

People's Part of Government

Sarah Ramsey

College Park High School

Abstract

America is ruled by a democracy controlled by the people. The people of this nation have come to believe this statement even though there is a lack of citizen participation. This paper will explore in what ways Americans are lacking in their civic duties. It will also propose ways to involve people again in their country so that there can be a democracy like the one America strives to have today. Americans are failing in a few areas including casting a ballot, being involved in political campaigns, attending town meetings and demonstrations, and participating in community activities such as service work. This paper incorporates the research from books, articles, and websites to provide information on active citizen participation.

Keywords: active citizen, participation, democracy, voting

People's Part of Government

Plato once said, "One of the penalties for refusing to participate in politics is that you end up being governed by your inferiors." He meant that without being a part of the government, you are subjected to what the people around you decide is right for the country. Throughout history people have wanted their beliefs and values to be represented in government. In recent years, citizens have stopped being a part of democracy and instead began accepting that they will be led by whichever politician comes into office next. As defined by dictionary.com (2015), democracy is a type of government where the power is in the hands of the people and either controlled directly or by elected officials through a voting system. Americans have been told this is the form of government present in the United States, but is that true? In order for the statement to be accurate the United States needs active citizen participation, which is "the involvement of citizens in decision making process of the State"... "to increase their influence on public policies and programs" (Armstrong, 2013). This includes voting, being involved in campaigns and communities, and attending demonstrations. Ninety-five percent of all Americans hold democratic values, but they do not let these values become a part of their lives (Miroff & Swanstrom, 2003). Therefore, Americans are taking the government for granted and not practicing what they believe. Ultimately, the people in the United States are failing at being active citizens.

Gradually through history, the percentages of people who vote have been decreasing. This is an American's primary way of being involved in his government. There are approximately 218,959,000 Americans who are able to be registered to vote, but of that number 146,311,000 people have actually filled out the appropriate paperwork (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Only about half of the eligible population vote in presidential elections and even less vote

in off-year elections. This puts America at the bottom of the rankings compared to other democratic countries (Piven & Cloward, 2006). The number of eighteen through twenty-four year olds who vote is even less than the average number (Ushistory.org, 2014). These young adults are the most important in the nation because they will be the next leaders of America; however, only twenty one percent of these Americans came to the polls in 2010. Instead, they believe that in order to see our government change there will need to be a revolution (The Economist, 2014). When looking at the types of people who vote certain trends appear. Typically the people who come to the polls are educated and well off (Piven & Cloward, 2006). Also, people who are white and above the age of forty-five are the most likely to vote (Ushistory.org, 2014). Ironically, these are also who run to be in political positions. Because there is such a low voter turnout, it is evident that there is a bigger problem going on than just politics (Putnam, 2003).

Many Americans view voting as a chore instead of as an honor. In reality, voting should be a habit ("A bigger..."2014). People should come to the polls just like clockwork no matter what type of election is occurring. The citizens should come informed and willing to vote. There are Americans who are excited to vote for the first time because they have just come of age or moved to the United States. People, especially the younger generation, would be more inclined to vote if political knowledge had more clarity and the candidates were presented as real people. Because of these difficulties, citizens do not inform themselves on issues and simply vote as their family or friends do. Also, Americans give their vote to whichever candidate presents them self the best through physical attributes because the public does not want to take the time to listen to what they have to say (Yu, 2000). People today are out of touch with politics. Adults under thirty know far less about current events than people two or three

generations ahead of them. Daily newspaper readers dropped from two thirds to one third between 1965 and 1990 (Putnam, 2003). Since voters do not continuously inform themselves about current events, they do not have strong beliefs about the decisions that they make for America's future (Yu, 2000).

One question that has puzzled Americans is does the public actually need to vote? In an established country that has about two million voters and the Electoral College, people feel that their one vote will not have an impact. These Americans are completely correct in their thinking. In the sense of a national election one vote has no benefit, which explains the low voter turnout. People know that a candidate will win whether or not they vote for them, but this should not be a valid reason not to vote. Also, if they were to vote for a candidate that is not in the main two parties their vote would not be recognized publicly. On the other hand, as citizens, they have a civic duty to vote and be a part of government (Kanazawa, 2009). In addition to the number of voters who create the popular vote, there is also the Electoral College to take into account. It is comprised of 538 electors who basically decide who wins the presidential elections as long as there are 270 votes for one candidate (Archives.gov, 2012). There have been times in history when the popular vote did not elect the president, but instead it was the votes of the Electoral College. The most recent occurrence was when Bush ran against Gore and won in 2000. This outcome shocked many Americans and is a reason that some citizens choose not to participate in voting at the polls (Bonsor & Dove, 2000). They believe it will not affect the outcome because their vote is not even acknowledged, which is disappointing. It is even more saddening to see people neglecting their piece of government.

