



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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EXERCISING CHOICE

From this perspective, the central duty of citizens is not just to show up, it is also to exercise choice. The essence of democracy is that the public make collective choices and the duty of each citizen is to take part in those decisions. But choices can only be made from among the available options, and it is hard for individual citizens to exercise choice if elections are not competitive. If the results are a foregone conclusion, why should we expect voters to spend a lot of time and trouble registering their preferences? This view therefore emphasizes not just the role of citizens, but the institutional context within which they must play that role. We need to have elections where there is enough competition for citizens to realize that their participation can make a difference. When parties compete, voters win, in this perspective. With competition, the voters can hold elected officials accountable; if voters have no real alternatives to the status quo, they have no way to register their disapproval of incompetence, corruption, or poor policy choices (or reward the opposite).

The United States essentially has a two-party system. Although this is not mandated by the Constitution, it is encouraged by our “first-past-the-post” voting system (where the candidate who gets the most votes is elected, even if they don’t reach a 50% threshold), by our non-parliamentary government, and by ballot access laws that set high barriers to entry into the electoral process (e.g. requiring the collection of large numbers of signatures to be eligible to run).

Some people argue that there is little difference between the Democratic and Republican parties, and that we need to encourage the inclusion of candidates representing a broader range of policy positions. In this view, both Democratic and Republican candidates rush to the middle in order to appeal to the greatest number of voters, thus leaving no real choices for people whose beliefs are further to the left or to the right on the political spectrum.

One way to increase the range of candidates would be to switch to a “proportional representation” voting system, some version of which is used in most major democracies. These systems seek to provide a close match between the percentage of votes that a party receives in an election and the number of seats they are given in the governing body. To illustrate: imagine an area called Citizenville that has a total of five congressional districts; 40% of voters in Citizenville are Democrats, 40% are Republicans, and 20% are supporters of the Alternative Party. Under our current first-past-the-post voting system, each of Citizenville’s five districts has a separate election to choose its own representative. In Citizenville District 1, 41% of the vote in this election goes to the Republican, 39% to the Democrat, and 20% to the Alternative; the Republican is elected and 59% of District 1’s voters have no one in Congress that represents their views. Similar outcomes occur in Citizenville Districts 2, 3, 4, and 5. Under proportional representation, Citizenville would be *one* district that elects five representatives.

There are many ways of apportioning votes in proportional representation systems, but the common thread is that seats are awarded approximately according to percentage of the vote received, so a party or candidate need not come in first to win seats. Thus under proportional representation, Citizenville would most likely elect two Democrats, two



Republicans, and one Alternative. Citizenville’s citizens would have three viable candidates to choose from instead of just two, and every citizen would have at least one official in Congress to represent his or her views. Proportional representation is currently in use in a small number of local electoral contexts (e.g. for school boards or city councils) around the U.S.,

but proponents would like to see it used in state and even federal elections.

Others have suggested that an easier way to increase electoral choice for American voters would be to reduce the barriers to ballot access that are currently in place and that often put third party candidates at a major disadvantage. In many states, the candidates of the major parties are automatically given a place on the ballot, while third party candidates have to go through a time- and resource-consuming process of signature collection to qualify. Critics argue that these measures solidify the powerful positions of the two major parties and make it difficult for third parties to break into the process.

On the other hand, some people feel that the two-party system provides plenty of choice for American voters. They point out that, unlike in many other democracies, American elected officials typically have wide latitude to vote as they (or their constituents) please regardless of their party affiliation. For example, while the Democratic Party as a whole may have a reputation of being pro-choice, there are certainly Democratic representatives that are against abortion; likewise, while the Republican Party overall may be against gun control, some elected Republicans vote in favor of it. While elected officials in many other countries may be expelled from their party if they vote against the party line, that is not the case in the United States. Thus, some argue, there is a broad range of opinion represented in Congress even though there are only two major parties.

