

Why Citizens Shun the Polling Booth

An Interview with Curtis B. Gans

Curtis Gans is director of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate. Having served as director for over two decades, Gans is acknowledged as a leading authority on voter turnout and participation.

Public Perspective: In 1996, we reached an historic low with less than half of eligible voters casting a ballot for president. What accounts for this now 36-year-old trend in declining voter turnout?

Curtis Gans: One reason is the growing misalignment of the American political party structure. Groups that were once aligned with the parties are now left out. For example, the Republican Party has moved far to the right of the center excluding what used to be the moderate Eisenhower, Taft, and Rockefeller Republicans—even Goldwater seems suspect now.

The Democratic Party has refused to redefine its message since 1968. It seems driven by polls suggesting the electoral importance of the middle class, thus leaving former elements including the working class and the poor out of their advocacy. It's no accident that the participation rates of people with incomes of \$15,000 or less declined 21% between 1990 and 1994, and that trend is likely to have been repeated between 1992 and 1996. Instead of providing grassroots mobilization, parties have increasingly become service centers for fundraising and consulting.

Television is another factor involved in low turnout. It has a systemic effect on the polity in which the individual becomes a passive consumer of public affairs. Television also atomizes our society and fragments people along channel lines.

Additionally, political campaigns use television to broadcast one or two hours of attack ads for two months. The public is told one candidate is bad, the other candidate is worse, don't vote for X, don't vote for Y. Eventually people don't vote at all.

It is also true that as reading declines, television viewing increases and people get most of their information in one-minute undifferentiated blips, without historical context, that emphasize the visually exciting. Not surprisingly, understanding decreases.

A Shift in Values

Polls show that most people who are over age 45 and don't vote tend to be angry and alienated, and people under that age tend to be indifferent, which speaks to a complex of things. First, our values have shifted. My parents' generation were largely immigrants or grew up in the Depression and worked hard to prevent their children from suffering the same privations. My generation grew up in relative security and translated our parents' values into trying to make society better for future generations. This generation, which has been aided and abetted by the unalloyed negative legacy of the Reagan White House, is into making their own lives better.

Second, leaders have been demagoguing against the concept of government—not talking about making government leaner or forming partnerships with states and

private enterprise—but making government itself a villain. That is not conducive to citizen engagement in politics and government.

We've also had a decline in the quality of education, particularly urban education. People like me have either migrated to places with decent schools or put their kids in private schools, which has caused the base of support for quality urban education to erode. Additionally, the competitiveness of the global economy has led to a decline in civic education. Moreover, we have a fairly new phenomenon in which young people are growing up with non-voting parents so they are not getting civic-minded socialization in the home or in the school.

Another factor in declining voter turnout deals with the national debt. Bob Dole's tax-cut program was not credible in the face of the national debt, and Bill Clinton could not propose much more than school uniforms and wiring for the Internet because of the debt burden. So we have a singular lack of vision and a lack of shared national goals.

I was, however, struck by the results of the most recent UCLA college freshmen survey. It indicated that we've got a higher level of volunteerism and more young people interested in teaching and law than in any recent time but a low level of voter interest. Kids are saying they are still idealistic and caring but they don't see any hope in American politics.

PP: While the voter-turnout trend shows a 36-year decline, in 1992 there was an uptick. How would you explain this?

CG: We always have a temporary bump-up in turnout when we have a recession. In the past 36 years, we had fairly significant increases in turnout only in 1982 and 1992, both recession years.

In 1992 other factors were also at play. One was real anger at George

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Bush’s “read my lips” pledge. The other was the appearance of Ross Perot who was a semi-serious and an agenda-determining candidate. As a result, 1992 was an aberration.

PP: Besides low income groups, are any other demographic groups responsible for the decline in turnout or is it a decline across-the-board?

CG: We’ve had a decline across-the-board except for the elderly from ages 65 to 70—they still vote. For awhile ages 55 to 70 were the exception but beginning in 1988 we had a decline in the 55 to 65 age group. The sharpest declines are among people at the bottom of the income scale and among the young. In addition to the elderly, between 1960 and 1988 another exception to the general decline was voting among African Americans. But beginning in 1988, the gap between blacks and whites has widened.

PP: Are certain regions or states more likely to participate in elections?

CG: The states that participate most are states with relatively homogeneous populations, strong educational systems, liberal election laws and historically strong political institutions. The states that participate least are those which are still overcoming the vestiges of slavery and segrega-

tion and those which have been hit hardest by the alienating effects of the Industrial Revolution. More recently, states such as California whose campaigns are conducted on television and which have no sinews of organizational activity are falling to the bottom of the participation list.

Both Motivation and Mobilization Are Needed to Increase Turnout

PP: What impact, if any, has legislation meant to bolster turnout had (e.g., motor voter laws or keeping polls open longer than a day to lengthen voting opportunities) ?

CG: Motor voter was a good way to enhance the opportunity to vote without enhancing fraud. However, its impact so far has been minimal because the real barriers to higher turnout are motivational, not structural.

Early voting and liberalized absentee voting have actually had a statistically negative effect on turnout. States that adopted liberalized absentee and early voting have had a greater decline in turnout than states that didn’t, which is not terribly surprising. People who avail themselves of liberalized absentee and early voting are essentially motivated voters who would already vote.

