

5.2 Voter Turnout

Explain the roles that individual choice and state laws play in voter turnout in elections.

When looking at voter turnout in American politics an age-old maxim comes to mind, “politics ain’t beanbag.” There is no easy way to explain why some vote and why some do not vote. There are plenty of factors behind political participation that political scientists have studied. We commonly look at education, socioeconomic status, rational decision-making theory, personality tests and social networking. Lost in these studies, however, is looking at political efficacy.

Our engagement in the political process is often connected to our feeling that our interest matters. Feelings of efficacy in the political process helps to explain who votes. When young people get involved in civic activity early in life they are more likely to be involved later in life. Alienation from civic activity results in disengagement. Getting citizens to cast that first ballot continues to vex political science.

Turnout rates are higher in most democracies around the world. Here in the United States voting turnout in presidential elections rarely exceeds 60% of eligible citizens. In non-presidential years turnout is much lower. Citizens who are white, older, college educated, with professional jobs tend to vote at higher rates. For this reason, conservative Republicans tend to focus on voting integrity. For instance, Republicans favor strict registration laws that also require photo identification of all voters. In contrast, liberal Democrats look for ways to make voting even easier. They are worried that their constituents, citizens less likely to vote, are underrepresented. Democrats push for early voting, same-day registration and touch screen ballots. Undoubtedly there are institutional barriers that do make voting more difficult.

An institutional barrier is a rule or law that prevents eligible adults from voting. One such barrier is the citizenship requirement. Unless you are an American citizen you cannot vote. Registration requirements in most states also make voting more difficult. Unless you have signed up in advance you are prohibited from voting. Most states also prohibit, for a period of time, convicted felons from voting. Our federal election day is always on a workday. This simple fact makes it difficult for many working Americans. Some complain that here in America we have too many elections and that our ballots are too confusing.

Voting turnout is low here. Grassroots efforts, work done at the local level by real citizens, like Suffrage @ 17 in Illinois have worked to increase political efficacy and subsequently increase voter turnout. Energizing the electorate around critical issues, mobilizing prospective voters through like-minded networks, offering compelling candidates, and framing laws and policies that encourage engagement are all a part of increasing voter turnout. Most agree that participating at the grassroots level is often successful at encouraging more Americans to vote. Of course, that presumes we want more voters? Right?

One might imagine that universally Americans desire more people to vote. This would be far from the truth. In recent years Democrats and Republicans have focused their civic ends on different means. Democrats have pursued policies that broaden access to voting by easing registration restrictions. Then Democratic president Bill Clinton pushed the Motor Voter Bill in 1993. Liberals have fought in court any attempt to make voting more difficult. Republicans, in contrast, look to assure voting integrity. Republican president George W. Bush signed into law the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) in 2002. This law modernized voting procedures in hope of reducing any Election Day shenanigans. HAVA modernized voting by replacing old punch card technologies with touch screen voting machines. In the end both goals are noble yet reflect the interests of each political party. It is argued that Democrats are advantaged when turnout is higher while Republicans are helped by the turnout of more traditional voters.

More recently Voter ID laws and early voting opportunities have inspired both debate and legal actions. State laws that require voters to have photo-identification, it is argued, depresses turnout. Voters without a photo ID tend to be poor, urban and a member of a minority group. Democrats representing this demographic have been the loudest critics. The evidence of voter suppression, however, is unclear. The Supreme Court has upheld voter ID laws, particularly those in Indiana, by declaring the “valid interest in protecting the integrity and reliability of the electoral process.” Republicans cheered the Court’s decision.

Republicans are less cheery about early voting laws. States have always made provisions for absentee ballot voting. Now majorities of states offer opportunities to vote early, to vote before the official Election Day. Facilitating early access to voting would appear to advantage those groups of people who are less likely to vote on Election Day. This would appear to advantage Democrats. The evidence is less clear. Most scholars have concluded that the most important help when trying to increase voter turnout is not through easier access to the ballot but through easier access to registration.

Still present in most states is a two-step process to casting a vote. Before you can vote you must register, most often not on Election Day. Many states require voter registration weeks in advance of Election Day. Such laws impose institutional barriers to voting. Even types of elections affect turnout. We turn out for presidential elections but tend to stay home for mid-term and local elections.

Angus Campbell and Philip Converse wrote the book on voting back in 1960, its simple title – *The American Voter*. In their “funnel of causality” the authors of *The American Voter* recognized that ultimately political decisions were made based upon attitudes toward the parties and the candidates. Membership in social groups, population movement and personality were important but less so. Issues mattered little. Voters were portrayed less as rational agents and more as conduits to exogenous factors. Voters in this study showed “a long-term psychological attachment to a political party.”