But even if our current two-party system is considered adequate, there are many other ways in which the competitiveness of elections is systematically reduced. One example is that of incumbent advantage. Election campaigns in America are very expensive and incumbents, with their existing power and influence over policy, are typically able to

raise far greater sums of money than their challengers. Incumbents also often have greater name recognition and receive more media exposure than their challengers, and they enjoy the privilege of sending free mail out to their constituents. The incumbency advantage is clear in US elections: 86% of incumbent senators and 96% of incumbent congressional representatives who ran in 2002 were successful in their reelection bids. One possible means of reducing the incumbency advantage would be to adopt term limits for members of Congress (as we already have for the President, and for many state Governors and legislatures). On the other hand, some people object that term limits prevent the public from choosing a representative they would prefer and also that it concentrates power in the hands of congressional staff and bureaucracies because they become more experienced than the elected representatives.

A further limitation on electoral choice comes about through the redrawing of electoral districts. Congressional districts are redrawn every 10 years based on the findings of the official United States census. In the majority of states, this process is overseen by state legislatures; elected officials can therefore manipulate the process by distorting district boundaries to make sure that as many districts as possible contain a majority of supporters of the favored party (i.e. gerrymandering). Districts can also be shaped to increase the security of incumbents. To prevent gerrymandering, some states have removed responsibility for redistricting from partisan legislatures and have instead created independent bodies to take charge of the process.



A final example of how electoral choice is restricted comes in the form of our presidential primary system. Because the media gives a tremendous amount of attention to the winners and losers of the early primaries, the outcome of the primary process can become a foregone conclusion long before voters in most states have cast their ballots. This means that relatively small numbers of voters decide who will ultimately get to run for office in the general election, and the rest of us are left to choose from amongst their preordained candidates. Some argue that this is particularly troublesome because the states that hold early primaries are not reflective of the population of the United States as a whole; rather, Iowa and New Hampshire, the two states that traditionally hold the first primaries (or caucus, in the case of Iowa) are less ethnically diverse, more rural, and wealthier than the national average.

In recent years, some states have sought to increase their influence on the outcome of the presidential primary process by moving their primaries to earlier dates; this has started a vicious cycle, with states pushing their primaries earlier and earlier to gain or maintain an advantage. The Democratic and Republican parties are trying to discourage these tactics by imposing penalties on states that move their primaries too early (by, for example, reducing the number of delegates the state will be allowed to send to the party's national nominating convention). Some have suggested that the best way to eliminate this problem and ensure that voters in all states have an equal say in selecting presidential candidates would be to have a "national primary" in which all states hold their primary elections on the same day. However, opponents argue that a so-called "national primary" would give an even bigger advantage to the best funded candidate and the one with the most name recognition; television advertising would become even more crucial, they say, since it is the most effective way to reach such large numbers of people, and whoever succeeded in raising the money for the advertising would thus have a big advantage.

