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Why is American Turnout so Low, and Why Should We Care?

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Abstract and Keywords

The vast literature on voter turnout in the United States addresses a variety of theoretical perspectives with a range of methodological tools, but students often return to three basic questions: Why is American voter turnout so low? Why is American voter turnout declining? And does low turnout really matter? This article specifically deals with these questions. It also explores American voter participation with both comparative and longitudinal perspectives. In addition to the changes in the social and partisan landscapes, changes in mobilization patterns also accounted for a portion of the change in turnout. It shows the conflicting incentives felt by elites, who shape the environment in which Americans vote. Election officials and candidates may value higher voter turnout in the abstract, but not to the exclusion of other political concerns and motivations.

Keywords: American voter turnout, United States, Americans vote, American voter participation, election officials, candidates

THE vast literature on voter turnout in the United States addresses a variety of theoretical perspectives with a range of methodological tools, but students often return to three basic questions: Why is American voter turnout so low? Why is American voter turnout declining? And does low turnout really matter? While normative issues are often implicit, and occasionally explicit, these questions are empirical and require that we examine American voter participation with both comparative and longitudinal perspectives. Understanding why US turnout is lower than turnout in other democracies requires an appreciation of how social and institutional forces shape voter participation across political systems, and understanding the decline demands some appreciation of how American society and institutions have evolved over time. In turn, if participation is more than just its own reward, we would expect to see differences in politics or policy

across time or space that correspond to variations in voter turnout. Scholars have continually returned to these questions in various formulations.

(p. 108) Why is American Turnout So Low?

One of the most noticeable aspects of turnout in US elections is that it is typically low, at least in comparison to electoral participation in most other advanced democracies. Occasionally, politicians, commentators, and professors will bemoan the fact that even in the most hotly contested and high-profile American elections, turnout barely exceeds half of the voting age population, while three-quarters of eligible Britons or Germans routinely participate in their national elections, and turnout rates are in a few countries are even higher. While low turnout rates are not exclusively an American phenomenon (thanks to Switzerland and a couple of emerging democracies in Eastern Europe), US turnout rates remain near the low end of all established democracies. (Franklin 2002). Pundits who note the embarrassing comparisons often place much of the blame squarely on the American people's lack of political responsibility and interest. However, comparative survey evidence suggests that Americans are at least as politically interested as citizens in most other democracies, and that interest is manifest in other forms of political action. Americans have relatively high rates of petitioning, campaign activity, communal activity, and lawful protesting (Dalton 2008; Powell 1986), so it seems unlikely that political sloth accounts for most of the difference in turnout rates between Americans and citizens in other democracies. It is possible that American society has more of a caste system of political participation than other democracies do, with a smaller proportion of people participating in multiple venues and a larger proportion of people completely removed from politics, but that seems unlikely.

As Mark Franklin and Till Weber point out in Chapter 35 of this volume, comparative analysis across democracies helps us to understand the effects of various features of the American political system on voter turnout. That research has shown that for the most part, comparatively low turnout in US elections is *not* the result of demographic and attitudinal differences between Americans and citizens of other democracies. When compared to Western Europeans in the 1970s, Americans on average had stronger partisanships, higher political efficacy, more political interest, more frequent discussions about politics (including attempts to persuade others how to vote), higher levels of formal education, more people in white collar jobs (Powell 1986), and greater devotion to religion (Wald 1987), all of which are associated with higher rates of voter turnout. Americans' relative youth explained a small fraction of the difference between aggregate US and European turnout, but the effect of age distribution is swamped by other demographic factors that should lead to higher turnout in the United States (Powell 1986). Moreover, the total effects of individual-level characteristics that might account for differences in turnout across democracies are dwarfed by country-level effects. In

short, “it matters whether one is rich or poor, educated (p. 109) or uneducated, interested in politics or not; but none of these things matters nearly as much as whether one is an Australian or an American” (Franklin 2002, 150).

