Of course, that is not true. Decisions are made by a majority of those who make themselves heard and who vote - a very different thing (www.thinkexist.com).” Hillary Clinton considers voting the “cornerstone of our democracy (Clinton 2000).”

However, not everyone agrees that all citizens should vote. For example, Selwyn Duke argues that democracy requires an educated population, and since not everyone is educated, they should not vote. Duke argues that voter mobilization efforts are detrimental to democracy because they

encourage people to vote who do not have the initiative to vote. Therefore they probably do not have the initiative to learn about the issues and will not make an educated vote. Duke also says that the emphasis should be put on the process, defined as “a systematic series of actions directed to some end,” rather than on the singular action of voting (Duke 2008).

However, it is essential that even uneducated citizens be represented. Political participation through voting is one of the main ways for United States citizens to take advantage of their rights and ensure that they maintain a principle-agent relationship with their elected officials. Citizens must participate in elections in order to elect representatives who understand their needs and will effectively implement policies in order to satisfy these needs. While elected representatives are technically obligated to represent their voting and nonvoting constituents, political science literature suggests that citizens who do not vote do not receive the same degree of consideration and attention that those who are political active receive. These representatives tend to consider themselves less accountable to these constituents than they are to those who are politically active and support them. This is not the way the principle-agent relationship should be working, and it is detrimental to the functioning of a fair and effective democratic government (Mayhew 1974, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, Shively 2005).

There is much debate among political scientists about whether voter turnout has been increasing or decreasing historically. This debate gives rise to arguments about how statistics are compiled, where the numbers come from and what the voter turnout trends actually look like. Some political scientists believe that voter turnout is decreasing exponentially and driving the country into crisis. Others believe the decreasing trend is a result of statistics being compiled in an

incorrect manner (McDonald 2010, McDonald and Popkin 2001, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, Abramson and Aldrich 1982, Samples 2004). The argument will not be discussed in these terms; instead, it will look at the current voter turnout rates in the United States.

Regardless of whether voter turnout is increasing or decreasing, it is suboptimal in the United States (Hill 2006, Patterson 2002, McDonald 2010, Voting 2010, Pintor, Gratschew and Sullivan 2002). Based on this assumption, which empirical research shows to be fact, the question remains which demographics are and are not politically active, and why. After answering this question, another question arises: which actions will promote political involvement and voting among these demographics. Congress last addressed this issue with the National Voter Registration Act of 1993.

The National Voter Registration Act will be discussed from its inception to its finalization. The resulting analysis shows that the act was not effective in the way that it was intended to be and discusses other voter mobilization campaigns that arose to address the remaining issues. Voter mobilization campaigns, while they have been somewhat successful, have overall been limited. They target citizens to vote, but the efforts need to begin long before Election Day in order for people to truly be motivated to participate. Any future legislation that addresses the question of how to increase voting must also address these arguments.

The problem of low voter turnout is a critical problem in society because, if people are not voting, they have no say in public policy decisions. Thus, the democratic process is at risk of failing. This issue should be a priority on the government's domestic public policy agenda, as

justice in public policy can only be achieved by having as many citizens as possible involved in the democratic process.

Part One: Problem Identification

Voter Turnout Statistics

An overview of the voting situation in the United States shows that a significant number of American citizens are not voting. A chart created by Michael McDonald shows both the Voter Eligible Population (VEP) turnout as well as the Voting Age Population (VAP) turnout for Presidential elections between 1948 and 2008. Voting Age Population figures are calculated by dividing the total number of votes in any given election by the number of people in the United States over the age of 18, which is commonly referred to as the “voting-age population;” however, this number includes many people who cannot vote, like certain felons and non-citizens. It is up to the states to set laws that disenfranchise felons, and studies have shown that there are so many of these felons in the United States that measures of population which do not take these numbers into account seriously skew voter turnout rates. All but two states disenfranchise convicted felons for some amount of time during or after their incarceration and eleven states disenfranchise felons permanently (Miles 2004). The Voter Eligible Population figures divide the number of total votes by the number of people eligible to vote, thereby accounting for felons and noncitizens. The difference between these statistics is the basis for many of the arguments about whether voter turnout is increasing or decreasing, since using the VAP turnout rates would make the situation seem worse as opposed to using the VEP turnout

rates. Using either method and looking at the turnout rates for presidential elections, it can be seen that the numbers oscillate mainly between 50 and 60 percent. This means that between 40 and 50 percent of people in the United States did not vote in Presidential elections between 1948 and 2008 (McDonald 2010). This is much less than the average of 80 percent of the electorate which votes in other industrialized democratic countries (Powell 1986).

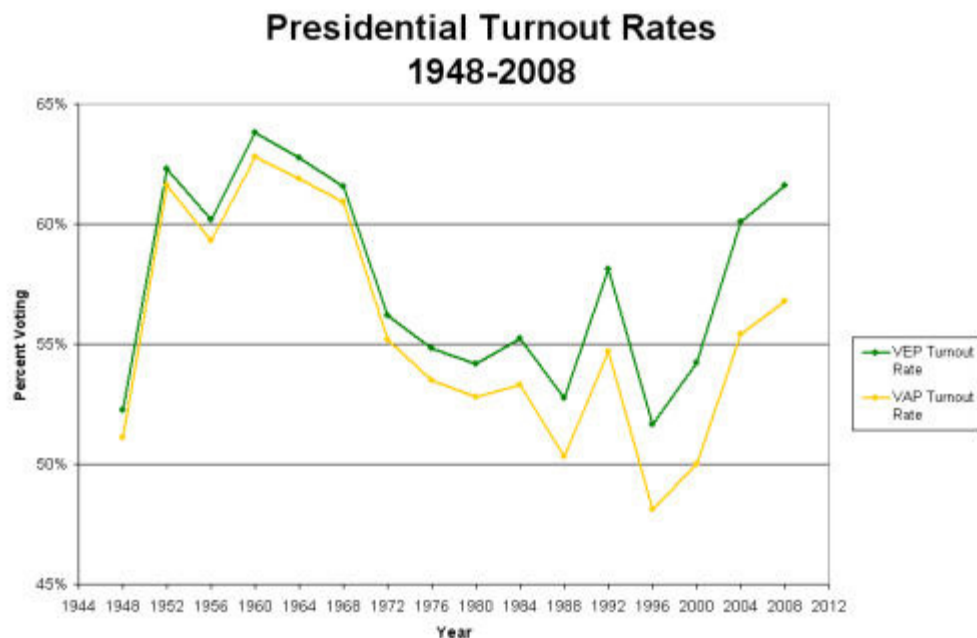


Chart Source: McDonald 2010

Looking more precisely at the numbers, the state with the highest turnout rate in the 2008 Presidential Primaries was New Hampshire, with a turnout rate of 53.6 percent. The state with the lowest turnout rate was Wyoming, with a rate of 2.6 percent. Other states with low numbers included Kansas with 2.9 percent, Maine with 4.9 percent, Alaska with 5.0 percent and Colorado with 5.4 percent. The rest of the states were in the middle percentile (McDonald 2010).

The turnout rates in the actual 2008 Presidential Election increase significantly. The state with the highest turnout rate was Minnesota with 78.2 percent. The states with the lowest were

Hawaii and West Virginia with 50.5 and 50.6 percent respectively. The rest of the states were in the middle (McDonald 2010). For the 2008 Presidential election, the U.S. Census Bureau reports that overall, 63.6 percent of people aged 18 and older voted (Voting 2010). Despite being significantly better than the turnout rates in the primaries, voter turnout overall in the United States is much less than in other established democracies. For example in a study that examined the ratio of votes cast to voters registered from 1945 to 2001 in established democracies, the United States was ranked 120th with a ratio of 66.5. The United Kingdom was ranked 76th with a ratio of 75.2, and Australia was ranked 1st with a ratio of 94.5. Another study that looked at the ratio of votes cast to voting age population ranked the United States 138th with a ratio of 47.7. The United Kingdom was ranked 53rd with a ratio of 73.8, and Australia was ranked 22nd with a ratio of 84.2. Other studies show the same results: United States voter turnout rates are consistently much lower than those of other established democracies (Pintor, Gratschew, and Sullivan 2002).

