

America's Disheartened Citizenry

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Abstract

The disheartened citizenry of today demonstrates some of the worst rates of political participation ever seen in this country. All political activities, from voting to running for office, display a dearth of participants across the board. Possibly as a result of this lack of participation and knowledge, many of us feel that the government is constantly swindling us or is controlled by big interests. These deep-seated suspicions only exacerbate the problem as more and more Americans withdraw themselves from politics because of the futility—real or perceived—of their actions. Thus, in order to reestablish faith in our government we must institute a series of democratic reforms to create newly active citizens. These reforms—a popular vote for the President, universal voter registration, and ranked-choice voting—are designed to reintegrate citizens into our political processes and educate them on the issues of today in order to create a truly democratic, trustworthy America.

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"A citizen of America will cross the ocean to fight for democracy, but won't cross the street to vote in a national election." –Bill Vaughan

As someone who will become eligible to vote in time for the 2016 election, I have heard numerous reminders and excited pleas to educate myself early and vote intelligently for our next president. I took this advice to heart and have since been watching the debates and researching the candidates as well as the politics of our nation in general. One can imagine my surprise then, when I discovered just how few of the emphatic adults who had lectured me for months actually voted. Not only that, I also found that active citizen participation in all aspects of our government is at an all-time low! My research in the coming pages has uncovered this, but the major question to ask ourselves is now and should always be how we can increase citizen participation in government rather than if we have an adequate amount of it already, the current shortfall only magnifies the importance of this question. Active citizen participation is so low because many people are too busy to vote, have lost faith in the politicians of today, and/or do not think their vote really matters. Thus, America must change the way we vote and what we vote for in a series of reforms including but not limited to: instituting the popular vote as the deciding vote for president, universal voter registration, and ranked-choice voting.

In 2012, the United States ranked 30th in a list of the 34 OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, a coalition of democracies who cooperate to promote prosperity among themselves) countries for voter turnout in elections. That means that only a measly 53.6% of the voting-age population cast ballots. It is notable, however, that among that 53.6% who voted were 84.3% of registered voters, which places the U.S. in seventh among OECD countries for voter turnout of registered voters. This also makes it glaringly obvious that

much of the age-appropriate population is not registered to vote (about 35%, in fact, compared to Sweden's 4% and the UK's 7%). If one is to subtract those who are ineligible (felons, illegal immigrants, etc.) from the population then the turnout grows to 58% (Desilver, 2015). In 2014, midterm elections saw an even smaller turnout with only 36% of eligible voters exercising their constitutional right, the lowest rate since 1942 (Clement, 2015). In the late 19th Century, the percentage of the voting-age population who cast ballots in presidential elections was around 80% until about 1900 where it dropped sharply to less than 50% and began to climb again. After peaking at a little over 60% in the 1950s and '60s, it has declined to its current state of around 50% (Wilson & Dilulio, 2006). One may attribute these rapid declines and ascensions to the enfranchisement of many new groups in the 20th century, through such methods as the 19th Amendment and the weakening of racial prejudice in the South, who simply did not vote or were socially discouraged from voting. However, today participation from all groups is lower, as in the 2012 presidential elections when only around 65% each of registered black and white voters cast ballots and only around 48% each of registered Asian and Hispanic voters cast ballots. Additionally, only about 40% of young adults (ages 18-24) of all ethnicities voted (Taylor & Lopez, 2013). Similarly, in the 2012 election 63.7% of women and 59.8% of men voted, two percentages which are similar to the group distributions aforementioned (Rampell, 2014). No more than two-thirds of any ethnic or gender group voted, suggesting that inactive citizenry is a problem regardless of race or sex.

Whatever the case may be, having only around half of our eligible population cast ballots is a major problem for our democracy. How can our government reflect the views of the people when only half of the people's views are being expressed? Some would counter that voting is not the only way to be an active citizen. They would say that perhaps this recent bout of abstinence

from the polls signifies a healthy democracy as people do not feel strong negative feelings and thus do not feel the need to vote to “make things right.” As long as the people of today maintain an interest in politics and since the political parties of today have only gotten stronger, it is probably safe to say that citizens are still participating in our government but are just content with it, such people would contend (Piven & Cloward, 2006).

