



THE VANISHING VOTER

Public Involvement in an Age of Uncertainty

THOMAS E. PATTERSON



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Acknowledgments

As a child growing up in a small Minnesota town, I remember elections as a time of activity and wonder. With eight children, my mom and dad voted in shifts, but vote they always did. Many of my grade-school classmates sported campaign pins. The “I Like Ike” buttons were more popular, but I wore my Adlai Stevenson pin proudly, even though something told me that ours was a losing cause. Campaign leaflets would appear at the house in the hands of neighbors or slipped between the doors. They were also found on store counters or on windshields when farmers came into town on Saturday night. Campaign posters were slapped on posts or taped to store windows. Summer evenings were spent watching the party conventions. There wasn’t anything else available on TV, but the conventions would have been the program of choice in most homes anyway.

Elections don’t look and feel like that anymore, and haven’t for a long time. During the past four decades, the United States has had its longest sustained period of decline in election participation, including but not limited to the vote. Elections are now conducted on high, beamed from war rooms and newsrooms. We are invited to send a check and to vote on Election Day. Increasingly, we don’t bother to do either one.

It is mythical, of course, to claim that elections were once bottom-up affairs that thrived solely on the effort and interest of ordinary citizens. But today’s elections are unmistakably top-down affairs,

conducted in ways that suit candidates, journalists, and officials. These professionals are not unmindful of or uncaring about the public, but they put their own needs first. The gap between the practitioner and the citizen—despite the intimacy of television and the immediacy of polling—has arguably never been greater. The world occupied by the hundreds at the top and the world populated by the millions at the bottom still overlap at points, but they do so less satisfactorily than before. The juice has been squeezed out of elections. The blinkered professionalism that marks other areas of American life has taken over politics and journalism, which are among the areas of modern life that actually work better when a spirit of amateurism prevails.

Absent that spirit, Americans are likely to continue to withhold their checks, their votes, and their attention. This prospect led to the Vanishing Voter Project on which this book is based. With the generous support of the Pew Charitable Trusts, we conducted weekly interviews with national samples of 1,000 Americans to discover how much attention they were paying to the 2000 presidential election campaign. We sought to discover what draws people to a campaign and what keeps them away. We did a lot of interviewing. Today's campaign lasts a full year, easily the longest among the world's major democracies. By the time the 2000 campaign ended, we had conducted nearly 90,000 interviews. We had not expected the outcome to go into overtime. But it did, and so did we, gathering an additional 10,000 interviews while Americans waited to hear whether George W. Bush's or Al Gore's legal team would win out.

Our Vanishing Voter Project benefited from the advice of a great many scholars, practitioners, foundation officers, and staff members. I begin my thanks with Sean Treglia of The Pew Charitable Trusts, who was the program officer for our research grant. Sean provided sound advice at critical stages of the project and represented Pew with distinction at our public forums. I am also indebted to Paul Light, who was at Pew when we proposed the project. Paul's backing was crucial. I am grateful for it, as well as for the support received from Michael Delli Carpini, Pew's Public Policy Program director, and Rebecca Rimel, Pew's president. Through its many grants, The Pew Charitable Trusts has made a singular contribution to improving American democracy.

It is a towering force in our civic life. It is also a hands-off foundation once a grant has been awarded. The opinions expressed in this book are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Pew Charitable Trusts.

Throughout the Vanishing Voter Project—literally from beginning to end—I had support, counsel, and friendship from Marvin Kalb. Marvin and I hatched the idea of the project, secured funding for it, and directed it together. Marvin's experiences in journalism and the academy helped shape every aspect of the study. To my delight, but not to my amazement after having already worked with him for several years, Marvin was adept even at devising survey questions. Marvin also pulled together our two successful Washington conferences and our two stunning national party convention forums. Always generous in his advice and polite in his disagreements, Marvin is what one hopes for, and is lucky to find, in a collaborator and colleague.

The Vanishing Voter Project was also fortunate to have a dedicated research and administrative team. Tami Buhr was in charge of preparing the survey questions each week and getting the data in shape for analysis. She also participated in the preparation of the weekly news releases, our conference papers, and this book. Once the surveys were off and running, Tami was easily the project's most valuable player. I am thankful for her many efforts, some of which required her to work evenings and weekends. She is a marvelously talented research scholar and deserves a large chunk of the credit for the project's success. The Webmaster for our project was Ben Snowden, a skilled refugee from the private sector who is now in law school. Ben set up our Web site (www.vanishingvoter.com) and took charge of sending out our weekly news releases. The task of monitoring news coverage of the 2000 campaign fell to Alison Kommer. The data she so painstakingly prepared have found their way into this book. Also helping to shape the book were two first-rate editorial assistants, Parker Everett and Lynn Weil. Eric Anderson ably assisted in tracking news coverage of the project and in routing inquiries about the project to their proper place. Karen Hart capably handled the project budget. In Washington, Marvin Kalb had the assistance of Michael Barre. At the start of the project, my personal assistant was Melissa Ring. After the book was under way, Jamie

Arterton moved into the position. Melissa and Jamie did it all, from helping with project inquiries to assisting in manuscript preparation. These two very talented young women learned to work around my chronic disorganization, imposing an order on the project that was a marvel to all in the office.