 **SOME PROPOSALS:**

	Approaches: Exercising choice	
	Arguments for	Arguments against
Increase the range of candidates and parties by moving to a proportional representation system to elect the legislature. Experimenting with proportional representation might begin with state legislatures.	Proportional representation results in a much closer match between the votes cast and the makeup of the government. People would feel free to vote for a third party without the risk of “wasting” their vote. More citizens would have someone to represent their opinions.	Proportional representation allows too many parties to become part of the government and would lead to a fractured congress that would be unable to form majorities to pass legislation. It also enables the legitimization of extremist factions. Finally, it would be difficult to enact on a widespread basis because of the need for multiple states to pass legislation to adopt it.
Increase the range of candidates and parties by reducing barriers to ballot access for third party candidates	High barriers to ballot access give an unfair advantage to major party candidates who have many more resources at their disposal than third party candidates.	If we lowered requirements for ballot access, we could have hundreds of frivolous candidates clogging up ballots, adding to voter confusion and creating chaos for those who run elections.
Increase competition by reducing incumbency advantage through the adoption of term limits for members of Congress	Term limits prevent elected officials from remaining in power indefinitely and make room for fresh candidates with fresh ideas. Also, if an elected representative knows that she is not able to run again, she will feel more free to legislate according to what she thinks is best rather than what she thinks is popular.	Term limits are anti-democratic because they deny voters the ability to be represented by the person of their choosing. Term limits also mean that our most experienced politicians are no longer able to serve and voters are left to choose from a crop of novices.
Increase competition by making sure that redistricting is done in a non-partisan way.	It is inherently undemocratic to “fix” an election by manipulating the makeup of a district. Making redistricting as apolitical as possible will mean that elections are really decided by the will of the people rather than the will of the politicians.	It is impossible to ensure that districts are drawn in a non-partisan way. Even if an independent body is put in charge, its members have to be appointed by someone (most likely a partisan legislature or governor).
Increase electoral choice by switching to a “national” primary, in which all states vote on the same day	Having a national primary would mean that candidates would have to pay attention to voters in every state rather than targeting the states they consider strategically important, and states’ influence on candidate selection would become proportionate.	Having a national primary would make primaries even more expensive and would give a greater advantage to candidates with more financial resources and name recognition. Campaigns would also become more superficial as candidates would have to try to reach out to voters all across the country all at the same time.
There is no need for change. Our current system provides enough choice.	Americans have two major parties that act as “umbrellas” for wide ranges of opinions. There are also often third party candidates and independents, and there are certainly cases where they have been successful (e.g. Jesse Ventura as Governor of Minnesota).	The current system stacks advantage in favor of just the two major parties and also in favor of incumbents. This means that Americans have only a very limited range of candidates from which to choose. True democracy requires representation of a broader range of opinions.



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SERVING ONE'S COUNTRY

In this view, citizens must do more than just vote and participate in an informed way in making collective choices. Our Republic faces major problems and has a big role to play in the world. If it is to succeed, citizens must be prepared to do their part, serve their country, and if necessary, make sacrifices for the public good. In this view, citizenship is not just about the pursuit of self-interest without harming others or breaking the rules. It is also about being part of collective efforts to solve our collective problems. After all, we all benefit from the successful operation of our democracy. Hence we all need to do our part.

When people hear the phrase “serving your country,” they often think of military service. Currently, the American military is an “all-volunteer” force. However, the United States has used conscription (“the draft”) during several periods in the past (for example, during the two world wars). Males between the ages of 18 and 25 are still required to register for the “Selective Service System” so that a draft can be more easily resumed if and when deemed necessary.

But public service does not have to be military in nature, and there are several federally-sponsored non-military public service programs. One example is AmeriCorps, which funds “volunteers” through a network of non-profit organizations to provide services ranging from public education to building public housing. Another example is the Peace Corps, which sends Americans to help with public service (e.g. health, education) in more than 70 countries around the world. Like the military, these programs are currently run on an all-volunteer basis.

While many people support the status quo of an all-volunteer military, some argue that the US should introduce a mandatory military service period for all US citizens. This would help with military preparedness, they say. Other countries do have military conscription. For example, all Israeli men and women must serve a period in the Israeli Defense Forces. One point of controversy if mandatory military service were introduced in the US would be the question of whether it would include women as well as men. As noted above, only men are currently required to register for the Selective Service System, and this has raised complaints of discrimination by women’s groups.

Some people argue that a period of national service should be mandatory in the US, but say that citizens should have options other than the military. For example, the service obligation could be fulfilled by time with a non-profit organization working for the public good (as is now done through AmeriCorps). Germany has a system like this, in which all males must serve for 9 months either in the military or in a civil protection (e.g. disaster preparedness) or other public service organization.

SOME PROPOSALS:

	Approaches: Serving one's country	
	Arguments for	Arguments against
Keep our current system of an all-volunteer military and public service opportunities on a voluntary basis	The current system of voluntary national service provides plenty of opportunities for those who wish to devote a period of time to serving their country. It also avoids the problems that arise from forcing people to serve against their will (just recall the turmoil caused by the draft during the Vietnam War).	The current system fails to instill a sense of civic pride and duty in our citizens. And having an all-volunteer military does not reduce the need for military personnel; it merely shifts more of the burden of military service on to those that have fewer resources and opportunities available to them (i.e. the poor).
Keep our current system, but expand volunteer public service programs such as AmeriCorps and Peace Corps	These volunteer organizations do valuable and important work while at the same time promoting the principle of public service. These kinds of activities are best performed by people who are motivated; people who are forced into public service might not have the same level of commitment.	Public service programs are expensive and expanding them would be costly. Furthermore, expanding volunteer programs falls far short of implementing any serious effort for public service as only a few will take advantage of such opportunities.
Require a period of public service by all citizens, either in the military or in non-military programs working for the public good	Requiring a period of public service would help citizens to understand and respect the responsibilities of belonging to a society as well as enjoying its benefits. Those who are opposed to military service will still have options that contribute to collective problem solving.	Mandatory public service runs contrary to the idea of personal liberty. Moreover, conscripts are likely to be less committed than volunteers, both in military and non-military contexts.
Require a period of military service by all citizens	Requiring universal military service will improve military preparedness. It will also help to more evenly distribute the burden of military service. Under our current all-volunteer system, poor people and minorities are over-represented in the military because they lack other opportunities; thus disadvantaged citizens bear a disproportionate share of the burden.	Requiring universal service would weaken the military by bringing in a flood of people who do not want to be there and who may not be committed or well-suited to military service. It could also take a toll on the economy as it would be a big drain on labor resources.



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— BECOMING INFORMED

From this perspective, citizens are not just obligated to participate or to exercise choice. They must also do so in an informed way. How can they be responsible citizens if they do not know the issues, if they do not know the differences between the candidates? Is it responsible to vote based on personality without any consideration for what candidates will do? This view sees an informed choice about issues, about policy positions and their consequences, as a necessary part of citizenship. Citizens have an obligation to become informed before they vote or participate. Only then will democracy produce a meaningful expression of the “will of the people.”

Americans currently score pretty low on levels of political knowledge, as has been demonstrated by many studies; in a 2007 study by the Pew Research Center, for example, only 49% could correctly identify Nancy Pelosi as the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and only 37% knew that the current Chief Justice of the Supreme Court is a conservative. Knowledge about political issues is also low; 45% were unable to correctly identify the approximate number of American military personnel killed so far in Iraq.

The media are often blamed for the lack of political knowledge among American citizens. American television news programs – especially local TV news, which is watched by more people than watch the network newscasts – tend to focus on stories that are dramatic or sensational, in order to appeal to a wider audience. Political stories are considered boring and garner little media attention. And during major political campaigns, when it is harder to ignore politics completely, the media tends to focus on superficial topics such as the horse race (who’s ahead, who’s behind) and candidates’ personal lives (will a candidate’s husband or wife be a hindrance or a help?). There is very little in-depth coverage of issues or candidates’ positions on them. Other countries place stricter public interest demands on television networks that use the public airwaves, and consequently have higher levels of political coverage. Some argue that one way to increase levels of political information among citizens would be to boost the supply of political information provided by the media by increasing public interest obligations of broadcasters. Many countries require their broadcasters to devote a minimum percentage of their airtime to public affairs programming, for example, or to provide coverage of a minority as well as majority viewpoints on political issues.

Because American campaigns are conducted almost entirely through the media, candidates are also very dependent on TV commercials to spread their word and attract voters. Some people argue that a 30-second TV spot is hardly an ideal format for candidates to share information about their policy positions. Rather, candidates aim to come up with ads that either attract voters through more basic appeals (creating an image as a “family man,” for example) or that try to turn off an opponent’s supporters through the use of negative tactics (“my opponent is an untrustworthy flip-flopper”). While these ads may provide some information, they fail to make the campaigns very substantive. In many other democracies, candidates are given blocks of free airtime on television. This allows for more substantive presentations – for example, discussions of issue positions – than can be crammed into a 30-second slot, proponents say. And it allows candidates to cover serious topics that are discounted as too boring by the news media.

