

CONNECTIONS

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Voter Participation

By Carolyn Farrow-Garland

The right of citizens to elect the men and women who will govern them is fundamental in a democracy. Yet here in the United States, the modern world's oldest democracy, more and more people are choosing not to exercise this most basic right. Voter participation has declined over the past 40 years from 63 percent in the 1960 presidential election to just 51 percent in Election 2000. This seeming disinterest is surprising in a nation whose founders were wary about government.

Voter participation is a widely studied issue, and a better understanding of why so many people have apparently given up on voting should provide important insights into the workings of our complex, modern democracy. The declining interest in voting is of considerable importance to the Kettering Foundation's research on understanding what it takes for democracy to work as it should. Findings from the many studies of voter participation, some of which are summarized below, have proven useful in helping shape our understanding of this issue. But unlike much of this analysis, which focuses on possible explanations for the decline, the objective of the foundation's research is to contribute useful insights on how voting can become a practice and pattern of behavior, especially among young people.

In his book, *The Vanishing Voter*, Thomas Patterson (see also his article in this issue) describes how the American public's disaffection with voting extends to virtually every area of election activity, from the number of volunteers who work on campaigns to the number of viewers who watch televised debates. Patterson and other social scientists identify a number of factors that help to account for this decline in electoral participation. Political parties no longer seem able to mobilize great numbers of people. Attack journalism and soft news are thought to weaken the foundations of trust and interest in politics. Election campaigns are criticized as being too long, too negative, and too expensive. Voters are frustrated with candidates who overpromise when seeking office but then are unable to

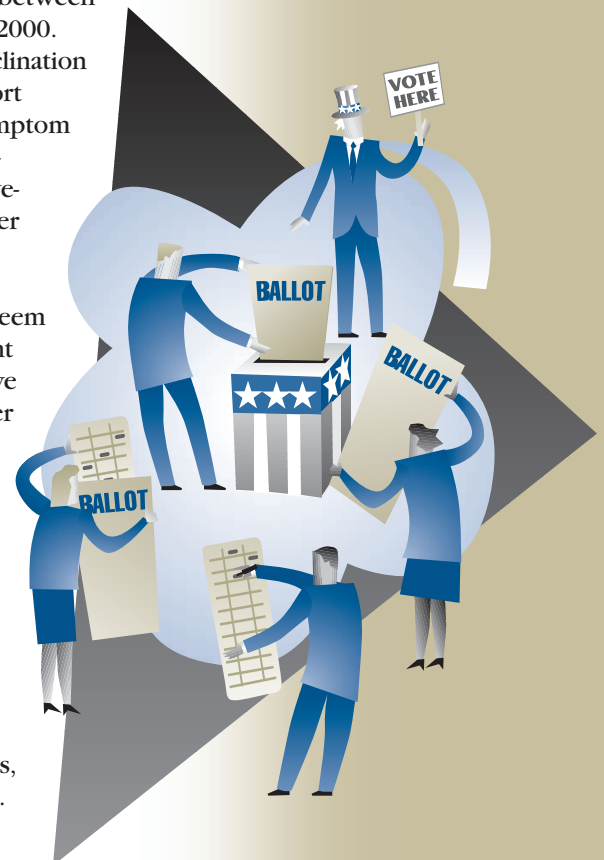
deliver once elected. Researchers also point out that there is often little real competition. In the 2002 election, only about three dozen of the 435 seats in the House of Representatives were seriously contested by a challenger. And even though many changes have been made to make voter registration easier and more accessible, people still think the process is too cumbersome.

Another cause cited by researchers is demographic change, which is an issue that goes directly to the heart of the Kettering Foundation's research in this area. Young people have come under special scrutiny as the level of voter participation among people aged 18 to 24 has declined steadily since 1972, the year that 18-year-olds received the right to vote. In an article in *Youth Vote*, entitled "The Youth Vote: Why Bother?" Patrick Boyle reports that voting rates among young people declined from 50 percent in 1972 to 32 percent in 2000. This low turnout occurred in spite of unprecedented efforts to get young people to the polls. By contrast, 72 percent of people between the ages of 65 and 74 voted in 2000. It is unclear whether this disinclination to vote will change as this cohort gets older or whether it is a symptom of a deeper negative attitude — about elections and the effectiveness of voting — among younger generations.

Get out the vote campaigns targeting young voters do not seem to have had much effect. Recent assessments of these efforts have led many foundations to wonder whether such activities are worth the investment. On the other hand, an argument can be made that without such initiatives the situation might be worse. This leads many to wonder what it is that young people do care about?

Some social scientists have found that despite youth disengagement from electoral politics, young people are not apathetic. In a recent national survey of

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college students conducted by the Institute of Politics at Harvard University, two-thirds of the students told researchers that politics is relevant to their lives. Despite low rates of participation in political campaigns (9 percent) or political or issue-related organizations (14 percent), 61 percent of respondents indicated they volunteered or did community service in the 12-month period before the survey was conducted. These high rates of voluntary service indicate that young people are concerned and interested in public life, yet their disinclination to participate in politics remains troubling.

Boots Riley, a hip-hop artist who joined efforts to get out the vote for the 2000 election, gave voice to a certain ambivalence about voting that may be prevalent among young people. He said “voting is the lowest form of political action you can do, if you want to change the world, there’s a lot more things that you can do.” According to focus-group research commissioned by the Southern Research Council (SRC), young people, voters and nonvoters alike, gain satisfaction from seeing the results of volunteering and community service. Both groups share a distrust of politicians and would not consider running for public office. Where young voters part with their nonvoting counterparts is in their sense of efficacy and their confidence that the act of voting is important and can make a difference. Voters and nonvoters use the same evidence — such as the recount in Florida — to make the case for their very different actions.

