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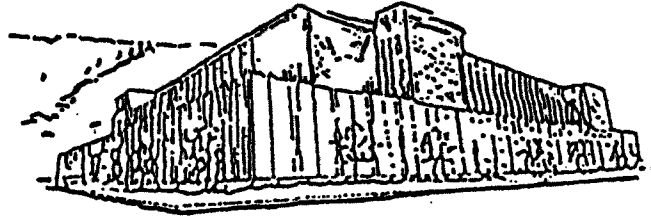
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LOW VOTER TURNOUT, REGISTRATION REQUIREMENTS,
AND MOTOR VOTER LEGISLATION IN AMERICA

by

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B.A. The University of Montana, 1993

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Montana

1995

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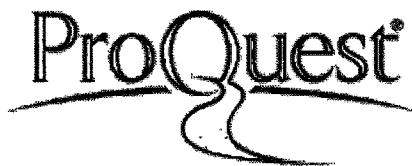


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Low Voter Turnout, Registration Requirements, and Motor
Voter Legislation in America (93 pp.)

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The existence of large-scale nonvoting in the United States has attracted the interest of many scholars. Although the particular results of their research endeavors are not always in agreement, most have recognized that contemporary turnout rates in the U.S. are lower than those produced during earlier periods of American history.

This research project explores the relationship between voter registration laws and low voter turnout. First, the existence of low voter turnout is established. Then, historical and quantitative information are employed to display the effect of registration requirements on citizen participation. Finally, an analysis of the impact of motor voter legislation is utilized to verify the relationship.

The study concludes that participation rates in the United States today are historically and comparatively low, and that the presence of large-scale nonvoting is, in part, related to the existence of restrictive registration requirements throughout the country. Finally, when the costs of registering are reduced, the probability that citizens will vote increases.

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INTRODUCTION

The primary purpose of this research project is to explore the relationship between voter registration laws and low voter turnout in the United States. A strong correlation between these two variables will be demonstrated.

In the late nineteenth century a variety of electoral laws were implemented throughout the country at the state and local level. The Southern planter class implemented poll taxes, literacy tests, and voter registration laws in order to restrict black and poor white participation. Northern progressives, also seeking to limit the size of the active electorate, passed voter registration requirements throughout the region.¹ The arrival of these electoral laws coincided with a marked decrease in voter participation rates.² Between 1888 and 1924 turnout rates dropped from 81% to 49% nationally. As the size of the active electorate decreased, the focus of the political parties narrowed.³

During the twentieth century most of the more extreme barriers to registration, like poll taxes and literacy tests, were overturned by a series of legislative acts and Supreme Court decisions.⁴ Despite the removal of legal restrictions, administrative barriers still remain embedded

in the electoral system, contributing to the political alienation of a considerable portion of the population.⁵ In fact, more than 83 million potential voters failed to participate in the 1992 general election.⁶ As a result, the focus of political parties, driven by simple political calculations, continues to be rather narrow, and those with lower levels of income and education are underrepresented in the active electorate.⁷

Given this scenario, many students of electoral behavior have attempted to discover the causes of low voter participation. Several of these endeavors have focused upon the legal and administrative barriers to voting, with particular emphasis placed upon registration requirements.⁸ However, the extent to which registration systems affect turnout rates is widely disputed. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward have argued that the legal reforms implemented during the Progressive Era are the root cause of poor electoral participation.⁹ Others, like Robert S. Erikson, have utilized quantitative methods to illustrate how registration requirements can help account for the existence of low voter turnout.¹⁰

The most widely accepted explanations of nonvoting are derived from social-psychological and party competition analyses. Social-psychological explanations tend to concentrate on the attitudes and personal characteristics of voters and nonvoters.¹¹ The party competition approach

analyzes the level of competition in elections and its relationship to voter turnout.¹² While neither of these approaches claims that registration requirements have no impact, they tend to treat it as a secondary or contributing factor.

Undoubtedly, the political phenomena of low voter participation is extremely complex, and the numerous factors which contribute to it are intertwined. It is not my intent to untangle the web of variables involved in the debate over nonvoting, but simply to show that a correlation between registration requirements and low voter turnout exists.

In order to demonstrate the importance of this relationship, a three-pronged research strategy is pursued. A historical analysis which investigates the linkage between restrictive electoral laws and the shrinking size of the active electorate, as well as its affect on the representativeness of the political parties, is provided. Furthermore, a review of contemporary quantitative studies and an analysis of the impact of motor voter legislation at the state level are included.

The first chapter explores the levels of voter turnout in the United States from a historical and a comparative perspective. The desirability of increasing voter participation is also assessed.

Chapter two examines the historical relationship between the establishment of voter registration requirements

and low voter turnout, the rationale for the passage of registration laws, and their continued relationship to nonvoting.

Chapter three evaluates several quantitative studies that have been published over the last several decades. These works investigate the relationship between registration laws and low voter turnout. Also, the direct costs associated with registering to vote are described.

The fourth chapter analyzes the passage and impact of state level motor voter legislation on both voter registration and turnout levels. The objective here is to examine whether decreasing the costs of voting raises turnout rates, and subsequently, to obtain some insight into the possible effects of increasing the price of voting on participation levels.

The conclusion reviews the findings, and comments on the future of voter turnout and associated electoral reforms.

ENDNOTES

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CHAPTER ONE

IS TURNOUT IN THE UNITED STATES REALLY LOW?

The heart of advanced democratic political systems throughout Western Europe and North America rests upon the citizens' right to vote. The existence of what has been labeled universal suffrage theoretically allows all segments of the voting age population to receive an appropriate amount of representation within the major political parties and the associated national, state, and local governments. Suffrage is the essential component to the democratic polity which allows all other rights to be recognized.

Given the importance of the act of voting, one might assume that participation levels in advanced industrial democracies would generally be high. However, turnout rates in the United States rank well below those of other comparable countries and with earlier periods in American history.¹ In this chapter, the level of voter turnout in the United States from a historical and a comparative perspective is described. Also, the desirability of increasing voter participation is discussed.

U.S. Voter Turnout from a Historical Perspective

The existence of large-scale nonvoting in the United States has attracted the interest of many scholars. Although the particular results of their research endeavors are not always in agreement, most have recognized that contemporary turnout rates in the U.S. are lower than those produced during earlier periods of American history.²

Table 1-1. Turnout in U.S. Presidential Elections, 1848-1992^a

Year	Turnout	Year	Turnout
1836	56.7	1916	61.8
1840	80.3	1920	49.3
1844	79.0	1924	48.9
1848	72.8	1928	56.9
1852	69.5	1932	57.0
1856	79.4	1936	61.0
1860	81.8	1940	62.5
1864	76.3	1944	55.9
1868	80.9	1948	53.4
1872	72.1	1952	63.8
1876	82.6	1956	61.6
1880	80.6	1960	65.4
1884	78.3	1964	63.3
1888	80.5	1968	62.3
1892	75.9	1972	57.1
1896	79.7	1976	55.2
1900	73.7	1980	54.3
1904	65.5	1984	55.2
1908	65.7	1988	50.2
1912	59.0	1992	55.9 ^b

Source: Teixeira 1992, Table 1-3

a. Based on legally eligible electorate (This excludes most blacks before 1870, most women before 1920, and most or all aliens throughout).

b. 1988 and 1992 data from Kimberling, Federal Elections Statistics.

In general, voter turnout reached its peak during the late nineteenth century. After this point, participation rates for presidential (on-year) elections have remained comparatively low (see Table 1-1).³ For example, the national turnout in on-year elections between 1876 and 1892

averaged 79.6 percent, while the mean for the 1976-92 time period was 54.2 percent.⁴

Even during periods of increased party competition, economic depression and social upheaval, voter turnout failed to achieve the levels set in the preceding century. Throughout the Great Depression (1928-40) participation rates averaged 59.4 percent, a solid twenty points less than the 1876-92 mean. Between 1952 and 1968, a period of considerable sociopolitical conflict, voter participation was just 63.3 percent.⁵

The decline in turnout for mid-term elections is even more striking. In the late nineteenth century (1874-1892) turnout in off-year congressional elections averaged 64.7 percent, while the mean rate of participation from 1952-70 was 44.5 percent.⁶ During Ronald Reagan's decade mid-term turnout peaked at 40.5 percent in 1982, fell to 36.3 percent in 1986, and increased up to 36.4 percent in 1990.⁷

U.S. Turnout from a Comparative Perspective

Generally speaking, voter turnout rates in the United States are considerably lower than those achieved in other advanced industrial democracies. In fact, many of these countries routinely produce turnout rates 25 to 40 percent higher than those in the U.S. (see Table 1-2).⁸

Table 1-2. Average Turnout in Twenty Democracies, 1980-89

Nation	Turnout	Nation	Turnout
Belgium	94	Israel	79
Austria	92	Greece	78
Australia	90	Finland	74
New Zealand	89	United Kingdom	74
Sweden	88	Ireland	73
West Germany	87	Canada	72
Denmark	86	France	70
Italy	84	Japan	68
Netherlands	84	United States	53
Norway	83	Switzerland	49

Source: Duch 1990 cited in Teixeira 1992, table 1-2. Data are from national legislative elections, except in the United States, where data are from presidential elections. The base is the legally eligible electorate.

