

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

Mobilizing Voters in the 21st Century

What Can Be Done to Increase Voter Turnout in
the United States

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Abstract

Voting is a critical part of our duty as Americans. As one of the oldest democracies in existence, we take great pride in our history of democratically selecting our leaders. However, voter turnout within the United States is much lower than other established democracies and continues to drop in elections.

In this paper the factors that affect voter turnout are identified. Then, steps in place in various parts of America to increase voter turnout are discussed, in addition to some of the key differences between the US electoral system and other democracies, identifying what may cause such a disparity in turnout. Finally, recommendations will be outlined that will likely allow for more widespread democratic turnout in the future.

The research shows that there are some problems inherent in our system that must be addressed. Furthermore, improvements can be made in terms of voter turnout, by increasing incentives for voting, while also making the act of casting a ballot more convenient.

Introduction

Voting is a critical part of our duty as Americans. As one of the oldest democracies in existence, we take great pride in our history of democratically selecting our leaders. However, if this is the case, why is voter turnout within the United States much lower than other established democracies and why has the percentage of registered voters who cast ballots continued to drop over the last number of decades?

In this paper, I will work to identify the factors that affect voter turnout, as well as those that may have contributed to this loss of voter engagement. I will then evaluate steps in place in various parts of America to increase voter turnout as well as briefly examine the differences between the US electoral system and other democracies, identifying what may cause such a disparity in turnout. Finally, I will include some recommendations that will allow for more widespread democratic turnout in the future.

Trends show that turnout in the modern era of Presidential elections has dropped significantly from its peak of 62.8 percent of the voting-age population in 1960.¹ Levels since have consistently been below 60% and sometimes even 50% of eligible voters. Why did this happen? Did something change within America? Why, even at the height of voter turnout in America were rates far below those in other countries, such as Belgium and Malta, where participation reaches 95%? What differs between the electoral system in these countries and our own system?

¹ "U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2012." Census.gov. www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0397.pdf (accessed May 1, 2013).

Figure 1 - Created using data compiled by UCSB American Presidency Project^{2 3}

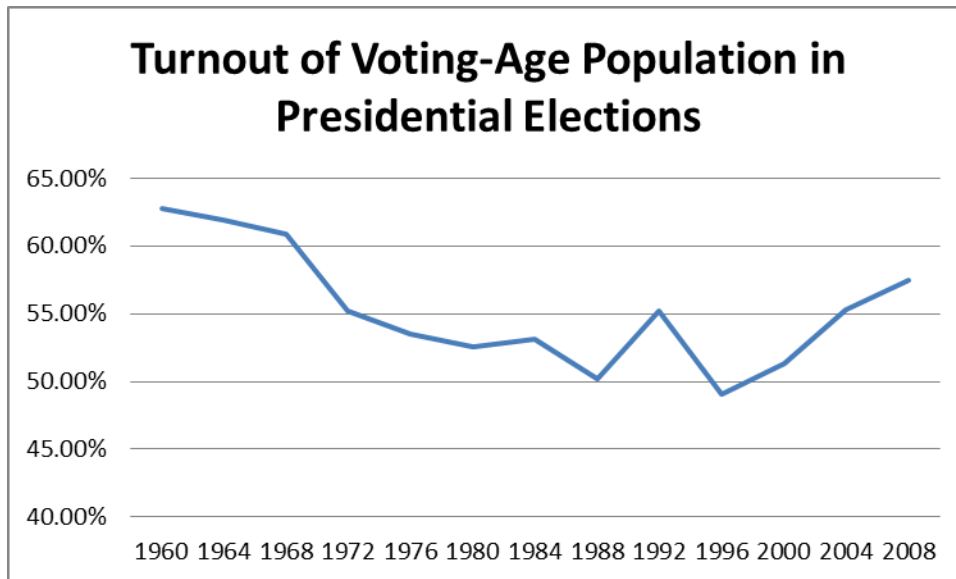


Figure 1, seen above, shows the percentage of turnout in Presidential elections between 1960 and 2008. Though the turnout rate has recovered in recent elections from its lowpoint in 1996, this is still a serious problem that needs addressing, as not a single Presidential election in the past fifty years saw participation of two-thirds of the population of voting age.

One of the possible reasons for low voter turnout is a lack of faith in our current electoral system. Before each individual voter casts a ballot to participate, he or she will make an assessment as to whether his or her vote is worthwhile. Based on scientific polls by various groups, as well as in-person testimonials, much of the negative association regarding voting is caused by frustration with our existing system, whether it be institutionally or procedurally. Especially after the 2000 presidential election, when there were rumblings of unfair voting practices, and multiple recounts

² Wooley, John, and Gerhard Peters. "Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections: 1828 - 2008." The American Presidency Project. www.presidency.ucsb.edu/data/turnout.php (accessed May 1, 2013).

³ Note: Percentages are based on voting-age population (VAP), not voting eligible population (VEP). The use of this statistic lends itself to a slightly lower percentage as it also includes some people ineligible to vote, such as felons.

ordered before bringing the problem to the Supreme Court, some voters' faith in the American electoral system was called into question. This wavering of faith in our system is problematic, as an "unreliable election system can undermine political and governmental stability in a nation and even undercut the legitimacy of the regime itself."⁴ Furthermore, the existence of the Electoral College also angers many potential voters. Put in place by the Founding Fathers as a compromise between Congress choosing the President, or being selected solely by the voting population, many feel that the Electoral College takes away power from the voter and gives little reason for some to participate.⁵

What Causes Some to Vote and Others to Not Vote?