The SRC report goes on to note that young voters and nonvoters think schools need to be more effective in educating students on voter registration, current events, and political issues. Young voters also say, however, that parents are a big influence. Young people become more interested in politics when their parents talk with them about political issues and explain to them why they voted for who they did. Projects such as Kids Voting, a



national effort to get families involved in voting, are designed to tap into the important role that parents play in influencing their children.

The Kettering Foundation’s initial research on voting will be conducted through a shared learning with SRC. Founded in 1919, SRC focuses on promoting racial justice, protecting democratic rights, and broadening civic participation in the southern United States. They have been active in promoting school desegregation and voting rights and have come to see the decline in voter participation as a symptom of a deeper issue. SRC staff are assessing the reasons for low voter turnout among young people and are developing new ways of connecting with them. Findings from research commissioned by the organization indicate that voting habits are learned early, that parents have a strong influence, and that the quality of civic education can be important in how young people come to an understanding of their roles as citizens and as voters.

The first step in the shared-learning that the Kettering Foundation is pursuing is to understand how young people come to view themselves as citizens and to learn how this awareness expresses itself in the ways young people view their rights and obligations. Do factors such as identity and culture contribute to this awareness? What types of experiences or influences strengthen the idea that voting is an important activity? Do certain issues play a role in generating interest in voting?

There is persuasive anecdotal evidence from the National Issues Forums network

that people are more likely to vote when they are able to deliberate on campaign issues and ask candidates questions about them. This was first demonstrated following the National Issues Convention held in Texas before the 1996 presidential election. Another example comes from National Issues Forums activity in South Carolina during the 1996 gubernatorial campaign. The Kettering Foundation thinks that these experiences provide clues for thinking about how young people develop the sense of agency that shapes their understanding of their roles as citizens.

SRC efforts are designed to enable young people to develop their abilities to affect civic life in their community. For

example, youth councils in Atlanta-area schools provide opportunities for young people to learn how issues impact their lives. Public deliberation will be a key component in SRC's work, and they intend to tie development of public knowledge about issues to the electoral process. This approach will serve as the starting point for examining the relationship between public engagement among young people and voting. In coming months, the Kettering Foundation will identify other opportunities to examine this relationship, which is so critical for the future of our democracy.

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The Vanishing Voter

By Thomas E. Patterson

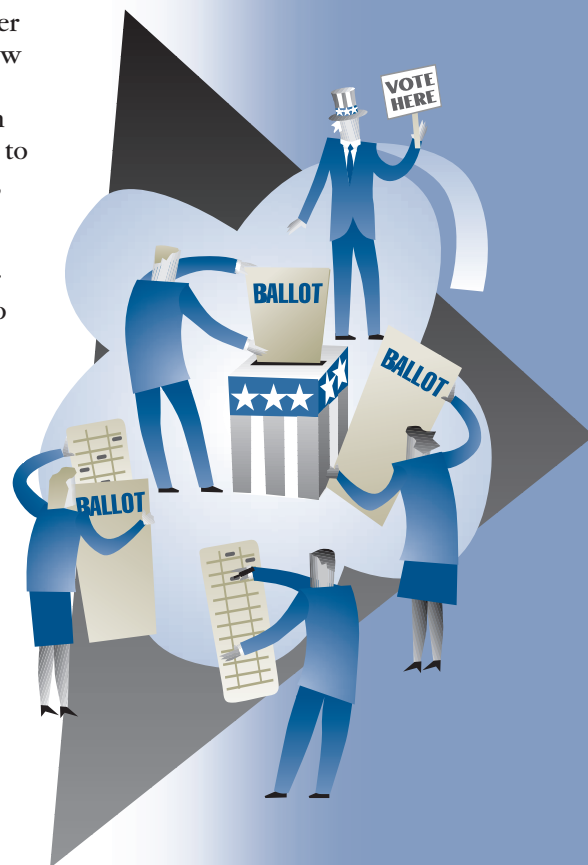
Writing in the 1950s, political observers were optimistic about the future of voter participation. Turnout had fallen sharply in 1944 and 1948. In Britain as well as the United States, partisan activity was waning. No analyst has fully explained why this had to be the case or why the wartime governing parties in both England and the United States suffered stinging defeats in postwar legislative elections.

By the 1950s, however, voter turnout was returning to the level of the 1930s, and all signs in the United States pointed to increasingly higher rates. College attendance was on the rise, the gap in the voting rates of men and women was shrinking, and black Americans were asserting their right to fuller participation.

Yet, turnout did not increase after the 1950s. In fact, the period from 1960 to 2000 marks the longest ebb in turnout in U.S. history. Turnout was 63 percent of the adult population in the 1960 presidential election and stood at only 51 percent in 2000. In the 2002 midterm elections, the voting rate was 39 percent, down from nearly 50 percent in such elections four decades ago. A mere 18 percent voted in the 2002 congressional primaries — roughly half the level — even as late as the 1970s.

Fewer voters are not the only indicator of the public's waning interest in political campaigns. In 1960, 60 percent of the nation's television households had their sets on and tuned to the October presidential debates. In 2000, fewer than 30 percent were tuned in. Few Americans today pay even token tribute to presidential elections. In 1974, Congress established a fund to underwrite candidates' campaigns, financed by a check-off box on personal income tax returns that allowed citizens to assign \$1 (later raised to \$3) of their tax liability to the fund. Initially, one in three taxpayers checked the box. Now only one in eight do so.¹

What's going on here? Why are Americans disengaging from election politics? During the 2000 campaign, as part of the Vanishing Voter Project at Harvard University's Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, we interviewed nearly 100,000 Americans to discover their level of campaign interest and participation. We combined this information with surveys of previous elections to evaluate long-term trends.



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