One of the more influential studies dealing with American voter turnout from a comparative perspective, was released in 1990 by Raymond E. Wolfinger, David P. Glass, and Peverill Squire.⁹ The authors begin by using the "traditional measure of turnout" and estimate U.S. participation as a percentage of the voting age population, while foreign turnout is calculated as a percentage of registered voters. Then they compute both the U.S. and foreign turnout rates as percentages of the voting age population. The authors used the two different measures of turnout in order to confront criticism of the "traditional" method for using two separate bases. However, both measures showed that Americans vote less than the citizens of any other advanced democracy except Switzerland.¹⁰

Wolfinger et al. suggest that two aspects of the electoral laws in the countries studied can help explain the variations in turnout. The first relates to the existence of penalties for not voting in Belgium, Australia, Italy,

Spain, and Greece.¹¹ According to the authors, the legal sanctions tend to increase the likelihood that citizens will participate. However, the average turnout in nations without compulsory voting between 1972 and 1980 was 77 percent of the voting age population, 23 points higher than turnout in the U.S.¹²

The second aspect of the electoral laws is the fundamental differences in registration systems. In a majority of the countries, registration is automatic. Other nations, like Britain and Canada, register citizens via government canvassing. Only in the United States and France is the task of registering voters solely the responsibility of the individual.¹³ However, citizens in France are usually registered when they obtain their required identification cards. In the U.S. there is no such precondition which brings citizens to the registration site.¹⁴ In fact, a similar study conducted by G. Bingham Powell Jr. found that turnout in America would increase by as much as 14 percent if an automatic registration system were put in place.¹⁵

It appears that voter turnout in the United States is historically and comparatively low. Citizen participation rates over the last 95 years have failed to match those achieved throughout most of the nineteenth century, even during periods of social, political, and economic turmoil.

Moreover, other advanced democracies routinely produce substantially higher turnout rates than the U.S.

The Value of Increasing Voter Participation

On the surface, low turnout may appear to be a neutral phenomenon with no negative consequences. However, many scholars have effectively argued that the continued existence of large-scale nonvoting is highly undesirable, and that measures to increase participation should be undertaken.¹⁶ A discussion of the presumed salutary effects of participation on democratic legitimacy, policy outcomes, and on individuals follows.

The role of voting is often viewed as merely a method of selecting public officials. But, it also displays the level of acceptance and commitment that a population has towards its political institutions and processes. In other words, voting represents, to some degree, the extent to which a government is perceived as being legitimate.¹⁷

With the question of legitimacy in mind, it is important to remember that in the last four presidential elections (1980, 1984, 1988, and 1992) voter turnout has averaged 53.9 percent (see Table 1-1).¹⁸ Not one of the presidents elected during this period received the support of more than 30 percent of the electorate.¹⁹ Although there is no set level of participation which assures legitimacy, surely the continued presence of a "party of

nonvoters" is sufficient cause for concern.²⁰ As Ruy Teixeira states: "As fewer and fewer people vote, the extent to which government truly rests on the consent of the governed is eroded."²¹

A second area of consideration is the relationship between voter participation and policy outcomes. Theoretically, the policies developed in a democratic nation should reflect the interests of the population at large.²² However, political parties are often guided by electoral calculations which frequently result in legislative initiatives designed to please the active electorate.²³ Subsequently, in the long run, policies may not accurately reflect the needs and interests of nonvoters, who tend to have lower levels of income and education.²⁴

American political history is full of examples which display the relationship between voting and legislative outcomes. During the New Deal Era, blacks remained generally disenfranchised throughout the Deep South. As a result, Southern Democrats were able to manipulate social policy so that most of the black population would be ineligible for old-age and food assistance.²⁵ Also, numerous contemporary studies have shown that increased black participation in urban areas has led to different policy outputs by city governments.²⁶

Possibly the most insightful study of the importance of participation to the democratic process was forwarded by E.

E. Schattschneider some thirty-five years ago.²⁷

Schattschneider contended that, "The outcome of all conflict is determined by the scope of its contagion."²⁸ Moreover, he argued that, "Conflicts are frequently won or lost by the success that the contestants have in getting the audience involved in the fight or in excluding it, as the case may be."²⁹ In short, Schattschneider suggested that levels and patterns of participation have a direct impact on policy outputs.

A third area of consideration is the effect of political participation on the individual. Walter Dean Burnham has argued that voting plays an essential role in exposing citizens to the possibilities and limits of a political system.³⁰ To participatory democrats, like Carole Pateman, participation is an essential part of human development. In fact, Pateman has suggested that the educative role of political participation is necessary for individuals to achieve self-actualization.³¹

Numerous research projects have provided evidence which suggests that voting and other forms of participation can lead to an increased interest in legislative activity, a higher level of commitment to public institutions, and an deepened sense of political efficacy. For example, Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba's cross-cultural analysis of individual political behavior and attitudes found that

political efficacy was enhanced by political participation.³²

In another study, William Crotty analyzed the attitudes and behaviors of American voters. He concluded that citizens who vote tend to have higher levels of political efficacy and are more likely to trust public institutions than nonvoters.³³ Furthermore, a research project conducted by M. Kent Jennings and Richard Niemi found that protest participation between 1965 and 1973 was associated with an increase political knowledge and the use of news media.³⁴

Conclusion

There is a considerable amount of evidence that voter turnout in the United States is low. From a historical perspective, participation rates in contemporary America are significantly lower than the standards set in the late nineteenth century (see Table 1-1). When compared to other advanced democracies, the U.S. is routinely ranked next to last (see Table 1-2).³⁵

Although low turnout may appear to be a neutral phenomenon, it has a potentially negative impact on the well-being of the American democracy. Voter participation has a significant influence on the legitimacy of public institutions, policy outcomes, and the political

socialization of individuals. Therefore, pragmatic steps designed to increase voter turnout are desirable.

The next logical step in this research endeavor is to explore the historical relationship between the arrival of voter registration systems and the decline in voter turnout.

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CHAPTER TWO

THE HISTORY OF VOTER REGISTRATION REQUIREMENTS AS A BARRIER TO VOTER PARTICIPATION

The political phenomenon of large-scale nonvoting in the United States has been present for most of the last one hundred years. This chapter examines the historical relationship between voter registration laws and the continued presence of low voter turnout. First, the struggle for the right to vote is discussed. Second, the establishment and immediate impact of registration requirements, as well as the rationale for their passage is described. Finally, a discussion on the continued relationship between registration laws and nonvoting is provided.

The Struggle for Suffrage

Since the earliest days of the Republic, the question of who would be given the right to vote has been a point of heated contention. For most citizens the right to participate in democratic elections was only obtained after an extensive struggle with those already politically

enfranchised.¹ The reason for this is obvious. Those citizens with suffrage can participate in the election of political leaders, and thus influence the development of public policy.²

Initially, the right to vote was severely restricted due to the existence of property, tax, and income qualifications.³ However, most states, under mounting public pressure, eliminated the property qualification by the early 1830's. Rhode Island resisted the national movement until its citizens, led by Thomas Dorr, rose up in a dramatic and violent rebellion in 1842.⁴ By 1860, no state in the Union maintained a property or income requirement. However, the use of the poll tax as a barrier to electoral participation would not end until the passage of the twenty-fourth amendment in 1964.⁵

When the nation was founded there were no laws which specifically denied women suffrage. However, when a significant number of females decided to vote in the late eighteenth century, the states quickly passed legislation denying them access to the polls.⁶ Women around the country quickly began to build organizations and express their concerns.⁷ In response, numerous anti-women's suffrage groups attempted to derail the movement.⁸ Finally, after engaging in over a century of hard-fought battles, women secured the right to vote with the ratification of the nineteenth amendment in 1920.⁹

For black citizens in the United States, it has been a particularly vicious battle. In 1870, the fifteenth amendment was passed prohibiting voter discrimination based on race. Yet the white citizens in many states, particularly in the South, quickly learned that voter registration requirements, poll taxes, "white primaries," literacy tests, and outright violence effectively prevented the black population from utilizing their constitutional right to vote.¹⁰

It was not until the emergence of the civil rights movement in the 1950's and 1960's that the nation would attempt to remove the barriers to black electoral participation. In fact, the Civil Rights Act of 1957 was the first piece of such legislation to be signed into law since Reconstruction.¹¹ In the next decade, two more pieces of civil rights legislation and the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965 would be enacted. Furthermore, numerous Supreme Court decisions and spirited federal enforcement helped to assure that every citizen's right to vote was protected.¹²

The most recent attempt to expand the electorate was the movement to lower the voting age to 18. Throughout American history young men and women were routinely denied the right to vote, while often required to serve in the military. Finally, the twenty-sixth amendment was ratified

in 1971, thus lowering the minimum voting age to 18 in all elections.¹³

It is clear that every attempt to expand the right to vote has met with considerable opposition. Those that are politically enfranchised have generally been hesitant to open the electoral doors to new and possibly unpredictable voters. As E. E. Schattschneider states in the classic, The Semisovereign People, "A change of scope makes possible a new pattern of competition, a new balance of forces, and a new result. . ."¹⁴ However, the same "conflict system" which allowed for the expansion of the electorate, is also responsible for the attempts to restrict it.¹⁵

The Election of 1896

The post-Civil War period was one of considerable social, economic, and political transformation.¹⁶ These years were characterized by extraordinary economic growth, painful market instability, decreases in real income for the average American, a massive influx of legal immigrants, and widespread farmer and labor oriented protests and strikes.¹⁷ The associated political environment allowed for the development of rather vigorous electoral activity.