For decades, political scientists have attempted to measure what motivates voters to vote. When considering this question from an economic perspective, a cost-benefit analysis framework is often applied to voter behavior. Anthony Downs created a concept known as the "paradox of voting," in which the reason that one votes is paradoxical, due to the miniscule chance that your vote will decide the election.⁶ William H. Riker and Peter C. Ordeshook built upon this idea, establishing a basic formula that attempts to explain whether or not a potential voter will cast a ballot. This formula is outlined below.⁷

⁴ Schier, Steven E.. *You Call This an Election?: America's Peculiar Democracy*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003. 9.

⁵ "U. S. Electoral College: Frequently Asked Questions." National Archives and Records Administration. <http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/faq.html#whyec> (accessed May 1, 2013).

⁶ Ferejohn, John A. and Morris P. Fiorina. "The Paradox of Not Voting: A Decision Theoretic Analysis." *The American Political Science Review* 68, no. 2 (1974): 525.

⁷ Riker, William H. and Peter C. Ordeshook. "A Theory of the Calculus of Voting." *The American Political Science Review* 62, no. 1 (1968): 25-42.

$$PB + D > C$$

When **P** is the **Probability** that an individual's vote will affect the outcome of an election

B is the perceived **Benefit** gained if the favored candidate wins election

D, originally representing **Duty**, now is viewed as the social or personal **gratification gained** from the act of voting

C is the **Cost** of voting, including literal financial cost, as well as time and effort exerted.

For citizens to likely vote, they must believe the **benefits** (left side of the equation) gained from voting **outweigh** the **costs** (right side).

Certain organizations and parties already have various techniques in place to attempt to increase voter turnout, usually for their respective groups. These efforts, known as Get-Out-the-Vote (GOTV) campaigns are put on to “reduce the perceived costs of voting, increase the perceived benefits, or enhance a sense of moral obligation to participate.”⁸

The effectiveness of various GOTV campaigns has been debated. Not surprisingly, a study completed by Yale University Institution for Social and Policy Studies shows that “more personalized messages are more effective in mobilizing voters.”⁹ Therefore, a message spread by a partisan entity, or one targeting a specific age demographic, when tailored correctly, will be more effective than a blanket effort to engage voters.

⁸ Levine, Peter and Mark Hugo Lopez. "What We Should Know About the Effectiveness of Campaigns but Don't." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 601, (2005): 182.

⁹ The Institution for Social and Policy Studies - Yale University. "Lessons from Recent GOTV Experiments | Get Out The Vote." Get Out the Vote. <http://gotv.research.yale.edu/?q=node/10> (accessed May 1, 2013).

Furthermore, it was found that door-to-door interaction achieved a higher success rate than less personal methods of reaching potential voters.¹⁰ Personalized phone calls administered in a conversational manner may be almost as effective, while more impersonal methods such as emails and pre-recorded calls are much less effective. As a whole “results suggest that it is the dynamic interaction of authentic person-to-person contact that is most important in determining whether a method will successfully mobilize voters.”¹¹

Systems in Other Democracies

To better understand our own electoral system, in addition to understanding the vast difference participation rates among foreign elections and our own, it is important to analyze the electoral systems in various other established democracies. There are many diverse systems in place, most of which involve voting for a member to represent either a district or the country as a whole within the legislative body.

Belgium, mentioned earlier to have a turnout rate of 95%, is a proportional representation democracy.¹² Yet, its voter turnout may be much higher than the United States’ not only because of this difference. In Belgium, “voting is compulsory and regulated in the constitution.”¹³ Therefore, when an abstention from voting is unjustified, penalties are levied, “ranging from a

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Schier, 36.

¹³ "Comparative Data — ACE Electoral Knowledge Network." Is voting on the national level voluntary or compulsory?. http://aceproject.org/epic-en/CDTable?question=LF004&view=country&set_language=en (accessed May 1, 2013).

fine to removal from the electoral register.”¹⁴ Yet, the United Kingdom, a region with a culture and legal system somewhat similar to our own, does not have mandatory voting. Its electoral system is considered a single-member plurality system. The region reported a 65% turnout in 2010, nearly seven percentage points higher turnout than in the US.¹⁵ 71.7% of registered voters participated in legislative elections in Spain in 2011.¹⁶ Spain hold a proportional representation system, where seats are allocated proportionately to parties based on voter preference.¹⁷

While many other countries in fact do have a higher turnout rate in elections, many of the rules and procedures in place regarding elections are unique to the American governmental system. It is therefore somewhat difficult to compare our system to others across the globe who do not have an electoral college or an executive elected by the people separately from the legislature.

Furthermore, many countries have political campaigns directly funded by the government, and personal donation to candidates or parties is either outlawed or seriously limited. Another thing to consider is that the public primary process to choose party candidates that occurs before the Presidential campaign, as well as the process that occurs before many general state elections is unique to the United States as well.¹⁸ Therefore, direct comparison is difficult, though the brief examination of other systems help to understand possible alternatives the US could implement.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "Voter turnout at UK general elections 1945 – 2010." UK Political Info.
<http://www.ukpolitical.info/Turnout45.htm> (accessed May 1, 2013).