Who Is Not Voting

The U.S. Census Bureau breaks down voter turnout rates into categories. The results show that certain social groups are not voting. Therefore, these citizens are underrepresented in government since they are not involved in the democratic process.

One of the major factors affecting voter turnout is age. In the 2008 presidential election 48.5 percent of people between the ages of 18 and 24 voted, 60.0 percent of people between the ages of 25 and 44 voted, 69.2 percent of people between the ages of 45 and 64 voted, 74.2 percent of

people between the ages of 65 and 74 voted, and 67.8 percent of people above the age of 75 voted (Voting 2010). This shows that there is a positive correlation between age and voting until the age of 75. The following chart, created using data from the U.S. Census Bureau, shows the consistency of this correlation from 1972 to 2008.

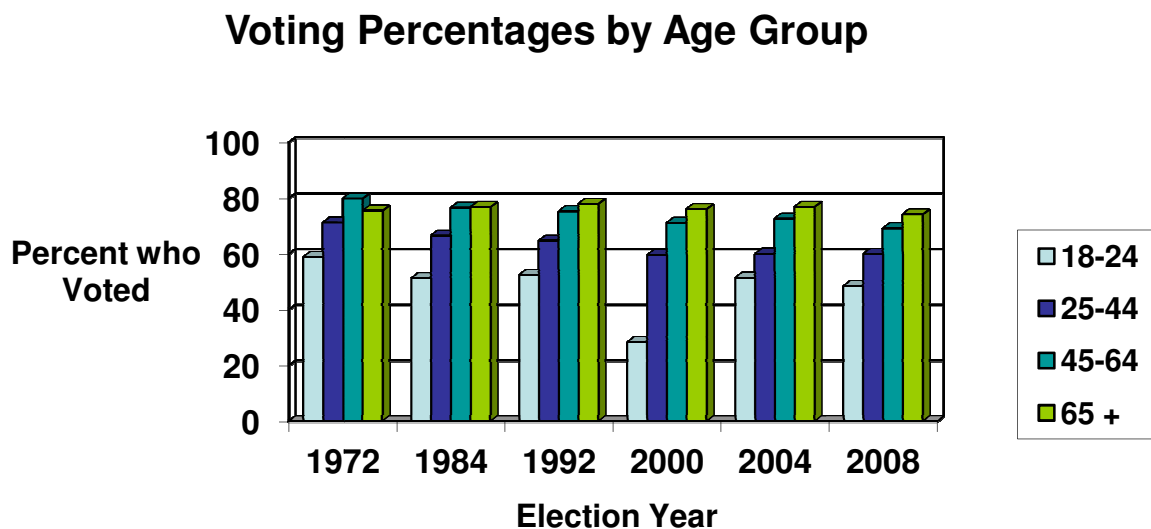
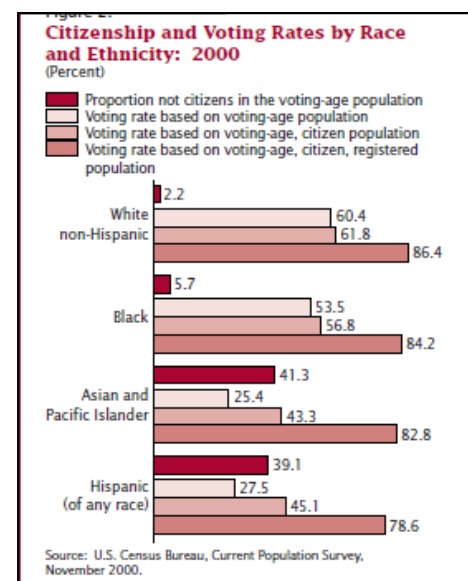


Chart Source: U.S. Census Bureau data

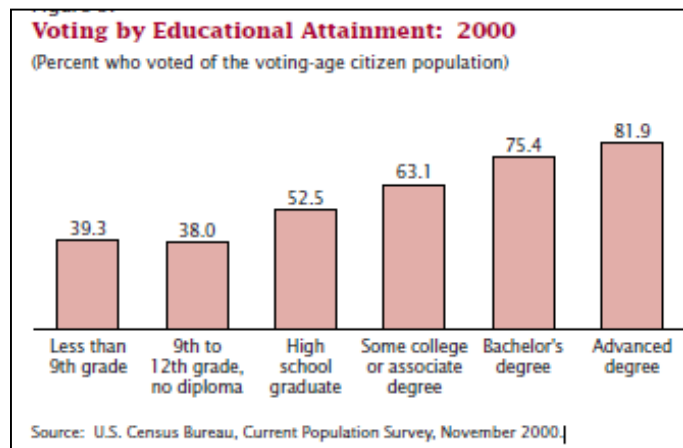
Minority groups, including blacks, Asians, and Hispanics, tend to vote less than Caucasians do. In the 2008 election, 64.7 percent of blacks voted, 47.6 percent of Asians voted, and 49.9 percent of Hispanics voted while 64.4 percent of Caucasians voted (Voting 2010). While these numbers show the lack of political involvement among Asians and Hispanics, they do not show the typical statistics among blacks. The reasons for this increase include that in the 2008



presidential election the United States was facing the possibility of having its first black president. This opportunity most likely accounts for the higher number of black voters than has been recorded in the past. Regardless of this anomaly, the overall statistics show that minority groups are not voting as often in elections. The chart to the right shows that regardless of how voter turnout statistics are compiled, minority groups tend to vote less often than whites do.

Voter turnout increases with education level. In the 2008 presidential election 38.1 percent of people who had less than a ninth grade education voted, 39.9 percent of people who had

completed grades nine through twelve but who had not received a high school diploma voted, 54.9 percent of people with a high school diploma voted, 68.0 percent of people who had some college or an associate's degree voted, 77.0



percent of people with a bachelor's degree voted, and 82.7 percent of people with an advanced educational degree voted (Voting 2010). These statistics show the positive correlation between voting and education. Less educated people are not voting while more educated people are making sure that their voice is heard.

Employment status affects voter turnout. In the 2008 presidential election, 54.7 percent of the 5.8 percent of the United States population who are unemployed voted. Private industry workers voted at a rate of 63.6 percent, 68.0 percent of self-employed workers voted, 76.4 percent of government workers voted, and 60.3 percent of people not in the labor force voted (Voting

2010). The biggest difference is between government workers and unemployed persons.

Government workers vote the most, other workers vote at an average rate, and unemployed workers do not vote as often.

Disabled people and those with difficulties do not tend to vote. In the 2008 presidential election 57.3 percent of people with a disability voted. Out of those who had difficulties but no actual disability, 63.1 percent of people with hearing difficulty voted, 56.8 percent of people with vision difficulty voted, 46.1 percent of people with a cognitive difficulty voted, 56.8 percent of people with ambulatory difficulty voted, 46.4 percent of people with self-care difficulty voted, and 45.7 of people with independent living difficulty voted (Voting 2010). The numbers show that overall people who have any sort of disability or difficulty tend to vote less.

Voter turnout increases with income. In the 2008 presidential election 49.0 percent of people with a household income of less than \$10,000 voted, 51.2 percent of people with a household income between \$10,000 and \$14,999 voted, 55.9 percent of people with a household income between \$15,000 and \$19,999 voted, 56.3 percent of people with a household income between \$20,000 and \$29,999 voted, 62.2 percent of people with a household income between \$30,000 and \$39,999 voted, 64.7 percent of people with a household income between \$40,000 and \$49,999 voted, 70.9 percent of people with a household income between \$50,000 and \$59,999 voted, 76.4 percent of people with a household income between \$75,000 and \$99,999 voted, 78.4 percent of people with a household income between \$100,000 and \$149,999 voted, and 81.6 percent of people with a household income above \$150,000 voted (Voting 2010). These

statistics show the positive relationship between income and voting. As household income increases, voting rates increase dramatically.

Marital status affects voting habits. In the 2008 presidential election 70.2 percent of people who were married with a present spouse voted, 55.9 percent of people who were married but their spouse was absent voted, 61.6 percent of widowed people voted, 59.0 percent of divorced people voted, 53.5 percent of separated people voted, and 53.5 percent of people who had never been married voted (Voting 2010). This shows that those in a stable, married relationship tend to be more politically active.