From 1872 to 1896 the alienation and discontent of farmer and labor organizations found a constructive outlet in third-party movements. Farmers in the early 1870's, upset about unjust railroad and banking practices, formed

organizations known as Granges.¹⁸ At this same time the industrial working class, caught in an increasingly violent battle with employers, formed the National Labor Union.¹⁹ But, unable to compete with the political and financial clout of established economic interests, the movements quickly lost momentum.²⁰

The deep economic depression which began in 1873 rejuvenated the labor and farmer movements, and led to the creation of numerous third-parties around the country. Over the next several years the economic downturn became increasingly painful, and calls for the creation of a coherent national organization grew. In February 1878, a labor-farmer coalition was formed, the National (Greenback) Labor party.²¹ In that same year the Greenbacks managed to win fourteen congressional elections and the Mayoral races in numerous industrial and mining towns. But as the economy began to recover, support for the maverick coalition rapidly disappeared in the early 1880's.²²

In 1892, the Farmers' Alliances orchestrated the construction of a new labor-farmer coalition, the People's Party. Their presidential candidate in that same year, James B. Weaver, received twenty-two electoral votes from Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, and Nevada. Later, in 1895, the People's Party merged into the Democratic Party, with William Jennings Bryan as their presidential candidate.²³

In response, the corporate backers of the Republican Party built a massive organization in preparation for the election of 1896.²⁴ The coffers of the Republican National Committee (RNC) swelled as Standard Oil, J. P. Morgan, New York Life, and the railroad conglomerates contributed generously to the attempt to maintain a "business friendly" national government. The financial records of the RNC show that they raised \$3,500,000 for their operations alone.²⁵ On the other hand, the Democratic party only received \$650,000 in donations, and found it difficult to compete with its wealthier opponent.²⁶

As the campaign grew in intensity, and enthusiasm over Bryan's candidacy increased, supporters of the Republican party began to resort to economic coercion. For example, businesses would submit orders that were to be canceled if the Democrats won. In agricultural regions, large insurance companies promised low-interest extensions on farm mortgages if Bryan lost. Furthermore, some workers were told not to report to work the day after the election if William McKinley failed to capture the White House.²⁷ Clearly, economic elites displayed their fear of an enfranchised and mobilized populace.²⁸

Late on November 3, 1896, Bryan realized that he had lost the election. McKinley had acquired 271 electoral votes by winning the Northeast, the border states, much of the Middle West, California and Oregon.²⁹

The initial effect of the Democratic loss, and the ensuing breakup of the labor-farmer alliance, was the solidification of the sectional party alignment created by the Civil War. The Republicans and corporate interests would dominate the North, while the Democrats and the Southern planter class would dominate the South.³⁰ But, more importantly, the election of 1896 is significant in that it allowed for the continued spread of electoral reforms (registration requirements, poll taxes, literacy tests, extensive residency requirements, white primaries, direct primaries, etc.) which disenfranchised millions of voters and weakened political parties.³¹

Why Electoral Reform?

The widespread implementation of electoral reforms during the Progressive Era can be viewed as, ". . . a pervasive response by American elites to the rising level of conflict and electoral challenge during the closing decades of the nineteenth century."³² More specifically, many conservatives felt a desperate need to control the influence of blacks, populist farmers, immigrants, urban political machines, and political parties in general.³³

Following the election of 1896, conservatives around the country sought to reduce the size of the active electorate and limit the likelihood of political opposition. In the South, leaders of the Democratic party believed that,

". . . not only black, but potential white opposition had to be eradicated."³⁴ Republican leaders in the North moved quickly to solidify their domination and reduce participation among the poor, less-educated, immigrant, and working-class populations.³⁵ According to Walter Dean Burnham, "The basic legal devices which were adopted - particularly the device of personal registration - without question contributed to the massive decline in voter participation after 1900."³⁶

Progressive Era reformers used a variety of arguments in order to muster support for their legislative initiatives. Political parties and urban machines were declared to be corrupt and unrepresentative. Immigrants were described as being lazy, drunk, and lacking in the necessary cultural development. Populist farmers were classified as being "backward" and "revolutionary." And finally, in the South, the racist sentiments of white citizens were played upon in order to disenfranchise the black population.³⁷

It is probably impossible to know whether the elites of the Progressive Era maintained a "conspiratorial" agenda or not. But, according to Burnham, they seemed to be in general agreement on several important issues. First, they understood that increasing the costs of voting would decrease electoral participation. Second, progressives believed that registration requirements would

disproportionately effect the poor and less educated. Finally, the existence of political parties and partisan competition was viewed as being highly undesirable.³⁸ In short, the electoral laws passed during the Progressive Era were designed to reduce voter turnout and solidify conservative domination over the development of public policy.

The Process of Disenfranchisement

The widespread and stringent electoral reforms which were passed throughout the South clearly illustrate the impact of restrictive registration systems on voter participation rates. In 1877, Reconstruction ended as federal troops withdrew from the Confederate states. In response, Southern Democrats began to implement Jim Crow laws designed to disenfranchise blacks and poor whites from the political process.³⁹

The Jim Crow electoral laws varied from state to state, but were generally effective in decreasing citizen participation throughout the region. "The key disenfranchising features of the Southern registration laws," according to Kousser, "were the amount of discretion granted to the registrars, the specificity of the information required of the registrant, [and] the times and places set for registration. . ."⁴⁰ In Florida, for

example, registrars simply erased the names of Republicans, and then refused them the opportunity to register again.⁴¹

Many Southern conservatives also utilized periodic registration requirements in order to shape the active electorate (those citizens that can and do vote) to their advantage. Frequently citizens were required to reregister every year, thus creating the opportunity for massive purges and greatly increasing the costs of voting.⁴² Furthermore, most Southern states required one to two years of residency in the state and as much as a year in the county; a requirement that undoubtedly lowered turnout.⁴³

Beyond the administrative barriers, Southern reformers also constructed a variety of legal roadblocks designed to further reduce the size of the active electorate. The poll tax, which required that citizens pay a fee in order to register, was well beyond the reach of many poor blacks and whites.⁴⁴ By 1904, all of the Solid South had adopted some form of electoral duty.⁴⁵ In four of the states the tax was cumulative, forcing citizens to pay the current year's assessment as well as any unpaid fees from previous years. In 1964, the twenty-fourth amendment outlawed the use of the poll tax in federal elections, and two years later its use was banned altogether by the Supreme Court (Harper v. Virginia State Board of Elections).⁴⁶

Most states in the South also adopted a literacy test, which further eroded the ability of the poor and less

educated to seek political representation. The laws generally provided for local administration in order to facilitate discriminatory behavior. In an attempt to allow otherwise unqualified white males to register, six of the states implemented "grandfather clauses."⁴⁷ However, according to J. Morgan Kousser, many poor and illiterate whites were unwilling to display their lack of education, thus rendering the clauses largely ineffective.⁴⁸ The legal loopholes for white males were found to be unconstitutional in 1915, but the literacy test would continue to be used until 1970.⁴⁹

Another component of the Jim Crow laws, the white primary, prohibited blacks from participating in primary elections. In a region dominated by one political party, the primary elections were, for all intents and purposes, the final say on who would be elected to public office. Thus, if an African-American managed to meet the travel, time, motivational, monetary, and intelligence requirements necessary to register, the impact of his vote would be negligible. It was not until 1944 that the Supreme Court, in Smith v. Alwright, declared the white primary unconstitutional.⁵⁰

The impact of the restrictive registration systems was immediate and substantial; participation rates dropped from nearly 80 percent in 1876 to just over 35 percent in 1912.⁵¹ The turnout rate in Mississippi fell 63 percent in

just 24 years (1876-1900). South Carolina's rate dropped from a respectable 83.7 percent in 1880 to just 18 percent in 1900.⁵² After Virginia passed new registration laws in 1897, voter registration rates plunged from 96.3 percent in 1896, to 46.6 percent in 1898.⁵³ In Texas, voter turnout dropped by 50 percent in just twenty years (1884-1904).⁵⁴

The registration laws also had the intended effect of disenfranchising the black community. In Florida, where electoral reform was implemented in the late 1880's, black participation plunged from 87 percent in 1884 to 5 percent in 1896.⁵⁵ The results were even more striking in Mississippi where black turnout was completely eliminated by 1895.⁵⁶ Soon most other Southern states recognized the benefits of such legislation and passed similar reforms. The effects were devastating. Black participation collapsed from 60 percent in the late nineteenth century to 0 percent in the early 1920's. White voter turnout also suffered, dropping from 69 percent in 1876 to 32 percent in 1920.⁵⁷ In short, Southern conservatives had solidified their control over the political process by rejecting the notion of popular government.⁵⁸

Although the South was more blatant in its attempts to disenfranchise many citizens, the North and West also constructed effective barricades. Initially, Progressives targeted the larger metropolitan areas where immigrant populations were concentrated. In 1878, the historian

Francis Parkman declared, "It is in the cities that the diseases of the body politic are gathered to a head, and it is here that the need of attacking them is most urgent."⁵⁹ During that same year The New York Times reported that, "It would be a great gain if our people could be made to understand distinctly that the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness involves, to be sure, the right to good government, but not the right to take part, either immediately or indirectly, in the management of the State."⁶⁰

After the election of 1896, Northern progressives began to replace older systems of voter registration with newer and more restrictive ones.⁶¹ "The key feature of this change," according to Paul Kleppner, "was the imposition of a personal-registration requirement, a provision that shifted the burden of establishing eligibility from the state to the individual."⁶² By 1920 personal registration requirements existed in 31 states outside of the South.⁶³

As time passed, the registration systems became even more restrictive in where, when, and how one was to register. When annual registration requirements and periodic purges were implemented, the number of citizens who were effectively disenfranchised increased.⁶⁴ Furthermore, by 1926, eleven states in the North and West had adopted literacy tests.⁶⁵ The end result was that voter turnout in Northern states dropped from 86 percent in 1896 to 57

percent in 1924.⁶⁶ "Inevitably," according to Piven and Cloward, "over the long run, these informal barriers tended to exclude those who were less educated and less self-confident, and in any case were often administered so as to secure that effect."⁶⁷

The registration systems which were put in place between the end of Reconstruction and the beginning of World War I contributed to the marked increase in nonvoting. The reforms in the South effectively disenfranchised millions of blacks and poor whites. In the North and West, restrictive registration systems and literacy tests forced turnout down. "Voting decreased, of course: that was the goal of the laws."⁶⁸ Progressive reformers had succeeded in dramatically altering the American political landscape to their advantage.

