The History of American Voter Participation

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by

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Abstract

In recent elections, at all levels of government, there has been an apparent lack of voter participation. With around 50 percent of the eligible electorate, at best, casting their votes at the polls, many are concerned. This unexplained lack of voter participation has stirred much debate in recent decades. Voter participation is an interesting phenomenon that has transcended American history. Changes in the electoral process, the role of the political party, and the rise of the court system are just a few of the factors that must be taken into account when discussing voter participation. My research intends to look at historic electoral processes and changes in American civic participation as ways of explaining recent voter turnout statistics. Also, I discuss some of the recent attempts to increase voter participation and their apparent lack of effectiveness.

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Despite much attention to election reform efforts, voter registration, and get-out-the-vote efforts during the hotly contested presidential election of 2004, only slightly more than half of eligible voters went to the polls ("New From the Century Foundation... "). Low voter turnout has been a major concern of political minds since the
late 1980's. Compared to other industrialized democracies, whose voter turnout reaches close to 80 percent, American voter participation rates are abysmal (Powell 17). Some critics see this as a decline of the civic state of our nation while others feel we have found new ways to participate in the political process, which do not involve the voting booth. The point of this research is to look at the history of American voter participation as a way of explaining the current state of our voter turnout figures. This is not an effort to criticize the lack of voter participation today, but rather one that seeks to explain trends in voter participation through the use of history. By examining changes in the electoral process, the role of political parties, the role of the citizen, and the role of the court system, one can begin to understand why voter participation has developed into what it is today.

**Early American Political Culture**

The early political culture of the United States was one based on consensus among the community and yielded decision making to land owning elites, placing them at the top of the political ladder (Schudson 14). The original place of political engagement, in the early Colonial Period, was the New England Town Meeting. In recent years we have recreated the scene of the town meeting through political debates, but these attempts to recreate were a far cry from the original (Schudson 16). The town meeting is often looked at as the “model democratic institution” but historical facts would argue otherwise (Schudson 18). “Political scientist Jane Mansbridge concludes that voter turnout in eighteenth century Massachusetts ranged from 20 to 60 percent of eligible voters for town elections” (Schudson 17). In other meeting places, numbers were very comparable. In Boston, the average was 15 to 25 percent, in New England 10 to 25 percent, and in the
middle colonies (New York and Pennsylvania) 20 to 40 percent. Later in the century, when more statistical records were available, turnout rarely reached 50 percent for town meetings (Schudson 17). Along with limited participation, the town meeting was not meant to be a place of open discussion or a medium through which the average citizen could seek political representation. The point of the meeting was to maintain both social and political hierarchical order (Schudson 18). “While in colonial days many members of minority religious groups were excluded from the ballot, the most important pre-Revolutionary limitation on voting related to property qualification and taxes” (Scammon 299). The elite class of land-owning gentry controlled the political process in the early colonial America. “Elections in Virginia were rituals for the reinforcement of gentry rule” (Schudson 20). The election was less of a time to express your political voice and more of a time to show your deference to the social elite. Voters were rewarded for their loyalty by being “treated” by those elected. The “treats” often consisted of rum punch, cookies, and cakes. In one of George Washington’s electoral campaigns for the House of Burgesses, he provided 391 voters with 160 gallons of rum (Schudson 21). Though some view this as a form of bribery, it was common practice during the time period. To colonial America, treating represented a ritual of deference. Freeholders offered a vote to the gentlemen and the gentlemen responded by treating them (Schudson 22). Nobody questioned this hierarchical structure. The elite classes were seen as the natural born leaders and the rest of the community simply accepted that. “In the seventeenth century there were no campaigns for office by rival candidates and in the eighteenth century they remained the exception” (Schudson 27). However, this would soon change due to the impact of urban life, the growing size of populations, the increasing availability of print
for political argumentation, and the ferment of the resistance to England (Schudson 27). The availability of print media would be one of the most important catalysts for political change. Print was not widely available in the eighteenth century but in the decade before the Revolution it would become a central institution of the public sphere (Schudson 32). Soon politicians would use print media to elevate themselves as public figures. As America approached the Constitutional moment, the political landscape was about to change dramatically.

