

# THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

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American voting is essentially state voting. Despite the quadrennial emphasis on our presidential election, the United States has no national election law and the electoral processes of America vary from state to state as state law may dictate. Alone among the major democratic powers, America votes with only the smallest measure of national supervision of the various state voting systems.

Thus, it is possible for a potential elector to be required to pay a poll tax in Virginia, but not in Maryland. He may have to be literate in English in New York, but not in New Jersey. He may be required to "interpret the Constitution" in Mississippi, but not in Minnesota. He may vote on a machine in San Francisco, and on a paper ballot across the Bay in Oakland. In Idaho, he may register as a voter up to just a few days before election; in some other states he must be registered many weeks or even months before the heat of the campaign has stirred his political emotions. Indeed, in some states he need not be registered at all, but may obtain his ballot simply by appearing at his precinct and asking for it.

But this great series of variants in our American state election laws should not serve to conceal the essential unity of our electoral process. Though differences there may be, the basic methodology remains the same from state to state—a secret ballot, a single election day, free overt campaigning, and the like. Not only is our current practice much the same in all parts of the Union, but the historical development of our franchise has been fairly uniform.

The present electorate of the United States—well over 100,000,000—has evolved from a relatively small group of propertied people in the pre-Revolutionary colonies. While in colonial days many members of minority religious groups were excluded from the ballot, the most important pre-Revolutionary limitation on voting related to property qualification and taxes. Before the Revolution half the colonies had a property qualification for voting and the rest allowed evidence of property or tax payments as proof of eligibility to vote.

As the West opened and new states were admitted, there was a withering away of property and economic qualifications for the franchise. With a few exceptions, America enjoyed universal adult white male franchise a century ago on the eve of the Civil War. With the passage of the postwar amendments on civil rights, voting was legally extended to the former slave population, though in many ways the position of the Negro as a voter was, and is even today, handicapped in some parts of the country.

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The final general extension of the right of franchise—"votes for women"—was much agitated in the nineteenth century, and Wyoming gave the vote to women as early as 1869.<sup>1</sup> But it was not until the First World War that women managed to win out in the whole country. By the 1920 presidential election enfranchisement was complete—at least in law. In the past forty years, the only changes affecting the right to vote have been slight extensions in a few states by the reduction of the age requirement to 18, 19, or 20 years. Today, then, despite state variations we have an America in which there is total legal enfranchisement. But there is *not* total participation in our electoral process.

A glance at the voter turnout by states will indicate the ranking of the fifty states in their percentage of voter participation in the 1960 presidential election. Only three states were as high as eighty per cent; in nine, less than half the civilian population of voting age actually went to the polls. The excellent estimates of the American Heritage Foundation<sup>2</sup> tell us that some sixty-four per cent of our adult civilians did, in fact, vote in 1960. Actually, this percentage should be somewhat higher, since aliens are included in the total civilian population. But even allowing for this adjustment the number of Americans participating in our last presidential vote was only two in every three citizen adults. In contrast to many other democracies, we are low indeed in our sense of voter responsibility.

In fact, if we go back to the nineteenth century, some seventy-three per cent of the estimated eligible population voted in the 1896 McKinley-Bryan presidential race. This contest is generally regarded as marking the beginning of the modern American political era, and America has yet to approach the seventy-three per cent figure again.

There are two major reasons why we have never equaled 1896 and why our present voting participation, with one-third of our adults not voting, remains so relatively low. One group of reasons is social and economic, the other, institutional and legal. Let us look at each and see how the components of each group might be detailed.

First, in the realm of the social and economic, has been the enfranchisement of women. Study after study has indicated that women register and vote less frequently than men. In the scholarly research undertaken a quarter century ago by the Swedish expert, Professor Herbert Tingsten,<sup>3</sup> this division in participation was developed in great detail. In our own country studies of registration data and of participation statistics have consistently borne out the findings of Professor Tingsten. Indeed, the Tingsten research had been preceded in the twenties by the work of Professor Harold Gosnell in his inquiries into non-voting in Chicago.<sup>4</sup>

The historic Gosnell and Tingsten studies, the contemporary registration and

<sup>1</sup> H. R. PENNIMAN (ED.), *SAIT'S AMERICAN PARTIES AND ELECTIONS* 53 (5th ed. 1952); *Wyo. Laws* 1869, ch. 31, §§ 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Based on various press releases and brief study reports issued by the American Heritage Foundation, 11 West 42d St., New York, N.Y.