Implications

There are numerous implications of these groups not voting. Case studies show that candidates and policies favored by men, white voters, older voters, and voters from households with higher annual incomes tend to win out over those favored by women, minority groups, younger voters, and voters from households with lower annual incomes. This suggests that since some demographics vote more than others, their voices are being heard and policies and elections reflect their wishes.

California

Due to its high population of Hispanics, California has been dealing with immigrant issues since the early 1990s. In 1994 California passed Proposition 187 which denied welfare, health care

and public education to illegal immigrants. While Proposition 187 never went into effect due to legal challenges, it did still pass. It is possible to see from the profile of Californian voters in 1994 that Hispanics were not making their voice heard. While Hispanic voters comprised 15 percent of the electorate, only nine percent actually voted in the election. In contrast, 78 percent of white voters voted in the election. The Latinos and young voters voted against the Proposition while white non-Hispanic voters and older voters strongly supported it (Voting 1995).

Another Californian example is when Republican incumbent Pete Wilson won his bid for re-election over Democrat Kathleen Brown in the 1994 California gubernatorial race. White non-Hispanic voters preferred Wilson by 28 percentage points. Latino voters supported Brown by 46 percentage points, and black voters supported Brown by 56 percentage points. Asian voters were divided and preferred Wilson by five percentage points. In terms of age, older voters preferred Wilson and younger voters supported Brown. Wilson was mainly preferred by voters from all education levels. Higher income voters preferred Wilson by 27 percentage points while low income voters preferred Brown by 15 points. Protestants and Catholics preferred Wilson while Jewish, other religious voters and voters with no religion preferred Brown. Women and men both preferred Wilson. This example demonstrates that overall, voters who are wealthier, older, and white are the ones whose voices get heard in elections (Voting 1995).

United States

In the 2000 U.S. General Election, the two main candidates were Al Gore and George W. Bush. Women preferred Gore while men preferred Bush. White voters preferred Bush while Black,

Hispanic, and Asian voters preferred Gore. Voters of all age groups were closely divided but younger voters preferred Gore while voters above the age of 30 preferred Bush. Voters from households with an annual income of less than 49,999 dollars preferred Gore while voters from households with an annual income above 50,000 dollars preferred Bush (US Elections 2000). George W. Bush won the election with the support from white voters, older voters, and voters from households with higher annual incomes. Due to low turnout rates, the voices of minority voters, young voters, and voters from households with lower annual incomes were not sufficient enough to determine the outcome of the election.

In the 2004 U.S. General Election the two main candidates were John Kerry and George W. Bush. Men preferred Bush while women preferred Kerry. White voters preferred Bush while Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and voters of other races preferred Kerry. Voters between the ages of 18 and 29 preferred Kerry while voters over the age of 30 preferred Bush. Voters from households with an annual income of less than 49,999 dollars preferred Kerry while households with an annual income of over 50,000 dollars preferred Bush (US Elections 2004). George W. Bush won the election, again making it clear that men, white voters, older voters, and voters from higher income households were the politically active demographic.

Reasons for not Voting

It is clear that the United States has suboptimal voter turnout rates and that specific demographics historically tend to be less politically active than others. There are many reasons for these trends and they can be examined in either a macroeconomic or a microeconomic

framework. The macro framework looks at systemic reasons why citizens do not vote. The micro framework looks at reasons for lower voter turnout on an individual basis.

Macroeconomic Effects

Ballington (2002) lays out a framework of macro effects on voter turnout. She finds five macro factors that have particularly strong effects on voter turnout. First, the type of electoral system has an effect on whether people feel that all votes are equally important to the outcome (Ballington 2002). The United States uses the plurality voting rule, which means that only one representative is elected from each district and, therefore, a majority is not required to win. The result is that only the largest party is represented. This form of electoral system tends to lead to the elimination of marginal parties which leaves only two main parties. In the United States the resulting effect is that the Democratic and the Republican parties dominate elections. With only two parties competing voters are left with a limited choice. Candidates tend to market themselves as having more extreme views in an attempt to appeal to their bases while most of Americans are somewhere in the moderate middle of the ideological spectrum. Studies have found that the motivation for people to vote under a plurality voting rule is less than the motivation under other voting rules such as a proportional representation system. Accurate Democracy did a study where they found motivation percentages for people to vote under different electoral systems. They recorded the motivation for people to vote in elections for members of the United States House of Representatives as only 38 percent while other countries had motivation rates for their legislatures that were much higher. Those countries that utilized a proportional representation system had the highest motivation rates (Democracy 2010).

Second, the type of registration system used has an effect. If an automatic or compulsory registration system is employed, people are more likely to vote than if they only have the option to register themselves (Ballington 2002). As a recent study by the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law found, the United States has the lowest percentage of voters registered among developed nations. Only 68 percent of eligible voters are currently registered. The study posits that the reason for this is because the registration system in the United States puts the burden of paperwork and effort on the citizen. Countries with higher registration rates put the burden on election officials who add new voters to the registration lists based on government information (Editorial 2009). For example Denmark automatically registers everyone to vote as well as automatically issuing ballot cards to each citizen eligible to vote, which they then present at the polling station. Denmark has high rates of voter turnout, which could arguably be related to this characteristic of their registration and electoral system (Lassen 2005).

Third, if elections are held too closely together, “voter fatigue” occurs. As voters get tired of going to the polls they tend to vote less often (Ballington 2002). Kostadinova’s (2007) findings that electoral concurrence increases voter turnout agree with this effect. When elections for different offices are held on the same day people are more likely to vote. The U.S. Census Bureau also found similar results in that registration and voting rates are higher in years of presidential elections than in years that do not include a presidential election (Jamieson 2002).

Fourth, more competitive elections result in increased voter turnout. If there are more parties and highly salient issues involved in the election more people are likely to vote (Ballington

2002). Potential voters consider whether their vote matters, and if elections are more closely contested they are more likely to think that their individual vote will affect the outcome of the election (Kostadinova 2007).

Lastly, compulsory voting laws tend to result in higher levels of voter turnout. Belgium, Argentina, and Australia were among the first countries to implement these laws in 1892, 1914, and 1924 respectively (Gratschew 2002). These countries each have among the highest voter turnout rates in their respective regions. Other countries such as Nauru, Singapore, and Liechtenstein also have compulsory voting laws and experience extremely high voter turnout as well (Pintor 2002). While the effects of compulsory voting laws are clear, there are strong arguments for and against them.

Proponents argue that decisions made by democratically elected governments gain legitimacy when higher percentages of the citizens vote. They also argue that voting has an educative effect on citizens and will result in citizens having a stronger sense of civic duty. Advocates also argue that it is every citizen's responsibility to partake in elections and elect their representatives. Arguments against compulsory voting laws include the feeling that compulsory voting laws are not in compliance with the freedom and liberty ideals associated with democracy (Gratschew 2002).

Opponents believe that compulsory voting laws might actually depress the political education of the people because citizens will react negatively against their perceived source of oppression: the government. They also argue that it takes resources to maintain and enforce these laws, and that

compulsory laws will result in more blank votes and random voters who check random options on the ballot because they are not interested in the issues but are only voting because they are legally required to do so (Gratschew 2002).

Compulsory voting laws can be applied in different ways. Some countries choose to create the laws without any method of enforcing them just as a way to publicly state that the government feels strongly about its citizens voting. Some countries do enforce the laws with sanctions such as warnings, fines, possible imprisonment, or infringements of civil rights or disenfranchisement. In Peru and Bolivia proof of voting cards are required for certain public benefits. Countries that enforce their compulsory voting laws experience the highest rates of voter turnout, but even countries that have the laws but do not enforce them tend to have higher voter turnout rates than countries that do not have the laws at all (Gratschew 2002).

