

The Tragedy of Citizen Participation

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## Abstract

A decrease in active citizen participation in the United States in recent decades has shifted the power to make political changes in society out of the hands of American civilians and into those of government officials, who unfortunately poorly represent the body they attempt to serve.

Voter apathy, discontent with the Electoral College system currently in use, skepticism towards the sincerity and credibility of the average politician, or a lack of information regarding everyday issues or democracy itself may all be contributing factors towards this unfortunate trend.

Politics may be a difficult topic in which to force one's interest, since the subjects at hand may be bland and becoming an informed voter requires so much time and effort. However, citizen participation does not only include activities directly linked to governmental affairs; if one is to perhaps become more involved in an entertaining local organization, one may eventually shift towards civic duties as well. Additionally, a reformed media and voting process may expose people to new and exciting third parties with whom they actually agree, instead of merely tolerating the forced publicity of the Democratic and Republican Parties. Only when all eligible American citizens vote can we have a government that is truly "by the people."

## The Tragedy of Citizen Participation

### Introduction

Nobody will ever deprive the American people of the right to vote except the American people themselves and the only way they could do this is by not voting.

*-Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1944*

One of the keystone elements that gave America its reputation of being “free” is the deeply rooted idea of democracy. The ability to vote is the ability to have one’s opinions and voice be heard, the ability to have input in the government’s actions, the ability to form an effective government geared toward its citizens’ needs, and the ability to keep the country’s rulers from having too much absolute power. The Founding Fathers were sure to emphasize this right for the American people after the overthrow of the tyrannical British monarchy, which made its own decisions without representation from the colonies. Giving this power, albeit limited at the time, to the people, they thought, would ensure that everyone would be satisfied, at least to some extent, with the government’s actions. In order for this to be achieved, however, the citizens in question must be willing to participate in the democracy that they have been granted in order for it to function properly. Civilians are an integral part of the governance process and their active involvement is considered essential in the decisions facing a community. This participation gives citizens the means to be their own leaders and to share the control of power relatively equally among these participants (Roberts, 2004). In spite of this liberty granted to the people of the United States, there has been a drop in turnouts not only for elections, but also in political activities such as party rallies or assemblies. With only about half of the eligible electorate voting in presidential elections and even fewer in the midterms in recent decades (McDonald, 2014), it can hardly be disputed that Americans are not the active citizens necessary

to have a satisfactory government. This disappointing statistic could be blamed on a number of factors, such as citizens' ignorance regarding politics, distrust in our government, or general cynicism about the impact of the votes of the people thanks to the Electoral College and other forms of dysfunctional representational democracy. Regardless of the cause, this trend the American people have been following must be halted by reintroducing the concept of citizen participation in a manner that is easier to swallow, lest this country lose its widely, and perhaps blindly, accepted status as being a strong and effective democracy.

The evidence is difficult to ignore: since 1940, anywhere from 51.7-63.6% of eligible voters have bothered to cast a vote in the presidential elections. This statistic refers to those adults who are registered to vote; the actual proportion of citizens who vote is in fact much lower if one also considers those who are not even registered (McDonald, 2014). One of the central causes for this disappointing lack of participation in government is due to voter apathy. They simply do not care enough about working for change or making their voices heard to exert the time or effort to be an active citizen. It is probable that these voters lack motivation because they feel as though their vote is insignificant. Loeb (2003) feels that there is a culture of "learned helplessness" present in the United States today: nothing that an individual does is meaningful regarding politics, so one might as well leave important decisions for others, such as powerful leaders or larger activist groups, to act upon. In order to be a committed participator, one must believe that his voice and his actions are truly worthwhile and in fact making a difference. Voters holding a negative sentiment must be convinced that their diligence will eventually be rewarded. This gratification could stem from the victory of one's choice of city council member or the next president. Once this candidate is elected, it could drive someone who was once an apathetic voter to become more actively involved. On a similar note, citizens must be able to recognize

themselves as active participants and not just beneficiaries of new laws and programs (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007). They may have not had strong opinions on an election for, say, a new state representative to begin with, so they may have chosen to simply let this poll come and go like the others. However, once this representative makes a decision that may negatively affect these nonvoters' lives, they will be dissatisfied and regret not taking action in the first place to have an outcome they desired. Although this is a hypothetical circumstance, it can be applied to case that we don't have to theorize: there is no doubt that the American public is unhappy with our Congress's recent performance. Perhaps if voter apathy weren't as widespread as it is today, our Senate and House of Representatives would hold members that are more indicative of what the people of the United States seek for in government.