<sup>3</sup> HERBERT TINGSTEN, *POLITICAL BEHAVIOR* (1937).

<sup>4</sup> HAROLD GOSNELL [WITH CHARLES E. MERRIAM], *NON-VOTING* (1924).

election figures, current public and private polling—all agree. Women register less frequently than men, and those registered vote less frequently than male registrants. Today in America there are some four million more adult women than adult men, yet students of our electoral process all agree that women cast no more than half the votes in our 1960 election, possibly less. In *The American Voter*, a distinguished analysis of American electoral patterns published by the Survey Research Center of Michigan in 1960, the differential of men and women in voting was examined in detail. In polling in 1956 the Center discovered that the voter participation rate among the women was ten per cent below that of men.

Though the voting turnout of women is higher today than it was when women's suffrage was first introduced for the whole country after the first war, it still remains enough below that of men to pull down the national average and to make it possible for researchers to agree on the concept of equality of voting strength between men and women despite the four million "extra" adult women in our population.

It might also be noted here that women, when they do vote, tend to be more conservative than men. Studies in pre-Hitler Germany have indicated the percentage of women voting for extremist left or right wing candidates was considerably less than the percentage of men who voted for these two parties. Contemporary studies in the same country show the Christian Democrats of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer get a larger proportion of the female vote than they do of the male. These German studies have been borne out by other comparisons of actual election figures outside the United States and by polling results here in America.

In 1960 many writers presumed that Senator Kennedy had a particular appeal to women, but the various survey polling operations undertaken during that campaign showed he did better with masculine than with feminine votes. The difference was not great, but if men had not been permitted to vote, Mr. Nixon would have won the Presidency. According to the Gallup Poll fifty-two per cent of American male voters preferred Kennedy, while fifty-one per cent of the women voted for Nixon.

While sex is one of the larger factors in the socioeconomic group of reasons underlying non-voting, there are many others as well. Studies of actual voting overseas and polling surveys in this country confirm the rise and fall of voter turnout on an age curve. Combining interviewing done in 1952 and 1956, the University of Michigan Survey Research Center estimates that just over half the 21-year olds actually voted in these two presidential campaigns. The percentage of participation rose sharply to age 30, then more gradually until it reached a peak between 50 and 65. Over 65 it gradually dropped off, but even at the age of 80 it was still at or above the national average.

This curving of pattern is not difficult to understand, for it measures the integration of young people into our society. Younger people are more mobile and have developed less of a stake in any community than have the middle-aged electors. It is notable in the Survey Research Center studies, as indeed in other inquiries of

this type, that the sharpest rise in voter participation by age is in the group of the late 20's, with all research indicating a maximum plateau in the middle years.

A third factor of group participation is that loosely called "socioeconomic status." This factor, roughly measured by personal income and educational attainment, affects both sex and age participation patterns and is itself a prime factor with respect to voter turnout. To cite just one example from the 1960 election, we may consider Hennepin County, Minnesota. On the near north side of Minneapolis in a three-to-one Democratic, working-class, ethnically-mixed neighborhood of some 35,000 population, sixty-three per cent of the adult population voted. In the same election, in the suburb of Edina, a wealthy, white, essentially "native" area of 30,000 people, ninety-two per cent of the adults voted—and, incidentally, voted four-to-one Republican.

Hennepin County is but one small example, but it may suffice for the whole country. Almost without exception, voter turnout is related to income and educational attainment. Since these two factors of population are almost entirely coterminous, it may be said that virtually any high income, high education area will have a higher percentage of voting than almost any low education, low income area. For additional evidence we might take the case of Massachusetts and its voter turnout in 1960. In that state there were seven cities and towns of over 10,000 population with a ninety per cent plus participation record. Every one of these areas was well above the state income median, the average ranging from \$1,500 per family up to nearly \$5,000 per family.

There are a few exceptions to this general rule of high income equals high turnouts, but the exceptions are few and far between. In Albany, New York, where the local political organization is perhaps the most efficient in the United States, there is a maximum registration effort and a phenomenal turnout of voters, but this *is* an exception. The rule is that the wealthy vote in far higher proportion than the poor, a rule with obvious consequences in our contemporary American politics.

The education-income factor as applied to turnout is especially notable in urban areas, and since seven out of every ten Americans are now regarded as "urban residents," the almost universal application of this relationship is an important part of the political life of our metropolitan areas. It is axiomatic in urban politics that an equality of population between suburbs and central city in any metropolitan area will produce a measurably larger turnout of voters in the suburbs. Indeed, it is largely the suburban voter turnout which enables metropolitan areas to register their high vote totals of recent years.

