

# CONNECTIONS

VOLUME XIV

ISSUE 1

July 2003

- **Reassessing the Relationship between The Public and The Government**  
.....page 2
- **Our Political Awakening**  
.....page 6
- **Is There a Public Interest in Political Campaigns?**  
.....page 8
- **Voter Participation**  
.....page 11
- **The Vanishing Voter**  
.....page 13
- **Understanding the Nature of Representation in a Democracy**  
.....page 17
- **Opportunity for State Legislatures**  
.....page 19
- **Communicating the Value of Deliberation**  
.....page 22
- **Erskine College Hosts a Legislative Orientation**  
.....page 25
- **Public Engagement with Government Agencies**  
.....page 27
- **Deliberation Where You Least Expect It: Citizen Participation in Government**  
.....page 30
- **Books Worth Reading**  
.....page 34



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.

*Carolyn Farrow-Garland, a program officer at the foundation, can be reached by E-mail at [cgarland@kettering.org](mailto:cgarland@kettering.org).*

## The Vanishing Voter

By *Thomas E. Patterson*

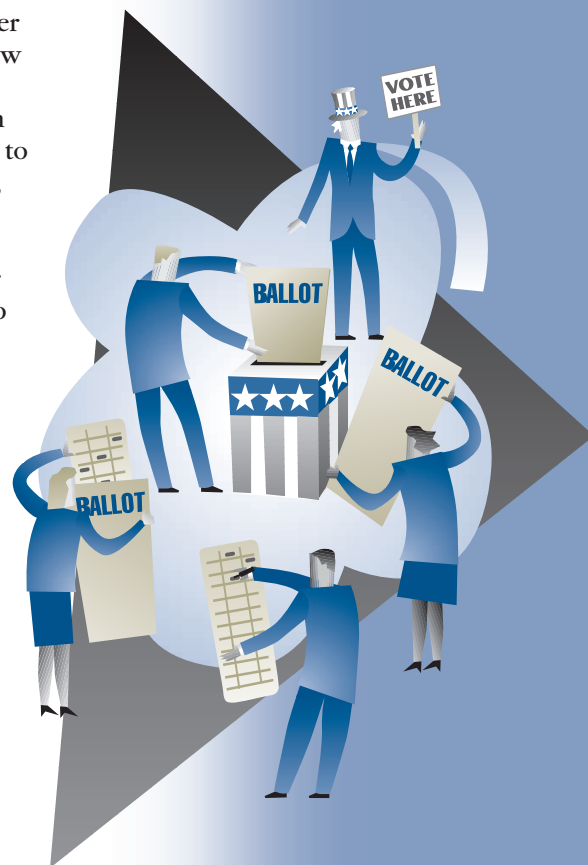
Writing in the 1950s, political observers were optimistic about the future of voter participation. Turnout had fallen sharply in 1944 and 1948. In Britain as well as the United States, partisan activity was waning. No analyst has fully explained why this had to be the case or why the wartime governing 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.



*Negative campaigning has long been part of campaign politics but now dominates it.*



(Details on the project can be found at our Web site.)

In my new book, *The Vanishing Voter*, I present the results of our study. We found, for example:

- ◆ That the weakening of the political parties as objects of both loyalty and thought has reduced the incentive to participate, particularly among lower-income Americans. A century ago, James Bryce worried that the growing complexity of American society threatened the parties' ability to forge and mobilize cohesive majorities. Social complexity is now orders of magnitude great and has clearly overtaken the parties.
- ◆ That demographic changes account for a large share of the decline. Whatever the contributions of the X and Y generations relative to those of the World War II and Baby Boom generations, electoral involvement is not among them.
- ◆ That modern reporting works against the development of political perceptions and attitudes that contribute to higher participation levels. Attack journalism and soft news have weakened the foundation of political

trust and interest, contributing to Americans' flight from election politics.

- ◆ That, despite substantial improvements in registration and balloting procedures, election laws remain an obstacle to participation, particularly for younger and lower-income adults.

Interest is also dampened by the nature of the modern campaign. Somehow, the United States has managed to create nearly the least-inviting and least-savory campaigns imaginable. Elections are supposed to energize the public. They are not supposed to ruin one's appetite, but that's the best way to understand much of what Americans now see during a campaign and why they don't have much taste for it.