The New Deal to the New Covenant

By the 1920's, restrictive registration requirements had severely weakened the ties between parties and the poor and less educated. "Calculations of electoral advantage turned party strategists away from the worse off, who voted less, and towards the better off, who voted more."⁶⁹ Politicians, having adapted to the shrunken active electorate, grew wary of the unknown voting patterns of the disenfranchised and attempted to maintain the registration systems in order to protect their incumbency.⁷⁰

Aroused by the changes in political activity, students of electoral behavior began to explore the possible relationship between registration requirements and plummeting participation rates. One of the earliest studies dealing with this subject matter was Joseph P. Harris's book, Registration of Voters in the United States. The author found, ". . . that some registration laws were especially devised to make it as difficult as possible for the elector to cast his ballot."⁷¹ More importantly, Harris provided two of the basic notions associated with this strain of inquiry: that registration requirements deter voter turnout and those who are registered tend to vote.⁷²

It was not until the heated election of 1928 that participation rates showed any increase. National voter turnout jumped from 49 percent in 1924 to 57 percent in 1928, due primarily to the controversial candidacy of Al Smith, a Catholic from New York City.⁷³ Electoral participation would continue to increase throughout the 1930's, reaching a peak of 62 percent in 1940. However, the regional variation in turnout that year was significant, with the North and West achieving 73 percent and the South topping off at 26 percent.⁷⁴

The gradual increase during the 1930's, though slight, was partially due to the economic depression and the changing orientation of the political parties. As the

blacks who had migrated North became enfranchised, along with many second and third generation immigrants, the Democratic party found itself in a position to gain considerable ground outside of the South.⁷⁵ Yet the remobilization of the 1930's was severely limited by the continued presence of restrictive registration requirements.⁷⁶

During the 1940's and 1950's the New Deal alignment continued to fragment. In 1948, the Democratic party formally adopted the recommendations of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission.⁷⁷ The shift in policy outraged many political leaders from the Deep South, and led to the Dixiecrat revolt in that same year.⁷⁸ When the Democratic leadership attempted to satisfy its Southern white constituencies by softening its stance on civil rights issues, they began to lose support among enfranchised blacks in the North.⁷⁹

National voter turnout suffered throughout the 1940's, dropping from 56 percent in 1944 to 51.1 percent in 1948. But participation rates increased over the next 12 years, leaping to 61.6 percent in 1952 and reaching a postwar high of 62.8 percent in 1960.⁸⁰ Once again, however, the registration systems artificially suppressed voter turnout. Residency requirements alone disenfranchised 4 million voters in 1950, 5 million in 1954, and 8 million in 1960.⁸¹ Yet the 1950's managed to end on a positive note, with

Congress passing the Civil Rights Act of 1957, which provided support for the protection of civil rights in general and voting rights in particular.⁸²

With the arrival of the social-conflict oriented 1960's, the momentum to overturn legal barriers to voting rapidly increased. The Civil Rights Acts of 1960 and 1964 expanded the Federal role in voting rights enforcement and standardized literacy tests. In 1964, the twenty-fourth amendment to the Constitution was ratified, and the use of poll taxes was outlawed. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 suspended the use of the literacy test in the South. Amendments to the Act passed in 1970 abolished the exams altogether.⁸³ By the end of the decade the most obvious barriers to voter participation had been eliminated; but registration systems were still firmly in place throughout the country.

After 1960, a thirty-year decline in national election participation rates began.⁸⁴ Between 1960 and 1988 national voter turnout plummeted, dropping from 62.8 percent to 50.1 percent. However, turnout jumped up in the 1992 election, with 55.9 percent of the voting age population participating.⁸⁵ A similar trend in midterm elections occurred, with turnout gradually decreasing after the 1966 postwar high of 48.2 percent down to the postwar low of 35.3 percent in 1990.⁸⁶

The fact that turnout continued to decline at the same time that the cost of voting was being reduced appears to be problematic. But, it is important to remember, that the basic registration systems created by the "system of 1896" still remain firmly in place. Over 90 percent of the voting age population still has to register two or more weeks before election day, thus preventing individuals from signing up when campaigns are at their climax.⁸⁷ Moreover, the average turnout between 1972 and 1988 was 54.9 percent, a figure which is dwarfed by the 77.7 percent average achieved between 1840 and 1900.⁸⁸

Another important consideration is the role that many politicians play in preserving the registration systems. President Carter accurately described this phenomena when, after losing the attempt to pass his election-day registration bill in 1977, he said:

In spite of a strong and well organized campaign, we were unsuccessful. The conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, almost to a person opposed this legislation. I was taken aback that many of the liberal and moderate members of the Congress also opposed any increase in voter registration. . . . The key [source of resistance was] "incumbency". Incumbent members of the Congress don't want to see additional unpredictable voters registered. I'm speaking in generalities and there were obviously some exceptions. But I tell you that what I say is true. The more senior and more influential members of the Congress have very safe districts. To have a 25 to 30 percent increase of unpredictable new voters is something they don't relish. . . I would suggest to you that this is the single most important obstacle to increasing participation on election day.⁸⁹

It seems that many incumbents believe that the registration systems presently in place effectively reduce citizen participation.

Conclusion

There is a strong historical correlation between the implementation of registration requirements and the evolution of large-scale nonvoting in America. As Rosenstone and Hansen state: "The legal restrictions on the exercise of the franchise adopted in the early part of the century and maintained to this day place significant burdens on American citizens and lower the probability that they will participate in political life."⁹⁰

The historical relationship by itself, however, is relatively weak. It can not sufficiently control for the variations in state electoral laws and thus fails to offer sophisticated predictive capabilities. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the complex statistical approaches to understanding the various aspects of the correlation between low voter turnout and registration requirements.

ENDNOTES

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4. Ibid., 100.

5. Paul Allen Beck and Frank J. Sorauf, Party Politics in America, 7th ed., (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1992), 203.

6. Conway, 85.

7. Ibid., 86.

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CHAPTER THREE

QUANTITATIVE APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF REGISTRATION REQUIREMENTS

In the last several decades numerous quantitative research projects have attempted to uncover the causes of nonvoting in the United States. In this chapter, many of the findings of these studies are utilized to illustrate the relationship between registration requirements and low voter turnout. First, a brief discussion of the direct costs of registering to vote is provided. Second, three major research projects which examined the impact of existing registration systems and the possible effects of electoral reforms are analyzed. Finally, the relationship between the state of being registered and the likelihood of voting is discussed.

The Costs of Registering to Vote

The process of voting in the United States is widely perceived as being overly burdensome.¹ Most citizens are required to overcome various administrative barriers, usually well in advance of election-day, to establish their

eligibility to vote.² When compared to other advanced democracies, where registration is generally automatic, it becomes clear that America maintains disincentives to voter participation.³

Presently, registration requirements exist in 49 states. North Dakota is the exception, and thus enjoys comparatively high rates of participation.⁴ But for an overwhelming majority of American citizens, numerous obstacles are in place which make the process of registering more difficult than it might otherwise be. Subsequently, the likelihood that people will register is decreased, and citizens who are not registered can not exercise their right to vote.⁵

One of the most costly barriers to voting is the closing date, the final day that citizens are allowed to register prior to an election. Closing dates tend to suppress voter turnout, in part, because they require citizens to register well before political campaigns have peaked. Currently, a solid 90 percent of the voting age population must establish their eligibility two or more weeks before election-day.⁶ Arizona and Georgia are the extreme examples, both maintaining a fifty-day closing date. Although Maine, Minnesota, and Wisconsin have implemented election-day registration, only 3 percent of the electorate reside in these states.⁷

Another administrative barrier to voter turnout is the location and operating hours of registration offices. In many regions of the United States there is only one office per county, frequently forcing citizens to travel long distances in order to establish their eligibility.⁸ Furthermore, registrars in many jurisdictions cannot grant authorization for deputy registrars or branch offices. Even more problematic is the fact that most offices are only open during normal working hours, not in the evenings or on Saturdays, requiring citizens to take time off from work in order to register. The end result is a series of administrative obstacles which demand extensive travel, time and motivational expenditures.⁹

Even when citizens manage to make it to the office that handles voter registration, they encounter yet another set of obstacles. Poor and minority citizens are often discriminated against, and purposefully removed from the list of eligible voters.¹⁰ Also, registration forms are commonly discarded for simple technical errors. For example, in New York City, forms are frequently rejected because they are filled out in pencil or signed on only one side.¹¹ As Piven and Cloward have commented, "For the less well educated and the less confident, the application process can be humiliating."¹²

Once citizens are registered, they still encounter numerous procedural barriers which may deny them their right

to vote. For example, approximately one-third of the population moves every two years, and subsequently, are required to reregister or notify the board of elections of their new address. One study has suggested that residential mobility decreases voter turnout by as much as 9 percent.¹³ Also, officials commonly remove the names of citizens who have not voted in one or more elections, and rarely notify the previously eligible voters of their actions.¹⁴

The registration systems in place throughout the United States increase the difficulty of voting.¹⁵ "If voting is costly," according to Anthony Downs, "it is rational . . . for some citizens with preferences to abstain."¹⁶ In other words, the American registration systems decrease the likelihood that citizens will cast a ballot on election-day.

The Predicted Effects of Electoral Reform

For most of the twentieth century, students of electoral behavior have been examining the role that administrative barriers have in reducing turnout. Many of the earlier quantitative studies were limited due to the lack of good data and the rather primitive status of statistical methods of analysis. However, several contemporary research projects have effectively shown that the registration systems currently in place significantly reduce voter turnout.