¹⁶ Comparative data - ACE

¹⁷ Schier, 36.

¹⁸ Ibid, 65.

Obstacles to Voter Turnout

Below some basic problems observed within our existing electoral system will be discussed.

Without first analyzing difficulties present, attainable solutions would be impossible to develop.

1. Too Many Choices - Voter Fatigue in the US

The importance of voting cannot be disputed. However, the number of positions and issues for which voters decide varies widely among different voting precincts. Some argue that the ability for citizens to choose leaders at nearly every level of government, from agriculture commissioner to President of the United States may actually lead to less effective participation as it “offers no real power to control government wisely for it assumes a degree of knowledge that voters cannot reasonably be expected to acquire.”¹⁹

The number of positions that are decided in elections, when combined with the number of referenda and ballot initiatives creates a large ballot, making it difficult for effective decision-making to occur.²⁰ Though giving each citizen a voice is key to our country and to our founding, the Founding Fathers had the utmost respect to delegation as well. James Madison himself made it clear that a representative democracy was necessary, as it allowed those in office to “refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens,

¹⁹ Wilson, Graham K.. *Only in America?: The Politics of the United States in Comparative Perspective*. Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House Publishers, 1998.

²⁰ Schier, 12.

whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it.”²¹

To demonstrate the difference in choice given to the average voter in the US compared to other countries, it is helpful to turn to a 2006 report that states, “Between 1999 and 2004, a resident in Oxford, England, could have voted four times, while a resident of Irvine, California, could have cast about forty votes in the single year of 2004.”²²

The current ballots in a number of jurisdictions are packed with issues and open positions that could oftentimes be decided by elected officials. While certain states, especially Oregon and California, champion the idea of direct democracy through referenda and other initiatives, such processes undermine “opportunities for refinement, informed deliberation, consensus building, and compromise” when deciding political issues.²³ Furthermore, initiatives rarely reach ballots without extensive support and financial resources from special interest groups, raising the question of whether such tools actually allow common citizens a greater voice in the political process.²⁴

One group of positions currently decided by voters in most precincts that arguably unnecessarily solicits voter response is the election of judges. “Across the United States, 87 percent of all state court judges face elections and 39 states elect at least some of their judges, according to the

²¹ Hamilton, Alexander, and John Jay. “Federalist 10.” In *The Federalist Papers*, 10. Auckland: Floating Press, 2011.

²² Tavits, Margit. “Direct Presidential Elections and Turnout in Parliamentary Contests.” *Political Research Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2009): 44.

²³ Schier, 79.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 82.

National Center for State Courts.”²⁵ Yet, as judges should be experts in the law in which they preside, some argue that the election of such positions is irrational. Instead, judges could easily be appointed in lower levels of government, just as they are within the United States Supreme Court.

Other than a limited number of judges in Switzerland, and rare, procedural elections in Japan, the United States is the only country in which judges must campaign to the public. For example, in France, lawyers who would like to be judges must pass a battery of tests to even be admitted to the 27 month-long training course necessary for being a judge.²⁶

It is possible that giving voters such a wide voice in government may lead to voter fatigue. Therefore by allowing so many measures to appear on the ballot, governments are diluting the energy spent becoming educated on the elections and policy issues that are of greatest importance. Furthermore, especially in elections that include initiatives and referenda, “Increasing ballot length is demonstrated to interfere with the voters' ability to translate their political preferences into consistent policy choices.”²⁷ For every additional measure included, there is an additional chance of 10-15% that the voter will stop before completing the entire ballot.²⁸

Returning to voter behavior, for citizens to likely vote, they must believe the benefits gained from voting outweigh the costs. Yet, every additional election or choice on a ballot adds extra

²⁵ Liptak, Adam. "U.S. voting for judges perplexes other nations." The New York Times. N.p., n.d. Web. 1 May 2013. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/25/world/americas/25iht-judge.4.13194819.html>>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Selb, Peter. "Supersized Votes: Ballot Length, Uncertainty, and Choice in Direct Legislation Elections." Public Choice 135, no. 3/4 (2008): 319-336.

²⁸ Schier, 79.

burden on the voter's behalf, requiring them to not only literally spend more time in the voting booth, they must also gather additional information, therefore increasing the overall cost of voting. "Unless voters' resources are unlimited, the costs imposed on them by additional elections may start to outweigh benefits and satisfaction received from participating in the democratic process."²⁹

2. Loss of Community Cohesiveness

The personal and political culture of the United States has shifted dramatically over the last four decades. The shifts mirror one another, as the changing level of engagement within communities led to a change in political structure as well. On a nearly continuous basis, citizens have withdrawn from the affairs of their communities, no longer serving on PTA boards or even participating in neighborhood associations. Churchgoing and participation in the Boy Scouts and the Red Cross also dramatically dropped within this period.³⁰ Yet, membership in other groups such as the Sierra Club and the AARP has exponentially expanded. Political scientist Robert Putnam attributes this shift from community-based groups to passive national organizations in which membership oftentimes relies simply on writing a check, to a shift in responsibilities of civic participation. Political scientist Ruy Texeira identified a similar decline in "social connectedness" as many voters became "younger and less integrated into their communities."³¹

Yet, as membership shifts away from direct contact with other group members to instead reading an organization's newsletter (if that much), there is no surprise a similar hand-off approach is

²⁹ Tavits, 42-54.