Negative campaigning has long been part of campaign politics but now dominates it. Candidates have discovered that it is easier in many situations to attract swing voters by tearing down one's opponent than by talking about one's own platform. Research indicates that negative advertising has more than tripled since the 1960s. Such ads now account for more than half the ads featured in most presidential and congressional races.<sup>2</sup>



Our surveys indicate that a cumulative effect of negative politics, campaign after campaign, is a reduced interest in elections. Our evidence does not resolve the recent dispute among scholars over whether a negative campaign in the single instance keeps voters away from the polls. But our evidence points clearly to a long-term effect. Attack politics has worn some people down to the point where they simply don't want to hear about campaigns. On the average day during the 2000 campaign, Americans who felt that negative messages are a defining feature of U.S. elections were less likely to discuss the campaign and to pay attention to news about it. The differences were not large, but they occurred across the course of the campaign. Day in and day out, those who believed campaigns are akin to mud wrestling were less attentive to the campaign, even when levels of education and income were controlled.<sup>3</sup>

Today's campaigns are also characterized by promises — endless promises. Unlike their predecessors in the age of party-centered politics, today's candidates are unable to campaign on broad statements of principle within the context of a reliable base of party loyalists. Today's candidates build their followings by pledges of support to nearly every conceivable voting group. The changing nature of party platforms tells the story. Whereas platforms were once declarations of broad goals and ideals, they have become promissory notes to special interests. The 1948 Democratic and Republican platforms were less than 3,000 words in length. By the 1980s, they had exceeded 20,000 words.<sup>4</sup>

An effect of this relentless flow of campaign promises is a public wary of taking candidates at their word. In our *Vanishing Voter* surveys during the 2000 campaign, respondents who felt that candidates will say almost anything to get themselves elected had a significantly lower voting rate than other respondents. On a day-to-day basis, they were also less likely to talk about the campaign and to follow news about it.

Modern day politics also exalts personality, increasing the likelihood that personal blunders and failings will loom large in campaigns. Through the 1972 presidential election, personal controversies did not receive even half as much news coverage as did policy issues. Since 1972, they have received nearly equal

time.<sup>5</sup> Even a short list indicates just how salient they have become: Gerald Ford's blundering statement on Eastern Europe, Jimmy Carter's "lust in my heart" *Playboy* interview, Geraldine Ferraro's tax returns, Gary Hart's affair with Donna Rice, Dan Quayle's assault on the fictional "Murphy Brown," Bill Clinton's relationship with Gennifer Flowers, and Al Gore's Buddhist Temple appearance. The revelation in 2000 that Bush had been arrested a quarter-century earlier for drunken driving dominated the headlines in the closing days of the campaign. The incident got more coverage on the evening newscasts in a few days than did all of Bush and Gore's foreign policy statements during the entire general election.<sup>6</sup>

Although startling revelations can perk up a campaign and draw people momentarily to it, Americans do not like the prominence they have attained. In our surveys, respondents who felt campaigns are now akin to theater were less likely to discuss election politics and to attend to news about it.

The length of the modern campaign is also a turnoff for many Americans. Today's candidates are self-starters who depend on themselves rather than the parties to win nomination and election. As a result, active campaigning now begins much earlier in the election year than it once did. In our 2000 election surveys, respondents repeatedly expressed displeasure with the campaign's length. The long campaign also numbed people to the point where many tuned it out. A week before the 2000 Republican national convention, only one in five American respondents knew it was only days away. Not surprisingly, a large share of those who did end up watching the Republican convention did so only because they stumbled across it while channel surfing.

The modern campaign is also warped by competitive distortions. Competition is the lifeblood of democratic elections, and when it weakens, participation suffers. Only about three dozen of the 435 House seats were actually in play in 2002. In nearly twice that many districts, there was literally no competition: the weaker major party did not bother even to nominate a candidate. And in several hundred other districts, the competition was so one-sided that the result was known even before the campaign began. House incumbents have created a lock

*Respondents who felt that candidates will say almost anything to get themselves elected had a significantly lower voting rate than other respondents.*

*Presidential campaigns are more closely contested, but the competition they offer is spread unevenly across the electorate.*

on the offices they hold. They gobble up 85 percent of PAC money, are favorably redistricted when House seats are reapportioned, and use their taxpayer-provided congressional staffs to conduct round-the-clock re-election campaigns.

Presidential campaigns are more closely contested, but the competition they offer is spread unevenly across the electorate. Front loading of the nominating schedule — the placement of a large number of state contests near the front end of the process — has led presidential hopefuls to raise and spend tens of millions on these early contests in an effort to secure nomination with a decisive victory on Super Tuesday. One effect is to make money the king of the nominating process. Not since John Connally in 1980 has the candidate who has raised the most money before the first contests in Iowa and New Hampshire lost a nominating race.<sup>7</sup> A second effect is to deprive millions of citizens the opportunity to cast a meaningful vote. Bush and Gore's Super Tuesday victories in 2000 completely devalued the yet-to-be-held presidential primaries and caucuses. Turnout in these states was a third lower than that in the early-contest states and would have been next to nothing if nominations for other offices were not being contested. Our *Vanishing Voter* surveys revealed that residents of the late-scheduled states were also much less likely to talk about the campaign and to follow news about it. They were also less informed about the candidates and issues.