The office in this case is the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Few places in academe are as stimulating or comfortable as the Shorenstein Center, a reflection of the two directors it has had, Marvin Kalb and Alex Jones. Alex came on board as the weekly surveys were in the final stretch and gave his full support to the project. Few things are more appealing to me than working with Alex in the years ahead. The mainstay in the Center throughout the project was Nancy Palmer. Superlatives are not enough in her case. She had her own job to do but always found time to help with the Vanishing Voter Project. I wore out the path to her office, two doors away, during our study. She was the first reader for every draft chapter, the first contact whenever a major problem arose, and a valued advisor at all times. Edith Holway was also there throughout the project, lending her special ability at bringing people together. Our conferences and meetings went off without a hitch as a result of Edie's skill.

Our surveys were conducted by International Communication Research. We paid for ICR's services but received a bonus when Melissa Herrmann was assigned to our project. Melissa went beyond what was required, cheerfully accommodating our frequent last-minute requests to add more questions to the weekly survey. ICR's A. J. Jennings and Chris Dinardo also helped enormously and have my thanks.

A project of this scope requires outside advice, and we had it in abundance. The scholars Robert Entman, Martin Wattenberg, Alex Keyssar, and Arthur LeGacy deserve special thanks. They served as readers of draft copies of chapters. Richard Morin needs to be singled out, too. Rich helped in preparing the initial survey and then worked with us on a special survey that became the basis for a *Washington Post* article. During various stages of the project, we received advice from numerous practitioners and scholars. With an apology to anyone inadvertently omitted, I would like to thank Iris Adler, Michael Alvarez,

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Ashbel Green, my editor at Knopf, was for a second time the source of wise advice. He was also editor for my earlier Knopf book, *Out of Order* (a brilliant title that he suggested). I will always be indebted to Ash's kind and constructive response to a ragged first draft of this book. In addition to Ash, Knopf's Jonathan Fasman, Ellen Feldman, and Robert Olsson all helped and deserve my thanks.

An election project followed immediately by the hurried writing of a book based on it places a heavy toll on family members, one that I promise not to impose again, despite the encouragement and forbearance they showed. Lorie Conway, my wife, spent most of a summer and many nights and weekends alone, as I worked on the manuscript. Lorie's support was unflagging, as was that of her son Max. Lorie saw the light at the end of the tunnel long before I did, and she often mentioned it, perhaps to remind both of us that this strain would pass. I am thankful for her help and constant encouragement. She was the deep inspiration for this book. My children, Alex and Leigh, give me purpose that has sustained me through more than one book. They may not realize it, but time with them brings new energy and fascination. I like their company so much.

Thomas E. Patterson
Cambridge, Massachusetts
March 12, 2002

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THE VANISHING VOTER

CHAPTER ONE

The Incredible Shrinking Electorate

I've lost interest in voting.

—twenty-six-year-old Pennsylvania voter¹

I just don't vote.

—twenty-five-year-old North Carolina resident²

I don't have any time, and I'm not interested anyway.

—forty-year-old Washington resident³

I don't see any reason to vote.

—thirty-year-old Wisconsin resident⁴

SAM ROBERTS, a Miami resident, was kicking himself. A Gore supporter, he had not voted in the 2000 presidential election. "I should have voted," Roberts told a reporter. "Had planned to but didn't get around to it. Dumb."⁵

With the outcome of the 2000 election hanging by the thread of a few hundred votes in Florida, citizen regret was widespread. Nearly half of adult Americans had not voted, and a CNN poll indicated most of them wished they had.⁶

Even if more people go to the polls in the next election, and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, could have that effect, the long-term prospects are anything but bright. The voting rate has fallen in nearly every presidential election for four decades. An economic recession and Ross Perot's spirited third-party bid sparked a healthy 5 percent increase in 1992, but turnout in 1996 plunged to 49 percent, the first time since the 1920s that it had slipped below 50 percent.