Compulsory Voting Laws Effect on Voter Turnout

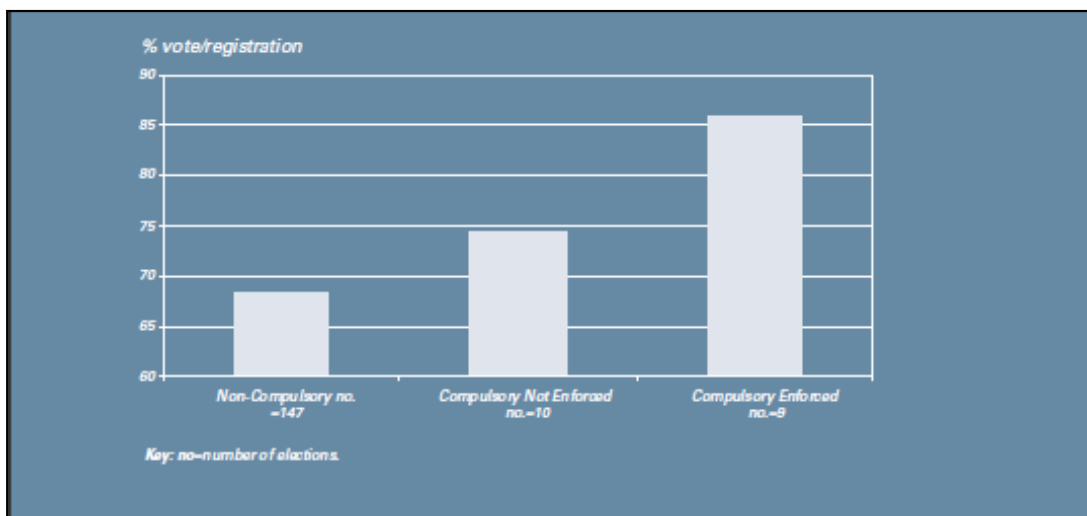


Chart Source: Gratschew 2002

Microeconomic Effects

Micro effects on voter turnout are defined as those reasons which cause the individual person not to vote. The U.S. Census Bureau asked people why they did not vote in the 2008 election. They found that 17.5 percent of people did not vote because they were too busy or had a conflicting schedule, 14.9 percent of people did not vote due to an illness or disability, 13.4 percent of people did not vote because they were not interested in the election, 12.9 percent of people did not vote because they did not like candidates or campaign issues, 11.3 percent of people did not vote for reasons other than the survey's options, 8.8 percent of people did not vote because they were out of town, 7.0 percent of people did not know or refused to respond to the survey, 6.0 percent of people did not vote because of registration problems, 2.7 percent of people did not vote because the polling location was inconvenient, 2.6 percent forgot to vote, 2.6 percent had transportation problems, and 0.2 percent did not vote due to inclement weather (Voting 2010).

Personal attitudes have a major impact on a person's choice to vote or not. Feelings such as disinterest, distrust of government, low sense of civic duty, that elections are not important, that individual votes do not matter, and weak attachments to a political party lower an individual's propensity to vote (Moore 2003). Herrnson found that people vote if they have a high feeling of efficacy and feel that their vote makes a difference. Internal efficacy implies that a person feels that they can personally cause political change while external efficacy means that a person feels that the overall political system is fair and effective. Having either type of efficacy will make a person more likely to vote. If a person does not have high efficacy then they will not think that

voting matters and therefore will not vote. If people distrust the government then they will not vote. People with a low sense of civic duty and obligation will not vote (Herrnson 2005).

A 1999 study conducted by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) found that young people specifically do not tend to vote due to feelings of distrust towards the government, lack of understanding about the way the system works, and a lack of time. Young people also tend to feel that their vote does not matter and that politicians are all corrupt (Ballington 2002). Gans agrees with Ballington's findings that young people do not trust politicians but further argues that, "The generation that is growing up now is looking at personal betterment, not the betterment of the future (Gans 1989)." Registration requirements, attending college away from home, serving in the military, and moving around a lot are also reason why young people do not tend to vote (Moore 2003).

Alienation and indifference to the candidates are also reasons why people do not vote. If potential voters feel like the candidates are too distant they feel alienated and, therefore, the gains from voting do not outweigh the costs (Adams 2006). As Ballington states, "This gap between those who govern and those being governed seems to be getting wider and appears to be a fundamental reason for low participation (Ballington 2002)." In addition, if potential voters feel like the candidates and parties are too similar, they do not develop a strong preference and are therefore indifferent. Similarly to when voters feel alienated, feelings of indifference mean that the benefits from voting do not outweigh the costs (Adams 2006). Gans says that often, "There is no candidate who advocates what people perceive as their needs and who people trust to deliver on promises once elected (Gans 1989).

Adams (2006) explains how on Election Day voters have three choices: abstain, vote for candidate one, and vote for candidate two. If a voter's utility for voting for one of the candidates does not outweigh their utility from not voting, then a voter will not choose to vote. The utility a citizen derives from voting for one of the candidates is, according to Adams, a function of party identification, ideological distance to each candidate, policy distance to each candidates, voter perception of candidate character, race, and retrospective evaluations of the national economy (Adams 2006). This logic makes it clear that if potential voters do not feel strongly about one candidate or the other due to alienation or indifference, they will not vote.

Lack of information is another major reason why people choose not to vote. Feddersen and Pesendorfer (1996, 1999) argue that the optimal choice for an uninformed citizen is to abstain from voting. Regardless of whether or not they have a preferred outcome, they choose to leave the voting responsibility to more informed citizens to increase the likelihood that the best electoral option will be chosen. Other scholars such as Matsusaka (1995), Coupé and Noury (2004, and (Ghirardato and Katz (2002) agree on the effect that lack of information has on voting. These scholars explain that uninformed citizens do not vote because they worry that they are going to make the wrong decision because they do not have enough correct information about the issues (Matsusaka 1995). Most potential voters do not feel that they have perfect information about these issues and therefore are unable to develop a strong candidate preference (Matsusaka 1995). It is also important to note that voters who are more confident about their voting decisions derive a higher utility from voting than those who are uncertain about their choice. Those who are not confident in their ability to make the right choice are likely to abstain

from voting (Lassen 2005). Thus, access to information is a critical factor when citizens are choosing whether or not to vote.

Part Two: Agenda Setting

The problems with low voter turnout that current statistics indicate have been present historically as well. In the 1990s political scientists widely believed that voter turnout rates were decreasing dramatically. The U.S. Census Report of 1991 showed that voter turnout rates had been on the decline since 1964 (Decline). While

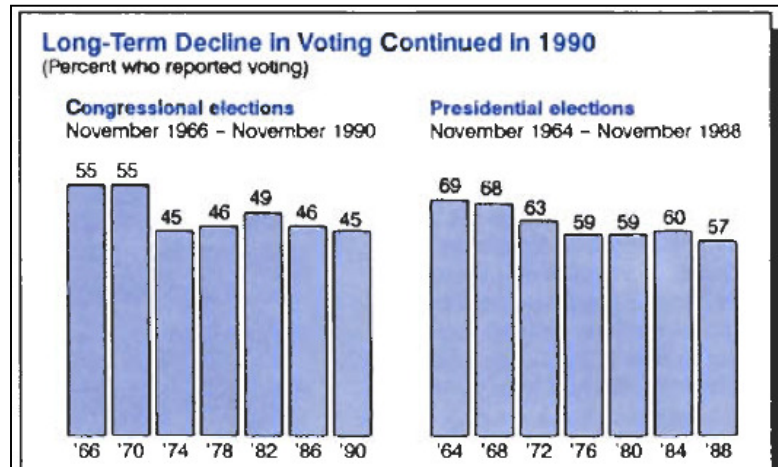


Chart Source: U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration Bureau of the Census 1991

this could have been due to disparities in the way turnout statistics were compiled (McDonald and Popkin 2001), the end result was that legislators felt that the American public was neglecting to participate in elections. Most experts at the time believed that dense, complicated registration laws were the main cause behind this lack of voting (Dreier 1994). As John Samples told the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, “Leaders in the discipline also thought that reducing the costs of voting – primarily through easier registration – would arrest this steady decline and fortify American democracy (Samples 2001).” People were moving around a lot and every time they switched residences they were dropped from the registration rolls. By the time people realized they were not on the rolls it was usually past the registration deadline for the next

election (Dreier 1994). Democrats in particular pushed for election reform legislation because major Democratic power bases were among the groups that were not voting. Due to pressures from Democratic politicians and advocates and, ultimately, the election of a Democratic president (Taylor 1998), Congress addressed the issue of low voter turnout legislatively through the National Voter Registration Act of 1993.

Part Three: Policy Formulation

Congress passed the National Voter Registration Act, commonly referred to as the Motor Voter Bill, in 1993. It aimed to link voter registration to applying for driver's licenses and other public certificates starting in 1991. Attitudes in Congress at the time were in favor of the "inclusion of all voters." Al Swift, D-Wash., Chairman of the House Administration Subcommittee on Elections and cosponsor of the original bill, articulated the opinion that large numbers of Americans were not voting because there were too many obstacles to registration in place. The act was geared to eliminate some of these obstacles (Motor 1993).