**The Constitutional Moment**

The framers of the Constitution met in 1787 to create a Republican Government that was derived from the people. The people would be, as the Framers intended, sovereign but also distant onlookers to the daily operation of Government (Schudson 51). The role of the people would be to elect good representatives to the Government and then allow them to do their job. The idea of people joining political parties to “crystallize and consolidate opinion,” was far from the Framer’s mindset. Attachment to a political party was seen as the opposite of the public-spirited virtue demanded of both citizens and leaders (Schudson 54). We will see later that the Framer’s intent for the role of citizens and parties would dramatically change as our nation progressed. Political parties originated in 1793 as private associations. There were more than 40 “Democratic,” “Republican,” and “Democratic-Republican,” associations that arose between 1793 and 1798. The goals of these early versions of political parties were to debate public questions, criticize government, and influence public policy (Schudson 55). Because the Framers were adamantly opposed to the formation of parties, early political parties found themselves forced to defend their legitimacy. The Democratic Society of New York
defended itself with this statement in 1794 saying, “It becomes a duty for citizens to acquire perfect knowledge of the government and political institutions of their country, in the administration of which they may one day be called upon to take an active share” (Schudson 57). The intention of early political parties was simply to educate the average citizen. Education of the political process, which is easily accessible today, was not prevalent during this time period. Although this view depicts political parties as a wonderful addition to the American political sphere, the Founding Fathers were still skeptical of what parties could become. In Washington’s farewell address given September 17, 1796, he warned against the effect political parties could have on our political process. Washington believed that, “The very idea of the power and right of the people to establish government presupposes the duty of every individual to obey the established government” (Schudson 63). He felt that political parties were dangerous and could potentially be destructive and, “serve to organize faction, to give it an artificial and extraordinary force; to put in place of the delegated will of the Nation; the will of a party…” (Schudson 63). In the late 19th century, Washington’s warning against the danger of political parties would seem warranted. However, during this time period, it reaffirmed the belief among the founders that the role of the citizen was to elect the best possible representatives and let them do their work without interference (Schudson 64).

From 1763 to 1775 the number of master printers in the colonies nearly doubled (Schudson 66). The more widely available asset of print news had many effects on both citizens and politicians. Congressmen began publishing opinions in newspapers and often saw to it that their speeches, given in Congress, were printed in newspapers sympathetic to their party. Politicians today are often criticized for formulating speeches
to provide sound bites for the media but the case was not much different over 200 years earlier. A contemporary wrote of the First Congress that, "it is generally agreed that many Speeches are calculated for the Gallery and the Gazette" (Schudson 68). The early news sources were dominated by Federalists and left Anti-Federalist party leaders like James Madison and Thomas Jefferson screaming foul play. Newspapers quickly began to align themselves with political parties. Poet and Editor Philip Freneau's paper, the National Gazette, supported Jefferson and Madison's federalist views while John Fenno's Gazette of the United States aligned itself with Alexander Hamilton and the Anti-Federalists (Schudson 68). A heated newspaper war ensued, Hamilton attacked Jefferson in Fenno’s paper and Jefferson retaliated through Freneau’s paper. The use of the news media in politics heated factional temperatures and faced political parties against each other (Schudson 69).

The growing press affected domestic life as deeply as it affected politics. Schooling and reading in Colonial America were understood to be key instruments in inducting citizens into the established order (Schudson 71). However, public leaders were skeptical about what message a free press might send to the people. A government founded on the people could only survive through the good opinion the people have of it. James Bayard wrote in Congress in 1799, "how is that good opinion to be preserved, if wicked and unprincipled men, men of indordinate and desperate ambition, are allowed to state facts to the people which are not true, which they know at the time to be false, and which are stated with the criminal intention of bringing the Government into disrepute among the people?" (Schudson 73-74). Congress displayed little support for a free press and made it clear with the passage of the Sedition Act in 1798. "This Act, codifying the
substantive English common law of seditious libel, made it a federal crime to publish
defamatory matter against the Congress, President, or government of the United States”
(Jenkins 154). The Sedition Act remained a law for two years until an extension of it was
defeated in Congress in 1780. It was at this time that a free press was interpreted as part
of the First Amendment. James Madison made his voice heard on the argument, claiming
that the Sedition Act was unconstitutional and that the freedom guaranteed to the press,
by the Constitution, was absolute (Schudson 75). It was in the wake of the Sedition Act
that Americans began to embrace a free press as necessary (Schudson 77). The American
political landscape began to change as citizens became more informed and Government
became more structured.

**Post Constitutional America**

America now had a democratic Government, of the people, backed by a
Constitution. The role of voting took a more important role than ever. An article in the
*Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1788 stressed the importance of voting,

> "Voting is the first concoction in politics; and if an error is
> committed here, it can never be corrected in any subsequent
> process. The certain consequence must be disease. Let no one say
> that he is but a single citizen and that his ticket will be but one in
> the box. That one ticket may turn the election. In battle, every
> soldier should consider the public safety as depending on his single
> arm. At an election, every citizen should consider the public
> happiness as depending on his single vote." (Schudson 77)

The new elections of the post-Constitutional America were far from their town meeting
predecessors. Democratic reforms, in the 1780’s and 1790’s, replaced viva voce voting
with written ballots, established polling places in each township, added more elective
officers (governor, lieutenant governor, state senators, and U.S. congressmen), and
provided more frequently held elections (Schudson 77). Some traditions did carry over
from early pre-Constitutional elections. The practice of “treating” was still prevalent. On Election Day local gentlemen gathered to drink and party, treated lower class citizens to liquor, and then herded them to the polls like sheep (Schudson 79). Regardless of certain traditions living on, the landscape of the American political and electoral process was ever-changing. Although the founders did not expect the people to be heavily involved in the political process, the average citizen was becoming a more important instrument in making a government (Schudson 89).

