



CITIZENSHIP IN 21ST CENTURY AMERICA

The United States is a representative democracy, in which government officials are selected by the people they represent. But many have questioned whether democracy in the U.S. is working as it should. Almost half of those eligible to vote do not do so in presidential elections (even fewer participate in lower-level elections), and studies have found that many Americans do not have even basic knowledge about their elected representatives or the workings of our government.

Today's citizens are faced with a very different world than that of the founding fathers who established our democracy. Our country is vastly larger and communication is vastly different than it was in the Republic with which we started. Instead of a small, mostly rural society of some three million people, we now have close to 300 million mostly urban and suburban residents. Instead of sending letters from Virginia to Boston that had to go by boat to England and then back again to America, we are all instantaneously connected electronically via internet and cell phone and physically by jet age transportation. Instead of just 30,000 persons in a Congressional District, we are now approaching 800,000. In the modern United States, election campaigns are conducted through the mass media rather than by grassroots and are controlled by highly skilled political strategists. Although the internet and 24-hour news organizations may make political information more readily available, there is frequently an emphasis on the horse race or on candidates' personal lives rather than on policy matters.

People have a lot to do with their lives apart from participating in a democracy. Suppose we have a society of "spectator citizens," who do little and are not much involved, who do not exercise any real choices, who do not know much about politics and policy and who do little in the way of public service or patriotism? Does this matter? Why? What must citizens do to make our democracy work? And what, if anything, can they reasonably be expected to do given the other pressures of the modern society in which we find ourselves? These are issues for our discussion.

We will focus on four paths of citizen involvement in government: participating in politics, exercising choice, serving one's country and becoming informed. In each case, there are different views and different ideas about the kinds of institutions and policies we might need—provided that each activity is something we think citizens in a democracy should do. In each case, we can ask: are these obligations of citizenship? Or alternatively, might we decide that they are not really matters of public concern?

CITIZENSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

Some people think that the first obligation of a citizen is to participate in politics. In representative democracies, election time is the key moment for citizens to express their preferences and influence how their country is governed. If a citizen does not vote, he or she forfeits that influence. When failure to vote is a result of disaffection or disenfranchisement, an election with low turnout is unlikely to produce an accurate representation of the will of the people. And since those who do not vote tend to be systematically different from those that do (e.g. poor people are less likely to vote than wealthier people, young people less likely than old people), groups that do not vote may have less influence on policy outcomes.

America has one of the lowest rates of voter participation of any democracy in the world. Even in a presidential general election, only about half the eligible voters turn out. In the presidential primary process and in state and local elections, the participation rate is much lower: in the single digits in some cases.

What factors contribute to our low voter turnout? Some argue that our election laws themselves make it more difficult for people to participate. For example, Election Day is usually on a weekday (the first Tuesday in November for presidential and congressional elections), and it may be difficult for people to get away from work to vote. To make voting easier, some states allow citizens to cast “early votes” in the run up to Election Day and/or to cast “absentee” votes by mail. However, other states do not have such measures in place, and critics argue that this is unfair because it makes it more difficult for some citizens to vote than others. Some suggest that Election Day should be a national holiday so that citizens in all states would have an equal and increased opportunity to vote.

In many states, furthermore, it is necessary to register weeks before Election Day in order to be eligible to vote. Critics point out that, since citizen awareness of campaigns and elections reaches its peak just shortly before Election Day, many citizens might not even be aware of an upcoming election at the time of the voter registration deadline. People who forget or don't have time or do not realize they need to register by the deadline then cannot have their votes counted on Election Day. Several states in the U.S. allow voters to register on Election Day itself, and these states tend to have significantly higher turnout than states that do not allow Election Day registration.

A more direct reduction in participation is brought about by laws in many states that bar convicted criminals from the political process. 48 states do not allow voting by citizens incarcerated for a felony, and the majority of states prohibit voting by felons who are on parole or probation. Even after they have completed their sentences, convicted felons in some states are not permitted to vote. Approximately five million Americans are unable to participate in elections for these reasons.

Some argue that our political institutions themselves discourage voter participation. The Electoral College system means that only so-called “swing states” are in play in presidential elections. It is assumed, for example, that California’s Electoral College votes will always go to the Democratic candidate. Thus both Democrats and Republicans in California may have less incentive to vote; some Democrats may not bother voting because they think they are going to win anyway, and some Republicans may not bother because they assume they are going to lose. Candidates tend to give short shrift to states that have safe majorities of one party or the other and instead focus their campaign resources on the “swing states” where they might sway enough voters to move that state into their own Electoral College camp. This means that perhaps 22 states out of 50 are likely to experience serious campaigning and television advertising, while voters in other states are left as second-hand observers to campaigns in which the ads are not even shown in their states. Voters in non-swing states are therefore marginalized and participation is depressed. Without the Electoral College, Republicans in California and Democrats in the deep South would be part of the presidential campaign in the general election.

