

By the People

Citizenship in 21st Century America

The United States is a **representative democracy**, in which government officials are selected by the people they represent. However, 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.

Representative Democracy: a form of government where citizens vote for officials to represent their desires indirectly in the government

Today's citizens are faced with a very different world than that of the Founding Fathers who established our democracy. Our country is much larger and communication is different than it was when the United States began. 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 (through the internet and cell phones) and physically (by airplanes). Instead of just 30,000 people in a Congressional District, we are now

approaching 800,000. In the modern United States, election campaigns are conducted through 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 who is ahead in the polls at the moment or on candidates' personal lives rather than on policy matters.

Suppose we have a society of "spectator citizens," who do little and are not involved in their democracy. Does it matter if people do not exercise any real choices, do not know much about politics and policy and do little in the way of public service or patriotism? Why? What must individual citizens do to make our democracy work? And what, if anything, can they reasonably be expected to do given the other pressures their daily lives? 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 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 requirements of citizenship? Or might we decide that they are not really matters of public concern?

Citizenship and Participation

Some people think that the first duty 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 gives up that influence. When failure to vote is a result of citizen disengagement or some deliberate effort to decrease the number of voters, 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 demographically 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 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 citizens in prison for a felony to vote, and it is illegal in the majority of states for felons who are on parole or probation to vote. Even after they have completed their sentences, convicted felons in some states are not allowed to vote. About five million Americans are unable to participate in elections for these reasons.

Some argue that our political institutions

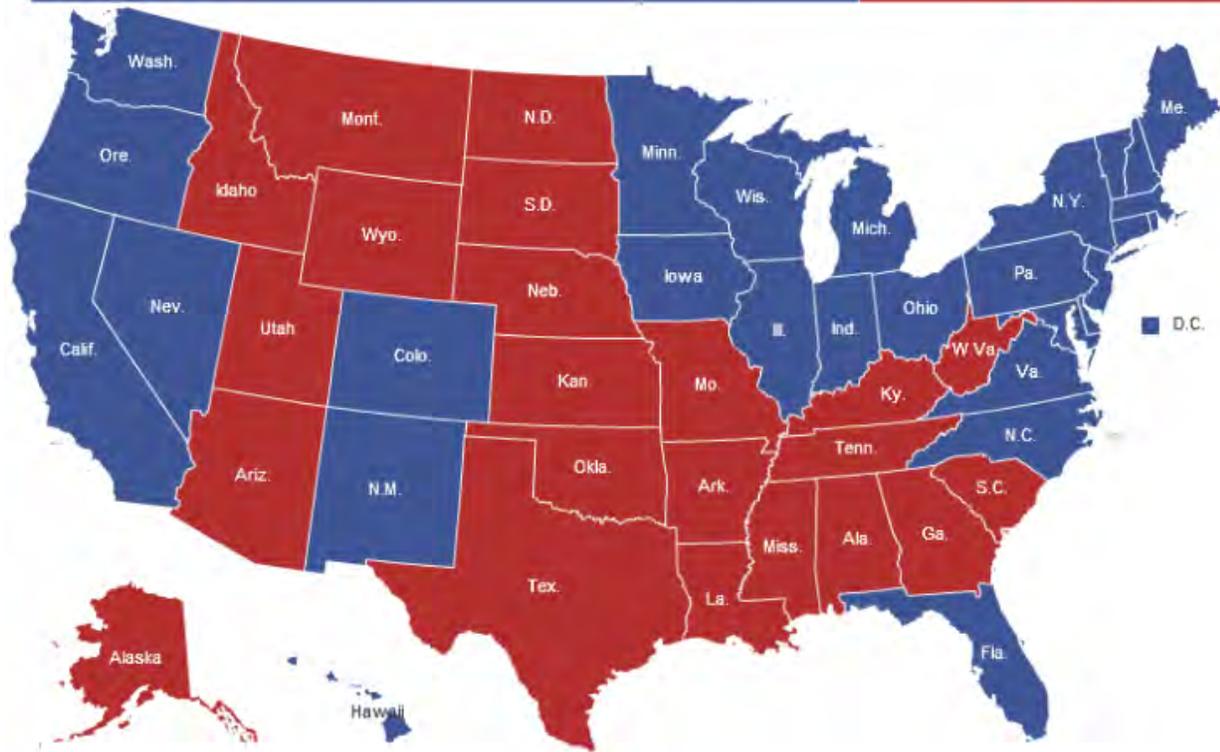
Swing State: A state that could potentially be won by either a Democrat or a Republican

themselves discourage voter participation. The system means that only so-called “swing

365 ✓ Obama
Electoral Votes
Projected Winner

0
and needed

173 McCain
Electoral Votes



The most recent Electoral College results

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 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

Electoral College: the system by which US presidents are elected; if a candidate wins the majority of votes in a state, he or she would win ALL of that state’s electoral college votes; because of the Electoral College, it is possible to get a minority of the popular vote and still win the election

lose. Candidates tend to give little attention 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 therefore experience lower voter turnout. 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 required by law. 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 required 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 worrisome. 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). 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? According to 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).

Discussion Questions

- What are the benefits of a representative democracy as compared to a direct democracy?
- Is it important to be informed about the government or election campaigns? Why or why not?
- How do election laws impact the number of people and the kinds of people that turn out to vote?
- Does the Electoral College make elections more or less fair?
- If you were 18, would you vote? On what information would you base your decision?

 **Some Proposals:**

Fill in the chart below with arguments for and against the following proposals

	Approaches: Citizenship and Participation	
	Arguments for	Arguments against
Increase voter participation by making Election Day a national holiday.		
Increase voter participation by allowing Election Day registration		
Increase voter participation by allowing felons to vote after they have served their sentences		
Increase voter participation by abolishing the Electoral College and substituting direct election of the president by popular vote		
Increase voter participation by switching to “compulsory voting,” with fines or other penalties for those that don’t comply		
It is not necessary to increase voter turnout; low turnout is not a problem for a democracy		



This background was prepared for *By the People* by the Center for Deliberative Democracy. BTP is partnering with the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation on the *Dialogue in Democracy* project. Ongoing BTP project funding partners include the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.



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