Focus on: The Public-Government Relationship

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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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(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.²
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.5

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.4

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.5 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.6

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

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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. 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.

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.”

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1. Federal Elections Commission data.
3. Vanishing Voter survey data.
8. Vanishing Voter survey data.
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