The only one of these electoral gimmicks that has positively affected turnout is voting by mail—and it’s only marginal. But there are downside risks to mail voting: The secret ballot is eliminated, which can lead to the potential of the pressured and manipulated vote. Pressures that could be resisted in the voting booth might not be resisted from the shop steward or NRA president when voting by mail.

You also have differentials in information on candidates and campaigns because voting by mail occurs over a 21-day period. One of my favorite examples was when Ross Perot appeared on *60 Minutes* in 1992 only 10 days before the election and accused the White House of sabotaging his daughter’s wedding. People who voted prior to that incident didn’t have that information. Another example is when former Department of Defense Secretary Casper Weinberger was indicted four days before the 1992 election in a bill of particulars that tended to indicate George Bush had lied about Iran Contra. Those who had voted before that didn’t have that information.

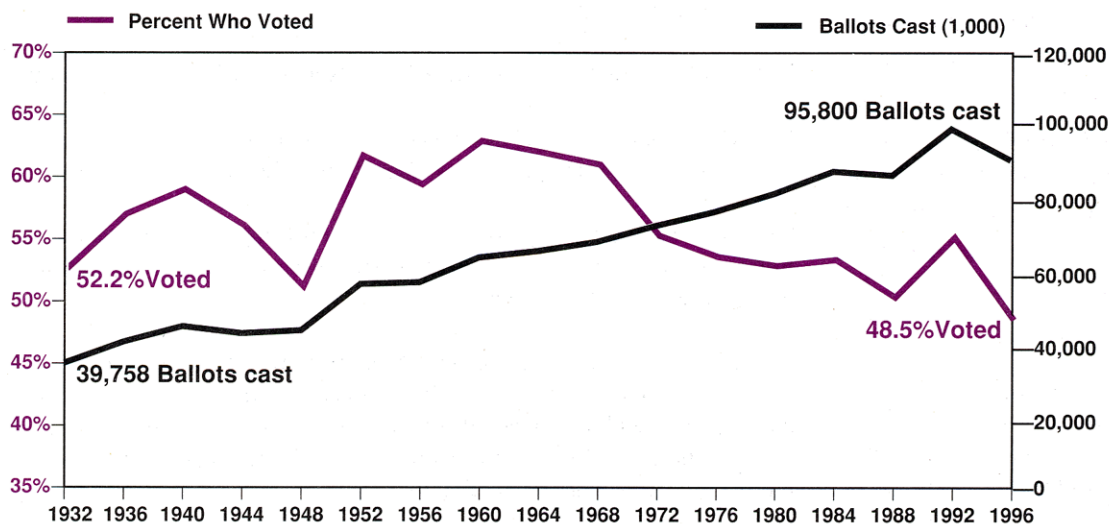
“ ***Additionally, political campaigns use television to broadcast one or two hours of attack ads for two months. The public is told one candidate is bad, the other candidate is worse, don’t vote for X, don’t vote for Y. Eventually people don’t vote at all.*** ”

Motor voter is, however, a healthy development which may ultimately give us 91% voter registration instead of the current rate of 69%. If motivation and mobilization were present, turnout could be substantially higher.

PP: What can be done to motivate citizens to vote?

CG: We need to cease being the only democracy in the world that doesn’t regulate political advertising on television. Regulation would profoundly change both the cost and content of campaigns and perhaps the structure of political parties.

**Voter Turnout
1932-1996**



We need to realign the parties. Moderate Republicans need to engage in hand-to-hand combat with the right on the precinct level so that the right doesn't exercise as much veto power as it does now. Or we need a center third party. Further, the Democratic Party needs to recapture its base.

We need to improve education and seriously consider national standards and rekindle civic-oriented values.

The Impact of Pre-Election Polls

PP: Currently there is a charged debate assessing the impact of pre-election polling on voter turnout. With so many polls suggesting a large Clinton victory, what impact, if any, did this have on turnout?

CG: The overwhelming number of polls could not have helped turnout. On the other hand, in 1964 we had an even more one-sided election in the polls—although we didn't have the overwhelming number of polls—and we had the second largest turnout since women were given the suffrage.

The broader question is what is destroying the will to participate. Yes, the polls and the scandals have probably

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had a minor contributory effect. But most of the indicators on voter participation were way down in September.

The reasons for low turnout are not usually election specific, although often there are factors unique to each election that affect turnout. For example, turnout declined slightly from 1960 to 1964.

The perception of Barry Goldwater as an extremist had to have something to do with it, particularly among Republicans, just as in the decline in turnout in 1968 had to do with Lyndon Johnson and the war. And the decline in 1972 had something to do with McGovern, and '74 had something to do with Nixon. There are things that are election specific but, remember, we've had the pattern of declining turnout for 36 years.

PP: What are the implications of this long-term decline in turnout on representative democracy?

CG: There's a point at which the sky won't fall any further. We probably won't go below 40% in presidential elections and 25% or 30% in midterm elections. But at that point the electorate will be dominated by a core of only the interested and zealots, which would be a profound danger to American society.