President Bush was in favor of the goals of the bill but thought that the way it was going to be implemented would allow for fraud and incur high administrative costs for states. Other opponents argued that the registration process already in place was not overly difficult and making it even easier to register would result in unqualified citizens voting. Proponents compared it to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, claiming that it would not only increase the overall size of the electorate but also increase relative voting power of minorities (About 2008).

The bill was cosponsored by Republican Mark. O. Hatfield from Oregon. He agreed to cosponsor the bill only after the bill was amended to include stronger antifraud language. Opponents on the Senate Rules Committee led by Mitch McConnell, a Republican from Kentucky, argued that there was no evidence to prove that a motor voter system of registration would increase voter turnout. Despite these objections the Senate Rules Committee approved the bill 7-4. The bill then moved to the Senate floor. Two attempts to invoke cloture both failed (Motor 1993).

In 1992 the cloture vote passed on the Senate floor. Bob Kasten, a Republican from Wisconsin, proposed an amendment that would impose uniform federal standards on the state product liability laws. Sponsors of the bill pulled the vote from the floor until they had enough votes to overturn the proposed amendment (Motor 1993). Two days later the Senate voted against the amendment (National 1993). The Senate also rejected another Republican amendment which would have made the bill's regulations voluntary and allotted \$25 million from 1992 to 1994 to help states that wanted to implement the motor voter system (Motor 1993).

The Senate then rejected a number of subsequently proposed Republican amendments, including an anti-crime amendment. The Senate finally voted 62 to 37 to pass the bill on May 20, 1992. The House then passed the Senate-approved version of the bill on June 16, 1992. The bill then moved to the stage where Presidential approval was necessary. Democrats urged Bush to sign the bill with House Speaker Thomas S. Foley, a Democrat from Washington, quoted as saying, "How the President of the United States can make an argument against expanding the opportunities of citizens to participate in their government is beyond me." Despite these

pressures Bush vetoed the bill on July 2, 1992. Bush said that although he was in support of “legislation that would assist the states in implementing appropriate reforms in order to make voter registration easier for the American public,” he would not “accept legislation that imposes an unnecessary and costly Federal regime on the states and that is, in addition, an open invitation to fraud and corruption.” The Senate was unable to reach the two-thirds vote necessary to overturn the veto, voting 62-38 to pass the bill (Motor 1993).

A similar bill, HR2, PL 102-31, was introduced in the following Congress. While the bill had failed the last time it was introduced, 1993 was marked by having a Democrat elected as President for the first time in twelve years. President Bill Clinton signed the bill into law on May 20, 1993 (Motor 1993).

Part Four: Policy Implementation

The National Voter Registration Act of 1993 became public law 103-31. The act began with three findings. Congress declared in the bill that “the right of citizens of the United States to vote is a fundamental right.” The bill stated that it is the responsibility of the government to promote taking advantage of that right, and that discriminatory or unfair registration laws can lower voter participation and disproportionately affect participation of groups such as racial minorities (National 1993).

The bill identified four main goals. First, it aimed to implement procedures that would increase the number of eligible citizens registered to vote. Second, it wanted to make it possible for state

and local governments to implement these procedures in a way that would increase citizen political participation. Third, it wanted to do these two things while maintaining the integrity of the election process. Fourth, it intended to facilitate the process of maintaining accurate voter registration rolls (Samples 2001).

To achieve these goals, the Motor Voter Bill established three new methods of voter registration. First, everyone over the age of 18 who obtained a driver's license was automatically registered to vote as well as anyone who renewed their license. In addition, any changes made to information provided on a driver's license would be automatically updated in the registration system (National 1993). While states had to make voter registration part of their application for a driver's license, the method they wanted to use was up to their discretion. This introduced issues such as which forms should be used, how to gather the correct information, how to handle applicants who did not wish to be registered to vote, language requirements for minority groups, and how to ensure that data was compiled accurately and given to the correct election offices (Rogers 2009).

Second, people could register to vote by mailing in letters or postcards. However if someone was a first time voter in a jurisdiction and registered by mail, they could be required to vote in person in their first election. This provision was meant to limit voter fraud. This requirement would not apply if the voter was exempt under certain provisions that allowed them to utilize absentee voting due to disabilities, handicaps, or other specific circumstances (National 1993).

Third, states were required to designate voter registration agencies in a number of public offices. All state offices that provided public assistance or services to people with disabilities would be required to be voter registration agencies. States were permitted to set up registration facilities in public schools, public libraries, welfare offices, and unemployment offices. City and county clerk offices could also be designated as voter registration agencies, meaning that prospective voters could register when obtaining marriage, fishing, or hunting licenses. Armed Forces recruitment offices also had to be designated as registration agencies (National 1993).

The act applied to all the states that already had pre-election registration laws and had to be enacted by either January 1, 1995 or January 1, 1996 depending on current state registration laws (National 1993). This meant that the act did not apply to states with no registration at all such as North Dakota. It also did not apply to states with same-day registration such as Idaho, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. The act also only applied to federal elections, although states quickly realized that creating separate registration systems for state and federal elections was inefficient so they used the registration system outlined by the act for all elections (Rogers 2009).

Many states initially did not like the new registration system created by the act. State legislatures saw registration laws as belonging to state jurisdiction and did not believe that Congress had the ability to regulate these laws. However the courts have upheld the constitutionality of the act under the Tenth Amendment. The courts have also given it legitimacy under Congress's authority to enforce the 14th and 15th Amendments (Rogers 2009). While the

states were required by law and judicial affirmation to follow the law, actual enforcement was often weak and this contributed to the limited success of the act.

The act was developed with an awareness of the social groups who generally do not vote and the overall reasons why they do not. By placing registration facilities in all offices of state-funded programs that provide services to people with disabilities, the act addressed the issue that disabled people tend not to vote. Allowing registration by mail also facilitated the registration process for disabled persons as well as citizens who are too busy to go to a registration facility. Placing registration facilities in schools, welfare offices, and unemployment offices addressed several demographics that do not vote such as young people, members of low income households, and unemployed workers. Automatically registering voters when they obtained drivers licenses further facilitated the process both for young people and all potential voters. The idea was that if the process was easy and accessible then citizens would be more likely to vote.

Part Five: Policy Evaluation

The Motor Voter Bill was unable to fix the problem of low voter turnout in the United States.

Although registration rolls increased by 20 percent from 1994 to 1998, John Samples, Director of the Center for Representative Government at the Cato Institute, considers the act a failure.

While many political scientists and experts believed that increasing voter registration would result in increased voter turnout, this did not prove true. While the law added 11 million names to the registration lists, voter turnout rates have not improved since the passing of the bill. Due to noncompliance and lack of enforcement, in 2006 only 60 percent of citizens in households

with annual incomes of less than 25,000 dollars were registered to vote while over 80 percent of citizens in households earning 100,000 dollars or more were registered (Rogers 2009). Samples (2001) said, “The world of voting turnout before and after ‘Motor Voter’ looks much the same.” Not only was the bill unsuccessful at boosting voter turnout rates, it also incurred high administrative costs (Samples 2001).

Motor Voter may have actually worked against protecting the integrity of the election process and facilitating the maintenance of accurate registration rolls. New registration procedures under the act made it more difficult to verify the identity of potential voters. Under the act, expensive mailings were required to verify that a person was no longer a voter and should be removed from the rolls. Due to limited resources, state and local governments did not always send out the mailings and this resulted in significant numbers of voters remaining on the registration rolls who should not have been there. For example, one study found that one in every five names on the Indiana registration rolls is inaccurate. A recent study in Georgia found over 15,000 dead people still recorded on the registration rolls. The Federal Election Commission reported that in 1998 Alaska had 502,968 names on its registration rolls while the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that Alaska only had a voting age population of 437,000. These examples show that the registration rolls remain inaccurate despite Motor Voter legislation and perhaps the legislation even exacerbated the problem (Samples 2001).