The American Voter established party identification as the leading determinant of one’s voting behavior. Additionally, these authors found that most voters stand pat with their

party loyalties. Voters choose the same party over and over. This attachment, they argued, was largely affective. Choices based upon strict policy agreement were less common. Party loyalty goes up with age.

One need not be concerned that *The American Voter* was written over fifty years ago. Its basic claims appear as true today as they were in 1960. Though we may teach the demise of the political party and the rise of the independent voter, party identification continues to be the wellspring of electoral victory. Though one might imagine that political efficacy and engagement correlate, political science appears to suggest that voting is a muscle memory. Once you vote, you will vote again and again. Voting is a civic habit. For many this habit has not yet formed. Whether or not we make voting easier may not in the end make much difference. Only you can make that difference. Vote.

There are many factors that influence voter choices. Political science demonstrates that party ID and candidate characteristics primarily determine voting decisions. Little has changed on these two fronts. Yet more and more research is beginning to suggest that voters care about specific issues as well. The lack of familiarity with issues has often been cited as a characteristic of American voters. New evidence appears to give “we the people” more credit in making educational choices when casting our ballot.

In the political jungle, your behavior is greatly influenced by who raised you. If raised by Democrats, you are more likely to behave like a Democrat. The same would be true for those raised by Republicans. It has been a long held belief in political science that party identification best helps us understand civic activity. It is argued that family provides the primary means of political socialization. These familial influences serve as a catalyst to group identity and subsequently to political action. Most political science would say,

Partisanship is a powerful influence on people’s perception of politics. One’s identification with a political party strongly informs candidate choice during campaigns. When information levels are low, people use their partisanship as a decision heuristic to fill in the blanks. When faced with new political information, people’s partisan priors bias how this information is interpreted. In other words, party identification is central to understanding how citizens interpret public affairs and make political decisions.

For many of us these partisan biases were formed in our adolescence. They prove to be stable over time. Partisan identification must be seen as a primary factor when trying to explain voter choices in American politics. If you cannot understand a friend’s political outlook, look at where their tree fort was located in their youth.

Partisan identification, however, should not be seen as the only factor that influences voter choices. Candidate characteristics continue to take on an ever more important role. Candidate-centered campaigns can now be seen as a game changer. As our nominating process has become more democratic with the rise of direct primaries

individual candidates make direct appeals to voters. Technology advancements as well help explain how candidate characteristics are more and more important. Radio, television and the Internet all provide greater intimacy between candidate and voter. We no longer need Party bosses to filter candidates. We assess competency and character for ourselves. Voters now demand to see their candidates on TV talk shows, up close in town hall meetings and even as guests on popular entertainment outlets. Our candidates now create viral videos, they Tweet and use Instagram. Voters now increasingly make visceral decisions based on personal preference rather than simply relying on elites. This allows for a new type of candidate, often unfiltered and more extreme.

Popular studies have claimed that “widespread ignorance and indifference over many matters of policy” characterize the American voter. Worse, independent voters appear “devoid of policy interests or concerns.” To the contrary, issue salience appears to be growing. Contemporary political issues now can be shown to be an important factor in determining voter choices. In his classic study David E. RePass has argued,

What is important to observe from this study is that by and large the voting public has at least a few substantive issues in mind at the time of an election, and the voters seem to be acting more responsibly than had previously been thought. To be sure, images of the presidential candidates are still the most important factor in the electoral decision; at least this was true in 1964. But this personal feeling about a candidate is not the only basis for choice there are substantive concerns as well. Furthermore, when we allow voters to define their own issue space, they are able to sort out the differences between parties with a fair degree of accuracy. It would probably be going too far to say that the public has contextual knowledge upon which to base its decision. But we have shown that the public is in large measure concerned about specific issues, and that these cognitions have a considerable impact on electoral choice.

Put simply voters have certain issues that energize political activity. When counting ballots we discover the impact of single-issue voters. For example, Democrats have historically mobilized around abortion rights and health care. And Republicans have mobilized around gun rights and tax policy.

There is no easy way to explain who votes and why. Political science has grounded many of our choices in Party ID and candidate centered campaigns. Increasingly, however, voters have grown savvier by recognizing salient issues. A more educated American electorate with greater access to information technology should make our elections the result of rational choices. Nevertheless, a picture is still worth a thousand words.