If low turnout in the United States cannot be explained by distinctive characteristics of the American people, the bigger culprits are likely the several institutional differences between the United States and other democracies. In his comparative analyses of turnout, Franklin (2002) notes that the United States and Switzerland have distinctively low levels of “electoral salience,” which can be understood as the theoretical effect that a single vote is likely to have on the direction of effective public policy. In other words, “electoral salience” is the institutional component of the PB term (the benefit of having one candidate in office over his or her opponent multiplied by the probability that an individual vote will bring about that difference) in the classic “calculus of voting” (Riker and Ordeshook 1968), and several aspects of the American electoral and constitutional system dampen it. First, most elections in the United States are conducted under the “first past the post” electoral system, allocating seats of power only to candidates who secure plurality support in their elections (Powell 1980). Due to low levels of partisan competition within many states and electoral districts, supporters of both the majority party and the minority party have less incentive to invest in the costs of voting or in the cost of mobilizing others to vote. Serious competition in US House elections is also limited as the two major parties battle for control of the House in a few key districts around the country, while incumbents use their resources increasingly effectively to ward off serious challenges (Jacobson 2004). In contrast, proportional representation and transferable vote systems (commonly but not universally used outside the United States) do more to ensure that parties, interest groups, and candidates will always have a greater incentive to mobilize supporters wherever they are found, creating a greater proportionality of seats to votes (Blais 2000; Jackman 1987), and giving supporters of minority parties in particular a greater sense that their vote might matter in electing a sympathetic member to the legislature (Blais 2000). Even in US presidential elections, campaigns usually concentrate their efforts in mobilizing voters in a few “battleground” states, and millions of potential voters in “safe Republican” or “safe Democratic” states might reasonably conclude that their individual votes are unlikely to make any difference in the outcome of the presidential election. As a result, voter turnout in presidential elections is higher in “battleground states” than in non-battleground states, but most Americans live outside the zone of competition (Gimpel, Kaufmann, and Pearson-Merkowitz 2007; Hill and McKee 2005; Shaw 2006).

A second aspect of “electoral salience” stems from the constitutional system itself. As powerful as the US president is in absolute terms, he shares authority with an independently elected Congress and an insulated judiciary. In such a system of separated powers, voters might find it difficult to clearly attribute responsibility for either successful or failed policies, as Congress, the President, and state governments could plausibly claim credit for successes or divert blame for failures to one (p. 110) another, powerful organized interests, or the courts (Franklin 2004, 98–104). This is especially true in eras of divided government, which may produce significant legislation (Mayhew

2005) but still make it more difficult for the voter to decide who deserves electoral rewards or punishments. Multiple elections give Americans electoral control over more offices (Wolfinger 1994), but they fragment power so much that no one election is decisive. Moreover, separation of powers systems are also more open to influence from interest groups and interest litigants, which in turn may reduce the perception among potential voters that elections can effectively change the direction of public policy. When faced with a president of one party and Congressional majorities of the other party (and perhaps governors of both parties from different states) claiming credit and casting blame, and with the significant influence of moneyed interest groups and unelected judges, some citizens apparently either cannot decide who in government deserves reward or punishment, or believe that the unelected and elected veto-players will limit the effectiveness of elections as institutions of policy change. That notion is supported by time-series evidence that the effect of divided government on national turnout in US elections is cumulative (Franklin and Hirczy de Miño 1998), and cross-national correlational evidence that turnout is higher when elections for the lower house are more decisive (Blais 2000, 26–29; Jackman 1987).

