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Why don't Americans vote?: a study of modern challenges to the would-be voter

Emily McDaniels
Vassar College

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Why Don't Americans Vote?

A Study of Modern Challenges to the Would-be Voter

Emily McDaniels

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Senior Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Bachelor of Arts in Urban Studies

Advisor, Professor Tim Koechlin

Advisor, Professor Sidney Plotkin

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Acknowledgements..... | 3 |
| Chapter One: Introduction..... | 4 |
| Chapter Two: Who Votes, Who Doesn't, and Why It Matters..... | 7 |
| Chapter Three: Why Aren't Americans Voting? The Conundrum of the Eligible Nonvoter..... | 25 |
| Chapter Four: Discrimination and Suppression at the Ballot Box..... | 36 |
| Chapter Five: Conclusions..... | 52 |
| Works Cited..... | 55 |

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Bridgett A. King writes that “over the course of American history, voting has been described as a right, privilege, and duty.”¹ Despite this “duty,” a majority of Americans do not vote regularly; in 2016, only about 60 percent of voting-age Americans cast their vote for the presidency, and that proportion drops well below 50 percent for midterm and local elections.² Concerns about America’s low voter turnout have persisted throughout much of American history, and perhaps one of the most commonly repeated explanations as to why people don’t vote in America is that people are uninterested in the political system. Some scholars argue that having a greater amount of participation in elections would not matter, as it would not change the course of policy due to the influences of capital on the American political system.³ Yet people of color, the poor, and other disempowered groups are vastly underrepresented among those who vote. It is possible that encouraging and facilitating their engagement and therefore having more complete participation could perhaps ameliorate some of the issues in our electoral system. This thesis delves into the questions of who is voting, why it matters that some people aren’t voting, and what factors are preventing people from making their way to the ballot box.

I begin in Chapter Two by addressing the first two questions posed above. I look at the composition of the population of the United States as compared to both the composition of the

¹ Bridgett A. King, “Introduction: Why Don’t Americans Vote? The History of the Franchise in the United States,” in *Why Don’t Americans Vote? Causes and Consequences*, eds. Bridgett A. King and Kathleen Hale, (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2016), xii.

² George Pillsbury and Julian Johannesen, “America Goes to the Polls: A Report on Voter Turnout,” *Nonprofit VOTE and US Elections Project*, <http://www.nonprofitvote.org/america-goes-to-the-polls-2016/>

³ Martin Gilens, *Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014).

voting population and the United States Congress, and I establish that these groups are extraordinarily mismatched from each other. I also discuss why it matters that some groups participate less than others.

I then move on to grapple with the bigger question of why so many people are not voting. The third chapter focuses on individuals who are eligible to vote but do not and elaborates on some of the most commonly given arguments and conditions that factor into their decision to not participate. From voter apathy to the monetary and personal costs of registering and voting, there are many detractors that contribute to Americans deciding not to vote.

The fourth chapter explores the concept that some people may wish to vote but are deterred by individuals or groups that wish to control the political system through the systematic exclusion of certain would-be voters. Some tactics that are employed to accomplish voter disenfranchisement include over-complicating the registration and voting processes, purging voter rolls, caging voters, and disenfranchising felons. These methods are by no means the only ones that prevent people from voting, but from my research they appear to be the most influential and widespread. All of these methods of suppressing votes specifically target minority voters, especially African Americans.

Through Chapter Three and Chapter Four, I conclude that there are two main categories of factors that deter people from voting; some people choose on their own to not vote, while others are the victims of policies and strategies that are specifically designed to make it harder for them to vote. Thus there is not one clear answer as to why people don't vote, but a variety of factors are at play, affecting different kinds of people differently.

In America, the idea that voting is a right exists in theory but not in practice. These findings show that it is impossible to accept that Americans are being adequately and equally represented in political offices. This project effectively nullifies the widespread belief that people simply don't care enough to vote; the situation is much more complex when it comes to Americans not casting ballots. The fact of the matter is that for many, the option to vote has been taken away from them by certain interest groups and parties that benefit from limiting the voting franchise to certain demographics, and thus continue to actively shut some people out of the political process.

Chapter 2

Who Votes, Who Doesn't, and Why It Matters

Why should it matter if all Americans vote? Many studies have shown that even if everyone were to show up on Election Day, the results would rarely be different. However, certain groups of Americans are much more active among the voting pool, thus indicating that they are the ones more likely to be catered to by those in office. Of course, the role of corporate finance is also important, possibly more important than the will of the voters in the legislative process, which relegates the needs of nonvoters even lower on the list of priorities for their representatives in government. This chapter will seek to answer the questions of what groups are currently underrepresented in the voting pool and why it matters that people show up on Election Day. First, I will look at the composition of the United States' population and break it down into several different focus areas. Some of the most crucial areas worth examining are race, gender, age, education, and socio-economic status. I then break down the demographic information on the voting population and discuss where the largest gaps in representation are. Next, I look at how federal governing bodies (specifically Congress) are broken down within these categories, including an overview of some relevant milestones. Finally, I explore why the discrepancies between the United States' population versus how federal officials fit within those demographics matter, specifically in regards to why it is so important for people to exercise their right to vote.