Many expected turnout to rise in 2000. The Clinton-Dole race four years earlier was one-sided from the start. The contest between Al Gore and George W. Bush, however, looked to be the tightest since 1960, when John F. Kennedy won by the slim margin of 100,000 votes. "Close elections tend to drive up voter interest," said CNN's political analyst Bill Schneider.⁷ Turnout did rise, but only slightly: a mere 51 percent of U.S. adults voted in 2000.

That was a far cry from the 63 percent turnout for the Kennedy-Nixon race of 1960, which became the benchmark for evaluating participation in subsequent elections. In every presidential election for the next twenty years, turnout fell. It rose by 1 percentage point in 1984, but then dropped 3 points in 1988. Analysts viewed the trend with alarm, but the warning bells really sounded in 1996, when more Americans stayed home than went to the polls on Election Day. In 1960, 68.8 million adults voted and 40.8 million did not. In 1996, 96.3 million came out and 100.2 million passed.⁸

The turnout trend in the midterm congressional elections has been no less alarming. The voting rate was nearly 50 percent on average in the 1960s, barely stayed above 40 percent in the 1970s, and has averaged 37 percent since then. After a recent midterm vote the cartoonist Rigby showed an election clerk eagerly asking a stray cat that had wandered into a polling place, "Are you registered?"

The period from 1960 to 2000 marks the longest ebb in turnout in the nation's history. If in 2000, as in 1960, 63 percent of the electorate had participated, nearly 25 million more people would have voted. If that many queued up at a polling booth in New York City, the line would stretch all the way to Los Angeles and back, twice over.

Fewer voters are not the only sign that Americans are less interested in political campaigns. Since 1960, participation has declined in virtually every area of election activity, from the volunteers who work on campaigns to the viewers who watch televised debates. The United States had 100 million fewer people in 1960 than it did in 2000 but, even so, more viewers tuned to the October presidential debates in 1960 than did so in 2000.

Few today pay even token tribute to presidential elections. In 1974,

Congress established a fund to underwrite candidates' campaigns, financed by a checkoff box on personal income tax returns that allowed citizens to assign \$1 (later raised to \$3) of their tax liability to the fund. Initially, one in three taxpayers checked the box. By the late 1980s, only one in five marked it. Now, only one in eight does so.⁹

What could possibly explain such trends? Why are citizens drawing back from election politics? Why is the voter vanishing?

American politics has many strange aspects, but few so mysterious as the decline in electoral participation. Two decades ago, the political scientist Richard Brody observed that the declining rate was at odds with existing theories about voting behavior.¹⁰

One such theory held that rising education levels would spawn higher participation.¹¹ In 1960, college-educated Americans were 50 percent more likely to vote than those who had not finished high school. With college graduates increasing steadily in number, the future of voting in America looked bright. "Education not only tends to imbue persons with a sense of citizen duty, it also propels them into political activity," the political scientist V. O. Key wrote.¹² In 1960, half of the adult population had not finished high school and fewer than 10 percent had graduated from college. Today, 25 percent hold a college degree and another 25 percent have attended college. Yet, turnout has declined.

The voting rate of African Americans deepens the mystery. In 1960, only 29 percent of southern blacks were registered to vote.¹³ An imposing array of barriers—poll taxes, rigged literacy tests, and courthouse intimidation—kept them from registering. Jim Crow laws ruled southern politics, as did segregationist appeals. Ross Barnett was elected Mississippi's governor in 1959 to the tune of a race-baiting song that included a line saying he would oppose integration with forceful intent. When George Wallace first ran for governor of Alabama, he was beaten by an out-and-out racist candidate, prompting Wallace to vow: "I'll never be outniggered again." He kept his word and won handily when he ran in 1962. Only 22,000 of Mississippi's 450,000 blacks—a

mere 5 percent—were registered to vote.¹⁴ North Carolina had the South's highest level of black registration but, even there, only 38 percent were enrolled.¹⁵

The force of the civil rights movement swept the registration barriers aside. The Twenty-Fourth Amendment, ratified in 1964, prohibits states from requiring citizens to pay "any poll tax or other tax" before they can vote in federal elections. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 empowered the U.S. attorney general to send federal examiners to supervise registration in the seven southern states where literacy tests had been imposed and where fewer than 50 percent of eligible adults were registered. Within half a year, black registration in the states of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina rose by 40 percent.¹⁶ The Voting Rights Act also suspended the use of literacy tests, which were banned completely five years later. President Lyndon Johnson told southern officials not to resist electoral change: "To those who seek to avoid action by their National Government in their own communities, who want to and seek to maintain purely local control over elections, the answer is simple: open your polling places to all your people."¹⁷

Many southern blacks saw their names on polling lists for the first time in their lives. African-American registration rose to 43 percent in 1964 and to more than 60 percent by 1970.¹⁸ In the process, black turnout in the region doubled. Southern whites reacted by also voting in larger numbers, mostly for racial conservatives.¹⁹ In 1960, participation in the South was 30 percentage points below that of the rest of the country. Today, it is less than 5 points lower. Nationally, the voting rate of African Americans is now nearly the same as that of whites. Why, then, has the overall rate declined?