Motor Voter legislation was unable to protect the integrity of the election process and instead facilitated voter fraud. Experts suggest that facilitating mail-in and absentee voting increases fraud since it allows charlatans to register and vote while pretending to be a dead person or

someone who has changed residences. This was a significant problem in the 2000 presidential election. The Miami Herald reported on January 22, 2001 that at least 2,000 fraudulent votes had been cast in roughly a third of the counties in Florida and roughly 6,000 fraudulent votes had been cast statewide. It was reported that numerous dead people, felons, and otherwise unqualified voters had been voting (Samples 2001). By facilitating fraud and manipulation of the system, Motor Voter increased the feelings of distrust towards the system that keeps many Americans from voting.

Another major issue with the effectiveness of the act was a lack of compliance and enforcement. Many states did not comply with certain provisions such as establishing registration agencies in the correct offices. When states did not comply, the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division often did not force them to do so, although there have been some attempts at enforcement. One problem was that the secretary of state was usually in charge of elections but did not typically hold authority over the agencies that were now supposed to be registration facilities and in 2006 the courts found in *Harkless v. Blackwell* that the secretary of state could not be held responsible if agencies failed to act as voter registration agencies in compliance with the act. However the Sixth Circuit court later reversed the original decision to clarify the responsibility of the states to comply with the act and to affirm the authority of election officials to force agencies to comply. In 2005 the courts rejected Michigan's claim in *ACORN v. Miller* that the state did not have to comply with the act until the federal government reimbursed the state for the administrative costs of implementing the program. In 2008 Missouri contested the act but courts ordered Missouri to establish registration agencies in the correctly designated offices (Rogers 2009). Since legal

challenges have arisen from 1993 to 2008 it is clear that many states are still not in full compliance with the requirements of the law and often do not think they need to be.

While Motor Voter addressed many important issues that keep potential voters from going to the polls it left many issues unaddressed and was not seen as effective legislation. As shown by the current 2008 voter turnout statistics, many American citizens are still not voting. Congress has not tried again to address the issue legislatively, and this has led to many other attempts at voter mobilization through other voter mobilization campaigns and organizations.

Voter Mobilization Campaign Case Studies

Choose or Lose

Choose or Lose was an MTV-sponsored call to action for the 2004 election. Its webpage greets visitors with a bright, colorful, simple interface. Visitors can choose to view recent headlines, send in their “two cents,” search for other youths with common interests in their area to discuss issues, and provides a “Voting 101” option. The “Voting 101” page offers numerous how-to and informational articles centered on voting. Articles educate readers on topics such as how to cast a vote, what the electoral college is and why it exists, how to obtain an absentee ballot, how to register, swing states, candidate debates, the difference between Bush and Kerry’s stances on important issues such as the economy, and more. These articles are all easy to read and accessible to the young audience that Choose or Lose appears to be targeting. The tagline reads “Twenty Million Loud,” and the website defines this term as, “a national campaign of

organizations mobilizing more than 20 million young adults age 18 to 30 to vote and be a deciding factor in the 2004 presidential election (Choose).”

This campaign is directed at mobilizing young voters which is the demographic that typically votes the least often in elections. It addresses the concern of potential voters not voting due to being uninformed by providing easy to understand information about the major issues. By informing potential voters about the major issues in the election it attempts to keep people from feeling disinterested and indifferent about the election. Providing information about candidate debates and explaining the difference between the candidates’ stances on important issues also tries to help potential voters avoid the feeling of indifference. The campaign clearly means to speak to the young potential voters in a language that they will understand to try to make them feel less alienated by the political process. By providing informational and how-to articles about the voting process it tries to overcome the obstacle of young people not voting because they do not understand the process.

Rock the Vote

Rock the Vote was founded twenty years ago and the website claims that it has “registered more young people to vote than any other organization or campaign.” It asserts that it is the “best-informed place online where young people can find out what they need to know before casting a ballot.” The Rock the Vote website is grabs attention with a black background and bright red and white letters urging visitors to “Register to Vote.” The front page is covered in calls to action such as “It’s time to get it done. Finish health care reform. Take action now,” and

“Tragedy in Haiti. The need doesn’t stop. Find out how you can help.” There is an area where popular music artists are featured talking about the importance of political participation and representation. There are other interactive options for visitors such as a playlist, merchandise, other ways to connect with Rock the Vote such as Facebook and twitter, a blog, research about young voters, an election center where visitors can monitor elections by state, and polls. The website also provides an Issues Center that highlights major current issues such as clean energy, green jobs, health care, higher education, and election reform. Every page has numerous links where visitors can click to “Learn more about this issue” or “Take immediate action on this.” Rock the Vote defines its mission as being, “to engage and build political power for young people in order to achieve progress and change in our country (Rock the Vote).”

Rock the Vote is aimed at mobilizing young people to vote. It also appears to be geared towards a black audience. It addresses the feelings of alienation and being uninformed that plague young potential voters by insisting that each individual vote matters. By using calls to action and interactive forms of communication that appeal to young people it attempts to keep young voters from being disinterested in the political process. The constant calls to action keep reinforcing the idea that each person’s vote does matter, which counteracts the feeling of unimportance that keeps young people and minorities from voting.

Hip Hop Action Summit

The Hip Hop Action Summit was founded in 2001. The website greets visitors with an immediate, “Hip Hop Team Vote Wants You to... Register to Vote.” The webpage is interactive

and filled with links to upcoming events, news updates, press releases, donation opportunities, informational pages, and videos. The Hip Hop Action Summit is “dedicated to harnessing the cultural relevance of Hip-Hop music to serve as a catalyst for education advocacy and other societal concerns fundamental to the empowerment of youth.” It is a non-partisan, non-profit organization comprised of Hip-Hop artists, leaders in the entertainment industry, education and civil rights advocates, and youth leaders. The organization believes that Hip-Hop music can be used to stimulate youth participation in the political process to fight against major issues such as poverty and injustice. It is dedicated to fighting against social inequalities, poverty, educational disparities, discrimination, HIV/Aids, and police brutality. It advocates universal health care, equality in the justice system, clean environment, and reparations for years of damage done to African Americans (Hip-Hop).

The Hip-Hop Action Summit is aimed at blacks and other minorities. It is a call to action meant to get these societal groups engaged in the fight for equality through participation in the political process. The integration of Hip-Hop music and popular culture in the message appeals to young people by bringing the importance of political participation into their world. This helps with the problem that people do not vote because they are disinterested or do not understand the process. By emphasizing and providing information on important issues that directly affect the target audience, the Hip-Hop Action Summit seeks to get people to vote who might not have due to being uninformed and feeling alienated or indifferent. By appealing to young people and minorities using youth leaders and minority Hip Hop artists, the Summit is trying to mobilize voters by appealing to them with members of their demographic. As Michelson (2003) found, this form of messaging is effective at motivating citizens to vote.

Voto Latino

Voto Latino greets visitors by saying, “It’s your country... represent!” Voto Latino is a non-profit, nonpartisan organization founded in 2004 whose mission is to “increase American Latino youth civic participation by both increasing voter turnout and political involvement among this group.” It attempts to increase voter registration as well as engage with youth through multimedia awareness campaigns and pop culture. Voto Latino was responsible for the 2006 Text2Represent Campaign which reminded subscribers to register and vote through text message reminders sent to their cell phones. Voto Latino continued this campaign through the 2008 election in key battleground states. Voto Latino created the “La Pasion de la Decision” television series featuring celebrities such as Rosario Dawson (the founder of Voto Latino), Jane Fonda and Perez Hilton among others. They developed a television program called “Crash the Parties” with SiTV where they sent two young journalists to report from the Republican and Democratic National Conventions. Voto Latino organized an Artist Coalition comprised of over 35 celebrities such as Jessica Alba, Eva Longoria, Fat Joe and Jennifer Lopez to encourage political participation. Voto Latino found that voter participation rates for Latinos were five points higher than the national average in battleground states where Voto Latino exerted significant effort. The organization claims to reach over 100 million individuals with their programs and announcements. Voto Latino encourages voting and all political participation but specifically focuses on immigration issues (Voto).

Voto Latino is aimed at increasing political participation and voting among Latinos. It focuses on getting Latinos and young people to feel important in the political process. The mobilization message is similar to the ones used in the Michelson (2003) study of ethnic solidarity and civic duty. The use of popular Latino celebrities keeps potential voters from feeling alienated and distrusting the process. By focusing on issues important to Latinos such as immigration it discourages feelings of disinterest and indifference. By sending out text message alert reminders to register and vote it helps avoid citizens not voting due to busy schedules and forgetting about Election Day. Awareness campaigns help potential voters understand the process and to realize that their vote matters.