Another aspect of electoral salience is the degree to which the party system represents the significant cleavages in society. When social class is the only significant cleavage in a democracy, parties align their positions on government services and redistribution questions to appeal to their class bases, and voters can clearly see the policy differences between the parties and cast their votes for candidates that best represent their real or perceived interests. However, politics is a messy sport, and it is messier in the United States where class consciousness is relatively weak and where other issues are often salient. As the two major US parties have taken more or less well-defined positions on social issues such as abortion and gay rights, the class bases of both parties have expanded. Republicans appeal to both a financial class and voters with strong moralist values, and Democrats appeal to both the working class and voters with more secular orientations. As a result, the party system's linkages to both the class and religious cleavages are relatively weak, which often leaves gay bankers, Bible-toting laborers, and other socially cross-pressured citizens in a quandary. Many resolve that dilemma by prioritizing either moralist or fiscal policy, but some citizens remain undecided right up through election day. Powell (1986; see also Powell 1980) estimated that the relatively weak party–group linkage in the United States accounted for most of the difference between American turnout and the average turnout in other democracies in the 1970s, and the social cleavages have eroded in the United States (and other democracies) since that time (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2007; Dalton 2006).

While some institutional factors that contribute to relatively low turnout in the United States are “baked into” the American constitutional system and political (p. 111) process, one aspect of the legal context that has been susceptible to efforts of reformers is the voter registration system in the United States. Voter registration in many democracies is “automatic” in the sense that the electorate is identified by permanent police list, a permanent voter list updated with other government records (such as drivers' licenses and naturalization), or by an enumeration of eligible electors prior to each election. In

contrast, voter registration in the United States (as well as in France and other democracies) is voluntary, and in most instances before the mid-1980s, the registration process had to be initiated by the prospective voter at least a month in advance of the election.

As Robert Brown notes in Chapter 10 of this volume, research on how the legal context shapes turnout *within* the United States is built on Wolfinger and Rosenstone's (1980) finding that variations in state registration laws (closing dates, regular and evening or weekend hours for registration, and absentee registration) were correlated with voter turnout rates in the states. The 1993 National Voter Registration Act mandated that states without election day registration offer registration at other public agencies, so that driver's license offices, welfare agencies, and military recruiting stations now offer citizens the opportunity to register to vote in one trip. Most of the evidence from the American states shows that more facilitative registration procedures do promote voter registration, especially among the young and those with enough education to stimulate some political awareness and interest, but not so much as to make them political junkies (Brians and Grofman 2001; Brown, this volume, Chapter 10; Highton 2004; Highton and Wolfinger 1998). Yet, Brown also highlights research that shows that the effects of NVRA and other registration reforms are contingent on the political context. These findings might begin to explain the gap between studies within the US that show significant effects of registration laws on turnout and the weight of the comparative cross-national evidence that suggests that automatic registration itself is not a consistent stimulus to voting when controlling for other institutional differences between the United States and other democracies (Franklin 2002, 159–60).

Other laws and administrative procedures also modestly affect the probability of voting among people who are registered to vote. Turnout is higher (especially among young people and the least educated) in states in which election officials mail each registrant a sample ballot and information about the location of his or her polling place, and where polls are open for longer periods (Wolfinger, Highton, and Mullin 2005). States that have made voting more convenient for registrants through vote-by-mail, early voting, early in-person voting, “no excuse” absentee voting, electronic voting, and voting by fax, generally have slightly higher turnout rates, usually ranging from 2 to 4 percent (Gronke et al. 2008). But to the extent that convenience has any discernible effect on *who* votes, it appears to stimulate participation among people who are already the most likely to vote based on strength of preference (Dyck and Gimpel 2005; Stein and Vonnahme, Chapter 11 in this volume), exacerbating rather than ameliorating socioeconomic biases in turnout (Berinsky 2005).

(p. 112)

Governments can offer incentives to vote, in the form of either positive or negative sanctions. A few democracies do impose light (and occasionally, heavy) civil fines for not voting, and although voting is not universal in those countries, compulsory voting does significantly boost voter turnout (Franklin 2002; Lijphart 1997; Powell 1980). Between

1968 and the 1990s, US states were actually more likely to impose weightier legal obligations on voters than on non-voters, in the form of jury duty. However, in response to concerns that many people declined to register to vote in order to avoid the possibility of jury duty, many states have begun to use driver's license lists for their jury pools. (Knack 1993; Knack 2000; Oliver and Wolfinger 1999)