The first comprehensive analysis of the impact of electoral laws on participation rates was completed in 1978 by Steven J. Rosenstone and Raymond E. Wolfinger.¹⁷ The research project utilized Census Bureau survey data for the 1972 general election, which provided a sample of 88,105 respondents representing every state and the District of Columbia. The size of the survey allowed the authors to compare the impact of state laws on turnout, and thus predict the effects of electoral reforms on participation rates. Previous studies were disadvantaged by much smaller sample sizes, which prohibited an examination of intranational variations.¹⁸

Rosenstone and Wolfinger first estimated the effect of registration laws on participation rates. They developed a statistical equation to focus on the impact of closing dates, regular office hours, evening and/or Saturday office hours, and the availability of absentee registration on turnout.¹⁹

They found that the registration systems in place deterred citizens from engaging in the simplest form of political participation. A thirty-day closing date reduced the probability of voting by 3 to 9 percent. Irregular office hours decreased the chances that individuals would exercise the franchise by 2 to 4 percent. Moreover, people living in jurisdictions where the registration office did not maintain evening and/or Saturday hours were 2 to 6

percent less likely to cast a ballot. Finally, for those citizens who were denied any form of absentee registration, the likelihood of voting was reduced by 2 to 4 percent.²⁰

Rosenstone and Wolfinger also estimated the effect of electoral reform on nationwide turnout. In order to accomplish this estimate, the authors predicted the likelihood of the respondents voting if each state adopted the most liberal registration provisions in existence. The following four measures were incorporated into the analysis: a) eliminating the closing date; b) keeping registration offices open during normal working hours; c) maintaining evening and/or Saturday office hours; and d) allowing absentee registration.²¹

As anticipated, Rosenstone and Wolfinger found that reforming registration laws would significantly increase voter turnout. They estimated that if every state embraced the liberal provisions discussed above, participation rates would increase by 9.1 percent (see Table 3-1).²² If these reforms were in place throughout the country in 1992, an additional 17 million people would have voted in the general election that year.²³

The information in Table 3-1 helps to express the variations in the effect of electoral reforms on participation rates. The most significant differences occurred among citizens with different education levels, with the least educated experiencing a 9.4 percent larger

increase than the best educated. The variation in the effect of income was also striking, with the poorest Americans undergoing a 5.2 percent greater rise in participation than the wealthiest.²⁴

Table 3-1. Effect of Registration Law Reform on Turnout

Characteristic	National Increase	Characteristic	National Increase
<u>NATIONAL</u>	9.1	<u>FAMILY INCOME^b</u>	
North	7.8	Under \$2,000	11.4
South	12.8	\$2,000-\$7,499	10.1
		\$7,500-\$9,999	9.6
<u>RACE</u>		\$10,000-\$14,999	8.7
Black	11.3	\$15,000-\$24,999	7.4
White	8.9	\$25,000+	6.2
		<u>AGE</u>	
<u>YEARS OF EDUCATION</u>		18-24	11.0
0-4	13.2	25-31	10.2
5-7	12.6	32-36	9.1
8	10.4	37-50	8.2
9-11	10.4	51-69	8.1
12	9.3	70-78	8.7
1-3 college	7.8	79+	10.4
4 college	5.6		
5+ college	2.8		

Source: Rosenstone and Wolfinger 1980, table 4-2.

a. Projected increases are based upon the existence of the following registration provisions: a) elimination of closing date; b) regular office hours; c) evening and/or saturday office hours; and d) some absentee registration.

b. Incomes are based on 1972 dollars.

Other areas of variation were less substantial, but still capable of expressing the impact of electoral laws on participation. For example, turnout in the South, where registration requirements were the most restrictive, would increase by 5.0 percent more than in the North. Also, on a national level, blacks would undergo 2.4 percent larger increase than whites. The variations among the different

age groups was meaningful, with the largest rise experienced by the youngest members of the electorate.²⁵

Another comprehensive analysis of low voter participation was completed by the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate in 1990. Employing 1984 Census Bureau data, the Committee found that: ". . . changes in election law aimed at making it easier for the citizen to register and vote can and do have a positive impact on voter turnout."²⁶

The study compared levels of citizen participation with the restrictiveness of electoral laws. Each state was classified as being open, middle or restrictive. Open states had either election-day registration, motor voter provisions, or no requirement for registration at all.²⁷ Those states placed in the middle category had a short registration period or provisions for mail-in registration. The restrictive classification was reserved for states that failed to qualify for the open or middle categories.²⁸

Table 3-2. Voter Turnout in States by the Openness/Restrictiveness of Their Registration Laws.

Election	Open	Middle	Restrictive	All
1984	58.3	55.1	52.0	54.7
1980	58.3	55.3	52.1	54.8
1976	58.8	55.8	52.3	55.2
1972	59.1	57.6	52.9	56.2
1968	64.1	63.1	59.1	61.9
1964	66.7	64.5	56.6	62.2
1960	69.2	66.0	55.5	62.9

Source: The Committee for the Study of the American Electorate 1990, Table 9.

Table 3-2 presents the results of the comparison between average state turnout and variations in registration laws. The relationship is clear and consistent. In every presidential election between 1960 and 1984 the states with open registration laws had the highest turnout, while restrictive states had the lowest. Even more striking, was the gap between the open and restrictive states, averaging 7.7 percent.²⁹

Building upon the previous analysis, the study's authors proceeded to examine the effect of alterations to electoral laws on voter turnout.³⁰ They found that 10 different provisions had a positive effect on participation rates (see Table 3-3). Election day registration was the most significant, increasing turnout by 3.5 percent. The impact of the other variables was less substantial, with only one provision leading to an increase of over 2 million voters.³¹ However, the Committee strongly supported the implementation of motor voter legislation, claiming that: "It offers the opportunity of vastly broadening the percentage of the electorate in all classes who are registered and it is . . . a relatively non-controversial change in registration law."³²

The most recent analysis of the effect of registration requirements on turnout was released in 1992 by Ruy Teixeira. The study utilized Census Bureau survey data from the 1972, 1980, and 1984 general elections; making it the

most comprehensive statistical research on this subject matter completed to date.³³

Table 3-3. Estimated Impact of Changes in Electoral Law on Turnout in Presidential Elections^a

Legal or Procedural Change	Increase in Turnout
Election Day Registration	6,252,000
Increase in # of Deputy Registrars	2,044,000
Easier to Become a Deputy Registrar	1,941,000
Uniformity of Office Hours	1,384,000
Decrease Frequency of Purges	1,325,000
Notification of Intent to Purge	1,268,000
Door-to-Door Registration	1,135,000
Non-Voters Stay on Rolls Longer	878,000
Driver's License Registration	780,000
Mail Registration	255,000

Source: The Committee for the Study of the American Electorate 1990, Table 1.

a. Estimated increases in turnout are based upon the 1984 voting age population.

Like Rosenstone and Wolfinger, Teixeira predicted the likelihood of each respondent voting if every state implemented a number of registration provisions. The following four variables were included in the final analysis: a) allowing for election day registration; b) eliminating purging for nonvoting; c) universal evening and Saturday registration; and d) universal regular registration office hours.³⁴

Teixeira concluded that if these four provisions were implemented in every state, national voter turnout would increase by 7.8 percent (see Table 3-4). However, acknowledging that certain forces at play may be unknown or unaccounted for, "upper-bound" (14.8 percent) and "lower-bound" (4.8 percent) estimates were forwarded. If the

reforms were implemented, a minimum of nine million more votes would have been cast in the 1992 general election.³⁵

Table 3-4. Estimated Turnout Increase from Registration Reform, by Demographic Group

Characteristic	Increase	Characteristic	Increase
<u>REGION</u>		<u>FAMILY INCOME^a</u>	
National	7.8	Less than 7,500	9.6
South	9.7	7,500-14,999	9.1
West	7.6	15,000-19,999	8.8
Northeast	6.7	20,000-29,999	7.8
Midwest	6.3	30,000-39,000	7.3
		40,000-59,000	6.2
		60,000 or more	5.4
<u>RACE</u>		<u>AGE</u>	
White	7.6	18 to 20	9.9
Black	9.3	21 to 24	9.7
Other	8.5	25 to 34	8.6
		35 to 44	7.3
		45 to 54	6.5
		55 to 64	6.3
		65 to 74	6.6
		75 or older	8.4
<u>EDUCATION</u>			
0-8 years	9.9		
9-11 years	9.6		
High school graduate	8.4		
Some college	7.0		
College graduate or more	4.5		

Source: Teixeira 1992, Table 4-2.
a. Family income based on 1988 dollars.

Table 3-4 displays the variations in the effects of registration law reform. The largest differences in increases occurred within the education category, with participation among the least educated expanding by 5.4 percent more than the best educated. The variations in the effect of income was also substantial, with a 4.2 percent gap between the poor and the rich.³⁶

Although the conclusions reached by Rosenstone and Wolfinger, the Committee for the Study of the American

Electorate, and Teixeira are slightly different, the underlying theme is consistent: decreases in the cost of voting will lead to an increase in turnout.

Do Registered Citizens Vote?

The existence of restrictive registration requirements throughout the United States prevents many citizens from participating in the democratic process. But once members of the electorate are registered, they are very likely to vote.³⁷ Subsequently, the majority of nonvoters come from the scores of citizens who are not registered.³⁸

One of the first contemporary studies to examine the impact of registration rates on voter turnout was conducted by Stanley Kelley, Jr., Richard E. Ayres, and William G. Bowen in 1967.³⁹ Utilizing 1960 registration and voting data from 104 cities across America, the authors attempted to explain variations in participation rates.⁴⁰ They found that 78 percent of the differences in turnout could be accounted for by variations in the percentage of citizens who were registered. In other words, those cities with higher rates of registration generally had larger levels of voter turnout.⁴¹ The authors concluded that: "It seems clear that registration requirements are a more effective deterrent to voting than anything that normally operates to deter citizens from voting once they have registered."⁴²

Another study of the influence of electoral arrangements on voter turnout was released in 1981 by Robert S. Erikson.⁴³ Employing data from the 1964 SRC election survey, which validated whether respondents were actually registered and if they voted in the primary and general elections, Erikson attempted to discover, " . . . who registers to vote and who votes among the registered."⁴⁴

After submitting the survey data to bivariate and multivariate analysis, the author arrived at two major conclusions. First, most citizens who are registered vote. In fact, 95.7 percent of registrants in the survey group cast their ballots on election-day.⁴⁵ The high turnout rate among registered voters, according to Census Bureau surveys, continued with 91 percent of registrants participating in 1968, 89 percent in 1980, and 90 percent in 1992 (see table 3-5).⁴⁶

Table 3-5. Registration and Voting by Registrants, 1968-1992^a

	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988 ^b	1992
Voters registered	74.3	72.3	66.7	66.9	68.3	67.0	68.0
Voting by registrants	91.0	87.0	89.0	89.0	88.0	86.0	90.0

Source: Piven and Cloward 1988, Table B.1

a. These percentages are slightly inflated because some respondents falsely claim to be registered or to have voted.

b. The information for 1988 and 1992 are the author's calculations of Census Bureau survey data.