**Early Nineteenth Century America**

The eighteenth century was a time where representative institutions and public participation were born. However, the nineteenth century is often regarded by historians as the first flowering of American democracy. Despite the growing involvement of the average citizen in politics, the eve of the nineteenth century was marked by low voter turnout (Schudson 90). Election laws were left to the states and as they drafted their own constitutions, changes would be made as to who was allowed to participate. “So far as the white male inhabitants were concerned all constitutional change in the states had hitherto tended so to extend the franchise that the poorest local resident, not a criminal nor a dependent pauper, might readily take part at the polls with those who paid taxes and had a pecuniary stake in the government” (Schouler 669). This sentiment was shared by all the states, as more men wanted their chance to be involved in the political process. By 1824, every state provided suffrage to basically all white males (Schudson 97).

The Jeffersonians, or Republicans, took office in sweeping fashion in the 1800 election and maintained an iron grip on politics in the first two decades of the century. By the 1820’s, Americans had lost interest in politics and it showed at the voting booth
with low turnouts. It was at this time that political parties began to rise. Michael Schudson writes that, “The most enduring organizational development of this time period, and the one that would later be identified as a central and defining feature of American democracy, was the political party.” He goes on to add, “It was the vehicle for organizing democratic participation” (110). Political parties began to play the most important role in the electoral process. They lent their names and symbols to candidates and provided them with the necessary resources to run. Parties found their way into government as collections of officials who worked together on policy and voted together. Political parties also became a source of identification and ideology among voters (Schudson 110). The introduction of the “second party system” in the 1820’s gave political parties an organizational permanence, ideological legitimacy, and a mass following (Schudson 112). The Democratic Party formed behind Andrew Jackson in 1828 and within the next decade the National Republicans, or Whigs, had risen in competition. The political party was here to stay and would become an even more important facet in the later half of the nineteenth century.

**Late Nineteenth Century America**

Americans are not often inspired by the late nineteenth century. It is taught as the “Gilded Age” because no president between Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt neither captured American’s imaginations nor inspired them (Schudson 144). In the last few decades, revisionist historians in American history have begun to look to the late nineteenth century with admiration. It was the time period with the highest voter turnout in history and, they claim, Americans enjoyed politics (Schudson 145). However, despite the admiration one could hold for the high voter participation, one could also be troubled
by the dichotomy of the politics. There was a two sided political equation in the late
nineteenth century. One side was a politics marked with lively political campaigns and
deeply held political loyalties. The other side was a politics that was not concerned with
ideas or efforts to enhance public good, a politics of sections, jobbery, ethnic, racial, and
religious scares and slurs (Schudson 146). Since political party competition had begun to
rise as a result of the second party system, politics was viewed at as a team sport where
one was supposed to chose sides. Although this time period encouraged people to
participate enthusiastically, it also led to a political system that lacked substance. It
didn’t matter that 80 percent of eligible voters in the North showed up to the polls if the
parties they were electing to office were corrupt (Schudson 146). However, this time
period was also the birth of social groups like the Progressives and Mugwumps who
attacked corrupt party chiefs and capitalist robber barons. The late nineteenth century was
a transitional period that would forever change American voter participation (Schudson
147).

Jobs were at the heart of politics during the late nineteenth century. Providing
jobs to loyal voters was the way that parties maintained their control. Political machines
controlled politics at the city level. Perhaps the most famous machine was the Tammany
Hall machine in New York. In 1897, 20 percent of the votes received for Tammany
mayoral candidates came from people that were on their payroll; this number increased to
36 percent by 1913 (Schudson 147). For the voter, whoever controlled the future of his
job received his vote. At the national level, party loyalists were rewarded with high
ranking political offices. Parties, during this time period, were more concerned with job
distribution than issues (Schudson 148). The idea of patronage was used by one of our
most adored Presidents, Abraham Lincoln, earlier in the nineteenth century. When he took office in 1860, he replaced 1,195 of 1,520 officials holding presidential appointments (Schudson 149). This was the practice of every president from Lincoln until the turn of the century. Patronage strengthened political parties and encouraged Progressives to demand civil service reform. The National Civil Service Reform league was formed in 1881 and raised public awareness that would eventually pressure the federal government into passing civil service reform legislation. The passing of the Pendleton Act in 1883 created the Civil Service Commission which was responsible for monitoring equal opportunity in Government jobs. Perhaps the job-hungry parties had gone too far and began to obstruct a democratic government that acted in the public’s interest. At the same time, civil service reform weakened political parties and possibly took the very thing out of the political process that brought people to the polls (Schudson, 155).