However, even ignoring the fact that voter participation has declined by about a quarter over the last three-and-a-half decades, does not make our citizenry seem any more active. The key to political participation is political education, and so if our citizens are indeed involved then they should have a solid knowledge of civics. In 2003, the average American was about as competent in basic civics as the average American 50 years prior. This sounds rather reassuring until one realizes that we have about four more years of formal schooling on average than our ancestors, and since civics knowledge is improved by education it is surprising that that the college graduate of the 2000s knows about as much about our government as a high school graduate of the 1940s would. The “post-baby boom generations”—those born in the late 1960s and after who became adults in the 1980s and 1990s—were found to be approximately a third less likely than the more elderly to know simple political questions such as which party controlled which parts of Congress. This generational knowledge gap is a recent phenomenon, as opinion polls from the 1940s to the 1970s show that the youth (those under 35 years of age) of that time was as, if not more, well-informed than their elders. Youth consumption of news materials has declined as well, as previously 66% of all people under 35 read newspapers daily but only 33% do now. A similar decline can be found in television news viewership, as the percent of all young Americans who watched such programs fell from 52% to 41% from 1965 to 1990. One could argue that these young people are seeking out news on the internet or through

apps on their phone instead of in print or on the television, but that begs the question of why they are less politically informed than their predecessors even with all these new founts of information (Putnam, 2003).

Our political knowledge has declined significantly, yet there is ample evidence that our political parties have only grown stronger. Over the past several decades, political parties have become markedly larger, richer, more organized, and more evangelical. This seems paradoxical considering the rate of party identification among Americans has plummeted 10% (from 75% of voters in 1960 to 65% in the late 1990s) and “grassroots level” (ringing doorbells, mailing campaign advertisements, etc.) involvement in parties has similarly plunged over that same time period. Parties are better financed and more zealous in the pursuit of votes than ever because of the dwindling number of voters and members! This general decline is not only seen in national elections but also in local elections. Participation in practically every form of communal political involvement has declined, “from the most common—petition signing—to the least common—running for office” according to the Roper polls (Putnam, 2003).

Now that it has been firmly established that American active citizenship has been declining, the natural subsequent question is why this is the case. In a study done by the Census Bureau and detailed in an article by the Washington Post, the four most common reasons registered voters failed to vote were “not interested” (28%), “illness/disability” (11%), and “out of town” (10%). Additionally, 8% said they “disliked candidates/issues” (Clement, 2015). Among nonregistered Americans, the four most common reasons for their lack of participation were “nothing ever gets done” (59%), “politics is so corrupt” (54%), “there is no difference between Democrats and Republicans” (42%), and “it doesn’t make very much difference in my life” (37%) (McElwee, 2015). Not a whole lot can be done for those who cannot make the time

to vote, as there are already mail-in voting systems put in place and “get out the vote” (or GOTV) drives have emphasized the importance of voting for years (Putnam, 2003). What is most alarming is the large number of non-voters who have lost faith in our government. Considering how many people are not registered to vote, the aforementioned statistics show a staggering number of Americans who feel politically powerless or ineffective. Thus, we must institute a series of reforms to reaffirm faith in the government and make the average citizen feel politically empowered again if we are to expect increased citizen participation anytime soon.

Based on the data above, it is reasonable to conclude that most Americans today feel out of touch with their government. One of the best ways to make them feel politically empowered again would be to institute a popular vote for president. A recent poll found that in 2012 a full 62% of Americans favored amending the Constitution to replace the Electoral College system with a popular vote for president. Such an amendment would receive bipartisan support since in 2012 71% of Democrats and 61% of Republicans supported such a reform (Saad, 2011). Perhaps the Electoral College can even be blamed for some of Americans’ ambivalence towards presidential elections and candidates. In many presidential campaigns, the vast majority of political advertising is centered in just a few states who have electoral votes that are “up for grabs” in the eyes of the candidates. In the 2012 election, 99.6% of all major party advertising funds were spent in just 10 states. These states were considered the “swing vote” states because of the impact of their electoral votes. Thus, there are states like California who get less than 0.4% of political advertising yet rank among the most populous in the nation (Levien, 2013). A national popular vote would increase voter participation by ensuring that more citizens are familiarized with the issues and positions of politicians of today by making every vote truly equal. A grand reform such as this would also improve attitudes toward the possibility of change

in government and would make Americans feel like their vote really does have an impact since they are the deciding body for who becomes our president.