High rates of participation occur even among newly registered voters. In a study conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, it was concluded that 77 percent of first-time registrants voted in the 1984 presidential

election.⁴⁷ In that same year, Bruce E. Cain and Ken McCue found that 75 percent of the newly registered citizens in Los Angeles County had cast a ballot.⁴⁸ Moreover, 84 percent of first-time registrants voted in the 1988 general election.⁴⁹

Erikson's second conclusion was that those citizens who are registered turnout in large numbers regardless of differences in income, education, age, and race.⁵⁰ Participation rates among the young, grade-school educated, and political independents was well above 90 percent. Even citizens with little interest in politics voted at 90 percent, while turnout among nonwhites was 89 percent.⁵¹

Once again, this particular type of electoral behavior seems to be generally stable. The information presented in Table 3-6 suggests that turnout among registrants of all ages, educational levels, and races is consistently high. The participation rates of registered voters is even more striking when compared to the 1976-1992 mean for the entire voting age population (54.7).⁵² Furthermore, Project Vote has reported that 65 to 70 percent of the citizens that they registered at social welfare agencies, individuals who may not have ordinarily registered, participated in the 1984 general election.⁵³

When citizens are registered they are very likely to exercise their right to vote. Also, the high turnout rate

among registrants is consistent regardless of age, income, education, and race.

Table 3-6. Voting by Registered Citizens, 1980-1992^a

Characteristic	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992
<u>RACE</u>					
White	89	89	88	87	91
Black	83	84	84	80	85
Hispanic	84	82	81	78	82
<u>EDUCATION</u>					
12 years or less	86	86	85	81	86
Some college	91	90	89	88	91
Bachelors degree plus	95	95	94	93	95
<u>AGE</u>					
18 to 24	82	81	79	75	82
25 to 44	90	89	88	86	90
45 to 64	91	91	91	90	93
65 years and over	87	87	88	88	90

Source: Author's tabulations of Census Bureau Survey data.

a. These percentages are slightly inflated because some respondents falsely claim to be registered or to have voted.

Conclusion

In previous chapters it was discovered that there is a strong correlation between the implementation of Progressive Era reforms and the evolution of low voter turnout. In this chapter contemporary quantitative research projects have shown that the registration systems in place decrease turnout, and predicted that certain electoral reforms would lead to greater rates of participation. Moreover, it was found that once citizens are registered they tend to vote.

The findings thus far suggest that a strong correlation between low voter turnout and registration requirements

exists. Therefore, if these findings are accurate, recent reforms designed to reduce the costs of voting should lead to an expansion of the active electorate.

ENDNOTES

1. See, for example, Michael J. Avey, The Demobilization of American Voters: A Comprehensive Theory of Voter Turnout (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1989) and Joseph P. Harris, Registration of Voters in the United States (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution).

2. Bruce E. Cain and Ken McCue, "The Efficacy of Registration Drives," The Journal of Politics 47 (June 1985): 1221.

3. Raymond E. Wolfinger, David P. Glass, and Peverill Squire, "Predictors of Electoral Turnout: An International Comparison," Policy Studies Review 9 (Spring 1990): 563.

4. Steven J. Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen, Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America (New York: Macmillian Publishing Company, 1993), 207.

5. John R. Petrocik and Daron Shaw, "Nonvoting in America: Attitudes in Context." In William Crotty ed., Political Participation and American Democracy (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1991), 80.

6. Rosenstone and Hansen, 208.

7. William Kimberling, Federal Election Statistics (Washington D.C.: National Clearinghouse on Election Administration, 1992).

8. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, Why Americans Don't Vote (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 178.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 179.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Raymond E. Wolfinger, David P. Glass, and Peverill Squire, "Residential Mobility and Voter Turnout," American Political Science Review 81 (March 1987): 45.

14. The Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, "Creating the Opportunity: Voting and the Crisis of Democracy," Policy Studies Review 9 (Spring 1990): 588.

15. Ibid., 586.

16. Anthony Downs, An Economic Theory of Democracy (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), 260.

17. Steven J. Rosenstone and Raymond E. Wolfinger, "The Effects of Registration Laws on Voter Turnout," The American Political Science Review 72 (March 1978): 22-41.

18. Ibid., 26.

19. Steven J. Rosenstone and Raymond E. Wolfinger, Who Votes? (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 71.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 73.

22. Ibid.

23. Kimberling.

24. Rosenstone and Wolfinger, Who Votes?, 74-75.

25. Ibid.

26. The Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, 586.

27. Ibid., 598.

28. Ibid., 599.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., 591.

31. Ibid., 587.

32. Ibid., 590.

33. Ruy Teixeira, The Disappearing American Voter (Washington D. C.: The Brookings Institution, 1992), 110.

34. Ibid., 111.

35. Ibid., 125.

36. Ibid., 114.
37. Piven and Cloward, 260.
38. Kimberling.
39. Stanley Kelley, Jr., Richard E. Ayres, and William G. Bowen, "Registration and Voting: Putting First Things First," American Political Science Review (June 1967): 359-379.
40. Ibid., 360.
41. Ibid., 362.
42. Ibid.
43. Robert S. Erikson, "Why do People Vote? Because They are Registered," American Politics Quarterly 9, (July 1981): 259-276.
44. Ibid., 260.
45. Ibid., 261.
46. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1992 Current Population Reports, Series P20, no. 405.
47. Cited in Piven and Cloward, 261.
48. Bruce E. Cain and Ken McCue, "The Efficacy of Registration Drives," The Journal of Politics 47, (June 1984): 1224.
49. U.S. Bureau of the Census.
50. Erikson, 261.
51. Erikson, 265.
52. Teixeira, 9.
53. Piven and Cloward, 261.

CHAPTER FOUR

MOTOR VOTER LEGISLATION: A STATE-LEVEL ANALYSIS

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the impact of motor voter legislation on registration and turnout levels. The goal is to test the theory that decreasing the costs of voting will raise turnout rates, and subsequently, to obtain some insight into the effects of increasing the price of voting on participation levels. First, a brief review of the history of motor voter legislation is undertaken. Second, the impact of motor voter legislation on registration rates is assessed. Third, the effects of the measures on turnout is examined. Finally, a short discussion of the possible consequences of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 is provided.

The History of Motor-Voter Legislation

Between 1960 and 1988 voter turnout in presidential elections declined by almost 13 percent. Although the 1992 election witnessed about a 5 percent increase, nearly 45 percent of the voting age population still failed to exercise the franchise.¹ Disturbed by the continued

presence of large-scale nonvoting, many groups have pursued reforms that would increase participation rates.²

The most widely implemented measure, the so-called motor voter laws, was introduced by Michigan Secretary of State Richard Austin in 1975. Having authority over both the driver's license and voter registration application process, Austin decided to merge the two transactions into one.³ By allowing people the opportunity to establish their eligibility to vote, while getting or renewing their driver's license, it was hoped that the costs of registering to vote would be significantly reduced if not eliminated.⁴

Initially, many reformers throughout the country were wary of motor voter provisions. It was thought that allowing citizens to register at motor vehicle bureaus would disproportionately benefit the middle and upper classes. Their fears evaporated, however, once they realized that approximately 90 percent of the voting age population has a driver's license or state-issued personal identification card.⁵ Subsequently, a handful of other states (Arizona, Colorado, North Carolina, and Ohio) implemented motor voter laws by the end of 1984.⁶

Throughout the second half of the 1980's states around the country considered legislation designed to reduce the costs of voting. By the end of the decade, twenty-one states and the District of Columbia had passed laws allowing citizens to register to vote while applying for a driver's

license. Three years later Connecticut, Hawaii, Mississippi, New York, Pennsylvania, and Texas had also established motor voter programs.⁷

After the election of Bill Clinton, the drive to reduce the costs of registration received renewed attention at the federal level. In May of 1993, the National Voter Registration Act (1993), also known as the motor voter bill, was signed into law.⁸ The legislation requires that all citizens be allowed to register when applying for a driver's license, at certain state and local public agencies, and through the U.S. mail. The provisions must be implemented in most jurisdictions by January 1, 1995. States that have to amend their constitutions in order to observe the law have until January 1, 1996. States without registration requirements (North Dakota) or with provisions allowing for registration on election day (Maine, Minnesota, and Wisconsin) are exempted from the legislation.⁹

The Impact of Motor Voter Laws on Registration Rates

At this point in time it is difficult to ascertain the effects of motor voter legislation on registration rates. The difficulty arises, in part, from the fact that the provisions are relatively new; subsequently, the ability to observe the impact of the measures over an extended period of time is not yet possible.¹⁰ Also, most jurisdictions do not have the data that would allow for an exact count of the

number of citizens directly effected by the policies.¹¹ However, the information that is available clearly shows that states with established motor voter programs have experienced increases in registration levels.

The information in Table 4-1 presents the registration rates in presidential election years for the five states with the oldest motor voter programs. In Michigan the results were immediate and substantial, with over a 6 percent jump in the number of citizens who had established their eligibility to vote between 1972 and 1980. Even more impressive is the fact that Ohio experienced a 19.4 percent increase in just eight years (1976-84). The registration levels achieved in these two jurisdictions are striking when contrasted with the 1992 rates in the comparable states of New York (67.5) and Pennsylvania (65.6).¹²

Table 4-1. Registration Rates in Five States for Presidential Election Years, 1972-1992^a

State	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992
Arizona	65.5	57.7	56.9	64.5	69.0	71.5
Colorado	76.1	74.1	67.6	68.9	81.5	80.1
Michigan	81.1	83.7	87.8	89.9	87.6	88.9
N. Carolina	66.5	65.4	64.9	71.3	69.9	73.2
Ohio	63.9	61.7	76.0	81.1	79.3	80.3
State Avg.	70.6	68.5	70.6	75.4	77.5	78.8
National Avg.	70.8	70.6	70.3	72.8	70.5	72.4

Source: Kimberling 1992.

a. Percentages in bold print indicate the first presidential elections with motor voter provisions in place.