Get Out Her Vote

Get Out Her Vote (GOHV) was a campaign during the 2008 election created by the Feminist Majority Foundation to urge women to vote. The webpage is white, pink and purple, and urges women to, “Vote as if your life depends on it!” The major issues emphasized are the right to abortion and birth control, global warming and affirmative action. GOHV was a nonpartisan campaign that specifically encouraged young women and “students of color” to engage in political participation. The website offers feminist merchandise and inspirational videos. The campaign provided action tool kits to help students get involved and launch GOHV campaigns on their campuses. The tool kit provided participants with informational brochures, information about how to spread the word on campus, a 30 and a 60 second public service announcement, full color polling fliers and register fliers (Get).

The Get Out Her Vote Campaign targeted women, young voters, and minorities to encourage political participation among these demographics. GOHV used volunteers to disseminate information to potential voters and facilitate registration for students. These tactics were meant to overcome the problems of potential voters abstaining from voting due to being uninformed, disinterested, or not understanding the process. By emphasizing issues important to women they encouraged women to feel that their vote matters and that they should not be indifferent to the election.

Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism

The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism created a Voter Information Center for the 2008 presidential election. The organization published a Get Out the Vote 2008 Guide to provide members with “tools, resources and information to help your congregation or community plan a successful voter engagement effort in advance of Election Day.” The guide encouraged voter registration and political participation specifically for Jewish congregations but also for general communities. The organization provided many materials for potential voters including timelines to keep citizens aware of the election and on track to be ready to vote on Election Day, tips for effective voter registration drives, ideas for informative issue nights and candidate forums, resources to assist voters with disabilities, and ways to help members understand the major campaign issues through Jewish texts. It also supplied sample flyers, bulletins, articles, postcards and letters. It provided rabbis with helpful tips and guidelines to encourage political participation without taking partisan positions. The organization also provided informational materials regarding voter rights, how to register, how to obtain an absentee ballot, and key points

about the candidates. It urged American Jews to vote to ensure that they had a say in government policies towards health care, foreign aid, civil rights, business, and support for Israel. The website urges the importance of the coming four years in terms of public policy, social justice, and judges being confirmed to the bench to show members that it is crucial that they cast their vote on Election Day to make their voices heard. The website reads, “Every vote counts and plays a defining role in setting policy agendas. It is our civic duty to register promptly, educate ourselves about the critical issues, and vote (Religious).”

The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism’s Get Out the Vote Campaign targets the Jewish Community as well as the general community. It attempts to educate members about the issues and teach them how to educate their greater communities about major issues to overcome the issue of potential voters being uninformed. It emphasizes the idea of civic duty to assure citizens that their vote matters and provides members with sample materials to encourage voter turnout. It gives tips on how to help disabled voters get to the polls to help with the problem that many disabled people do not vote. By providing timelines to keep voters on track it addresses the problem that people do not vote due to busy schedules and forgetting about Election Day. By emphasizing issues important to members of the Jewish Community the organization seeks to keep Jewish potential voters from feeling disinterested and indifferent to the outcome of the election.

New Voters Project: The Student PIRGs

The Student PIRGs' New Voters Project was established 25 years ago to mobilize young voters. It aims to show young voters that they are important, that their vote matters, and to improve the techniques used to reach this age range. In 2008 they implemented the "What's Your Plan?" campaign to get young people interested and invested in major issues important to this demographic. The organization utilized over 500 student volunteers in 28 states to appear at fundraisers, town hall meetings and stump speeches on the campaign trail. The volunteers spoke directly with the presidential candidates 106 times to urge them to pay attention to young voters. They submitted photo petitions asking candidates about their stances on important youth issues such as healthcare, financial security, global warming, and college affordability. The organization integrated newer technological techniques such as texting and Facebook with traditional grassroots mobilization efforts to reach young voters. The organization focused their grassroots efforts on 100 campuses in 20 states and was able to register 118,000 young voters. In the days prior to the election the organization sent 440,000 personal voting reminders via text messaging. The campaign also placed poll-watchers at polling areas to identify and remove any student voting barriers. The organization asserts that "When you pay attention to young people, they will turn out." The organization's website provides visitors with voting information such as why vote, voting 101, know your rights, state election offices, registration deadlines, voting absentee, early voting, and polling places. It also provides research results and studies, news releases, campaign materials, and a link to register to vote (New).

This campaign focused on mobilizing the young demographic through technological techniques such as texting and Facebook. By addressing issues that matter to young people it helps young people stay informed about important issues and therefore keep them from feeling disinterested,

alienated, or indifferent to the election. By mobilizing young voters using other young people the organization encourages positive reception of the get out the vote message. The organization focused on getting young people to realize that their vote matters. The tactic of sending personal voting reminders sent via text message was aimed at avoiding the problem of citizens being busy and forgetting to vote. The organization provided simple voting information to ensure that young potential voters could register and vote easily as well as could understand the process.

Smackdown Your Vote

Smackdown Your Vote was a campaign organized by the World Wrestling Entertainment Inc. It was geared at getting potential voters between the ages of 18 and 30 to vote. It set up the candidates in the 2008 presidential election as two wrestlers about to engage in a fight. The website has links to find information about polling places and times to vote, information about major issues, surveys and polls, and comments from WWE Superstars and Divas about critical election issues. There are recorded Public Service Announcements from WWE Superstar Shelton Benjamin and WWE Diva Michelle McCool encouraging viewers to “Smackdown their vote on Election Day, November 4.” WWE Superstars and Divas attended the Democratic and Republican National Conventions to encourage voters aged 30 and younger to vote. Visitors to the website can watch interviews of the Superstars and Divas speaking with politicians and celebrities at the conventions (Smackdown).

Smackdown Your Vote was targeted at mainly male voters under the age of 30. It focused on fostering awareness of the election and the election process to keep people from not voting due

to forgetting or not understanding the process. It provided information on the issues to make sure that potential voters felt informed and ready to vote. By presenting the information through WWE Superstars and Divas it was attempting to overcome the issues of disinterest and alienation that keep citizens from voting. The overall attempt of this campaign was to provide potential young male voters with essential information needed to participate in the election in a way that this demographic could understand.

League of Women Voters

The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan political organization founded in 1920 to “improve our systems of government and impact public policies through citizen education and advocacy.” It is a grassroots organization located in each of the 50 states. The website allows visitors to look at news and events, projects, issues and take action. It keeps members informed of current events as well as up-to-date on the current issues. It encourages voting through providing information about how to vote, candidate responses on major policy issues, debates, links to register to vote and voting information in Spanish (League).

The League of Women Voters voter mobilization efforts encourage everyone to vote with an emphasis on Spanish-speaking and women voters. The organization provides information to facilitate the voting process and political participation in general by keeping potential voters informed of the issues and aware of the process. By providing information on debates and candidate responses to major policy issues the organization attempts to avoid potential voters feeling alienated or indifferent to the outcome of the election.

Project Vote Smart

Project Vote Smart markets itself as “The Voter’s Self-Defense System.” It provides the means for people to find information about their representatives and to stay up-to-date on election issues. It provides biographical information about elected representatives, voting records, issue positions, interest group ratings, public statements and campaign finance records. Information about how to register to vote, ballots, issues, legislation and state-specific information is also provided (Project Vote Smart).

Project Vote Smart targets all potential voters to encourage their political participation. It mobilizes voters through informing them about the candidates personally as well as about the issues. Informing potential voters about the candidates personally by providing biographies, voting records, issue positions, group ratings, public statements and campaign finance records helps to counter feelings of distrust towards politicians. Providing information on the specific election issues as well as candidate stances helps potential voters avoid feeling indifferent or alienated. Information about the registration and voting procedural process helps make sure that potential voters understand the process.