The US lag in turnout is probably less than meets the eye, as many comparative analyses of turnout are based on slightly different measures. In most democracies, turnout is reported as the proportion of the registered or enumerated population that casts votes, based on the premise that the registration or enumeration procedure is nearly universally successful in identifying the eligible voters in the electorate, an assumption that may not always be tenable (Black 2005). In the United States, where voter registration is voluntary, turnout is routinely reported as the proportion of the voting-age population that casts votes. This measure is also problematic in that its denominator excludes thousands of eligible voters (overseas Americans who are eligible to vote by virtue of their citizenship) and, more importantly for comparative analyses, it includes millions of people who are not legally eligible to vote in the United States (mostly non-citizens, but also felons and ex-felons in states that have varying degrees of “civil death” penalties for felony convictions) (McDonald and Popkin 2001). Substituting estimates of the voting-eligible population for the voting-age population in comparative analyses of turnout might account for a substantial fraction of the difference between American turnout and that in other democracies. To be sure, there are normative issues that should be considered (such as whether democratic states should disenfranchise felons), but every democracy currently excludes non-citizens from voting in national elections, so at the very least they should be excluded from our comparisons.

Why Did Turnout Decline in the US (or did it)?

Michael McDonald's historical perspective (Chapter 8 in this volume) provides a useful reminder that voter turnout has fluctuated dramatically over the course of US history, mostly in response to electoral needs of political elites. A substantial body of research is based on observations about trends in voter turnout beginning (p. 113) in the mid-twentieth century, but, as McDonald points out, voter participation in this period is both considerably lower than during the Party Machine Era (1828–1896) and notably higher than participation during the Founding Era (1789–1824). Nevertheless, Richard Brody's (1978) simple puzzle still shapes much of the research on turnout in the United States. Brody observed that, from the 1950s to the 1970s, registration requirements (particularly the residency requirements) were relaxed in many states, and at the same time, educational attainment was steadily increasing. Turnout did increase markedly in the South (where prior to the 1965 Voting Rights Act, adult blacks were included in the voting-age population denominator but systematically excluded from the ballot box by literacy tests, poll taxes, obstruction, and intimidation), but outside the South, turnout

crested in 1960 and then started a steady decline through 1976 (and ultimately bottoming out in 1996). In an era when registration was becoming easier and more people had access to education and higher-status occupations, Americans were becoming less interested, less concerned about electoral outcomes, less efficacious about the electoral process, and less likely to vote. Why?

Party identification was about to reach its nadir when Brody posed his puzzle, and many wondered whether the decline in turnout was associated with the dealignment in the electorate. Not surprisingly, attitudes toward the parties had some impact on turnout, though Teixeira (1992) suggested that overall the effect was rather modest due to a rather stable trend in the number of “pure independents” and an increase in the proportion of people who saw differences between the two parties. So, much of the decrease was left to explain.

The expansion of educational opportunities may have been the most significant post-war change in the social tapestry of the United States (which as Brody and others noted, should have bolstered turnout), but other social changes that were underway in the latter part of the twentieth century apparently contributed to the decline in turnout. As a whole, the American electorate become younger in the 1970s (after the adoption of the Twenty-sixth Amendment in 1971), less married, and less likely to attend church. The declines in marriage and churchgoing are symptomatic of a general decline in social connectedness (Putnam 1995), and (together with age) account for a significant part of the decline in turnout from 1960 to 1988. Teixiera (1992) finds that the largest impact on the decline in turnout is from the decline in newspaper reading, political interest, and efficacy. But because these motivational variables are so close to the “tip of the funnel” of causality of turnout, the total effects of social connectedness and the decline of partisanship (including indirect effects through political motivation) may be even larger than they appear in Teixeira's estimates.