The results are just as meaningful in the states of Arizona and Colorado. In Arizona, where motor voter legislation was signed into law in 1982, the registration

rates increased by 14.6 percent over a 12 year period (1980-92).¹³ Later, in 1984, the people of Colorado approved their own motor voter referendum, and saw a 12 percent expansion in the next presidential election.¹⁴

A similar tendency occurred in the state of North Carolina. After passing motor voter legislation in 1983, the state experienced a 6.4 percent increase in its registration rates before the next presidential election.¹⁵ By 1992, the level had reached 73.2 percent, compared to the rates achieved in South Carolina (57.5) and Georgia (64.2) that same year.¹⁶

When the average registration levels of the five states are compared with national rates, the findings are significant (see Table 4-1). Gradually, as each of the jurisdictions implemented their motor voter programs, the state average caught up to and then surpassed the national mean. In the most recent presidential election, the five states outpaced the nation by over 6 percentage points.¹⁷

The increase in registration rates has been consistent even during midterm election years (see Table 4-2). Between 1982 and 1990, the states of Arizona and Colorado both experienced over a 14 percent increase in the percentage of the voting age population registered to vote in off-year elections. In Ohio the results were also as substantial, with rates increasing by nearly 13.9 percent during the 1974-86 time period.¹⁸

The impact of motor voter laws in the remaining states was less dramatic, but still noteworthy. In Michigan, registration rates expanded by almost 10 percent between the 1974 and 1990 mid-term elections. North Carolina achieved a 6.7 percent increase during the 1978 to 1990 time period.¹⁹

Table 4-2. Registration Rates in Five States in Mid-term Elections, 1974-1990^a

State	1974	1978	1982	1986	1990
Arizona	59.8	54.9	54.6	66.6	68.9
Colorado	70.8	68.2	64.3	75.2	78.5
Michigan	78.9	81.6	86.4	86.4	88.0
N. Carolina	61.1	59.4	60.5	65.1	66.1
Ohio	60.7	67.8	72.6	74.6	72.0
State Avg.	66.3	66.3	67.7	73.6	74.7
National Avg.	68.2	66.7	66.6	67.8	66.6

Source: Election Data Services 1994.

a. Percentages in bold print indicate the first mid-term elections with motor voter programs in place.

The mid-term performance of the five motor voter states is impressive when compared to the entire country. Once again, as the states reduced the costs of registering they matched and then passed the national rate. By 1990, the group had a mean registration rate of 74.7 percent, over 8 percent larger than the national average. Even Arizona, which still maintains a restrictive 50-day closing date, currently fares better than the nation-at-large.²⁰ Only North Carolina ranks below the country's mid-term mean. However, its 1990 registration rate (66.1) is more impressive when contrasted with the levels achieved by the comparable states of Georgia (57.9) and South Carolina (52.6).²¹

The results of the analysis thus far are clear; those states with established motor voter programs have experienced increases in registration levels. Furthermore, as the costs of registering were reduced, the five state average gradually caught up to, and then surpassed the national mean in both presidential and mid-term election years.

The Impact of Motor Voter Legislation on Voter Turnout Rates

The effect of motor voter legislation on turnout rates, like registration levels, is rather difficult to determine at this time. Presently, analysis is limited due to the infancy of the programs and the inability to account for the numerous factors, like party competition and the salience of political issues, which influence political participation.²² However, the information that is available strongly suggests that motor voter programs can lead to increased turnout.

Table 4-3 displays the voter participation levels in all national elections since 1972. When comparing the group of five states with the entire country, the results are significant. In the early presidential elections (1972-84), the average national turnout exceeded the results produced by the states. But, once all five motor voter programs were in place, the group produced greater turnouts, on average,

than the nation-at-large in both the 1988 and 1992 elections.²³

The results for the mid-term years were just as substantial, with the five states maintaining a higher mean than the nation. In fact, the gap between state and national averages gradually expanded from .04 percent in 1978, to 3.3 percent six years later, and up to nearly 6 percent in 1990. In general, once all five motor voter programs were in place, the states, as a group, produced turnout rates which were larger than the national average.²⁴

Table 4-3. Voter Turnout in Presidential and Mid-term Elections, 1972-1992^a

Presidential Elections						
State	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992
Arizona	47.4	46.1	44.4	45.2	44.9	55.2
Colorado	59.5	58.8	55.8	55.1	55.2	63.9
Michigan	59.4	58.8	59.9	57.9	54.0	62.7
N. Carolina	42.8	42.9	43.9	47.4	43.4	50.1
Ohio	57.3	55.1	55.3	58.0	55.1	61.9
State Avg.	53.3	52.3	51.9	52.7	50.5	58.8
National Avg.	55.2	53.5	52.6	53.1	50.1	55.9
Mid-term Elections						
State	1974	1978	1982	1986	1990	
Arizona	37.5	31.2	35.5	37.1	40.6	
Colorado	47.8	42.9	45.8	45.5	42.7	
Michigan	43.8	46.6	48.2	36.8	38.6	
N. Carolina	27.3	27.8	29.9	33.6	40.9	
Ohio	43.1	39.5	45.4	45.7	44.9	
State Avg.	39.9	37.6	40.9	39.7	41.5	
National Avg.	38.2	37.2	39.8	36.4	36.4	

Source: Kimberling 1992 for presidential elections and Election Data Services for mid-term elections.
a. Percentages in bold print indicate the first election with motor voter provisions in place.

The effect of motor voter legislation on turnout rates at the state level is varied. In two of the jurisdictions, North Carolina and Arizona, the increases in participation were rather sizable. After establishing their program, North Carolina saw its mid-term and presidential turnout rates enlarge by 10.7 percent and 6.2 percent, respectfully, over a twelve year period (1980-92). The results in Arizona were similar, with an expansion between 1980 and 1992 of 10.8 percent during presidential elections and 5.1 percent in the off-years.²⁵

The outcomes of the measures were somewhat less extensive in Colorado and Ohio. For example, the Ohio experienced an increase of 6.6 percent in presidential elections over a twelve year period (1980-92), while mid-term rates were enhanced by 5.9 percent between 1978 and 1986. In Colorado, off-year turnout remained relatively stable at the same time that on-year rates expanded by 8.8 percent (1984-92).²⁶

After enjoying a large boost in registration rates, Michigan has achieved minimal, and often unstable, increases in participation. Once the motor voter provisions were in place, turnout reached 59.9 percent in 1980, dropped to 54.0 percent eight years later, and then reached a new high of 62.7 percent in the last presidential election. A similar trend occurred for off-year elections, with participation peaking in 1982 at 48.2 percent, then falling to 38.6

percent in 1990.²⁷ According to unofficial estimates, however, turnout has rebounded, reaching approximately 45 percent in the most recent mid-term election.²⁸

Several conclusions have been reached in this section. First, as a group, the motor voter states have produced turnout rates which are higher than the national average. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the gap between the two groups is growing wider with every election. Finally, most of the states have enjoyed substantial increases in participation levels in both presidential and mid-term election years. However, some states, like Michigan, have experienced minimal, and often unstable, gains in turnout.

The National Voter Registration Act of 1993

The previous discussion allows for the development of some insight into the potential effects of the motor voter provisions in the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) of 1993. In order to see what the magnitude of the consequences might be, the experiences of the five states with the oldest motor voter programs will be applied to the entire country.²⁹ Also, a brief discussion of comments made by Ruy Teixeira concerning legislation similar to the NVRA of 1993 will be provided.³⁰

Allowing citizens in every state to register while getting or renewing their driver's license should lead to an overall increase in the number of registrants. Once all of

the five motor voter states had programs in place, they produced registration rates which were about 7 percent greater than the national average in both presidential (1988-92) and mid-term (1986-90) elections (see Tables 4-1 and 4-2). Assuming that the entire country would experience comparable results with similar provisions in place, over twelve million more citizens would have been eligible to vote in both the 1990 and 1992 general elections.³¹

Given the increase in registration rates, a corresponding trend in turnout should also be expected. During the 1992 election, the five states generated a 2.9 percent larger turnout than the national mean (see Table 4-3). Once again, if all jurisdictions had similar policies and experiences, over 5 million more Americans would have cast their ballots in the last presidential election. The consequences in the mid-term years would be even greater, with a projected nine million more citizens exercising the franchise in 1990.³²

Since motor voter programs are a relatively new electoral measure, political scientists have not produced any sophisticated statistical analyses of the impact that they may have. However, Ruy Teixeira was able to provide some beneficial insight by suggesting that motor voter laws and election day registration are analogous, in that they both come close to eliminating the costs of registering.³³ Having already calculated that eliminating the closing date

could increase turnout by 4.8 percent in on-year elections, he found that a national motor voter law might expand participation by 4.2 percent.³⁴

The above analysis focused upon the impact of motor voter legislation on registration and turnout rates. Several conclusions were reached. First, states with established motor voter programs have witnessed increases in registration and turnout rates. Second, as a group the five states have produced participation and registration rates which are higher than the national average. Finally, national motor voter legislation can be expected to produce significant increases in turnout.

ENDNOTES

1. William Kimberling, Federal Election Statistics (Washington D.C.: National Clearinghouse on Election Administration, 1992).
2. Jordan Moss, "Motor Voter: From Movement to Legislation," Social Policy 24 (Winter 1993): 22.
3. Ibid., 27.
4. Ruy Teixeira, The Disappearing American Voter (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1992), 130.
5. Moss, 27.
6. "State Motor Voter Laws," Congressional Digest 72 (March 1993): 72.
7. Ibid., 96.
8. Moss, 21.
9. "Summary of H.R. 2," Congressional Digest 72 (March 1993): 75-76.
10. Teixeira, 130.
11. Robert S. Montjoy, Motor Voter Registration Programs (Washington D.C.: National Clearinghouse on Election Administration, 1992), 18.
12. Kimberling.
13. "State Motor-Voter Laws," 72.
14. Ibid., 96.
15. Ibid.
16. Kimberling.
17. Ibid.

