

Read the Book

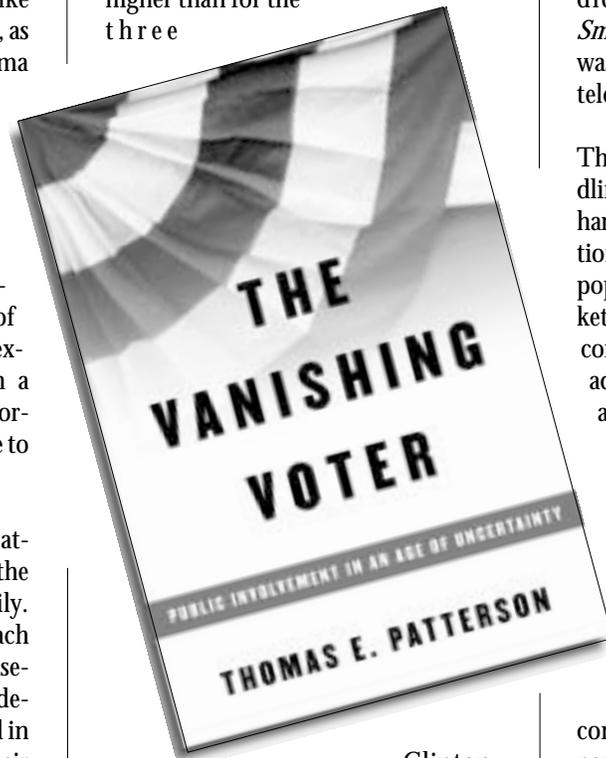
An excerpt from *THE VANISHING VOTER*
By Thomas E. Patterson

The Incredible Shrinking Electorate

Although they are still a major attraction, even the October presidential debates get less attention than before. Except for the Super Bowl, the Summer Olympics, and the Academy Awards, the debates are the most watched events on television. Like those other contests, the debates are, as Alan Schroeder writes, “human drama at its rawest.” Conflict, risk, and suspense are all elements of drama, and the debates offer them on a level unmatched by other campaign events. They have regularly produced surprising performances. Ronald Reagan demonstrated an unexpected command of the issues in 1980, and, just as unexpectedly, addled his way through a 1984 debate, concluding his performance with a time-capsule anecdote to which he forgot the ending.

Although the October debates still attract tens of millions of viewers, the numbers have been falling steadily. The four Kennedy-Nixon debates each attracted roughly 60% of all households with television sets. When debates resumed with Carter and Ford in 1976, viewers again flocked to their TVs, as they also did for the single Reagan-Carter face-off in 1980. Since then, except for the Clinton-Bush-Perot encounters in 1992, debate audiences have been declining. Only 46% of the country’s television households watched the two Reagan-Mondale debates in 1984. Barely more than 36% saw the Bush-Dukakis debates in 1988. The Clinton-Dole debates in 1996 averaged 29%.

The debate audiences in 2000 were widely expected to exceed that level. The Bush-Gore contest was much tighter than the Clinton-Dole race, and large numbers of voters had not yet settled on a candidate. “In just thirty-five days, Americans will choose a new president,” said CBS’s Dan Rather on the night of the first debate. “What’s about to happen... could have a big impact on whether it will be Democrat Al Gore or Republican George Bush.... [T]he race is tight.” Yet, the audience rating for the three Bush-Gore debates was no higher than for the three



Clinton-Dole debates. The third debate in 2000 had a 26% rating, the lowest ever.

The audiences for primary election debates are also shrinking. Large numbers of Americans saw Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy face off in 1968 and watched Hubert Humphrey and [George] McGovern debate in 1972. The 1980 Republican debate in New Hampshire that thrust Ronald Reagan

back into the lead for the GOP nomination also attracted a sizeable audience. In contrast, the two dozen primary debates in 2000 drew, on average, 1.8 million viewers—about a fifth of the audience of the typical prime-time program. None of these debates attracted even as many as 5 million viewers. If the debates had been a new television series, they would have been cancelled after the initial episode. The first Democratic debate in 2000 went head-to-head with a World Wrestling Federation match: the wrestlers had four times as many viewers as the candidates. Even then, WWF’s *SmackDown!* with 7.2 million viewers was rated ninety-first among the week’s television shows.

The convention audience is also dwindling. At one time, Americans could hardly get their fill of the televised national party conventions. They were so popular that they became even a marketing tool. “Buy a television, watch the conventions,” suggested a 1952 RCA ad. Another RCA ad said: “With the aid of television, we had what amounted to the greatest town meeting ever held.... Sixty million people had front-row seats and got a better picture of what was going on than any delegate or any reporter on the convention floor.”