The election process in the late nineteenth century was much different than what we experience today. Party workers would identify voters sympathetic to their party before Election Day. When Election Day came, they would coax voters to the polls and hand out pre-printed party tickets that voters could simply drop in the ballot box, without having to mark them (Schudson 162). The parties owned politics in the late nineteenth century. They immorally used money as a means of getting voters to the polls. New Jersey voters would often be paid between one and three dollars for showing up at the polls (Schudson 163). Indiana politicians often paid up to fifteen dollars per vote. Parties were also notorious for stuffing ballot boxes with bogus votes that would easily slip by the system. This was a time period when Presidential elections could very easily be
turned by the votes of a single state. This means that, in close elections, the result quite possibly could have been decided by election fraud (Schudson 164). Once again, the Progressive movement took hold and called for reform of campaign practices (Schudson 166). Progressive reform, in this field, was some of the most important reform of the time period. As a result, popular and presidential primaries were created, which weakened the control of parties over nominations for state and federal positions. Also, uniform ballots became the standard, which meant parties could no longer print their own. The idea of requiring members of the electorate to register with state or local officials also developed in the nineteenth century (King 116). By the end of nineteenth century, many states passed personal voter registration laws that aimed to curb voter fraud. Personal registration laws “shifted the burden of establishing eligibility from the state to the individual” (Quinlivan 2366). All of these reforms not only leveled the playing field in politics, but also made the political process more complicated. In fact, registration laws (which are discussed in more detail later) are argued as one of the primary causes for low voter turnout in our present day. Progressive reforms also created municipal health, education, and welfare. This greatly limited the control parties had and limited their use of patronage to buy votes (Schudson 175). Everything during the end of this time period became more distant from politics and parties. Newspapers, which at one time were directly aligned politically, now concerned themselves with commercially minded news, news that would sell. Newspapers began to cast off their party affiliations and become independent of partisan politics (Schudson 177). With the Progressive movement slowly changing the political landscape, the citizen began to become affected as well.
Progressive era politics encouraged citizens to be less concerned with passionate and loyal feelings towards parties and more concerned with educating themselves on political issues (Schudson 182). The model citizen to the reformist was, “disciplined enough to register, educated enough to read, thinking enough to choose candidates with little or no party guidance, and docile enough to leave many matters to the experts” (Schudson 185). From here on out, citizens would have to be much more self-motivated in going to the polls and in gathering information on candidates. Political parties would no longer come get them from their house or provide them with pre-marked voting cards. Citizens were headed down a path of becoming more distant from the political process. Government services became less connected to government officials and more connected to administrative agencies and bureaucracies, which did not rely on votes. Voting day practices that provided citizens with monetary and social rewards were also changed and the self interest in voting sharply declined (Schudson 185). Even though party loyalty and voter participation were at all time highs during this time period, the corruption that accompanied them lead to their decline. Progressive reforms certainly created a government more concerned with public interest, but also robbed the political process of the very thing that made it compelling to the average citizen (Schudson 147).

Early Twentieth Century America

As America entered the 1920’s, citizens became disenchanted with politics. With the passage of the 19th amendment in 1920, women were now extended the right to vote and the number of people eligible to go to the polls increased. Despite this, voter turnout between 1920 and 1924 was the lowest in almost one hundred years and would remain the lowest until 1988. The party era had ended and Americans now saw less of a
difference in who received their vote (Schudson 190). America was entering a time period where a new word, "propaganda," would be at the center of the political process. The way politicians conveyed information through the media became important. Arthur T. Hadley, political scientist and President of Yale, said in 1914 that, "It is not by the personal influence which was characteristic of the old party system that nominations are now secured and the way made clear for the passage of laws. It is by the influence of the printed page, which enables the man who controls it to determine thousands of votes for good or for evil" (Schudson 193). Candidates for president during these years became more concerned with the way they were portrayed in newspaper headlines. The Harding campaign in 1920 staged event after event to attract newspaper headlines. They created Women's Day, Colored People's Day, First Voters' Day, and Foreign Voters' Day in an attempt to sell their message through the news media. Every president during these years was attacked as a creature or manipulator of propaganda (Schudson 195). Since news media was now becoming so important, newspapers became much more professionalized. They adopted "the language of 'objectivity' to describe the ethics of their profession" (Schudson 196). After the corruption that marked previous decades; fairness, democracy, and ethics seemed to be the overarching theme of the 1920s.