In addition to the changes in the social and partisan landscapes, changes in mobilization patterns also accounted for a portion of the change in turnout. The decline in voter turnout from the 1960s to the 1980s coincided with a shift by parties and candidates from reaching out to voters individually, in small groups, or **(p. 114)** in coffee klatches (retail politics) to communicating to voters through the ubiquitous but expensive medium of television (wholesale politics). Controlling for other factors that should have boosted turnout (easing voter registration laws and the increase in education) and other factors that contributed to its decline (a younger voting-age population, as well as weakened social involvement, political efficacy, and partisanship), Rosenstone and Hansen (1993, 214–19) estimate the decrease in voter contacting accounts for about half of the decline in turnout between the 1960s and 1980s. This research is complemented by large-scale field-experimental research that shows significant effects of personal contacting, and substantially smaller effects of more impersonal contacting (telephone and mail) on the likelihood of voting (Gerber and Green 2000; Green and Gerber 2004; Green, Gerber, and Nickerson 2003).

Kenneth Goldstein and Matthew Holleque (Chapter 30 in this volume) remind us that much of the research on mobilization is focused on the medium of contacting (with a special emphasis on canvassing voters), and they urge more attention to how message content affects voter participation. There are suggestions in the literature that messages matter, but no consensus yet on the magnitude, or even in some cases the direction of those effects. In non-partisan canvassing experiments, the effects of message content pale in comparison to the main effects of contact itself (Gerber and Green 2000, 658), but those experimental manipulations may miss the full range of message intensity and substance that might affect voter participation. Some research does suggest that a shift in the content of paid media, in the form of increased “attack advertising” on television (see Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Ansolabehere et al. 1994), has contributed to the demobilization of the American electorate by lowering efficacy and increasing cynicism among viewers, but critics dispute their evidence and argue that deleterious effects of attack ads on efficacy are offset by the increased provision of political information (Brooks and Geer 2007; Finkel and Geer 1998; Geer 2006). Changes in unpaid media messages, in the form of “interpretive” news (Patterson 2002), may also account for some of the decline, though proponents of this notion have not yet provided estimates of *how much* of the decline might be attributable to those sources.

Changes in social institutions affect mobilization patterns, as well. As labor unions in the United States and elsewhere have both weakened and become less representative of the proletariat and more representative of the burgeoning “new middle class” or “salatariat” (Dalton 2008, 145–50), their decreased capacity to mobilize generally and to mobilize the working class specifically accounts for about 3.5 percent of the low- and middle-income groups' drop in turnout between 1964 and 2000, and about 2.5 percent of the upper-income drop (Leighley and Nagler 2007).

Of course, the decline in turnout from the 1970s onward is not as dramatic as was first observed. As alluded to earlier, McDonald and Popkin (2001) showed that the **(p. 115)** populations of disenfranchised felons and, especially, ineligible non-citizens increased dramatically in the United States beginning in the 1970s. When ineligible adults are excluded from the denominator (and eligible overseas citizens are included), the hemorrhaging of turnout appears to have been mostly abated after 1972. There are peaks (1992) and valleys (1996), but no clear monotonic trend in turnout from 1972 to 1996. McDonald and Popkin's correction does not completely solve Brody's original puzzle (as turnout of the voting-eligible population did decline between 1960 and 1972), but it does reduce the amount of decline that requires explanation.

More recent trends in turnout in the United States pose a new question. Turnout in Clinton's reelection in 1996 reached a local minimum (VEP rate of 51.7 percent), bumped up in 2000 (54.2 percent), surged in 2004 (to 60.1 percent), and increased again in 2008 (to an estimated 61.2 percent) (McDonald 2008). We need to begin to assess whether the explanations of the turnout decline in the post-war era help us to understand the increase in voter participation in the last three presidential elections. I doubt that there have been significant upticks in social involvement, but the number of battleground states increased

in 2008. Has contacting also increased in those states, or are potential voters simply more aware of the competitiveness of the national (and state) races and, post-Florida 2000, sensitive to the potential importance of a handful of votes?

Does it Matter if Turnout is High or Low?