If we are to institute a popular vote, the next step is to get as many American opinions as we can concerning who should be our president. We need to continue what was started in 1993 with the National Voter Registration Act: making voter registration easier. Many modern democracies automatically register voters when they come of age or register for other activities regulated by the government, such as when applying for a driver's license. California's recent "Motor Voter" is an excellent example of the latter and such a bill should be proposed nationally. It is ironic that one of our sacred rights, mentioned no less than five times in our constitution, requires significant effort on the part of ourselves in order to exercise properly (Donnelly, 2012). Thus, voter registration should be automatic upon reaching a certain age. This would also quell any concerns about illegal immigrants or others not yet eligible to vote from illegally affecting election results by signing up for driver's licenses or other activities that would might cause them to be mistakenly registered.

Now that voter registration has been addressed, the next concern would be increasing voter turnout. Other countries have crafted laws that make not casting a vote a crime in order to increase voter turnout (Desilver, 2015). There have been numerous proposals to make Election Day a national holiday, and the two coupled together could certainly result in a more active citizenry. The natural concern would be that voting would now evoke the same dread as jury duty, but none could argue that both duties are necessary for a healthy democracy. Thus, though some may not take as much pride as others in doing their civic duty, in order for our nation to be truly ruled by the people these duties must be performed by each and every one of us. However,

such a bill would first need to be debated by Congress, and before that can happen our selection of our representatives needs to be improved to be more representative of the electorate at large.

Sadly, many Americans today believe that their vote has no real impact and that the candidates of today have too much in common (McElwee, 2015). Many people believe that voting for a third party is a waste of time, as if they were “throwing away their vote.” To counteract this narrowing of the field, we should change the way we vote. Simply picking one candidate oversimplifies our complex political opinions and overshadows third party candidates. Thus we should instead opt for ranked-choice voting. This form of voting allows voters to express support for more than one candidate and thus provides a more representative electoral process. In order to demonstrate how this system works, let us suppose we have an election with four candidates running for an office. On the ballot, a voter would be allowed to mark their first, second, and third choice for the nomination. The candidate with the least first choice votes would be eliminated, and then each of the ballots marked with the eliminated candidates as the first choice would be added to the totals of their highest ranked continuing candidate. This process would be repeated once more so that there would then be only two candidates that remained, and the candidate between the two of those left that receives a majority is elected to the office. This system would allow more Americans to accurately express the full range of their political views, making them feel like their full opinion matters again. It would also give third parties more publicity as their candidates would feature more prominently in elections. Thus, Americans who are not currently involved in politics would be inspired to do so because of the new opportunities given to them to express their alternate views (“Top Four Elections,” 2014).

In short, our political participation rates are abysmal. Across race and gender, Americans are voting, campaigning, and doing everything in between at an exceedingly limited capacity.

The reforms I have recommended to remedy this—a presidential popular vote, universal voter registration, and ranked-choice voting—are only the beginning. For a very long time, we have seen a downward trend in American active citizen participation because of a distinct loss of faith in our government and its institutions. These few measures are only the first in a long line of necessary changes we need to make if we want our democracy to survive. These few steps, however, need to be put in place first in order to return power to the people before trust in government can be rebuilt. After these reforms are put in place, I do not doubt that we will see extensive change in areas such as money in politics (especially regarding the *Citizens United* decision) and the minimum wage because as citizen participation grows so does the average American's knowledge of our government and its policies. Our country is no longer a democracy while so few people participate in its rule, and though we may have a long road ahead of us it is certainly time we started heading down it again.

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