Getting Out the Vote

Half the nation stands still

By Martin P. Wattenberg

The 2000 presidential election demonstrated the importance of turning out to vote better than any civics teacher could have dreamed. Shortly after the election, the Pew Research Center asked a national sample, "Has the outcome of this election increased your belief that every vote counts, or has it raised doubts in your mind about the importance of your vote?" Seventy-four percent responded that they were now more of the opinion that every vote matters.

> "More practical than trying to restore bygone institutions, however, would be to update 19th century American election practices to facilitate turnout in the 21st century."

Yet, despite all media projections that the presidential race was too close to call in the campaign's final days, the turnout rate barely exceeded 50% of the voting age population. Even when non-citizens (approximately 7% of the adult population) are removed from the calculations, one finds that only about 54% of American adults turned out to vote. Forty years ago, when the Kennedy-Nixon race was decided by a similar razor-thin margin, the comparable figure was 64%.

In 1960, there was still a good excuse for relatively low voter turnout: the aftermath of the Civil War. The states of the old Confederacy were long a major drag on the nation's turnout rate, owing to racial discrimination, the poll tax, and lack of party competition. In the Kennedy-Nixon contest only 41% of adult citizens in those southern states voted, whereas the figure in the rest of the nation was a respectable 71%. Philip Converse hypothesized shortly thereafter that southern turnout rates would eventually converge with those of the North due to dwindling educational differences between the regions and the ongoing urbanization of

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the South. Table 1 shows that 9 of the 11 formerly confederate states have, indeed, seen their turnout rates rise since 1960.

Another reason scholars in the 1960s were not terribly worried about US turnout rates was that education levels were increasing with generational replacement, and there was good reason to expect that this would raise turnout throughout the country. And had they been able to foresee the general loosening of registration requirements over the last four decades, they would have been even more confident that America's turnout problem would be short-lived. Registration hurdles were long considered one of the primary reasons for America's low turnout.

Nevertheless, despite the implementation of more user-friendly registration procedures—most notably passage of the Motor Voter Act of 1993—turnout rates have not increased. This outcome has recently led some scholars to reassess the importance of registration laws, but it hasn't stopped the calls for the liberalization of registration deadlines. For example, Joseph Lieberman writes that raising turnout rates should be "a hard national goal" and recommends that all states make it legal for voters to register at the polls on Election Day.

In Table 1, states that currently have this procedure in place, or have no registration at all (North Dakota) are listed in italics. The results from Maine, Minnesota, and Wisconsin support the notion that Election Day registration facilitates voting, as these states not only had high turnout in 2000 but also have seen little turnout decline over the last four decades.

However, there have been substantial turnout declines in Wyoming, New Hampshire, North Dakota, and Idaho, despite their liberal registration laws. The overall evidence does not support the argument that Election Day registration is the answer to America's turnout problems.

One clear pattern in the data is that turnout has declined most in states which once had strong traditional party organizations. Excluding the confederate states, the average turnout decline in these states was 17.5%, as compared to 12.2% in states that never had strong party organizations. Bringing back such party organizations, and the ballot procedures they promoted, such as the user-friendly straight-ticket lever, would probably increase turnout rates.

More practical than trying to restore bygone institutions, however, would be to update 19th century American election

Voter Turnout Most Improved in the South

	2000 Turnout	Change since 1960 (in percentage points)		2000 Turnout	Change since 1960 (in percentage points)
Mississippi	48%	+22	Oklahoma	50%	-13
Virginia	54	+21	Washington	59	-14
Alabama	51	+20	Michigan	60	-14
South Carolina	48	+17	*Wyoming*	60	-14
Georgia	45	+16	Missouri	58	-14
Alaska	56%	+12	Iowa	63%	-14
Louisiana	55	+11	Kansas	55	-14
Arkansas	49	+8	Delaware	58	-15
Florida	57	+7	California	52	-15
Texas	47	+6	*New Hampshire*	64	-16
Tennessee	50%	0	Ohio	55%	-17
North Carolina	50	-3	New York	52	-17
Maryland	52	-5	Nebraska	54	-17
Kentucky	53	-5	Pennsylvania	54	-17
Maine	68	-5	Massachusetts	61	-17
Minnesota	71%	-6	New Jersey	54%	-18
Wisconsin	68	-6	*North Dakota*	61	-18
Hawaii	44	-7	Connecticut	59	-19
Oregon	65	-8	Rhode Island	58	-19
Montana	62	-9	South Dakota	58	-20
Vermont	64%	-10	Illinois	56%	-21
Arizona	43	-10	*Idaho*	56	-24
Colorado	60	-10	Utah	55	-24
Nevada	49	-10	Indiana	49	-28
New Mexico	51	-12	West Virginia	45	-33

Note: States with Election Day registration or no registration as of 2000 are in italics. Calculated by the author on the basis of available election results, US Census estimates of the voting age population for each state, and various Census data on citizenship. For 2000, citizenship rates for each state were ascertained by combining Current Population Survey data from July through September of that year. For 1960, citizenship rates were calculated based on adjusting Census data on the percentage of foreign born in each state using an estimate of 74% of foreign born residents then being citizens. The estimate of the foreign born population who were citizens in 1960 is based on an average of 1950 and 1970 numbers, as 1960 data were unavailable.

practices to facilitate turnout in the 21st century. In my view, the most practical and efficacious suggestion of all those currently being discussed is weekend or holiday voting. An 1872 law established the first Tuesday after the first Monday of November as Election Day. With an ordinary act of Congress, the date for federal elections could be moved to Saturday or made a holiday, thereby giving people more free time on Election Day to vote.

In 2000, the holding of the election on Tuesday seemed particularly mistimed in that many Americans had the following Friday off from work for Veterans' Day. Why not have the 2004 election on Veterans' Day and see how it works? The potential for increased turnout would certainly outweigh possible disadvantages. If it doesn't improve turnout, Congress can always revert back to the normal date for 2008.