Declare Yourself

Declare Yourself was established in 2003 as a nonprofit, nonpartisan campaign that aims to make voting part of youth culture. It utilizes videos, advertisements by popular actors, social

networking sites, press releases, news articles, voting FAQs, information about the government and a blog to help integrate political issues and voting into the lives of young citizens. The campaign relies on media, retail partnerships, celebrity spokespeople as well as online and cellular technology to infiltrate pop culture and schools with the importance of voting. Declare Yourself provides an online registration tool which the organization used to register over 2.2 million young people in 2008. Over five million people signed up to receive text reminders on their cell phones. Their “Only You Can Silence Yourself” multimedia campaign featuring popular actress Jessica Alba reached over 100 million viewers through publications in numerous major magazines (Declare).

Declare Yourself targets young people from all angles to make voting a part of youth culture. Its techniques focus on emphasizing the importance of every vote, making sure young voters are informed about the voting process and integrating voting into youth culture in a way that avoids feelings of alienation and indifference towards the political process. Issue awareness keeps potential voters feeling informed and capable of voting. Texts remind people to vote so that they do not forget. The online registration tool helps overcome registration problems.

Part Six: Strategy to Increase Voter Turnout

Although Motor Voter law and voter mobilization campaigns have tried to increase voter turnout, they have not been successful. As Duke (2008) argued, the process of political involvement needs to be promoted rather than just the singular act of voting. An effective strategy is one that involves several steps where each step builds on the one before it. The end

result will be an educated and enthusiastic populace that will be politically active. The first step is teaching civic duty at a young age. The next step is changing attitudes towards politics. The third step is educating the public about the issues. The fourth step is reforming the National Voter Registration Act to further simplify the voting and registration process. The fifth step is supporting electoral concurrence to avoid voter fatigue. The sixth step is voter mobilization efforts. The seventh and last step is implementing compulsory voting laws. This step by step strategy is one that Congress should consider when next addressing the issue of low voter turnout. The last time Congress looked at the issue legislatively was in 1993 and as Samples (2001) says, “Motor Voter seems ripe for reform.”

The first step to increasing voter turnout in a positive way is teaching civic duty at a young age to start getting younger voters involved. As Robertson says, “Voting is an acquired rather than instinctive behavior that needs to be cultivated and encouraged (Robertson 2004).” Since adolescence is a longer life phase, many 24-year-olds do not yet consider themselves to be adults and do not feel obligated to vote. High school curriculums avoid topics concerning civic duty or democracy so the idea of participating in these ideals is strange to many young people (Robertson 2004). Lowering the voting age would encourage political participation at a younger, more impressionable age and would instill a stronger sense of voting being part of their civic duty in young citizens. Supporting preparatory exercises in school such as mock elections would help politicize young citizens and make the election process more understandable to them (Ballington 2002). Encouraging political participation in schools at a younger age would also help young people become more active members of society. If parents and teachers encouraged children to get involved in local politics at a young age they would be more likely to vote and

participate in politics once they reached voting age (Patterson 2002). Gans feels that families and schools are not – and should be – teaching values greater than individual self interest. He says that, “Somewhere in the educational system, we have to inculcate values larger than the self (Gans 1989).” Any policy that will be successful in the long term at increasing voter turnout will have to start early and teach young people the importance of political participation.

The second step is to change attitudes towards political participation among the adult populace. Some of the major obstacles to voting are that people do not have high efficacy regarding the importance of their vote, feel alienated or indifferent to the candidates, have a weak connection to political parties, distrust the government and have a low sense of civic duty (Ballington 2002). While teaching civic duty at a young age will help begin to change these attitudes, involvement in political organizations could also be a solution to change attitudes and increase voter turnout (Michelson 2003). Encouraging the growth of organizations in minority areas could lead to increased political involvement among these groups and encouraging involvement in youth organizations could lead to increased voter turnout by young voters. Promoting political organizations that incorporate other demographics that typically do not vote such as members of lower income households, unmarried citizens, disabled persons, less educated citizens and unemployed workers could increase the political involvement of these groups as well. Through organizational affiliation and encouragement of political participation, attitudes towards politics can be improved.

The third step is to build upon the change in attitudes and educate the public about the major issues. Matsusaka (1995) found that a person has to have enough information about the

candidates and issues in order to develop a preference that will result in voting. As previously discussed, Feddersen and Pesendorfer (1996, 1999) found that the optimal choice for an uninformed citizen was to abstain from voting. Each potential voter therefore needs to know what policies the candidates plan to implement once they are elected as well as what consequences these policies will have once they are implemented. According to Lassen (2005), a voter has to be confident about their choice in order to vote. If voters have more information they are more likely to develop a preference and feel confident that their preference is the right choice. Public information campaigns, school visits, office visits, information displays, and brochure distribution can be effective methods of disseminating information about issues (Ballington 2002). Distributing information about major political issues in simple, engaging formats will inspire citizens to be more informed.

The fourth step is to make the process of actually registering and voting easier. A 2002 Voter Turnout Global Report published by IDEA suggested ways to make voting and registration easier and increase voter participation. Options include having Election Day be on a weekend or making Election Day a holiday. Placing polling facilities in convenient areas and providing free transportation to the facilities are other options to facilitate voting. These policies would help motivate citizens to vote who avoid the polls due to being too busy, having a conflicting schedule or being unable to get to polling locations independently. Internet registration and voting would also facilitate these processes (Voter 2002). Placing registration facilities in places where people are likely to frequent would also facilitate voting and registration (Ballington 2002). If registration and voting processes are easier then citizens will be more likely to

participate. This goal could be partly accomplished through reforming the National Voter Registration Act.

The fifth step is to have fewer elections and to have elections for different offices on the same day. Kostadinova (2007) found that electoral concurrence is important to increasing voter turnout. Electoral concurrence refers to holding elections for different political offices such as president and congressional or state and federal on the same day. This decreases the number of elections and addresses the “voter fatigue” obstacle to voter participation identified by Ballington (2002). Fewer elections and being able to vote for multiple offices at once will result in voters placing more importance on Election Day and choosing to participate.

The sixth step is voter mobilization efforts such as the voter mobilization campaigns discussed earlier. Mobilization efforts are very important to taking people to the next step of acting on their understanding of their civic duty and actually voting (Michelson 2003). In Michelson’s study, door-to-door appeals to Latinos based on ethnic solidarity as well as civic duty appeals were shown to have a significantly positive effect on voter turnout. These appeals would most likely work for other minority groups as well. Michelson found that potential Latino voters reacted well when the “get out the vote” message came from other Latinos (Michelson 2003). This finding suggests that voter mobilization efforts aimed at minorities and executed by minorities would be effective. It could similarly be suggested that get out the vote efforts towards any demographic group, if executed by members of that group, would significantly increase the political participation of these groups. However it is important to note that studies have shown that certain mass mobilization campaigns such as telemarketing calls to voters are

not effective. The messages tend to sound mechanical and rushed. While these calls are inexpensive, they are not a bargain because the ineffectiveness of the calls results in the cost per vote being about \$250 which is much more expensive than other methods of voter mobilization (Gerber 2005). Other mobilization efforts such as internet, text, and advertising campaigns or door-to-door targeting should prove successful at giving potential voters the last reminder and push to turn out on Election Day.

The last step is implementing compulsory voting laws. Although these laws can be said to interfere with democratic ideals of freedom, result in more blank or random votes and incur administrative costs, compulsory voting laws clearly increase voter participation (Gratschew 2002). If increased voter turnout is a goal that the government is truly committed to attaining, compulsory voting laws are a possible last resort solution. If the first six steps are followed, however, compulsory voting laws should not be necessary.

Conclusion

The issue of low voter turnout in elections in the United States is an important issue that needs to be addressed by Congress. The National Voter Registration Act of 1993 was not a sufficient or effective solution. It is now 17 years later and voter participation rates remain unchanged. The evidence demonstrates that there are a multitude of reasons that explain why potential voters do not vote. The step by step strategy outlined above explains the lack of success of both the Motor Voter Act as well as subsequent voter mobilization campaigns. By only focusing on specific demographics and certain reasons for low voter turnout these efforts did not effectively address

other causal factors included in the additional steps. Each of the demographics and reasons for not voting need to be addressed together to significantly increase voter turnout. Any legislation that will dramatically increase voter participation will require significant changes to the election system but Congress should be expected to take extreme action when the problem being addressed is the very effectiveness of America's prized democratic government. The United States has a democratic form of government that only functions effectively when it has the mandate of the people. For this relationship to be possible, American citizens must understand their civic duty to be educated about political issues, participate in the political process, and cast their vote on Election Day.

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