Citizens may feel as though their votes are insignificant because their ballots are, in fact, virtually meaningless. A true democracy might take the voices of all members of a population into account when reaching a conclusion, not only, for instance, 538 votes out of the whole. Though America is proud of its democratic roots, the Electoral College system currently in use is a far cry from the fair representation it was supposed to evoke. In the 2012 presidential election, 69% of the post-convention campaign events took place in Ohio, Florida, Virginia, and Iowa, four of the nine total "battleground states." These states' 20, 27, 13, and 7 electoral votes, respectively, are usually the ones to make or break a candidate's success because they tend to oscillate between the two major parties each election. Additionally, only 12 states hosted at least one campaign event involving a presidential or vice presidential candidate. The candidates feel the need to sway voters their way only in the states that truly "matter" to their success. As a result, "Voter turnout is adversely affected in non-battleground states because voters of both parties in such states realize that their votes do not matter in presidential elections." Most other

states' loyalties are virtually set in stone; California's 55 votes will go to the Democratic candidate, and Texas's 34 votes will go to the Republican candidate. There is a valid argument that it is simply a waste of time for a Republican to cast his vote in the former or for a Democrat to cast his in the latter, let alone any third party supporters. In states with an overwhelming majority favoring one party, the opposing voters may not even bother to attempt to make their voices present because the Electoral College system will silence it anyway. Many Americans agree with this viewpoint; the nation's voter turnout was 11% lower than the average in battleground states. Those who believed their votes had more of a chance to make a difference were more eager to participate, while those who supposedly already assumed which party their states' electoral votes would support did not cast a ballot. Although the Electoral College is used only in the presidential elections, voters' sentiments regarding accurate representation of their opinions may carry over to other polls ("Four Out of Five Americans," n.d.).

Skepticism towards politicians' honesty and genuineness may foster discontent between voters and their representatives. In recent years, there has been a drastic increase in the proportion of Americans who believe that our government is not run for the benefit of its people, but rather for the few officials near the top of the lot (Chomsky, 1997). When one thinks of the stereotypical politician, what may come to mind is a wealthy, dishonest, and privileged white male who says one thing on while campaigning but does another while in office. If a person such as this seeks to represent the wants and needs of a certain cluster of civilians, how can he be expected to do so accurately if he himself is unlike those he supposedly embodies? The answer many inactive citizens may produce is that he simply cannot; rather, this politician may aim to favor himself and his peers when forming policies or casting a vote in the state's or United States' Congress. Furthermore, distrust in the government and its actions has recently been on

the rise, initially spiking in the 1960s and 70s with occurrences such as the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War. Since this era,

there now exists, at least at the extremes, evidence of paranoia rather than healthy distrust....excessive cynicism about politics and government may well discourage voting and other forms of political participation. A presumption that politicians are unworthy keeps many honorable people out of the field. And a belief in conspiracies prevents citizens from making critical distinctions among leaders, organizations, and ideologies (Galston & Levine, 2003).

Because of these and other infamies, the public may have a stronger urge to distance itself from the establishment that was centrally involved. Blunders by only a few of this country's politicians over its nearly 240-year history have resulted in wariness towards any and all individuals holding this title.

Despite these adverse circumstances, an apathetic voter may eventually wish to become a responsible and active citizen. However, in order to vote confidently this person must first become informed and educated on the issues about which he is forming an opinion and voting accordingly. One of such issues is that of democracy itself:

Democracy is not a process in which one shining idea conquers all as erstwhile contenders fall into blissful consensus. Rather, it is an extremely disorderly muddle in which clashing ideas and interests (all of them "special") do unkempt and unequal, if peaceful, battle and in which ideas are often reduced to slogans, data to distorted fragments, evidence to gestures, and arguments to poses.... If one idea wins out, it is likely to be severely compromised in the process, and no one goes away entirely reconciled or happy (Mueller, 2003).