Who Makes Up the U.S. Population?

Before I begin this section, it is worth noting that I rely heavily on data concerning the population of the United States collected by the U.S. Census Bureau. The U.S. Census is an

extremely large survey that reaches the majority of the United States' population; in 2010, 72 percent of American households participated in the Census survey.⁴ With about a three-fourths response rate, it is possible that these data counts may slightly over- and under-represent some groups, if certain demographics are more or less likely to respond than others.

Race and Ethnicity

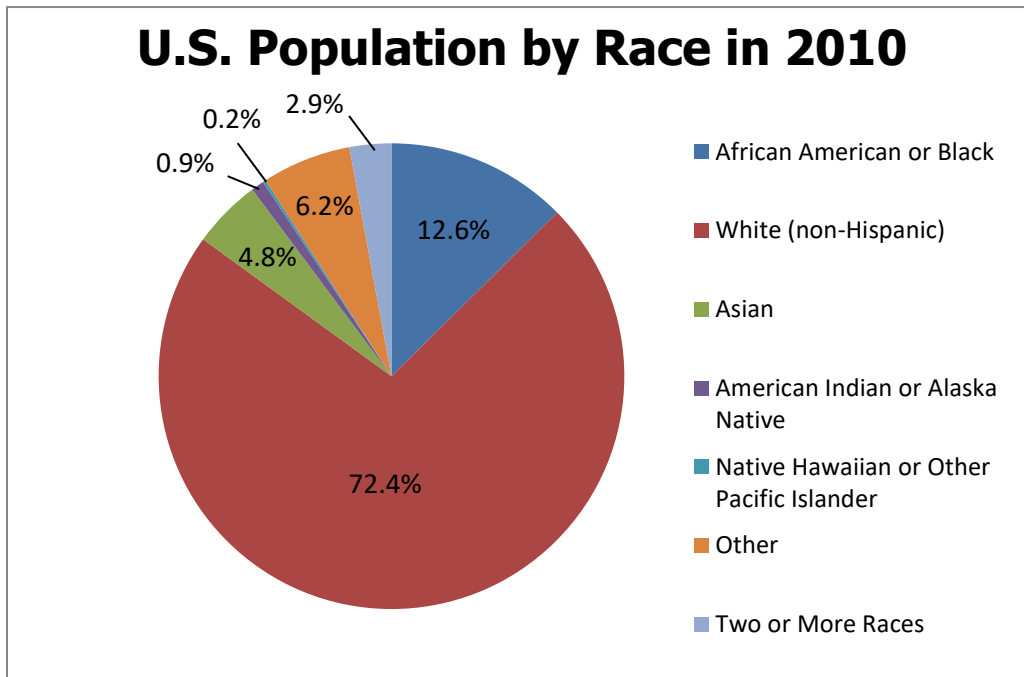
In the 2010 Census, 72.4 percent of the American population identified as white, 12.6 percent identified as African American or black, 4.8 percent as Asian, 0.9 percent as American Indian or Alaskan Native, 0.2 percent as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 6.2 percent as other, and 2.9 identified with more than one racial group.⁵ This breakdown is included below in Figure 1. Furthermore, 16.3 percent considered themselves Hispanic or Latino, while 83.7 did not. More recent surveys completed by the Census Bureau indicate that these proportions are shifting. As recently as July of 2016, for example, the proportion of the population that identifies as white (non-Hispanic) has decreased drastically, hovering just above 60 percent. This decrease is offset by modest increases in most of the other racial categories, most notably within the African American and black category, whose proportion increased to 13.3 percent, as well as the Asian population and the American Indian and Alaskan Native populations, which increased to be 5.7 percent and 1.3 percent, respectively. It is important to acknowledge here that the Census methodology for identifying individuals is not consistent across the two study dates, 2010 and 2016. The 2010 survey does not provide a specific response for Hispanic and Latino persons, but instead added them to the "Some Other Race" category, and then then goes on to distinguish

⁴ "The Numbers Are In: 72 Percent of Nation's Households Mail Back 2010 Census Forms," *United States Census 2010* (April 28, 2010) <https://www.census.gov/2010census/news/releases/operations/the-numbers-are-in.html>

⁵ Karen R. Humes, Nicholas A. Jones, and Roberto R. Ramirez, "Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2010," *United States Census Bureau*, United States Census 2010 (March 2011) <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-02.pdf>

between Hispanic and non-Hispanic Americans in a separate analysis. In the 2016 data, Hispanic or Latino is counted as its own racial group that is included within the percentages that make up the whole United States' population.