It is not uncommon to read pundits laments' that relatively low American turnout (either historically or comparatively) is an indicator of the low or declining health of our political system, though the resultant conditions that we might expect to see in such a sick patient are rarely articulated in the popular media. If, as Austin Ranney (1983) argued, “non-voting is not a social disease,” what are the important political consequences of varying levels of turnout?

The intellectual ancestry of much of the work cited in this chapter traces directly back to *Who Votes?*, where Raymond Wolfinger and Steven Rosenstone (1980) laid the foundation for much of the research that has examined differences in rates of voting among men and women, young and old, rich and poor, and black, white, and brown. Their chapter on the effects of state registration laws on turnout was a keystone in shaping arguments in support of registration reforms at both the state and national levels. Wolfinger has also been a strong voice on Capitol Hill, speaking in support of both successful attempts to liberalize registration laws (such as the 1993 National Voter Registration Act), as well as other attempts to simplify (p. 116) re-registration among the residentially mobile through use of the Postal Service change of address cards (Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass 1987). Throughout this line of research, Wolfinger and his colleagues have been astute enough politically to know that major reform efforts were unlikely to succeed if any of the major players in the debate had an ox that was likely to be gored by higher levels of turnout that would result from liberalized registration laws. Again and again, Wolfinger's (and later Highton's) analyses would show that the reforms were politically possible, precisely because the most likely beneficiaries of such reform efforts (mostly young people and the residentially mobile) did not have a partisan tilt that was substantially different than that in the existing electorate (Highton 2004; Highton and Wolfinger 2001; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, 80–8). Those arguments should (and to Wolfinger's credit, probably did) help mollify Republican legislators who otherwise might have presumed the conventional wisdom that higher turnout would ultimately work against their party's interests. But then the question becomes, if turnout doesn't have a significant (or even predictable) partisan consequence, why bother? Why should Democratic legislators choose to invest their limited time and political capital on legislation that would ease voter registration, instead of on proposals in other policy areas that would more directly affect their constituents' welfare, security, and political rights and freedoms? For that matter, why should we, as citizens or as members of the scholarly community, care whether turnout is high or low? What difference does it make? Are there communal benefits to societies

where turnout is high, beyond whatever aggregated sense of satisfaction millions of people might derive from having participated in the political process?

One of the ways to assess the consequences of the level of participation is to examine its relationship to the bias in participation. Bias reflects a state when the active participants are descriptively *unrepresentative* of the population of potential participants. By definition, bias is zero when all potential actors participate, and in general, class-based measures of participation bias tend to be negatively, but imperfectly, correlated with the rate of participation. Thus, when turnout is relatively high, bias tends to be relatively low (Mahler 2008, 176–8; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 228–48), and modes of political activity that have lower participation rates than voting, such as running for office, contributing money, and working in campaigns, evidence even higher education and income bias than does turnout (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 240–1).

Moreover, in cross-national comparisons, correlations between measures of class and turnout tend to be higher in the United States than in sister democracies with higher levels of turnout (Dalton 2008, 59–65; Ginsberg 1982), suggesting again that class bias is inversely related to the level of turnout. Concern about whose ox is gored closely follows from concerns about the declining rates of turnout, and Burnham (1980; see also Piven and Cloward 1988) argued that the late–twentieth-century decline in turnout reflects a continuation of the demobilization of the working class. However, it appears that turnout rates were declining among all (p. 117) socioeconomic classes in the 1970s and 1980s, so that the income-turnout bias in the 1988 presidential election was not all that different than it was in the 1972 election (Leighley and Nagler 1992; Teixeira 1992). The relationship between turnout level and bias over time is negative, but it is also imperfect, suggesting that factors other than turnout rate can substantially affect turnout bias.