The women's vote adds to the mystery. Although women gained the right to vote in 1920, they were slow to exercise it. Even as late as 1960, turnout among women was nearly 10 percentage points below that of men.²⁰ American society was changing, however. The tradition-minded women born before suffrage were giving way to generations of women who never doubted that the vote belonged to them as much as it did to men. Today, women vote at the same rate as men. But the overall rate has fallen.

The relaxation of registration laws in recent years also provides reason to think that the turnout rate should have gone up, not down. Unlike Europe, where governments take responsibility to get citizens registered and where participation exceeds 80 percent, the United States places the burden of registration on the individual.²¹ For a long period, this arrangement was a boon to officials who wanted to keep the poor and uneducated from voting. States devised schemes that hampered all but the stable homeowner. In most states, residents had to live at the same address for as long as a year before they were eligible to register, and had to re-register if they moved only a few doors away. Registration offices were open for limited hours and were sometimes located at inconvenient or hard-to-find places. Many states closed their rolls a year before an election. By the time people got around to thinking about going to the polls, the deadline had long since passed. Many districts were also quick to purge the rolls of nonvoters, requiring them to re-register if they wanted to exercise their right to vote.

For years, the League of Women Voters sought to persuade Congress and the states to reduce registration barriers.²² Many scholars also believed that registration reform was the answer to the turnout problem. Studies indicated that participation among America's registered voters was nearly identical to that of European voters.²³ The political scientists Raymond Wolfinger and Steven Rosenstone estimated that eased registration requirements could boost presidential election turnout by as much as 9 percent.²⁴

Registration laws have been relaxed. No state today is allowed to impose a residency requirement that exceeds thirty days for a federal election. Six states—Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, and Wyoming—allow residents to register at the polls on Election Day.²⁵ The Motor Voter Act, passed by Congress in 1993, has even shifted some of the registration burden to the states. They must offer registration to citizens who seek services at public assistance agencies, such as food stamp and Medicare offices, or who apply for driver's licenses. States can also offer registration at unemployment offices and other public facilities, such as libraries and schools. Moreover, the act requires states to allow registration by mail and prohibits them from arbitrarily purging nonvoters from the rolls.

Millions of Americans have enrolled through the Motor Voter Act. Most of them would have registered anyway under the old system, but the Federal Election Commission estimates that the legislation has added at least 10 million registrants to the rolls since 1993.²⁶ With so many additional registrants, why did turnout drop by 5 million voters between 1992 and 2000?

The political scientists Michael McDonald and Samuel Popkin claim that the turnout decline is a “myth.” “There is no downward trend [since 1972] in the national turnout rate,” they say.²⁷ Their argument is built on the fact that the U.S. Census Bureau bases its official turnout figures on the total adult population. This population includes individuals who are ineligible to vote, including noncitizens, prison inmates, and convicted felons.* Their numbers have increased substantially since 1960. As a result of liberalized immigration laws, the United States in recent decades has experienced its largest influx of immigrants since World War I.²⁸ Noncitizens were 2 percent of the adult population in 1960 and today account for 7 percent.²⁹ Tougher drug and sentencing laws have also increased the number of ineligible voters. The nation now has a higher percentage of its population behind bars than any other country in the world.³⁰ Roughly 3.5 million are disqualified from voting because they are incarcerated or a convicted felon. This is a sizeable increase from 1960, when fewer than 500,000 were ineligible to vote for these reasons.³¹

When voting rates are adjusted for ineligible adults, the picture improves. Between 1960 and 2000 turnout among eligible voters

*The U.S. Constitution does not prevent aliens, felons, and inmates from voting. They are barred by state laws. Indeed, although all states prohibit legal aliens from voting, some allow felons to vote. Some analysts say that the most precise turnout figure is one that includes the disbarred, since the decision to exclude them is a political one. Roughly 10 percent of Americans cannot vote, compared with, for example, only 2 percent in the United Kingdom. One out of seven black males of voting age is ineligible to vote because of a felony conviction. To ignore such differences, some analysts say, is to ignore official efforts to control the size and composition of the electorate. See Pippa Norris, *Count Every Voice: Democratic Participation Worldwide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).