American citizens began a love affair with the Constitution in the years between World War I and World War II and this led to a growing importance of the Court system. In 1935 the Supreme Court would receive, for the first time in American history, its own building (Schudson 202). Though the effects of the focus on the Constitution and Courts were not obvious, certainly the appeals to them during this time represented an effort to solve the problems of democracy (Schudson 203).
The role of the Presidency also began to change. The president's role became less understood as a constitutionally defined and constitutionally limited executive position and was looked at as more of a policy maker and national leader (Schudson 207). This enabled presidents, starting with Theodore Roosevelt, to pursue their own policy agendas and develop a closer relationship to the general public (Schudson 208). With Progressive era reforms placing the nomination of President as well as the election of U.S. senators in the hands of the public, politicians became more concerned with public opinion. As we fought through two world wars in the first half of the 20th century, foreign policy decisions became a more important role of the President. Presidential leadership replaced party leadership in shaping legislation and setting the tone of politics (Schudson 209).

Education in the field of politics saw a dramatic rise during the early part of the twentieth century. There were increasing numbers of scholars who received doctorates in political science and defined themselves as specialists in the field of politics (Schudson 215). Graduate instruction in political science started in 1880 at Columbia University, but grew substantially after 1900. By 1914, there were more than forty political science departments in colleges and in universities across the nation (Schudson 216). This gave birth to a field of specialists who specifically concentrated on politics. The parties no longer were the experts on political engagement. The result of this reform was a focus on study and the publicity of study results. The political process now focused on policy rather than politics.

With better educated and more informed citizens making up the American population, the role of public opinion continued to become more important. George
Gallup recognized this and believed that the poll would be, “a practical way of learning what the nation thinks” (Schudson 223). Gallup began polling in 1934 on a small scale but with a more scientific process than the mass sampling techniques used by other polls at the time. When Gallup predicted Franklin D. Roosevelt’s victory in the 1936 election and other polls did not, it was clear that his scientific polling technique and the importance of public opinion were here to stay (Schudson 224).

The many changing moods and ideas in America were represented well by Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roosevelt played a major role in shifting the center of government from the legislature to the bureaucracy under direct presidential authority (Schudson 229). Roosevelt hired experts in agriculture, economics, and other academics, who supported his New Deal and used them to fill government positions. He changed the role of patronage from party based to idea based; further distancing parties from the political process and emphasizing even more the role of the President in policy making (Schudson 230). This contributed to Roosevelt’s effort to portray himself as the first President that was above party labels. He realized that to be a successful President, one required the ability to attract voters from both sides of the political spectrum. Roosevelt also made strong efforts to reach out to African Americans and the labor movement for votes. This created a divide in the Democratic Party between the North and the South over the issue of race. Although Roosevelt only briefly touched on it, government would soon have to deal with including African Americans, as well as other minority groups, in the public arena (Schudson 231). This set the stage for the second half of the twentieth century, where a rights revolution took place in this country like it had never seen before.

The Rights Revolution
The rights revolution that encompassed the second half of the twentieth century began in the 1930’s with the *Palko v. Connecticut* case, which interpreted the Fourteenth Amendment as a means to apply certain features of the Bill of Rights to the states. In previous cases, the Supreme Court had specifically declared that the Bill of Rights did not apply to the states but that precedent was overturned here. In Justice Benjamin Cardozo’s decision in *Palko v. Connecticut*, he expressed that the Bill of Rights represented “fundamental principles of liberty and justice which lie at the base of all our civil and political institutions” and thereby should be applicable to the states (Schudson 246). This was a gateway for cases leading up to the legendary 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case, which was represented by a form of judicial activism that fought for civil and political liberties. The Warren Court of 1953 to 1969 was mostly responsible for putting the issue of individual rights on the national agenda. Their landmark decision in the *Brown* case launched a revolution that started in the courts (Schudson 248). Until this time period, citizens sought to influence the state through their legislative representatives and did so by entering the voting booth. Now, a new avenue of power was available for the citizen to become politically engaged. The courtroom joined the voting booth as a location for civic participation. The rulings of the Supreme Court did not act alone in creating the transition into a rights revolution. Voluntary political associations, like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), found it easier to get policy changed through the creation of a legal defense fund and the use of litigation, than by appealing to the legislature (Schudson 250). Other organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) followed suit by establishing a tax deductible litigation arm in the 1960’s. A new
generation of litigators was emerging. Ralph Nader established the Center for the Study of Responsive Law in 1967 and soon after the Public Interest Research Group, which helped give birth to public interest law that is very prevalent today. Different groups focused on maintaining rights for different citizens. Whether it be minorities, the poor, women, children, prisoners, the disabled, gays and lesbians, workers, or environmentalists, everyone had their cause and a special interest group rose to fight for them (Schudson 256). The revolution in the courts led to a revolution in congress where more legislation pertaining to civil rights was passed than ever before (Schudson 264). The 1964 Civil rights act banned employment discrimination on the basis of race or gender (Schudson 261). The All Handicapped Children Act (1975) changed public school procedures and helped lead a handicapped rights revolution (Schudson 265). In 1973, Congress passed the Child Abuse and Treatment Act which financed child abuse service programs and raised awareness about domestic violence (Schudson 268). The Clean Air Acts of 1963, 1967, and 1970 along with the Clean Water Acts of 1965, 1970, and 1972, made protection of the environment one of the duties of the federal government (Schudson 270). All of these acts, and many more, came to fruition because Americans could now seek political representation through the courtroom, no matter what their cause was. Did America take the rights revolution to far though? Many feel that the emphasis on rights in the later half of the twentieth century has had alarming consequences for democratic politics (Schudson 287). To put it frankly, some believe rights-based citizenship makes our political system far too dependent on lawyers (Schudson 289). Whether that is the case or not, the American citizen found a new way to gain individual rights and it did not involve the voting booth.
Concern in the Late Twentieth Century

