

# Political Participation

Americans are less likely to vote than are Europeans. The reasons for this difference are complex. First, the United States has an almost bewildering number of elective offices, an estimated 521,000 positions. Voters' enthusiasm for elections is surely deflated by the sheer volume of names with which they must familiarize themselves. In Europe, in contrast, each voter generally is confronted with only one or two offices to fill per election, so that electoral decisions do not impose a burden upon the voter. Even in Europe, however, voter apathy increases with the number of elections. Too much democracy, in terms of either selecting government offices or making policy, is exhausting.

A second explanation for the poor turnout rate involves the mechanics of voting procedures. It is common in other countries for voting to be compulsory by law and for registration to be carried out automatically by the government. Mandatory voting would probably fail to survive a constitutional challenge in this country on First Amendment grounds; just as people have a right *not* to speak (like refusing to salute the flag), it would seem to follow that they have a right to refrain from voting—a form of speech—as well. Simplifying registration is a different matter. Republicans in particular have tended to resist any easing of registration standards. President Bush vetoed legislation designed to enable voters to register when obtaining a driver's license, legislation passed in 1993 and in effect as of 1995. As of summer 1997, the partisan breakdown of new voters remained unknown.

The weakness of political parties must also be considered. Unlike in the past, parties today lack the patronage and welfare incentives to mobilize voting blocs. Moreover, the impact of progressive reforms—such as the Australian ballot and stricter registration requirements for voting—have contributed to the loss of party influence over the electorate.

All these factors combine to explain why people do not vote in large numbers in the United States. Yet it is equally important to comprehend the other side of the issue, namely, the factors that do make people vote. Research underscores the significance of personal characteristics in motivating a person's decision to participate on election day. Education is the most critical variable. As their educational level increases, individuals develop a stronger sense of civic duty and a greater interest in, and knowledge of, politics. But education alone is not a sufficient explanation, since voting rates have continued to decline despite the proliferation of college degrees in recent decades. Another characteristic that correlates with voting is age; older voters are more likely to participate. But here again, overall voting rates have diminished while the population has aged. Something other than personal characteristics therefore seem to play a role in election turnout: the characteristics of the election itself. Most recent elections have presented voters with uninspiring candidates who failed to stimulate interest

or excitement. The lack of a realigning issue has made politics boring. However, turnout reaches notable peaks in certain elections, as in 1964 (a sharp ideological choice between candidates) and 1992 (an economy in recession and the charismatic candidate H. Ross Perot). Voters participate when aroused to do so.

Considering how few tangible rewards participation produces, it is not surprising that over 40 percent of Americans either do not participate at all or limit their participation to voting. Compared to citizens of other democracies, Americans vote less but engage more in communal activity.

Who participates in politics is an important issue. Because those who participate are likely to have more political influence than those who do not. Higher education is the single most important factor in producing a high degree of participation. Older persons and men are also likely to be active. Blacks participate more than whites of equal socioeconomic status.

Although voter turnout has decreased over the past twenty years, it seems that other forms of participation, such as writing letters to public officials and engaging in demonstrations, have increased. There are many ways in which Americans can participate in politics—ranging from voting, which a majority do with some regularity, to belonging to a political club or organization, which only a few do. In an elaborate analysis of the ways people participate, Verba and Nie discovered six different kinds of citizens. 1. Inactives participate little if at all (22 percent). 2. Parochial participants neither vote nor engage in campaigns or community activity, but they do contact officials about specific, often personal, problems. 3. Communalists engage in community activities of a nonpartisan nature. 4. Voting specialists regularly vote but do little else. 5. Campaigners vote and also participate in conflictual political activities, such as campaigns. 6. Complete activists participate in all forms of political activity (11 percent).

The absence of citizen involvement in other countries carries a cost in that governments have a freer hand to operate without much public scrutiny. As levels of participation escalate, governments come under greater pressure to exchange responsible behavior for openness. B. Guy Peters has found this pattern to exist in contemporary Great Britain: "The increasingly participative nature of British citizens ... is making them increasingly resentful of their lack of involvement in government, and there is now a need to reexamine the secrecy and limited democracy of British government." Thus the participative character of Americans has arguably compelled the government to address public concerns despite the weakness of political parties.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Why is voter participation lower in the United States than in European countries? Would one not expect voter participation to be higher here, because more offices are up for election?
2. What have been the policy consequences of a broader electorate? Which extensions of the suffrage have changed policy outcomes, and which have mattered little?
3. What could be done to increase voter turnout? Would a program of reforms to increase voting turnout need to focus on the cost of voting, the benefits, or both? Which do current reform proposals do?
4. Why not simply make voting compulsory? If you do not want to use coercion to induce voting, why not pay people to vote? If elections are a public good in which all citizens have a stake, why should we depend on unpaid voluntary action?
5. Why is a large turnout a good thing? We say, rightly, that we have free speech in this country, even though most people have nothing particularly controversial or interesting to say. Why is our country less democratic if people simply choose not to vote?