³⁰ Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000. 68.

³¹ Schier, 68.

applied to government. “By almost every measure, Americans' direct engagement in politics and government has fallen steadily and sharply over the last generation, despite the fact that average levels of education--the best individual-level predictor of political participation--have risen sharply.”³² Putnam attributes the rise of television in the 1950s and 1960s to the drop in civic engagement. Ironically, he also claims the lessening of political involvement is indirectly linked to TV as well, as parties attributed resources to shaping opinion over on-the-air programming and moving away from personal, local campaigning.³³

Political culture has shifted as a result. As partisan identification declined, mobilization techniques used by parties shifted as well. During the partisan era, which came to an end in the early 20th Century, political mobilization was inclusive, leading to a system where “practically everybody voted.”³⁴ Yet, as the parties weakened due to Progressive reforms in the 1890s-1920s, political power was taken from parties. Voting became more complicated as measures were put into place to prevent parties paying for votes and voters submitting straight party ballots.³⁵ After this systematic shift, mobilization efforts dramatically changed as well. Instead of parties working to get every voter to the polls, a system emerged where “candidates, parties, and interests identif[ied] those parts of the public most likely to participate on their behalf,” employing human and monetary resources more directly to these groups.³⁶

³² Putnam. Bowling, 68.

³³ Putnam, Robert D. "Tuning in, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 28, no. 4 (1995): 667, 678-683.

³⁴ Schier, 66-69.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 61-64.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 69.

3. Advertising Overload

A completely separate yet equally important factor may also affect voter participation: The type and frequency of political advertisements. The political advertising field has expanded exponentially over the past century, yet can trace its roots to campaign spokesmen. Before the rise of commercials, or even print ads, persuasive arguments for various candidates appeared in newspapers. As each major newspaper was controlled by a different political party, any reporting concerning political races developed a partisan tone. It was difficult for the audience to decipher where the reporting ended and the campaigning began. Furthermore, campaign spokesmen used to travel to different cities, encouraging people to vote by word and oftentimes through drink or other, less acceptable methods.

Advertising has become a key form of electoral communication. As early as 1990, candidates spent more on television advertising than any other form of political communication.³⁷ Some political scientists have noted that such a shift has hurt the political process, as it “rewards candidates whose skills are rhetorical, rather than substantive”³⁸ As the prevalence of negative political ads has steadily increased since the fateful Daisy ad since LBJ’s 1964 campaign, there is reason to question whether frequent advertisements actively help in increasing voter engagement. As candidates more consistently “criticize, discredit, or belittle their opponents -rather than promoting their own ideas and programs” there are possible negative repercussions for the voting populace.³⁹ In a 1991 study by Basil, Schooler, and Reeves, it was

³⁷ Ansolabehere, Stephen, Shanto Iyengar, Adam Simon and Nicholas Valentino. "Does Attack Advertising Demobilize the Electorate?" *The American Political Science Review* 88, no. 4 (1994): 829.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

found that “negative advertisements reduced positive attitudes toward both candidates in the race, thereby indirectly reducing political involvement.”⁴⁰ Furthermore, in another study regarding the 1992 Senate race, turnout was “significantly reduced in states where the tone of the campaign was relatively negative.”⁴¹ As negative ads become even more commonplace, this may be a cause for reduced political engagement, awareness, and desire to vote. As of 2005, by one measure, negative ads made up 1/3 of all appeals a Presidential candidate makes to the public.⁴² “Candidates with sufficient resources can, through the use of negative messages, keep voters away from the polls.”⁴³

Yet, negative ads cannot be viewed in a simple negative light. Some political scientists, notably John Geer applaud negative ads as they provide “access to more discussion about important issues presented with specificity and evidence to support candidates’ appeals...”⁴⁴ Yet even Geer that “perhaps the amount of negativity in campaigns is excessive.”⁴⁵

Therefore, though negative political ads may be beneficial in sharing accurate information and truthful comparison, it is likely not beneficial in increasing voter turnout. This begs the question of whether it is more important to have a better informed voting populace or one that is more broad. Furthermore, if such a correlation is in fact accurate, one must consider whether it is more

⁴⁰ Ibid, 829-31

⁴¹ Ibid, 830

⁴² Geer, John Gray. *In Defense of Negativity : Attack Ads in Presidential Campaigns*. Chicago: Health Press, 2006. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 26, 2013). 137.

⁴³ Ansolabehere, 835.

⁴⁴ Geer, 136.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 137.

important to preserve the free speech of those crafting and showing such ads or to preserve the right to vote that arguably is diminished by such advertisements.

This issue is further complicated as there is currently no requirement that political advertisements must be truthful.⁴⁶ Unlike manufacturers and retailers, who are bound by law to only broadcast truthful claims, there is no equivalent for politics. This is because political campaigns are protected by a statute attributed to the First Amendment known as “political speech.”⁴⁷ This statute was put in place because thinking at the time viewed that voters had the right to uncensored information on which to base their vote.