Often Americans struggle to be involved in politics because they cannot seem to understand the complex processes. To be an active citizen, one needs to get involved in politics

in some way. Outside of voting, Americans could volunteer in campaigns. By stepping into activities such as these, it helps eliminate the confusion that citizens experience. People during the 1950s and 1960s were very involved in working with political parties in election campaigns. Then in 1968 the number of Americans participating in these sorts of campaigns dropped. When comparing the 1990s with the 1970s, people are half as likely to work for a political party. Interestingly enough, the political parties and their campaigns did not suffer from the lack of citizen participation. Instead they grew stronger due to financing from wealthy people and prosperous companies and from professional staff. Because the campaigns have more money than they used to, the candidates are more likely to win the public's support. The citizens are able to learn more about the potential politician (Putnam, 2003). This shows how Americans are not needed in political parties which in turn explains why citizens feel isolated from their government. This is not to say that people are unnecessary in the voting process, but campaign leaders find them somewhat disposable until it is time to vote.

In a democracy, Americans control the government. People can do this through attending town meetings. Town meetings inform the people of the community what is happening in their surrounding area and who controls what happens in the town. It is a simple way to be an active citizen and learn about politics. Also, people can bring issues that they feel need a response by the city or that they would like the city to be informed about (Wisegeek.org, n.d.).

Unfortunately, Americans often do not attend these meetings and those who do come attend simply because they have the time. As a society, the United States is notorious for being very busy and uninterested in little other than our daily lives, which is reflected in the number of attendees at the meetings (McComas, Besley, & Trumbo, 2007).

Demonstrations are a popular and productive step to being an active citizen. Those Americans in the younger generations find this to be the most effective way to see change in government and to make their voice heard. If the demonstration is large enough, outcomes, either good or bad, are seen immediately. Realistically, political protests do not cause change but instead illustrate the changes that are happening in the government and in everyday life, which forces the government to respond in a timelier manner (Madestam et al., 2013). Even though demonstrations can be beneficial to citizens in America, people often shy away from it. Americans fear the police force, being hurt, or being arrested. They are aware of the history of protests and do not want to become a part of them. People also do not participate in demonstrations because they do not mind the status quo even though they are living without some human rights that are worth fighting for. Americans are living with the status quo since they are too busy with work and their everyday lives to attend a protest rally and try to change their government (Fraud, 2013).

Even though there is very little time in today's society, some Americans are actively involved in their communities. People can then influence and discuss issues with one another both socially and politically. Also, those citizens who have a small window of knowledge about government can expand it. There is information about how volunteer programs work that can pertain to government and give volunteers a more in depth look at the interworking of politics. Being a part of community event is a snowball effect, which will bring people out of their homes into neighborhoods where they can talk about their beliefs on a common ground. Through community service, Americans are taking small steps to make the country better by being selfless and improving the areas they live in (UCSD.org, 2015). According to a poll taken in 1970, eighty-two percent of Americans are involved in some type of volunteer activity. This poll

may have changed recently, but is still relatively accurate due to the rising number of college and high school students who participate in services around their communities. There is a link between college graduates and being involved in volunteer opportunities. Those who graduated college were thirty-two percent more likely to be associated with an organization than those who were not (Galston & Levine, 2003). Community service can benefit everyone including the volunteers and allow people to discuss political views with others.

The citizens of the United States are slowly becoming more out of touch with their government, even though they are supposed to be the driving force in it. Americans need to regain control of the nation and become active citizens again. A step in the correct direction would be to require all people of eighteen years or older to register to vote. When Americans register they would be given information about general laws and political issues of the time to give everyone a basic knowledge in the government. People should be able to stay updated with politics this way and not have to mindlessly vote anymore. Having all citizens registered would make all of the people have the opportunity to vote, which would allow everyone to have a common ground. This way, when people are in neighborhoods, everyone can discuss political issues. Also, because Americans are always busy and work too much, Election Day should be taken off to allow for community bonding and discussion, and to permit people to take time to research what they are voting on so they no longer have to vote based on appearance. Americans would be able to take voting more seriously and not have to think of it as another item on a to-do list. In order for people to stay in community with people in their neighborhoods outside of Election Day, more service days and city outreaches should be scheduled. Americans can then give back and involve even more people the political process. The nation would improve on both physically and social level. As of right now, Americans are failing at actively participating