Unversed citizens may be discouraged from voting if the democratic process does not initially live up to their lofty expectations. In order to have a “fair” voting mechanism, there has to be some element of compromising in order to come to an agreement. There is rarely a clear answer to satisfy all voters or their representatives, and one must become acquainted with this unfortunate concept if one is to embrace the idea of being an active citizen. Moreover, the American people may feel unmotivated to vote because they are uneducated in current events and therefore are unaware of conflicts that the world is facing today. Putnam states that

curiosity about public affairs continues to fluctuate in response to daily headlines, but the base level of interest is gradually fading, as an older generation of news and politics junkies passes slowly from the scene...Daily newspaper readership among people under thirty-five dropped from two-thirds in 1965 to one-third in 1990, at the same time that TV news viewer-ship in this same age group fell from 52 percent to 41 percent (Putnam, 2003).

In this day and age, people are generally more interested in *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* than their town’s upcoming proposal on a new grant for local schools. Being oblivious to the issues addressed in each election may give inactive voters a false impression that they will be unaffected by the decisions at hand, and therefore do not need to cast a ballot. A lack of knowledge about the situations being put to vote and about democracy itself can greatly hinder anyone attempting to become a responsible participant in politics.

It is simple to point out all that is wrong with citizen participation in the United States, but it is more difficult to identify solutions to this pressing problem. To begin, it may be beneficial for those who are inactive civilians to first become involved in other aspects of community life. Some endeavors concerning both community life and political action include



“serving on juries, attending public hearings, participating in advisory boards, commissions, and task forces, responding to telephone polls and newspaper clip-out questionnaires, contacting and meeting public officials, and writing letters to the editor expressing interest or opposition to some governmental action” (Roberts, 2004). However, many of these civic duties are widely considered to be more like chores: jury duty can be a long and tedious process, and telephone survey companies always call at the most inconvenient times. Yet other more enjoyable activities may act as stepping-stones to these services. For example,

recent scholarship suggests complex links between associational activities and key political variables such as political participation, social trust, and confidence in government. Controlling for education and income, members of church groups, neighborhood associations, and sports leagues are especially likely to follow politics and vote—a correlation that supports the hypothesis that political participation is significantly more attractive for individuals who belong to social networks (Roberts, 2004).

Associations like these often open up opportunities for the members to discuss politics or other local issues. While it may require a large portion of time and attention to form political opinions on one’s own, it is easier and more pleasant to gain this type of valuable information in a setting like a softball field or a neighbor’s house than by reading a bland pamphlet or listening to a morning radio talk show (Galston & Levine, 2003). Once these first advances are made, it may inspire one who was initially uninterested in participating in elections to take part in such civil activities mentioned earlier in addition to voting.

Not only should citizens act to fix their attitudes toward elections, but there should also be an effort to mend the system itself. As discussed earlier, the Electoral College takes representative democracy to the extreme, going so far as to virtually eliminate the influence of

votes from those supporting minor parties. Many Americans scoff at the concept of “one person, one vote.” It is awfully discouraging for civilians with alternative views of government when it is true that a third party would still not win any representation in Congress after receiving as much as 30 percent of a vote in a Congressional or presidential race (Street, 2002). Having a direct vote might not completely eliminate this dilemma, but it may encourage people to take part in elections knowing that their votes actually possess some leverage.

Furthermore, the public may have grown weary of the everyday politician from one of the only two “significant” parties using the same generic advertisements. Even if one is a member of the Democratic or Republican Party on paper, he may eventually come to realize that he does not agree with either of these two mainstream groups and lose enthusiasm. Because these are the only two parties that are allotted any significant amount of attention by the media, he will not be aware of any other parties’ ideologies and simply refrain from voting at all. To solve and avoid this problem, “campaign finance reform including publicly financed elections and free media time for candidates and the introduction of proportionate representation and other measures enabling third and fourth parties” could be useful. This progressive shift would not only stimulate the electorate due to such a drastic and interesting change from the norm, but also it would give other parties opportunities to gain supporters and voters (Street, 2002). Although this would require much cooperation and ample generosity from both the media and the two main parties, it might be the invigoration the American people need to become and stay involved in their civic duties.

### **Conclusion**

In order for the American people to take full advantage of our democratic system, they must be willing and have the proper knowledge to make an effort to have their voices be heard.

Active citizen participation is the only way to ensure that a democracy such as ours is run in a way that perhaps does not represent everyone's ideal image of government, but possesses traits to appease most of those who offer their opinions. Instead of giving Congress and the executive branch the option to make a majority of important decisions facing our country for us, we could offer our own inputs to assist in reaching agreements that span both sides of "the aisle" separating the two main parties, and perhaps satisfies third party supporters as well. Thus, the United States government will come to truly personify the government by the people it represents in theory.

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