Though Geer found that exposure to paid and free media, along with non-TV exposure, increases turnout,⁴⁸ there at some point is probably a saturation point in which the multitude of ads no longer increases turnout by reminding people of the election but instead begins to deter them. According to NPR estimates, in the 2012 general election cycle, there were collectively over 3 million advertisements between the Congressional and Presidential races shown over broadcast and cable networks. This avalanche of ads does not even include the massive amount of ads employed during the Republican primary season.⁴⁹ The total spent in the general election in 2012 totals to approximately \$1.92 billion. Compared to the 2008 race, this shows a 33% increase in

⁴⁶ Sullivan, Amy. "When the First Amendment Protects False Campaign Ads." TIME.com. <http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1843796,00.html> (accessed May 1, 2013).

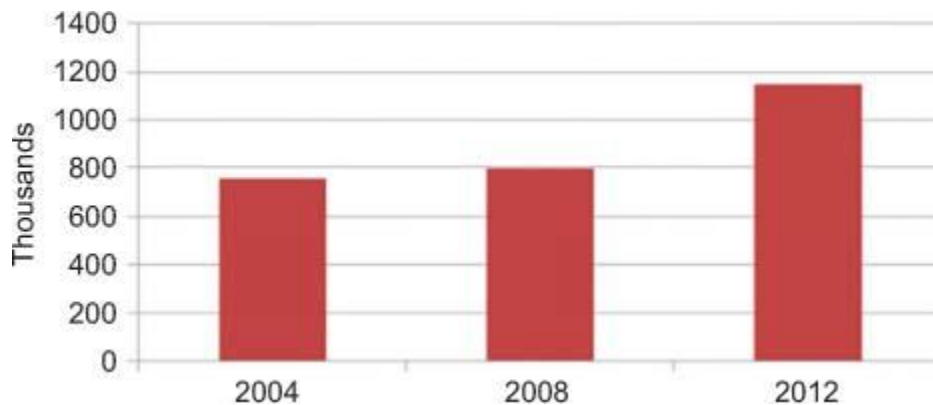
⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Krasno, Jonathan S. and Donald P. Green. "Do Televised Presidential Ads Increase Voter Turnout? Evidence from a Natural Experiment." *The Journal of Politics* 70, no. 1 (2008): 245-261.

⁴⁹ Overby, Peter. "A Review Of 2012 Confirms A 'Pulverizing' Level Of Political Ads." NPR : National Public Radio. <http://www.npr.org/blogs/itsallpolitics/2013/02/14/172044192/a-review-of-2012-campaign-confirms-a-pulverizing-level-of-political-ads> (accessed May 1, 2013).

volume of ads and an 81% increase in dollars spent.⁵⁰ In Figure 2, the volume of advertisements in the last three general elections is shown, exhibiting only those purchased for the Presidential race.

Figure 2 - Volume of presidential general election advertising⁵¹



4. Increase in Partisan Intensity and Sentiment

Another change that has occurred in the political landscape over the past thirty years is increased polarization within each party coupled with greater levels of partisanship. According to various polls citing voter opinions, Americans during this time have become “somewhat more conservative” but as a whole rest near the political center.⁵² Party affiliation has weakened as well. The number of voters considering themselves strong partisans dropped from nearly 80 percent in the 1950s to less than 25%.⁵³ However, during this same time period, the political

⁵⁰ Fowler, Erika Franklin and Travis N. Ridout. 2013. Negative, Angry, and Ubiquitous: Political Advertising in 2012. *The Forum*. 10(4): 1-146. Retrieved 1 May. 2013, from doi:10.1515/forum-2013-0004

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Destler, I. Mac. "The reasonable public and the polarized policy process." *The Real and the Ideal: Essays on International Relations in Honor of Richard H. Ullman* (2001): 80.

⁵³ Patterson, Thomas E. *The Vanishing Voter: Public Involvement in an Age of Uncertainty*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002. 39.

parties' views have become more extreme, drawing from ideological opposites as opposed to those in the center. Congress has, for the most part, reflected, and even magnified this trend.

"The number of bills on which a majority of Republicans lined up against the majority of Democrats nearly doubled between 1970 and 1986," continuing to rise until 1995.⁵⁴ The number of centrists serving in Congress has been steadily declining since 1980, when 25% of all members identified as such.⁵⁵ As of 1999, every Democrat in the Senate had a voting record to the left of the most liberal Republican. Such a stark differentiation between the two parties has led to continuous gridlock in recent sessions of Congress. This dysfunction has brought the passage of much legislation, ranging from setting the budget, changing immigration laws, and ratifying gun-control measures to a standstill.

This in turn has a negative effect on how the public views Congress, and therefore may cause frustration that leads to lower voter turnout. In a 1994 ABC poll, respondents were asked "When members of Congress cannot agree on legislation, do you think that's mainly because of honest disagreement about policy, or because each side is trying to score political points?". Eighty-nine percent, a near unanimous decision, ascribed Congress' action to political point scoring.⁵⁶ A similar poll held in 2000 showed that 75% of respondents agreed that "political candidates are more concerned with fighting each other than with solving the nation's problems."⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ibid, 37.

⁵⁵ Destler, 80.

⁵⁶ "American Public Attitudes." Center on Policy Attitudes . <http://www.policyattitudes.org/ems2.htm> (accessed May 1, 2013).