Towards the end of the twentieth century, many political analysts became concerned with our country’s apparent lack of voter participation. “In the 1988 general election, only 50.16 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot, the lowest turnout rate since 1924” (Quinlivan 2362). This figure was surpassed almost a decade later in the 1996 presidential election when only 48.9 percent of eligible voters showed up at the polls (Putnam 32). Since 1960, statistics show that voter turnout has slowly declined (Quinlivan 2362). To be fair, turnout increased and decreased periodically throughout the twentieth century as the political landscape of our country continued to change. Nevertheless, when voter turnout in presidential elections dropped to around 50 percent and 33 percent in off-year elections, many Americans became concerned and looked for somewhere to put the blame (Everson 416).

Many scholars have focused their study on voter registration and how it affects voter turnout. Roughly 35-40 percent of eligible voters in 1989 were not registered to vote (Quinlivan 2363). This is important because while the participation rate of the U.S. voting-age population was low, more than 80 percent of those registered did vote (Schachter, Low Voter Turnout...). At the time, the majority of states’ registration laws required citizens to register up to fifty days before an election and they set up registration sites at odd locations with inconvenient hours. If you decided to move, whether it was across the county, across the state, or across the country, you had to register again (Quinlivan 2373). Over 40 states, along with the District of Columbia, utilized purge statutes that required a citizen to re-register if they had not exercised their right to vote during a given period of time (Quinlivan 2374). This created a two-tiered election
process in the United States; the first being the registration process and the second the
testing process (Quinlivan 2375). The United States is criticized as “the only western
nation that continues to follow the ‘obsolete’ English practice of placing the entire burden
of registration upon the individual” (Quinlivan 2376). These findings led many scholars
to believe that personal registration, in the United States, was at least partly responsible
for low voter turnout (Quinlivan 2364). James D. King, in his work Political Culture,
Registration Laws, and Voter Turnout among the American States, quotes Anthony
Downs’ theory of citizens as rational political actors who make choices based on the
gains to be derived from various courses of action. King writes, “According to Downs,
‘every rational man decides whether to vote just as he makes all other decisions: if the
returns outweigh the costs, he votes; if not, he abstains”’ (King 116). From the
perspective of this argument, difficulty in voter registration could be seen as one of the
principle costs of voting. The concern with voter registration and its’ affect on voter
participation spurred congress to create new legislation that dealt specifically with voter
registration. Representative Al Swift (D-Wash.) said that voter registration procedures in
all 50 states had “created a sufficient impediment to the voting process to warrant a
federal response,” he went on to add, “It is a proper function and responsibility of the
federal government to make the registration process as open, fraud-proof, and as
accessible as possible.” (Schachter, Low Voter Turnout...). The response came in the
form of a bill, HR15, more commonly known as The National Voter Registration Act of
1993 (NVRA). The NVRA was designed to increase electoral participation in the United
States by requiring states to implement a variety of procedures to lighten the burden of
voter registration. The NVRA prescribed four approaches to higher turnout: motor voter,
public agency registration, universal mail registration, and a prohibition of purging for not voting. The heart of the act was the section dubbed “Motor Voter.” Motor Voter was a proposal to have motor vehicle agencies register people to vote as they applied for their driver's licenses (Schachter, Low Voter Turnout…). Since part of the problem with registration stemmed from people moving from state to state, Motor Voter provided a good solution because people who moved would inevitably change their driver's license. In addition, 85 to 90 percent of eligible voters held driver’s licenses or non-driver identification cards issued by the motor vehicle licensing agency (Schachter, Low Voter Turnout…). Motor Voter and the registration problem seemed to be a perfect match. However, Motor Voter did not return the results that many had hoped when it was passed into law in 1994. As people registered to vote in Indiana in 1995, more than half registered at social service agencies while less than one third registered at the bureau of motor vehicles (Hacker, Motor Voter Sputters…). It also did not seem to help in bringing anyone to the polls since the 1996 election turnout of 48.9 percent was one of the lowest in the twentieth century. Grassroots registration drives also sprang up during the 1980's and 1990's. In Ohio, Secretary of State Sherrod Brown issued a huge grassroots registration drive in 1989 that aimed at making registration more available to the voter. Registration forms were “sent by utilities, credit card companies and other firms that do business through the mail. They were made available at state agencies. They were even printed on paper tray liners at McDonald's fast-food restaurants” (Cook, Turnout Hits 64-Year…). In the end, Ohio registered a half-million new voters but voter turnout rates in the next election were lower than they had been five years earlier (Cook, Turnout Hits 64-Year…). The great efforts made through legislation and grassroots
registration drives may have helped some Americans get past the barrier of registration, but they did not contribute to a higher voter turnout.