While the active electorate's accent has a distinct upper-middle-class tinge (in comparison to that of habitual non-voters), the policy preferences of voters and non-voters appear to be remarkably similar on a wide range of issue areas, including moralist (abortion, gay rights), foreign policy (interventionism), and racial issues (Bennett and Resnick 1990; Gant and Lyons 1993). Abstainers are also not much different than voters on their attitudes toward the political system; in other words, few abstainers *and* voters have high levels of trust in the political system, but not many in either group are itching for revolutionary change either. Voters are slightly less supportive of redistributive policies than are non-voters, which in part reflects the class differences in the compositions of the two groups. But, it is also true that those slight differences persist when controlling for socioeconomic status. In other words, less-educated voters are more conservative on issues directly involving the welfare state than less-educated non-voters are. Whether those differences are attributable to selective mobilization or socialization remains an open question.

Quite naturally, the evidence of class-based bias in turnout leads to the “conventional wisdom” that higher turnout should tend to help the parties on the left that represent the interests of the working class. In the United States, practitioners and pundits commonly

assume that any effective reform measures that would increase turnout generally would work to the Democrats' advantage. Implicitly invoking the Columbia school's perspective that people act politically as they are socially, this perspective is based on the assumption that higher turnout would result from the mobilization of a significant fraction of the population of non-voters, which is disproportionately less educated, lower income, working class, and ergo, should have a greater propensity to support Democratic candidates. DeNardo's (1980) alternative perspective, roughly based on the Michigan model of voter behavior, suggests that higher-stimulus elections would include strong short-term forces that would generate higher turnout *and* spur more partisan defections. According to this logic, the partisan effects of higher turnout should be context-dependent, and generally work to the benefit of the minority party. Thus, in areas where Democrats are the majority party, the pool of potential Democratic defectors (who would vote Republican) is larger than the pool of potential Republican defectors (who would vote Democratic). Empirical research has either regressed aggregate votes on turnout across states and time (Erikson 1995; Nagel and McNulty 1996, 2000; Radcliff 1994) or simulated the likely partisan choices of actual non-voters under varying levels of turnout (Citrin, Schickler, and Sides 2003; Martinez and Gill 2005). While there has been some support for the conventional wisdom **(p. 118)** (Gomez, Hansford, and Krause 2007; Radcliff 1994; Tucker and Vedlitz 1986), most findings point to partisan turnout effects that are either variable (Citrin, Schickler, and Sides 2003) or contingent on the partisan make-up of the state (Nagel and McNulty 1996, 2000) or the strength of the class–party linkage (Martinez and Gill 2005).

Notwithstanding the mixed findings in research on the effects of turnout on election outcomes, the known effects of turnout on policy outputs seem to be clearer. On the whole, states that have higher working-class turnout also tend to have more generous welfare policies (Hill and Leighley 1992) and less regressive tax policies (Martinez 1997). Economists who have investigated this question from a cross-national perspective have also concluded that higher levels of turnout, reflecting greater working-class mobilization, encourages more government intervention in the economy, which in turn, results in lower rates of economic growth (Mueller and Stratmann 2003).

Another approach that has started to answer the “so what” question has been to focus on the process of representation. Higher levels of turnout may indicate to a policymaker that more constituents are paying attention, and thus engender a greater degree of responsiveness to all interests. Research that has pursued this line has shown that descriptive representation of minority populations is higher in cities with higher levels of turnout (Hajnal and Trounstine 2005), congressional policy responsiveness to voters is higher than it is to non-voters (Griffin and Newman 2005), and counties with higher levels of turnout exact a modestly larger share of pork from the federal government, other things being equal (Martin 2003). Some may view more pork in the federal budget as a tragedy of the commons, but these findings do suggest that higher levels of turnout can shape patterns of representation. As Patricia Hurley and Kim Quaile Hill argue (in

Chapter 38 of this volume), the mechanisms that provide for this enhanced representation for voters are not altogether fully understood nor well integrated into the literature on representation theory.