In the past there has been a general view that city people vote in larger proportions than their rural cousins, but this is generally not correct in the North. With the improvement of roads and communications, the farmer has almost as much opportunity in voting as the urbanite and often tends to turn out in rather greater proportions than his city cousin. An examination of the participation table will indicate the number of rural states in the leading half dozen in terms of participation

PERCENTAGE OF CIVILIANS OF VOTING AGE PARTICIPATING IN THE  
1960 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

State	Percentage	State	Percentage
Idaho.....	80.8	Nebraska.....	71.5
New Hampshire.....	80.6	Ohio.....	71.3
Utah.....	80.0	Oregon.....	71.2
North Dakota.....	79.6	Kansas.....	70.6
South Dakota.....	78.8	California.....	70.6
West Virginia.....	77.2	Pennsylvania.....	70.5
Minnesota.....	77.0	New York.....	67.6
Connecticut.....	76.9	Oklahoma.....	64.6
Indiana.....	76.7	New Mexico.....	63.4
Massachusetts.....	76.5	Nevada.....	61.6
Iowa.....	76.3	Kentucky.....	59.9
Illinois.....	76.2	Arizona.....	58.6
Rhode Island.....	76.1	Maryland.....	58.0
Wyoming.....	75.7	Hawaii.....	57.6
Delaware.....	74.5	North Carolina.....	54.3
Maine.....	73.5	Tennessee.....	50.6
Michigan.....	73.4	Florida.....	49.8
Alaska.....	73.2	Louisiana.....	45.6
Colorado.....	73.1	Texas.....	43.4
Missouri.....	73.0	Arkansas.....	41.6
Washington.....	72.9	Virginia.....	34.4
Wisconsin.....	72.9	South Carolina.....	31.5
Vermont.....	72.7	Georgia.....	31.3
New Jersey.....	72.5	Alabama.....	30.9
Montana.....	71.7	Mississippi.....	25.6

in 1960's presidential election. However, the low participation in the rural South tends to bring down the national farm and small town turnout.

Despite this factor, one must not fall into the error of thinking of a massive city vote turning out in disciplined ranks to overwhelm the countryside. For example, in New York State in 1960, fifty-nine per cent of New York City's adults voted while seventy-seven per cent of the adult population outside the city went to the polls. Some of this lower percentage inside the city would be due to the number of adult alien residents in New York and to a number of non-English-speaking Puerto Ricans, but nonetheless the differentiation is substantial.

To take another example—in New Jersey, only about half of Newark's adults went to the polls in 1960. The voting in rural districts was better and the voting in high-income Bergen County suburbs was better still. To take Illinois as a case in point, the voter turnout in the rural counties of southern Illinois was markedly higher in 1960 than in most wards of the city of Chicago.

Finally, it must be noted that the white population votes in higher proportion than the colored. Reliable figures are not available, but current estimates of Negro non-voting rank between fifty and sixty-five per cent of the Negro adult population. Some of this, of course, is due to the legal and physical disabilities in the Negro exercise of the franchise in the South, but there is a considerable fall-off of Negro

as compared to white turnout percentages in the North as well. The northern Negro is an urban citizen, with an income markedly below that of his white fellow voters. Even in politically well-organized cities such as Philadelphia and Chicago, the voter turnout is less in Negro than in white wards, just as it is less in low-income wards than in middle- and high-income wards. While race is a major factor in low turnout in the South, economic status seems to be the major determinant in so far as Negro turnout is concerned in the North.

So it is that the socioeconomic factors affecting voter participation and turnout in the United States are very real. Women vote less than men. The young and the aged vote less than those in the middle years, the wealthy vote more than the poor, the Negro less than the white, the farmer and small-town voter frequently turns out in greater percentage than his city cousin—at least in the North. Except for this last factor of urbanism, these American habits reflect the patterns of other parts of the world and the patterns indicated by earlier research a quarter century ago by such scholars as Tingsten and Gosnell. Whether measured by actual election behavior or by survey research, these factors form an important part of our electoral process and of our political life. But the turnout of our electorate is also much affected by institutions, by the laws under which elections are held and by the regulations under which elections are conducted. Indeed, many of these institutions have a greater effect on voter turnout than the social and economic factors listed above.