18. The information on mid-term election and turnout rates was provided by Dean Plotnick of Election Data Services.

19. Ibid.

20. In the state of Arizona the ability to register to vote is ended fifty days before elections are held.

21. Ibid. The political cultures in North Carolina, Georgia, and South Carolina are very similar. See, for example, Daniel Elazar, American Federalism: A View from the States (New York: Cromwell, 1972), Chap. 4.

22. Montjoy, 18.

23. Kimberling.

24. Election Data Services.

25. Kimberling.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. The information was provided via a telephone conversation with a staff member of the Elections Division of the Michigan Department of State.

29. The applicability of the five states to the entire country is enhanced by the fact that the group is somewhat representative of the geographic regions and political cultures within the United States.

30. Teixeira, 130.

31. The populations of those states without registration requirements or that allow for election day registration were not incorporated into the calculations of the possible increases in registration rates. Information on voting age populations was provided by Election Data Services.

32. Populations of those states that do not require registration or that allow for election day registration were not incorporated into the calculations of increases in voter turnout. Information on the total number of citizens registered was provided by Kimberling and Election Data Services.

33. Teixeira, 130.

34. Ibid., 131. Author simply adjusted the size of the affected population in order to estimate the impact of motor voter laws in presidential elections. $4.8 \times .87$ (percent of population with driver's license) = 4.2. Also, Teixeira's estimate of 4.2 percent is only slightly larger than, but not inconsistent with, the 2.9 percent presented by the author.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the entire research project and the major conclusions that have been reached. First, a brief discussion of the findings presented in the previous sections is forwarded. Second, possibilities for further research will be examined. Finally, a few general observations concerning the future of voter turnout and associated electoral reforms are provided.

Summary

This research project has explored the relationship between voter registration laws and low voter turnout. First, the existence of low voter turnout was established. Then, historical and quantitative information was employed to display the effect of registration requirements on citizen participation. Finally, a review of the impact of motor voter legislation was utilized to verify the relationship.

In the first chapter, the level of voter turnout in the United States and the desirability of increasing citizen participation were explored. A historical review demonstrated that contemporary turnout rates are lower than those produced during earlier periods of American history (see Table 1-1).¹ A comparative analysis showed that other advanced democracies routinely produce higher turnout rates than the U.S. (see Table 1-2).² Also, it was found that voter participation has a significant influence on the legitimacy of public institutions, policy outcomes, and the political socialization of individuals.³

In chapter two, the historical relationship between registration requirements and low voter turnout was demonstrated. Clearly, there has been a struggle for the right to vote throughout American history. Citizens who are disenfranchised seek suffrage, while those who are already in the electorate often attempt to preserve their political advantage.⁴

During the Progressive Era, reformers succeeded in disenfranchising millions of potential voters by developing highly restrictive registration systems.⁵ These electoral barriers continued to suppress voter turnout throughout the first half of the twentieth century, even during periods of economic depression and highly competitive elections. Having adapted to the shrunken active electorate, neither of

the major political parties found it necessary or desirable to mobilize the unpredictable nonvoting population.⁶

Although many of the more obvious barriers to participation were eliminated during the 1960's, the administrative provisions are still in place, and voter turnout remains comparatively low.⁷ Presently, voter participation in presidential elections hovers just above the 50 percent mark.⁸

In the third chapter, numerous quantitative research projects were utilized to illustrate the impact of registration requirements on voter turnout. It was found that the process which potential voters must go through in order to establish their eligibility to vote is more difficult than it might otherwise be.⁹ Also, a review of several highly respected studies showed that the registration systems in place decrease turnout and that certain electoral reforms would lead to greater rates of participation.¹⁰ Finally, it was demonstrated that once citizens are registered, they are very likely to exercise the franchise.¹¹

The analysis in chapter four focused on the impact of motor voter legislation on registration and turnout levels. The main objective was to test the notion that reducing the costs of voting will raise turnout rates. A series of conclusions were reached.

First, those states with established motor voter programs have experienced increases in registration levels. Also, as the costs of registering was reduced, the five state average gradually caught up to and subsequently surpassed the national mean in both presidential and mid-term elections (see Tables 4-1 and 4-2).

Second, motor voter states have enjoyed substantial increases in participation levels in both presidential and mid-term elections. As a group, the five states have produced turnout rates which are higher than the national average. Moreover, the gap between the two groups appears to be growing wider (see Table 4-3).

Third, if the experiences of the five motor voter states is applied to the entire country, substantial increases in registration and turnout rates can be anticipated.¹²

Participation rates in the United States today are historically and comparatively low. The presence of large-scale nonvoting is, in part, related to the presence of restrictive registration requirements throughout the country. When the costs of registering are reduced, the probability that citizens will vote increases.

Suggestions for Further Research

The presence of large-scale nonvoting in the United States has generated a considerable amount of scholarly

activity. However, given the complexity of the phenomena of low voter turnout, and the recent passage of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, there is still plenty of room and opportunity for continued research.

One area that requires examination, is the relationship between the historical role of registration requirements and the evolution of increasing political alienation. In the past decade, several groundbreaking studies have been completed on the role of each of these variables in reducing voter turnout. But, no extensive examination of the relationship between the two has yet to be conducted. For example, Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward have argued that the legal reforms implemented during the Progressive Era are the underlying cause of low participation rates. Although the authors suggested that registration requirements have played a crucial role in allowing for the development of widespread political alienation, they failed to develop the relationship.¹³

In 1992, Ruy Teixeira found that the largest contributor to contemporary nonvoting was the increasing sense of being disconnected from the political process.¹⁴ A year later, Steven J. Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen obtained similar results.¹⁵ However, neither of the studies elaborated upon the potential relationship between registration requirements and political alienation.

It seems quite plausible that those demographic groups which were disenfranchised by the Progressive Era reforms are currently disconnected from the political process.¹⁶ As citizens lost the ability to exercise the franchise, they were denied the most basic form of political socialization.¹⁷ Overtime, as political parties adapted to the shrunken active electorate, they became reluctant to mobilize the nonvoting population.¹⁸ Lacking a history of voting and active representation, those groups most affected by the restrictive electoral laws have become increasingly alienated from the political process.

Research into the relationship between the historical role of registration requirements and the increasing sense of political alienation could accomplish at least two goals. First, it might begin to build a bridge between two different approaches to understanding electoral behavior, thus allowing for movement towards the development of a truly comprehensive theory of voter turnout. Also, it could provide insight into what actions are necessary to affectively diminish large-scale nonvoting.

There are numerous other areas that invite further research. The most obvious is the need to determine the short and long term effects of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 on electoral behavior. Will the reduction in the costs of voting lead to an increase in registration rates? What about turnout? What demographic

groups are the most and least affected? If participation increases, will party competition intensify? Are policy outcomes and the level of political alienation altered in the long run? These and many other related questions need to be addressed.

Closing Observations

The future of voter turnout in the United States is relatively uncertain. There is, however, some room for optimism. For example, participation in the 1992 presidential election (55.9) was over 5 percent larger than the rates achieved in 1988 (50.2). Moreover, turnout for midterm elections has expanded slightly, growing by over 1 percent between 1990 (36.4) and 1994 (37.8).¹⁹ Although the increases in participation are small, and possibly insignificant, they may indicate that the downward trend in turnout has ended.

Another reason for optimism is the passage of the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) of 1993. The legislation, which allows citizens to register at motor vehicle bureaus and other public agencies, will substantially reduce the costs of voting for many Americans. As discussed in chapter 4, the NVRA promises to increase both registration and turnout rates. The law took effect on January 1, 1995, and the preliminary data suggest that

millions of potential voters will benefit from the simplified registration process.²⁰

As a democracy, the United States must move aggressively to encourage participation for two reasons. First, large-scale nonvoting has potentially undesirable effects on the legitimacy of public institutions, policy outcomes, and the political socialization of individuals. Finally, as E. E. Schattschneider stated, ". . . a free society maximizes the contagion of conflict; it invites intervention and gives a high priority to the participation of the public in conflict."²¹ The need for further reforms, like the implementation of an automatic registration system, must be actively considered.

ENDNOTES

1. See, for example, Raymond A. Wolfinger and Steven J. Rosenstone, Who Votes? (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) and Kevin P. Phillips and Paul Blackman, Electoral Reform and Voter Participation (Washington D.C.: AEI for Public Policy Research, 1975).

2. See, for example, Raymond E. Wolfinger, David P. Glass, and Peverill Squire, "Predictors of Electoral Turnout: An International Comparison," Policy Studies Review 9, (Spring 1990): 551-573 and G. Bingham Powell, Jr., "American Voter Turnout in Comparative Perspective," American Political Science Review 80 (March 1986): 17-37.

3. See, for example, Carole Pateman, Participation and Democratic Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) and Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations (Boston: Little Brown & Company, 1965).

4. M. Margaret Conway, Political Participation in the United States (Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 1985), 83.

5. Phillips and Blackman, 50.

6. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, Why Americans Don't Vote (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), xi.

7. Steven J. Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen, Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993), 198.

8. William Kimberling, Federal Election Statistics (Washington D.C.: National Clearinghouse on Election Administration, 1992).

9. See, for example, Michael J. Avey, The Demobilization of American Voters: A Comprehensive Theory of Voter Turnout (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1989) and Joseph P. Harris, Registration of Voters in the United States (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1929).

10. See, for example, The Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, "Creating the Opportunity: Voting and the Crisis of Democracy," Policy Studies Review 9 (Spring 1990): 583-601 and Ruy Teixeira, The Disappearing American Voter (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1992).

11. Robert S. Erikson, "Why do People Vote? Because They are Registered," American Politics Quarterly 9 (July 1981): 259-276.

12. Teixeira, 130.

13. Piven and Cloward, xi.

14. Teixeira, 57.

15. Rosenstone and Hansen, 229.

16. Walter Dean Burnham, Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), 153.

17. Pateman, 42-3.

18. Piven and Cloward, xi.

19. Kimberling.

20. "Motor Voter Law Adds Thousands to Rolls," Missoulian, 27 March 1995, sec. A, p. 7.

21. E. E. Schattschneider, The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1960), 5.

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