In 1952, the typical television household watched 25 hours of convention coverage, often in the company of friends and neighbors. Even as late as 1976, the typical household viewed the conventions for 11 hours. Since then the ratings have hit the skids. By 1996, the average had fallen to less than four hours. A new low was reached in 2000: three hours of convention viewing for the typical household. In 1976, 28% of television households had their sets on and tuned at any given moment to the convention coverage. Only 13% were watching in 2000, down from 17% in 1996.

Throughout the 2000 campaign, as part of our Vanishing Voter Project, we monitored Americans' attention to the campaign through weekly national surveys. By the time Election Day arrived, we had conducted 80,000 interviews in fifty-two weeks, the most comprehensive study ever conducted of election interest. Our polls paint a disturbing picture of involvement in the world's foremost democracy. During the typical week, four times as many respondents said they were paying "just some," "only a little," or "no" attention to the campaign as said they were paying "a great deal" or "quite a bit" of attention.

The 2000 election was slow to engage Americans. By Thanksgiving 1999, the candidates had been campaigning nonstop for two months, and four primary debates had already been held. Nevertheless, the campaign might just as well have been taking place in Siberia. Americans sat around their holiday dinner tables talking about everything but George Bush, John McCain, Bill Bradley, and Al Gore. Only one in twenty adults reported having talked about the campaign on Thanksgiving Day—and that included conversations of any length with anybody, not just extended discussions with family members over turkey and trimmings.

Interest rose during the period of the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary, and it continued to grow through early March's decisive Super Tuesday primaries, fueled in part by McCain's drawing power. The number who said they were paying close attention nearly doubled. Even then, many were tuned out. In the week after New Hampshire's GOP primary, only 47% could name McCain as the winner. Four percent claimed Bush had won, and 49% said they did not know.

After Super Tuesday, interest dropped sharply. By the end of April, three in four said they were paying almost no attention to the campaign. Americans were so uninvolved during the late spring and early summer months that many forgot some of what they had learned about the candidates' policy positions earlier in the campaign.

Not until the August conventions did people again start to pay closer attention. The news that Gore had selected Joseph Lieberman as his running mate—the first Jewish candidate to run on a major-party ticket—was known to 66% of Americans within forty-eight hours of the announcement. The October debates also sparked interest, as did the news four days before the election that Bush had been arrested in 1976 for driving while intoxicated. Within a day, 75% were aware of the incident. But these were unusual moments. In only two weeks out of fifty-two did the number of adults who said they were paying "very close" or "quite a bit of" attention reach 40%.

An inattentive public is an uninformed one. As the 2000 campaign entered its final week, only one issue position—Gore's stand on prescription drugs—was familiar to a majority of Americans. During the past half century there has been a revolution in higher education and in mass communication. Citizens have never had so much information available to them or been better equipped to handle it. Research indicates, however, that Americans today are no better informed about election politics than they were fifty years ago. The high school-educated public of 1948 knew as much about Harry Truman's and Thomas Dewey's positions on price controls and the Taft-Hartley Act as the media-saturated, college-educated public of 2000 knew about Gore's and Bush's stands on prescription drugs and tax cuts.

Ironically, it was not until after Election Day that the public became keenly interested in the 2000 campaign. The unfolding drama in Florida captured imaginations in a way that the campaign itself never did. Interest had peaked just before Election Day when 46% were paying "a great deal" or "quite a bit" of attention. During the following week, as it became clear that the Florida vote would decide the outcome, nearly 80% were paying close attention. For a period, a majority acted as if election politics really mattered, talking about it with interest, and absorbing each new twist in the Florida vote count.

Except for the black community and some die-hard partisans, however, the Florida wrangling was cause for neither anger nor anxiety. Citizens were captivated by the story but not wedded to the result. Only 10% believed the situation was "a constitutional crisis" and, within two weeks, half said the dispute had "gone on too long already." The public's response was a stark contrast to how Americans had reacted in 1876, the last time a president was chosen by post-election wheeling and dealing. Then they had taken to the streets, and more than a few fistfights broke out. Wider civil unrest was averted only when a political deal was brokered to end the Civil War Reconstruction. Nothing remotely like that was required to keep the peace in 2000. "There will be no mobs gathering to shout 'Gore or blood' or 'Bush or blood,'" the *The New York Times's* Adam Clymer wrote. "Nobody cares that much."

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