Perhaps the most important of all institutional barriers to voting are our registration and residence requirements. The Bureau of the Census estimates that one out of every five Americans moves in any given year. In an election system like ours, with voluntary registration the general rule, this means the elector must do two things to requalify to vote: first, he must establish a new residence; second, he must re-register. Residence requirements vary from state to state and so do registration requirements, but the American Heritage Foundation estimated that some eight million American adults were unable to meet these residence requirements in 1960. In recent years there has been an effort to qualify "mobile voters," at least to the extent of voting for President. "New resident" voters' laws have been adopted in several states to provide a minimum qualification period on voting for the Presidents. However, these laws have had little effect. For example, in 1960 there were 2,635,000 votes cast for President in Los Angeles County. Of these, only 3,600 were in the "new resident" category. Undoubtedly, many more persons might have qualified, but the process of application and special registration was just too cumbersome for most voters.

While residence requirements are a handicap to voting, the very nature of voluntary registration is itself at least an equal inhibition. The United States remains one of the few countries in the world in which the voter must qualify himself to vote. In Canada, for example, a general election is preceded by a door-to-door enumeration and listing of voters *by the Government*. Variations of this system

are used in most European countries, to insure that a permanent listing of voters is maintained without requiring the voter to himself undertake the work of registration. Not only does such a system insure the listing of a much larger number of potential electors than at present, but it also guards against a long time lag in closing the books of registration. For example, in the state of California no one may register for a period of nearly two months prior to an election. Since the election campaign itself may not be reaching maximum impact until well in October, it can be seen that this kind of time barrier may often work against a maximum registration of voters.

Moreover, local systems of registration are quite frequently set up with greater attention to the convenience of the administrator than they are to the convenience of the voter. Some jurisdictions will register in the evening hours, some will set up local registration points in fire stations, school houses, and the like, but many areas will provide neither of these conveniences. Many require the voter to come down, during working hours, to the local city hall or county court house. Such arrangements do not inhibit the truly dedicated citizen, but they do act as a barrier to many on the fringes.

There are, of course, other institutional disabilities to voting, some of them deliberate, some of them accidental. In the South, for example, the extensive reports of the Commission on Civil Rights must lead any unprejudiced observer to agree there is substantial denial of Negro voting rights on the basis solely of color. How extensive this may be is subject to much discussion, but the list of counties in the South with large Negro adult populations and few registered Negro voters is an impressive one. There has certainly been much improvement in this area in the years since the end of the Second World War, but even the most casual witness will testify as to the institutional disfranchisement of hundreds of thousands of colored Americans in the South.

One aspect of this type of inhibition of voting is found in the poll tax, though this is not primarily a discrimination based on race. The largest of the five remaining poll tax states is Texas; it is interesting to note that Texas and Massachusetts cast about the same number of votes in the 1960 presidential election, though Texas had over two million more adults than did Massachusetts. Our table of state participation percentages indicates the five poll tax states to be in the bottom one-fifth of the country in voter turnout.

Finally, there is no question but that actual election day voting administration has an effect on participation. When polls are opened late or closed early there is a natural cutting down of the votes cast. When polls close before dinner time, as in Louisville, it is more difficult to build up a large vote than if the polls stay open until 8 or 9 o'clock in the evening. If polling places are difficult to reach or are located in crowded, decrepit, dingy surroundings, this will cut down the vote, especially among women.

Sometimes insufficient voting machines are provided in non-paper ballot pre-

cincts, and this leads to long, discouraging lines, with many a voter giving up in disgust and going home before his vote is cast. If the voter is faced with a huge bedsheet ballot, with sometimes literally hundreds of names and propositions to vote upon, he may also feel discouraged about his civic responsibilities. In many instances in America it seems surprising that as many voters turn out as do when faced with institutional difficulties in exercising their franchise.

There have been many suggestions for changes so designed as to increase voter turnout in American elections. Some of these have been mentioned here; others include such devices as enlarged absentee voting, the holding of elections on Sunday, and the use of compulsory voting laws. Each has its proponents and its opponents. Looking over the total electoral process in America, however, it appears public (as opposed to private) registration, the simplification of residence requirements, the short ballot, the lengthening of polling hours, and the elimination of poll tax might be the most productive ways by which to build up our voter turnout on election day.

However, even with one-third of our adults not voting there is no need to despair at the vote of American Democracy. With some unfortunate exceptions, our citizens who really want to vote can do so, and it may well be that the ballot of the rest is less vital than we think. We would like to have *all* vote, and there are ways in which we can increase the participation of our people in our electoral processes, but the absence of even a third of the electorate from the polling place will not inhibit our electoral process or our democratic way of life.