The focus on communal benefits of higher turnout (via enhanced representation or other forms) could also provide a partial answer to a long-standing paradox. From a rational choice perspective, the real puzzle is that turnout is as *high* as it is. In the classic calculus of voting (Riker and Ordeshook 1968), an individual's probability of voting should be negatively related to C, the costs of voting (including the time and effort required to register, acquire useful information about the candidates to make a decision, and actually cast a vote), and should be positively related to B, the differential benefit of having one party elected over the other, multiplied by P, the probability that an individual's vote will affect the outcome of the election. By and large, turnout is higher among individuals who bear lower costs (such as less restrictive registration laws) when they see more than "a dime's worth of difference" between the candidates and when the election is expected to be close. The paradox arises from the non-zero cost of voting and the infinitesimal (p. 119) value of P, reflecting the likelihood that any single vote will determine the outcome of a presidential, gubernatorial, congressional, legislative, mayoral, or referendum election, which is virtually nil. According to most interpretations of rational choice theory, every voter has an incentive to abstain, because each person should recognize that his or her preferred candidate(s) will almost certainly win (or lose) with or without his or her vote.

But, "unfortunately for the theory, many people do vote" (Blais 2000, 2). Beginning with Riker and Ordeshook's inclusion of a D (citizen duty) term in the individual calculus, rational theorists have suggested a variety of ways to account for the fact that people do indeed vote (reviewed in Blais 2000, 2–14; Fiorina 1990), notably including the rationality of groups in mobilizing blocs of voters (Morton 1991) and individual aspiration levels and feedback mechanisms that affect future decisions to vote (Bendor, Diermeier, and Ting 2003). None of these "patches" are remotely satisfactory to critics of rational choice theory, who view consumptive benefits in the D term and psychological devaluations of the C term as proof that rational choice can be saved only by the inclusion of irrational terms (Green and Shapiro 1994, 47–71). However, empirical findings that representation is enhanced under conditions of higher turnout suggest that D can be viewed not just as an individual consumptive benefit (i.e., the personal satisfaction from voting), but also as a public good that is provided when large numbers of people either learn that they are better off cooperating than shirking (see Axelrod 2006) or are compelled to vote (Lijphart 1997). Thus, an individual vote both marginally affects the probability of electing a preferred candidate, as well as contributing to the collective good of better representation regardless of who is elected to govern.

Conclusion

As the behavioral revolution in political science began several decades ago, contras warned that the emphasis on new analytical tools would shift our attention away from theoretically meaningful and normatively important concepts, such as justice, toward more easily quantifiable concepts. Voter turnout was perhaps the prototype among the latter: turnout is easily countable, and relatively inexpensive data would provide large numbers of cases amenable to powerful statistical techniques. Early critics and their Perestroikan descendants largely accepted the premise that we would be able to successfully model voter turnout and other easily measured concepts, but wondered whether we will have stripped "politics" out of the question in the process. While critics could no doubt point to particular studies in support of such a position, my reading of the field as a whole is that we have (p. 120) retained a healthy respect for the theoretical and normative underpinnings of popular participation in democratic settings. We have asked, and should continue to ask, how American institutions shape attitudes, opportunities, and incentives to vote (Leighley 1995), as well as whether and under what conditions voter turnout in the United States is biased, both in comparison to other democracies and compared to other forms of political participation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

It may also be instructive for us to begin to examine the attitudes, opportunities, and incentives of elites who shape the environment of electoral participation. A couple of years ago, I served as an academic consultant to my city's Charter Review Commission, and I heard some conscientious and dedicated public servants lament the low participation and voter turnout in our municipal elections. They clearly wanted more public involvement in local government, and looked to me for advice on how to stimulate voter participation in local elections. When I suggested that the most certain way to increase turnout rates would be to move the city election from a spring ballot to a fall ballot, concurrent with either the presidential or gubernatorial election, the same conscientious and dedicated leaders suddenly expressed concern about whether important issues on the city's agenda would be buried (or distorted) amidst the noise of national or statewide campaigns. I have no doubt about either the sincerity of their desire for more participation or about their concern for the quality of information that might get through to city voters in a fall election. But that exchange illustrates the conflicting incentives felt by elites, who shape the environment in which Americans vote. Election officials and candidates may value higher voter turnout in the abstract, but not to the exclusion of other political concerns and motivations.

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