Other countries have found more direct ways to ensure high voter turnout, such as making voting “compulsory.” In Australia, citizens who do not vote are subject to paying a fine and in Belgium, repeated failure to vote can lead to having your right to vote permanently canceled. These “compulsory” voting laws do result in higher turnout: Australia and Belgium average over 90%. 32 countries currently have some kind of compulsory voting law.

On the other hand, there are those who say that low levels of voter participation are not a problem. We have relatively respectable levels of participation from those who are registered to vote, they argue. It is just that, unlike most countries, we put the burden of registration entirely on the individual (in many other countries, voters are automatically registered by the government). And if citizens do not even bother to register, then why should we be concerned about their votes? If people can’t take the time to register, how informed or involved could they be in the campaign? In this view, we should not be concerned about the preferences of those who cannot make even a minimal effort to get to the polls once every year or two.



And of course, it must be recognized that voting is not the only form of political participation. Showing up at rallies, writing letters to public officials such as members of congress, contributing to campaigns, or even just discussing one’s political views might all be considered forms of political participation. In this regard, the spread of the web has dramatically increased opportunities for political participation (consider the massive number of political blogs, for example, or the success of online political organizing tools).

SOME PROPOSALS:

	Approaches: Citizenship and participation	
	Arguments for	Arguments against
Increase voter participation by making Election Day a national holiday	Having Election Day on a workday makes it very difficult for people to find time to vote. It is especially difficult for poor people who may not be able to afford time off work to make it to the polls.	National holidays are very expensive because of lost economic productivity. We already have enough national holidays. If people really want to vote, they will find the time even on a workday.
Increase voter participation by allowing Election Day registration	Pre-Election Day registration establishes unnecessary bureaucratic barriers to political participation. Voting should not be dependent on ability to jump through bureaucratic hoops.	Requiring voter registration before Election Day helps to prevent voter fraud. It is the best way to make sure that only people who are truly eligible get to vote.
Increase voter participation by allowing felons to vote after they have served their sentences	Convicted criminals who have served their sentences have already paid their debt to society; they should be allowed to once again enjoy the full benefits and responsibilities of citizenship.	Convicted felons have shown that they are incapable of behaving as responsible citizens; permanently removing their votes is an appropriate punishment.
Increase voter participation by abolishing the Electoral College and substituting direct election of the president by popular vote	The Electoral College is undemocratic as it makes some people's votes (e.g. residents of small states) weigh more than others'. Switching to direct election by popular vote would make everyone's votes equal and would remove the disincentive for people in "safe" states to vote. Abolishing the Electoral College would also force candidates to appeal to voters in all states instead of being able to ignore those states they consider "safe."	This is not a realistic option as it would require a constitutional amendment, and could not be accomplished for many years – if ever. Also small states enjoy disproportionate influence because of the Electoral College and they are unlikely to give up their current advantage. Finally, the United States is a federal coalition and it should assign a value to the collective opinion of each state distinct from the value of the US population as a whole.
Increase voter participation by switching to "compulsory voting," with fines or other penalties for those that don't comply	Voting is an obligation of citizenship and our laws should reflect this. Compulsory voting helps to ensure that the elected government represents the will of <i>all</i> the people. It also helps to prevent the disenfranchisement of certain segments of society, such as poor people.	Voting is a right, not an obligation, of citizenship. Even if you consider it a moral obligation, people should still be free to choose whether or not to meet that obligation. Compulsory voting is antithetical to democratic notions of personal liberty.
It is not necessary to increase voter turnout; low turnout is not a problem for democracy	If people do not bother to vote, we can assume that they do not care about the outcome of the election, so neither they nor society lose anything as a result of their not voting. And do we really want people who have no interest in or knowledge of politics to have a hand in choosing our government? Furthermore, voting is not the only form of political participation, so people can be "good citizens" even without voting.	High voter turnout is necessary to ensure the legitimacy of electoral outcomes. Often, people fail to vote not because they do not care, but because candidates have not reached out to them effectively or because they lack the time/resources to make it to the polls. These people are still important members of society whose voices need to be heard.



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