in government. There is a voter turnout of approximately half of the number of registered voters. The reasoning behind this for many people is that their one vote will not matter amongst the other millions of votes. Also, many voters are aware that the Electoral College can overrule the popular vote. Citizens have gradually removed themselves from participating in political campaigns and stopped attending town hall meetings. This drastically has changed the amount of information that Americans have exposed themselves to. People still go to protests but not in the same amount as they used to because they have begun to fear the power of America's government and police force. Also, people have found that it is too time consuming for their packed lives. Lastly, Americans have participated in community service fairly regularly, which is a successful way to have political discussions with other people. Because America is a democracy where people should have the power to guide the government it is vital that there is active citizen participation. Sadly, based upon the decrease in national issues and an increase in focus around everyday lives it is unlikely for people to become involved in the government once again.

References

- A bigger midterm turnout. (2014, September 15). *New York Times* [editorial]. Retrieved on October 24, 2015, from http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/15/opinion/a-bigger-midterm-election-turnout.html?_r=0
- archives.gov. (2012). What is the Electoral College?. Retrieved on October 24, 2015, from <http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/about.html>
- Armstrong, E. (2013). The role of active participation and citizen engagement in good governance. *United Nations*. Retrieved October 24, 2015, from <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/egms/docs/2013/EmpowermentPolicies/Elia%20Armstrong%20presentation.pdf>
- Bonsor, K. & Dove, L. (2000). How the Electoral College works. Retrieved on October 24, 2015, from <http://people.howstuffworks.com/electoral-college.htm>
- dictionary.com (2015). *Democracy*. Retrieved October 24, 2015, from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/democracy>
- Galston, W. A. & Levine, P. (2003). America's civic condition: A glance at the evidence. In Miroff et. al., *Debating Democracy*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin).
- Kanazawa, S. (2009). Why do people vote? *Psychology Today*. Retrieved on October 24, 2015, from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-scientific-fundamentalist/200911/why-do-people-vote-i>

Madestam, A., Shoag D., Veuger S., & Yanagizawa-Drott, D. (2013). Do political protests matter?. Retrieved October 25, 2015, from

http://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/dyanagi/Research/TeaParty_Protests.pdf

McComas, K., Besley, J., & Trumbo, C. (2007). Why citizens do and do not attend public meetings about local cancer cluster investigations. Retrieved on October 25, 2015, from

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1541-0072.2006.00197.x/abstract>

Miroff, B., Seidelman, R., & Swanstrom, T. (2003). *Debating Democracy: A Reader in American Politics, 4th Ed.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Piven, F. F. & Cloward, R. A. (2006). Why Americans still don't vote. In W. F. Grover & J. G. Peschek (Eds.), *Voices of Dissent: Critical Readings in American Politics* (pp. 152-161). New York, NY: Pearson Longman.

Putnam, R. D. (2003). Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American Community. In Miroff, B., et. al., *Debating Democracy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

UCSD.org. (2015). Community service: Top 10 reasons to volunteer. Retrieved October 25, 2015, from <https://students.ucsd.edu/student-life/involvement/community/reasons.html>

U.S. Census Bureau. (2015). Voting statistics. Retrieved October 24, 2015, from <http://www.statisticbrain.com/voting-statistics/>

ushistory.org. (2014). *American Government Online Textbook*. Retrieved October 24, 2015, from <http://www.ushistory.org/gov/4d.asp>

Fraud, S. (2013). 5 reasons why more Americans don't protest against the system. *Waking Times*. Retrieved October 25, 2015, from <http://www.wakingtimes.com/2013/07/17/5-reasons-why-americans-dont-protest-against-the-system/>

wisegeek.org. (n.d.). What is a town hall meeting?. Retrieved October 25, 2015, from <http://www.wisegeek.org/what-is-a-town-hall-meeting.htm>

Why young people don't vote. (2014). *The Economist*. (2014). Retrieved on October 24, 2015, from <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2014/10/economist-explains-24>

Yu, D. (2000, June 11). Voting seems more chore than privilege. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved October 24, 2015, from <http://articles.latimes.com/2000/jun/11/local/me-39834>