The study of voter participation in the last decade focused immensely on America's youth. In a study done at Wayne State University in 1993, Doctors James D. Chesney and Otto Feinstein found that, "Those between 18 and 25 are particularly unlikely to participate in political activity" (Chesney and Feinstein 535). In an effort to solve this problem, they introduced an interesting incentive to their Introduction to American Government course. They felt that if students could become more informed and experienced with the political process that voluntary participation would increase.

To achieve this, students were required to earn 25 percent of their grade by doing one of three things, "(1) identifying an issue agenda and convening an agenda convention; (2) helping with voter registration and voter participation projects; and (3) interviewing candidates about agenda issues" (Chesney and Feinstein 535). They viewed these activities as important to achieving coalition building and political mobilization. In the end, they found that their studies did not increase voter participation significantly among their students at the time, but they did find that many students felt they would become more politically active in the future as a result of the class (Chesney and Feinstein 535).

In the 2000 presidential election, the figures of youth voter participation were once again troubling to many Americans. Only 33 percent of Americans 18-24 showed up at the polls. This led Rhode Island Secretary of State Matthew Brown to launch an experimental Civics 101 course at Central Falls High School. The course covered such material as the structure of the state and federal governments, the concept of volunteerism and civic participation, how to run for office, the importance of voting, and the history of
Rhode Island’s role in the development of the United States. Brown believed that once young people learned about the different ways they could become involved, they would want to volunteer (Pina, Giving Youth a Voice…). This study and the one conducted at Wayne State University were small-scale experiments. The result of forcing students to become involved in politics, through increased education of the political process, did not provide any conclusive solutions to the voter participation problem.

Robert Putnam argues in his book *Bowling Alone* that, “Members of today’s older generation are slightly more interested in electoral campaigns than were their predecessors four decades ago, while youths today are less interested than youths were in the 1950’s and 1960’s” (Putnam 37). Perhaps then it is not education of politics that keeps young Americans from the polls, but rather their age. In a *New York Times* article released in 2001, Richard Rothstein argues that, “One might assume that students who learn more about their rights will be more inclined to exercise them as adults. So perhaps better history and civics courses would help. But no research confirms that students who know more about those subjects are more likely to vote” (Rothstein). He goes on to note that, “The National Assessment of Educational Progress, given to a nationwide sample of students, has tested civics knowledge only twice, in 1988 and 1998. Although the exams were not strictly comparable, civic awareness of high school seniors seemed mostly unchanged from the first test to the second. So while voting by 18-year-olds fell during that time, the drop cannot be explained by falling academic achievement” (Rothstein). Rather than focusing on education, Rothstein believes that age and maturity better explain voter participation. While the young generation of 1960 had a voter turnout of around 50 percent, that same group of Americans produced a turnout of 60 percent in the
1996 election, 36 years later. As that generation grew older they seemed more willing to participate in the political process (Rothstein).

The fact that Americans have to take time out of their work day to vote is another argument for low voter participation. The city of Boston sought to remedy this problem in 2002 by declaring November 5th “Democracy Day”. According to an article in the Boston Globe, the Democracy Day initiative does a few things, “It urges Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino to encourage city workers to take time off on Election Day to vote and asks Menino to encourage nonessential municipal workers to volunteer time on Election Day in order to boost electoral participation. And it encourages leaders in the private sector, particularly the heads of the city's corporate elite, to encourage voter participation by allowing its employee's time off to vote and volunteer on election day” (Peterson, Everybody’s Goal...). This initiative came as a result of a 30 percent voter turnout in Boston’s 2002 primary election, one of the lowest in the city’s history.