⁵⁷ Patterson, 51.

Such frustration with government and its perceived inability to perform its duties translates to less trust in government institutions. This lack of trust in turn leads to less people wishing to be involved in government decisions, and therefore refraining from voting.

Recommendations to Increase Voter Turnout

Below I will outline various recommendations that I believe will increase voter turnout, either by lowering the cost of voting or by increasing the benefits of casting a ballot. These recommendations look to apply solutions already in place in limited areas to the greater population in hopes of increasing turnout and strengthening our democracy.

1. Increase Vote by Mail and Other Alternate Voting Options

One possible method to increase voter turnout is to allow greater flexibility in the ways in which voters cast ballots. One key method to doing this that has seen success is vote by mail (VBM) initiatives. Such an option is somewhat easy to implement, as some capacity to process mail ballots already exist in every city, due to absentee ballots. Other areas use mail voting more extensively, such as Oregon, providing interesting insight regarding possible greater adoption.

Truth be told, vote by mail has completely replaced conventional voting in Oregon. The initiative was slowly implemented in Oregon over the past few decades. First utilized by select counties, a special election in 1996 was run with all stages of the election conducted solely by mail. All Oregon elections since 1998 have been run in this manner.⁵⁸ In this system, every voter receives a voting guide by mail approximately three weeks before Election Day. Then, the ballot itself is

⁵⁸ Gronke, Paul, Eva Galanes-Rosenbaum and Peter A. Miller. "Early Voting and Turnout." PS: Political Science and Politics 40, no. 4 (2007): 639.

mailed 18 days before the election. The ballot may then be returned any time after it is received until the end of the election, including in-person on Election Day.⁵⁹

Oregon's system is notable as it claims to accomplish two key goals

- Increasing voter turnout
- Saving the government money⁶⁰

While at first thought, it does not seem that much would be saved by shutting voting areas and instead mailing a barrage of paperwork to every eligible voter in the district, there are other factors to also consider. The Federal Election Commission book "Innovations in Election Administration 11: All-Mail-Ballot Elections" highlights other expenses avoided:

*No pollworkers includes: no recruitment; no notices to be sent; no classes to conduct; no distribution and retrieval of election day supplies; no last-minute cancellations from workers who had agreed to serve; no paychecks to cut and mail; no W-2's to send; no pre-dawn election-day hours to line up replacement workers. No polling places includes no polling place leases, telephones, utilities; no searching for or preparation of accessible locations; no frantic phone calls about locked doors; no preparation, set-up, tear-down, or emergency repairs of voting machines or devices; no confusion about where people must go to vote.*⁶¹

While Oregon is the first and only state to administer mail voting on a statewide scale, other states offer similar options. California, along with 24 other states, offers a vote by mail option

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ "Vote by Mail." FairVote. <http://archive.fairvote.org/turnout/mail.htm> (accessed May 1, 2013).

⁶¹ "Innovations in Election Administration 11." *Federal Election Commission*

upon request, and “Any registered voter can vote by mail”⁶². In 2012, of nearly 18 million registered voters, 8.8 had requested to vote by mail.⁶³ California is one of five states that allow for permanent absentee status, giving the option to move to a de-facto vote-by-mail status.⁶⁴

Many other states, such as Alabama, also allow vote by mail, but only when extenuating circumstances (out of the county, 10+ hour workday, military duty) prevent one from voting in person.⁶⁵

Yet, the Oregon model is very intriguing. Not only does the state report a higher turnout, moving to a VBM system saved the state approximately 17% of costs related to holding an election.⁶⁶ Obviously, costs would not be as greatly reduced, if traditional polls remained open in addition to greater utilization of mail. However, the increase in choice still leads to increase in turnout as seen in California.⁶⁷

2. Create Standards for Political Advertising

Advertising, both in regard to that spent on established media including television and print, as well as the recent explosion of online advertisements, has a serious effect on how the public views campaigns as well as individual candidates. As discussed earlier, there is currently little

⁶² "Voting by Mail." Official Voter Information Guide | California Secretary of State. <http://voterguide.sos.ca.gov/past/2012/primary/voter-info/voting-by-mail.htm> (accessed May 1, 2013).

⁶³ "Today is deadline for California voters to request mail-in ballots." latimes.com. <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2012/10/deadline-california-voters-mail-ballots.html> (accessed May 1, 2013).

⁶⁴ Gronke, 640.

⁶⁵ "How to Vote by Mail - ALABAMA." Vote by Mail America. <http://www.votebymailamerica.org/alabama.html> (accessed May 1, 2013).

⁶⁶ "Vote by Mail."