In the 1970s, when the nominating schedule unfolded a state at a time until the final month or so, the races lasted longer, money was less influential, and residents of nearly all states had a chance to cast a meaningful vote. Turnout nationally was twice the level that it is now.

In the presidential general election, Americans' opportunity to be full participants is affected by the Electoral College. Although this feature of our constitutional system has always distorted the process to some extent, the fact that today's campaigns are based on money rather than volunteers has exaggerated the effect. Unlike volunteers, who work within the communities where they live, money can be targeted and withheld at will. During the 2000 general election campaign, there were no ad buys and no candidate visits in Kansas, a lopsidedly Republican state. In neighboring Missouri,

which was a battleground state, there were 18 candidate visits and millions of dollars were spent on televised political advertising.

In 2000, residents of battleground states had a voting rate that was several percentage points higher than that of residents of other states. In fact, although the overall voting rate in 2000 was slightly higher than it had been in 1996, turnout actually fell in nine states, all of which were safely in the Bush or Gore column. Compared with residents of battleground states, those who lived in noncompetitive states talked less about the campaign, paid less attention to news about it, and were less informed about the candidates.<sup>8</sup>

No doubt, ordinarily Americans share responsibility for their lapse in participation. It is always easier to leave the work of democracy to others. But the modern campaign is anything but an inviting event. In the concluding week of the 2000 campaign, when asked whether the campaign had been "rather depressing, that it hasn't been nearly as good as a campaign should be" or whether it had been "uplifting, that it made [you] feel better about elections," respondents in our survey said by more than two to one that the campaign had been "depressing."

*Thomas E. Patterson is the Bradlee Professor of Government & the Press at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. He can be reached by E-mail at [thomas\\_patterson@harvard.edu](mailto:thomas_patterson@harvard.edu). This article (reprinted with permission) is derived from his new book, *The Vanishing Voter* (Knopf, 2002).*

1. Federal Elections Commission data.

2. See, for example, Darrell M. West, "Air Wars: Television Advertising in Election Campaigns, 1952-2000," 3rd ed. (Washington, D.C.: *Congressional Quarterly Press*, 2001).

3. *Vanishing Voter* survey data.

4. Jeff Fishel, "Presidents and Promises: From Campaign Pledge to Presidential Performance" (Washington, D.C.: *Congressional Quarterly Press*, 1985), p. 28.

5. Thomas E. Patterson, *Out of Order* (New York: Knopf, 1993), ch. 4.

6. Thomas E. Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter* (New York: Knopf, 2002), p. 57.

7. Barbara Norrander, "Candidate Attrition During the Presidential Nominating System," p. 2. Paper presented at the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy roundtable, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Oct. 16, 2000.

8. *Vanishing Voter* survey data.

Kettering Foundation  
200 Commons Road  
Dayton, OH 45459-2799

Nonprofit  
Organization  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Dayton, OH  
Permit No. 638

*The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is an operating foundation — not a grant-giving foundation — rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.” The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now — the study of what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required for strengthening public life. Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research corporation supported by a \$250 million endowment.*

## How to Order Kettering Foundation Publications

To request a *KF Publications Catalog*, call 1-800-600-4060, send a FAX to 1-937-435-7367, or write:

Kettering Foundation  
Order Department  
P. O. Box 41626  
Dayton, OH 45441

Name \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Title \_\_\_\_\_

Organization \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Street \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

State \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

Phone (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_

For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's Web site at [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org).

*Connections is published by the Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799.*

*Unless expressly stated to the contrary, the articles in Connections reflect the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its trustees, or officers.*

*Those who contributed to producing this issue include:*

*Editor...*

*Robert Loper*

*Program staff...*

*John Cavanaugh*

*Cole Campbell*

*John Dedrick*

*Carolyn Farrow-Garland*

*Graphic Design*

*& Desktop Publishing...*

*Long's Graphic Design*

*Copy Editor...*

*Betty Frecker*

*Assistant to the Publisher...*

*Valerie Breidenbach*

*Publisher...*

*Kenneth Brown*

*Kettering  
Foundation*

© Copyright 2003 by the Kettering Foundation

200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799 (937) 434-7300  
444 North Capitol Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001 (202) 393-4478  
6 East 39th Street, New York, New York 10016 (212) 686-7016