Bostonians are not alone on the idea of Election Day becoming a national holiday. New York City has implemented a similar policy because it is an option at the state and local level to do so. The federal government does not recognize Election Day as a national holiday but there are many who support the idea. Senators Hillary Clinton and John Kerry backed the idea as a way to combat low voter turnout and after the 2000 presidential election and Florida vote recount, former presidents Carter and Ford, who led a commission to re-examine voting laws, concluded that Election Day should be a national holiday (Rauh, Election Holiday Stirs...). The city of Philadelphia previously had the same election day policy as Boston and New York, but grew tired of paying city employees, which had to work on election day (police, firemen, etc.), overtime.
However, many still support the idea on a national level. A professor of political science at Rutgers University, Peter McDonough, expressed his opinion on the idea saying, “Without question it should be a holiday every year,” he went on to add that private employees should be given a few hours to vote but should not be allowed to take the entire day off (Rauh, Election Holiday Stirs). Whether making Election Day a national holiday would help to increase voter turnout cannot be predicted at this time. However, the idea has certainly been circulating through the Federal Government and the result is yet to be seen.

Many explanations have been given for the low voter turnout of recent decades. Robert Putnam argues in *Bowling Alone* that, “Very little of the net decline in voting is attributed to individual change, and virtually all of it is generational” (Putnam 34). Putnam believes that regardless of their social standing in life, baby boomers and their children have been less likely to vote than their parents and grandparents. This is troubling to Putnam because in his eyes, “Voting is by a substantial margin the most common form of political activity, and it embodies the most fundamental democratic principle of equality. Not to vote is to withdraw from the political community” (Putnam 35). Putnam is also concerned with the fact that while political parties are better financed and more professionally staffed than ever, fewer people identify with and participate in partisan politics (Putnam 38). Putnam’s argument is that the results of polling Americans on civic engagement have shown that virtually every form of community involvement, from petition signing to running for office, has declined in the last two decades (Putnam 41). He does not identify the problem with a lack of knowledge, in fact he writes that, “We remain, in short, reasonably well-informed
spectators of public affairs, but many fewer of us actually partake in the game” (Putnam 46). Putnam’s argument is that there is simply a lack of community in America today, the close community ties that existed two decades ago and before, are no longer there. While Putnam argues this point of view, other observers like Michael Schudson see things in a different light. Schudson argues that, “Citizenship in the United States has not disappeared. It has not even declined. It has, inevitably, changed” (Schudson 294). Schudson sees our past models of citizenship, which have been discussed throughout this paper, still alive in present times. The legacy of colonial citizenship lives through citizen’s deference to old families and the contributions to public service they provide. Americans still trust those we see as natural leaders, if they have visible proven records. The nineteenth century, with its mass political participation, lives on in how organized political parties have become, and majority rule by “the people” has contributed to the idea of mass democracy in modern politics. The Progressive era informed citizens, cleaned up politics, and forced journalists to take pride in their profession and become more ethical in reporting. The effects of the rights revolution are still being felt and have placed the courtroom alongside the polling booth as a place to practice politics (Schudson 295). Citizens today not only have ties to elected officials, but also attorneys in courtrooms and organized interest groups that represent them to administrative agencies (Schudson 299). Schudson argues against Putnam’s negative view of modern civic life saying that, “With such dramatic changes in who is free to participate in politics, what means are available for political participation, and what domains of human endeavor fall within the political, it would be remarkable if one could quickly sum up the changing quality of civic life as rise or fall” (Schudson 295).
What Americans need to ask themselves is whether voter turnout is the right way to measure civic engagement. The high turnout figures of the nineteenth century certainly did not attest to a healthy civic environment, just as recent low voter turnout figures do not attest to a civic environment that is fatally ill. In fact, some may even argue that the civic environment of the United States has improved. Carl Ladd, executive director of The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut, argues that

“The technological revolutions of our post-industrial era have given larger proportions of the public advanced educational skills and new communications tools. They have freed broad segments of the populace from grinding physical toil. And, by extending material abundance, they have widened the range of individual choice, thus inviting millions to explore civic life in ways previously out of reach.” (Ladd, “Americans are More…”)

Americans should feel privileged to live in an era where so many are allowed to participate in the political process freely and by whatever means they choose. The low voter participation numbers of our present times should neither be looked at as a positive nor negative attribution to our level of civic engagement. Rather, we should continue to study the issue until we arrive at a more decisive conclusion of what exactly those statistics mean.
Bibliography