⁶⁷ Gronken 644.

governing the content or overall message of political ads. This leads to statements of questionable accuracy to be broadcast by the media. For example, in 2008, advertisements claimed that Obama favored sex education for kindergarten students and that McCain hated all Latinos.^{68 69} Furthermore, the negativity of ads, though beneficial for creating a better-informed electorate, is not beneficial to turnout as such ads dissuade potential voters from turning out.⁷⁰

Political scientist Stephen Ansolabehere believes “the more realistic approach to influencing the tone of campaign advertising rests on voluntary or incentive-based restraints.”⁷¹ However, simply banning negative advertisements is neither a feasible nor a helpful solution. Due to negative advertisements’ focus, they are more likely to increase people’s understanding of campaigns and issues. Therefore “if an informed electorate is a desirable outcome of campaigns, the negative advertisements may perform an important function in our electoral system.”⁷² A possible solution, instead of the banning of negative ads is to create a slight disincentive for campaigns to run or rely on ads as heavily. One way of doing so is by amending the current guarantee that campaigns receive the lowest market rate for ads to only apply when an ad is positive in nature.⁷³ However, due to the increase in ad spending by SUPERPACs and other outside groups in the 2012 cycle, who already do not receive the guaranteed lowest rate, the

⁶⁸ Sullivan.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ansolabehere, 835.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Thurber, James A., Candice J. Nelson, and David A. Dulio. *Crowded Airwaves: Campaign Advertising in Elections*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000. 84.

⁷³ "Remember Lowest Unit Charge Windows for Local Political Races and Upcoming Presidential Primaries and Caucuses." Broadcast Law Blog. <http://www.broadcastlawblog.com/2011/10/articles/political-broadcasting/remember-lowest-unit-charge-windows-for-local-political-races-and-upcoming-presidential-primaries-and-caucuses/> (accessed May 1, 2013).

effect of such a change would be very limited. For example, there were more ads purchased by Republican-leaning non-party organizations in the 2012 presidential election than the number shown by Romney's own campaign.⁷⁴ Furthermore, the enforcement of such standards would either require a decision to be made by individual networks, or require the creation of an oversight board. Due to the quick window in which a political ad is written, produced, and aired, the requirement of additional approval would be fairly unpopular to campaigns and would possibly reduce the timeliness and applicability of certain content.

Yet, due to political speech's inherent link to the First Amendment, it is unlikely for any serious change to occur in the short term.

3. Publicly Identify Those Who (Do and) Do Not Vote

In most communities, participation in elections is viewed in a positive light. Therefore, many voters proudly display their "I voted!" sticker after casting their ballots earlier in the day. This simple sticker oftentimes represents for different people different things: A love of country, a dedication to civic duty, or the completion of an important right. However, with the increase of non-election day voting, either because of early or by mail initiatives as outlined earlier in this paper, not everyone gets such a sticker. In addition to these circumstances, certain areas in Texas angered voters in 2012 after running out of stickers, while other jurisdictions, such as New York, did not even issue them at all.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Fowler, 53.

⁷⁵ Woodruff, Mandi. "'I Voted' Sticker Shortage Annoys Voters - Business Insider." Business Insider. <http://www.businessinsider.com/lots-of-businesses-are-doling-out-election-freebies-to-voters-who-cant-get-them-2012-11> (accessed May 1, 2013).

In response to constituent complaints, some jurisdictions have crafted other ways for people to express their proud voting status. In Ohio, the Secretary of State created and distributed a virtual sticker to show that one voted.⁷⁶ This sticker is not applied to one's shirt like a customary sticker, but instead is added to one's Facebook profile or Twitter. If such a practice became more common, voters and the act of voting would become more identifiable, likely creating social pressure that may lead others to vote.

Furthermore "voters turn out at higher rates when they believe that the status of their participation will be made public within their neighborhoods."⁷⁷ Therefore, judging from research from Yale's Institution for Social and Policy Studies, citizens would be more likely to vote if there were more effective or public means to disseminate the names of those who did not vote. One interesting method to consider is the GOTV methods used by Virginia group Americans for Limited Government during the 2012 election. This group worked to increase voter turnout by creating a spin on typical mailings. Instead of simply stating facts about races or campaigns, in letters sent to over 2.7 million people in 19 states, a "Vote History Audit" was included, including information of whether the recipient and some of their neighbors had voted in previous presidential elections.⁷⁸ While not disclosing for whom neighbors had voted for in past elections, under labels for the years 2004 and 2008 a "Yes" or "No" was listed for each name. In the last column, representing 2012, the word "Pending" appeared, along with a notice

⁷⁶ Ohio Secretary of State. Downloadable sticker. <http://www.sos.state.oh.us/sos/upload/sites/sticker/Sticker.aspx> (accessed May 1, 2013).

⁷⁷ The Institution for Social and Policy Studies - Yale University.

⁷⁸ "Americans for Limited Government political mailing fuels worries over invasions of privacy." WPTV Newschannel 5. <http://www.wptv.com/dpp/news/political/americans-for-limited-government-political-mailing-fuels-worries-over-invasions-of-privacy> (accessed May 1, 2013).

that an updated voting history audit would be sent after Election Day. All information used in generating those mailers was accessible as part of public record.

While many recipients viewed the Americans for Limited Government mailing as an “offensive invasion of privacy” and “absolutely despicable,”⁷⁹ such an effort was likely much more effective in pressuring people to the polls than other measures. In an experiment completed by Yale political scientists Green and Gerber, a group of voters who received “a list of their neighbors’ voting histories” and the question “What if your neighbors knew whether you voted?” voted at a rate of almost eight percent higher than a control group receiving no mailing.⁸⁰

With the increase in technology as well as current information available in the public domain, similar projects could be completed on social media sites such as Facebook, increasing scope and hopefully increasing the social awareness of those who do and do not vote. By cross-referencing one’s friend list on social media sites with provided identifiers such as city of residence and date of birth, it is feasible that a list can be generated for individual users, listing which friends were likely to vote based on previous trends and which need some coaxing. As an offshoot of such an initiative, badges or some other visual identifiers could be sent to friends, making public their frequency of participating in elections. This could quickly, cheaply and effectively raise the social profile and social cost of not voting in elections, therefore likely improving turnout.