Other people argue that the fault for low levels of political knowledge might not be with the supply of information, but rather with unequal opportunities for citizens to take advantage of it. These people note that there are systematic differences between citizens



with high levels of knowledge and those with low levels of knowledge. For example, wealthier people tend to be considerably more informed than poor people. One contributing factor to this might be that poor people are less likely to have internet access; 76% of people with an income over \$75,000 have a broadband connection at home, for example, while only 30% of those with an income under \$30,000 have one. There is now a huge quantity of political information available on the web (candidate websites listing issue positions and providing text of speeches, for example), but this is of no use to people who do not have internet access. One way to reduce the inequality of information between wealthy and poor people would therefore be to provide all citizens with easy access to the internet.

Reformists have suggested that we need to find new ways of engaging all citizens and helping them learn about politics. One proposal is to provide public funding for non-partisan voter information groups who aim to help voters become informed. There are, for example, organizations that gather information about candidates’ issue positions, voting records, campaign financing, interest group support, and/or public statements. This information is in many cases made available on the web. Some organizations even offer a toll free phone number that citizens can call to get information about the candidates in their area. Providing public funding for these and other civic education initiatives would allow such efforts to become more widespread and to come up with novel ways to disseminate information to citizens.

There are others who argue that Americans’ low levels of political knowledge are irrelevant and that voters can still make good decisions without having to learn in-depth about the candidates and their issue positions. These people argue that citizens can successfully approximate their “correct” voting decisions (i.e., the decisions they would take if they were fully informed) by using “shortcuts”; voters can rely on a candidate’s party identification and on endorsements by public officials they trust, for example. In this view, citizens have plenty of information to make the correct voting decisions without ever needing to have a clue who the Speaker of the House is.

 **SOME PROPOSALS:**

	Approaches: Becoming informed	
	Arguments for	Arguments against
Increase opportunities for citizens to become informed by increasing public interest obligations of broadcasters	Television is a main source of political information for most citizens. Increasing the amount of political coverage on television would thus be likely to increase political knowledge. Networks get to use the public airwaves and it is reasonable to expect them to contribute to the public good.	Even if television networks increased their public interest programming, that would not guarantee that citizens would watch it. Citizens could simply choose to change to another channel or turn off the TV all together. There is also no way to be sure that more coverage would be better coverage; more sensationalist coverage is not going to make citizens more informed on the issues.
Increase opportunities for citizens to become informed by providing free air time to candidates	When candidates have to buy TV time, they cannot afford to buy big blocks. The 30-second spots that they are able to buy do not give enough time for them to address substantive topics such as their issue positions, but free airtime would enable them to do so. It would also erase some of the advantage enjoyed by candidates with more money.	There is no guarantee that candidates would use free airtime to cover more substantive topics; they could still choose to make superficial appeals or just to attack their opponents. There is also no guarantee that voters would watch longer political campaign ads/programs even if they were on TV.
Decrease the gap in political knowledge between wealthy and poor people by using public funding to ensure that all citizens have access to the internet.	The internet provides an unparalleled opportunity for citizens to inform themselves about political issues from a wide variety of sources, and more and more candidates and elected officials make information and services available online. We should make sure that all citizens have equal access to this amazing resource.	How can we be sure that people would use their publicly-funded internet access to learn about politics? Even if they do, the internet is full of unreliable sources and could make citizens more misinformed than informed.
Provide public funding for non-partisan civic education groups that gather relevant political information and make it available to the citizens who need it.	Average citizens do not have time to dig for all the information they might need to make an informed choice between candidates. Dedicated civic education groups can sift through multiple sources to come up with a comprehensive and balanced guide for citizens. Citizens are much more likely to make use of this information if they can find it all in one place.	It would be difficult to guarantee that these groups were really non-partisan. Even if the groups gather all the relevant information, there is no guarantee that citizens would take advantage of it. Public funding of such efforts would be a waste of taxpayer dollars.
It is not necessary to increase opportunities for citizens to become informed	Citizens learn as much about politics as they feel they need to know to make the right decisions for them. There are many shortcuts that citizens can take to make effective decisions without studying the issues in-depth.	There are numerous examples of cases in which people seem to have voted against their own interests or against positions that they seem to hold. Lack of information leaves voters vulnerable to manipulation by candidates who know how to use advertising techniques.



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