

Chapter 8

Political Participation

REVIEWING THE CHAPTER

CHAPTER FOCUS

This chapter reviews the much-discussed lack of voter turnout and other forms of political participation in the United States, and concludes that individual Americans may not be at fault for their seeming nonparticipation but that other factors may be at work. After reading and reviewing the material in this chapter, you should be able to do each of the following:

1. Explain why the text believes that the description, the analysis, and the proposed remedy for low voter turnout rates in this country are off base.
2. Compare the way turnout statistics are tabulated for this country and for other countries, and explain the significance of these differences.
3. Describe how the control of elections has shifted from the states to the federal government, and explain what effects this shift has had on blacks, women, and youths.
4. State both sides of the debate over whether voter turnout has declined over the past century, and describe those factors that tend to hold down voter turnout in this country.
5. List and explain Nie and Verba's four categories of political participation.
6. Discuss those factors that appear to be associated with high or low political participation.
7. Compare participation rates in various forms of political activity here and in other countries.

STUDY OUTLINE

I. Introduction

- A. 80 percent voter turnout in European countries
- B. Low turnout in America blamed on apathy
- C. Calls for action by government or private groups to mobilize voters

II. A closer look at nonvoting

- A. Alleged problem: low turnout compared with Europeans, but this compares registered voters with the eligible adult population
- B. Common explanation: voter apathy on Election Day, but the real problem is low registration rates
- C. Proposed solution: get-out-the-vote drives
 1. 2004 study found little impact in relation to such efforts
 2. If anything, get-out-the-vote appeals may mobilize those who usually vote in low turnout elections
- D. Apathy not the only cause of nonregistration
 1. Costs here versus no costs in European countries where registration is automatic

2. Motor-voter law of 1993 (which took effect in 1995)
 - a) 630,000 new voters in two months
 - b) Accounted for almost 40 percent of applications in 2001–2002
 - c) Scant evidence of impact on turnout or election outcomes

E. Voting is not the only way of participating

III. The rise of the American electorate

A. From state to federal control

1. Initially, states decided nearly everything
2. This led to wide variation in federal elections
3. Congress has since reduced state prerogatives
 - a) 1842 law: House members elected by district
 - b) Suffrage to women
 - c) Suffrage to blacks
 - d) Suffrage to eighteen- to twenty-year-olds
 - e) Direct popular election of U.S. senators
4. Black voting rights
 - a) Fifteenth Amendment gutted by Supreme Court as not conferring a right to vote
 - b) Southern states then use evasive strategies
 - (1) Literacy test
 - (2) Poll tax
 - (3) White primaries
 - (4) Grandfather clauses
 - (5) Intimidation of black voters
 - c) Most of these strategies ruled out by Supreme Court
 - d) Major change with 1965 Voting Rights Act; black vote increases
5. Women's voting rights
 - a) Western states permit women to vote
 - b) Nineteenth Amendment ratified 1920
 - c) No dramatic changes in outcomes
6. Youth vote
 - a) Voting Rights Act of 1970
 - b) Twenty-sixth Amendment ratified 1971
 - c) Lower turnout rate initially and no evident party loyalty
 - d) Turnout remains lower than that of other age groups although rates of political participation generally are at an all time high
7. National standards now govern most aspects

B. Voting turnout

1. Debate over declining percentages: two theories
 - a) The percentages are real and the result of a decline in popular interest in elections and competitiveness of the two parties
 - (1) Parties originally worked hard to increase turnout among all voters
 - (2) The election of 1896 locked Democrats in the South and Republicans in the North
 - (3) Lopsided Republican victories caused citizens to lose interest
 - (4) Leadership in the major parties became conservative and resisted mass participation
 - b) The percentages represent an apparent decline induced, in part, by more honest ballot counts of today
 - (1) Parties once printed ballots
 - (2) Ballots cast in public

- (3) Parties controlled counting
- c) Most scholars see several reasons for some real decline
 - (1) Registration more difficult: longer residency, educational qualifications, and discrimination
 - (2) Continuing drop after 1960 cannot be explained
 - (3) Refinement of VAP data to VEP data also reveals a decline
- d) Universal turnout probably would not alter election outcomes

IV. Who participates in politics?

A. Forms of participation

- 1. Voting the most common, but 8 to 10 percent misreport it
- 2. Verba and Nie's six types of participants
 - a) Inactives
 - b) Voting specialists
 - c) Campaigners
 - d) Communalists
 - e) Parochial participants
 - f) Complete activists

B. Causes of participation

- 1. Schooling, or political information, more likely to vote
- 2. Church-goers vote more
- 3. Men and women vote same rate
- 4. Race
 - a) Black participation lower than that of whites overall
 - b) But controlling for SES, higher than whites
- 5. Level of trust in government?
 - a) Studies show no correlation
- 6. Difficulty of registering: as turnout declines, registration gets easier
- 7. Several small factors decrease turnout
 - a) More youths, blacks, and other minorities
 - b) Decreasing effectiveness of parties
 - c) Remaining impediments to registration
 - d) Voting compulsory in other nations
 - e) Ethnic minorities encounter language barriers, whereas blacks are involved in nonpolitical institutions
 - f) May feel that elections do not matter
- 8. Democrats and Republicans fight over solutions
 - a) No one really knows who would be helped
 - b) Nonvoters tend to be poor, black, and so on
 - c) But an increasing percentage of college graduates are also not voting
 - d) Hard to be sure that turnout efforts produce gains for either party: Jesse Jackson in 1984

C. The meaning of participation rates

- 1. Americans vote less but participate more
 - a) Other forms of activity becoming more common
 - b) Some forms more common here than in other countries
- 2. Americans elect more officials than Europeans do and have more elections
- 3. U.S. turnout rates heavily skewed to higher status; meaning of this is unclear