⁷⁹ “‘Vote history audit’ shows whether your neighbors voted.” The Hill. <http://thehill.com/blogs/on-the-money/voting-records/265455-vote-history-audit-shows-whether-your-neighbors-are-good-voters> (accessed May 1, 2013).

⁸⁰ Drutman, Lee. “Simple Ways to Increase Voter Turnout.” Pacific Standard. <http://www.psmag.com/politics/simple-ways-to-increase-voter-turnout-4660/> (accessed May 1, 2013).

Voter Turnout Recommendations Which are Not Feasible

Throughout my research, I have encountered many impassioned writers and citizens who are frustrated with the way our current political system is run. Many have provided suggestions, some of which I incorporated in the segment above. Yet, other recommendations possibly would have created more havoc than good. Find below two recommendations that, while some agree with, I personally believe would be detrimental to our electoral system.

1. Abandon the Electoral College

While doing away with the electoral college may lead some to vote in states that are consistently party leaning, this will not be viewed as a viable recommendation, as the college is necessary for ensuring a President is capable of building a nationwide coalition, and also encouraging candidates to spend time campaigning outside of typical population centers. Without such check in place, a nominee could skate to the Oval Office with the support of voters only in population centers, and would have little incentive to reach out to smaller cities and states throughout the campaign cycle. Furthermore, the existence of the Electoral College magnifies the margin of victory for presidents, conferring a greater sense of legitimacy. One such example is the 1992 Presidential election in which Bill Clinton only received 43% of the popular vote but received 70% of electoral votes.⁸¹ Therefore, the Electoral College, the system currently in place that angers so many, is a good idea. It ensures that the President represents Americans from every state, running as a true leader of the nation as a whole.

⁸¹ "Popular Vote or the Electoral College?." The Foundry: The Heritage Foundation.
<http://blog.heritage.org/2011/10/26/popular-vote-or-the-electoral-college/> (accessed May 1, 2013).

2. Make Voting Mandatory

One simple idea to counter low voter turnout is to simply make it mandatory. According to International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, thirty-one countries have some sort of mandatory voting in place. Many of these measures are enforced by monetary penalties, and some hope the force of the law will make people vote.⁸²

Surprisingly, the countries with such measures in place are not all developing countries with nothing in common with the United States. Australia, whose political system is more similar to the United States' than any other English-speaking country has such a law in place. Enacted after low voter turnout in 1922, there is now a monetary penalty waged against citizens if they do not vote and do not have an established reason for not doing so. Such reasons can include illness and foreign travel.⁸³

However, making voting mandatory, while forcibly increasing turnout, does not notably improve our democracy in any way. While some claim that mandatory voting forms greater cohesion and improves the legislative process⁸⁴, this is simply not the case. In fact, required universal voting would likely "significantly damage the integrity of America's voter registration system."⁸⁵ This is because if voting were required, many people who were completely uneducated and disinterested in the political process would randomly cast ballots in an effort not to decide policy,

⁸² Galston, William A. "Telling Americans to Vote, or Else." The New York Times. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/06/opinion/sunday/telling-americans-to-vote-or-else.html> (accessed May 1, 2013).

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Spakovsky, Hans A. von. "Mandatory Voter Registration: How Universal Registration Threatens Electoral Integrity." Heritage Foundation. <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/03/mandatory-voter-registration-how-universal-registration-threatens-electoral-integrity> (accessed May 1, 2013).

but rather to avoid penalty. This would in turn lessen the weight of votes cast by citizens aware of policy decisions and interested in deciding policy.⁸⁶ On a lesser note, requiring citizens to vote may also violate a right to choose whether to participate in the political process.⁸⁷

Summary

As stated throughout this paper, the turnout for given elections within the United States is very low. While this may be attributed to many of the factors outlined in this document, this very question must make us reconsider the “paradox of voting” first outlined by Anthony Downs. In his given scenario, a rational, self-interested voter would not cast a ballot because the costs do not likely outweigh the benefits associated with voting, due to the miniscule chance that an individual vote may change the election outcome.⁸⁸ Riker and Ordeshook took this basic premise and also factored in the term “D,” originally meant to encompass one’s civic duty in attempting to establish some mathematical formula in deciding when voters turn out to the polls. With this in mind, the costs of voting clearly still outweigh the benefits for many citizens, as the percentage who vote in Presidential elections, those that are seen as most far-reaching and necessary rarely is over 60%.

Yet, by analyzing some of the problems inherent in our system, as well as viewing initiatives being used on the local level, I believe improvements can be made in terms of voter turnout. One of the key things necessary for this to occur is increasing incentives for voting, while also making it more convenient.

⁸⁶ "How Mandatory Voting Hurts Democracy." PolicyMic.com. <http://www.policymic.com/articles/2376/how-mandatory-voting-hurts-democracy> (accessed May 1, 2013).

⁸⁷ Spakovsky

⁸⁸ Ferejohn, 525.

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