Figure 1: U.S. Population by Race in 2010



The Pew Research Center finds that the Hispanic and Latino population is one of the fastest growing populations in America; from 2000 to 2007, there was 4.4 percent growth, and following the onset of the economic depression that growth slowed to be 2.8 percent through 2014. At 2.8 percent, the Hispanic and Latino population has fallen behind the Asian population, which experienced a growth rate of 3.4 percent from 2007-2014.⁶ These two groups are projected

⁶ Jens Manuel Krogstad, "Key facts about how the U.S. Hispanic population is changing," *Pew Research Center*, September 8, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/08/key-facts-about-how-the-u-s-hispanic-population-is-changing/>

to be responsible for a majority of the growth that the United States will see over the next several decades, mostly due to immigration.⁷

Age and Gender

In regards to gender, the American population is 50.8 percent female and 49.2 percent male, according to the U.S. Census taken in 2010.⁸ As of 2016, this ratio has stayed essentially the same.⁹ The United States' population is fairly young; about a quarter is less than 18 years old, while 60.5 percent is less than 45 years old.¹⁰ However, the concentration of Americans by age group has shifted since the 2000 Census, where 25.7 percent of the population was under 18 years old and 65.6 percent was under 45 years old.¹¹

Education

As for education, in 2015, 88.4 percent of the American population that was twenty five or older had at least graduated from high school; 42.3 percent had an Associate's degree or more, 32.5 had a Bachelor's degree or more, and 12.0 percent had an Advanced degree.¹² This distribution has shifted throughout America's history; for example in 1980, the percent of the population that had received at least a high school diploma was just 66.5 percent, and only 16.2 percent had a Bachelor's Degree. By 2000, these proportions had increased to 80.4 and 24.4,

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Lindsay M. Howden and Julie A. Meyer, "Age and Sex Composition: 2010," *United States Census Bureau* (May 2011) <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-03.pdf>

⁹ "Population Distribution by Gender," *The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation* (2016) <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/distribution-by-gender/?currentTimeframe=0&selectedRows=%7B%22wrapups%22:%7B%22united-states%22:%7B%7D%7D%7D&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>

¹⁰ Howden and Meyer, "Age and Sex Composition 2010," 2.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Camille L. Ryan and Kurt Bauman, "Educational Attainment in the United States: 2015," *United States Census Bureau* (March 2016) <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2016/demo/p20-578.pdf>, 2.

respectively.¹³ Although education attainment has increased among Americans generally, some groups have seen more growth here than others. For example, in 2015, 88.8 percent of white people older than 25 had their high school diplomas, whereas 87.0 percent of black people, 89.1 of Asian people, and just 66.7 percent of Hispanic people had graduated from high school.¹⁴ In regards to obtaining a Bachelor's degree, the differences between racial groups are even starker; in 2015, 32.8 percent of white people had received a Bachelor's degree, contrasted with 22.5 percent of black Americans, 53.9 percent of Asian people, and 15.5 percent of Hispanics.¹⁵

While men and women have historically been unequal in regards to levels of education achieved, data collected in 2015 projects that women actually achieve slightly higher levels of education as compared to men. For example, 88.0 percent of males had graduated from high school, while 88.8 percent of females had done the same, and 32.3 percent of males had received their bachelor's degree, while 32.7 percent of females had accomplished this feat.¹⁶

Income and Socio-Economic Status

The distribution of the American population by income is also worth noting. In 2015, 44.8 percent of households earned less than \$50,000, while 28.8 percent earned from \$50,000 to \$100,000. 26.4 percent earned more than \$100,000.¹⁷ Of the United States' population, 13.5

¹³ "A Half-Century of Learning: Historical Census Statistics on Educational Attainment in the United States, 1940 to 2000: Tables," *United States Census Bureau* (2015) <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/educational-attainment/educational-attainment-1940-2000.html>, tables 1 and 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid* table 3.

¹⁵ Ryan and Bauman, "Educational Attainment in the United States: 2015," 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁷ "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2015," *United States Census Bureau*, table A-1 <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2016/demo/income-poverty/p60-256.html>

percent lived in poverty as of 2015.¹⁸ Additionally, poverty does not affect demographic groups evenly. For example there are variations in age groups' poverty levels. In 2015, 19.7 percent of people under age 18 lived in poverty, while 12.4 percent and 8.8 percent of people 18 to 64 and 65 and older, respectively, lived in poverty.¹⁹ Similarly, 11.6 percent of white (non-hispanic) Americans live in poverty, compared to 24.1 percent of blacks, 11.4 percent of Asians, and 21.4 percent of Hispanics.²⁰ It is also important to mention that over time, income inequality among racial and ethnic groups has become even more pronounced as income inequality in general grows. Rodney E. Hero and Morris E. Levy find in their study of this issue that "income divides between racial groups accounted for a larger share of total inequality in 2010 than they did in 1980."²¹

All of this information regarding the composition of the United States' population goes to show how vastly diverse the population is, in terms of race, gender, age, education, and socio-economic class. Now I turn to the composition of the electorate.

Who is voting?

In the 21st century, about 50 to 60 percent of the population eligible to vote has shown up for presidential elections; that number drops to about 40 percent or lower for midterm and other types of elections.²² The fact that a maximum of about 6 out of 10 Americans vote in elections is

¹⁸ Bernadette D. Proctor, Jessica L. Semega, and Melissa A Kollar, "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2015," *United States Census Bureau* (September 2016), 13.

¹⁹ *Ibid* 14.

²⁰ *Ibid* 13.

²¹ Rodney E. Hero and Mirris E. Levy, "The Racial Structures of Economic Inequality in the United States: Understanding Change and Continuity in an Era of 'Great Divergence,'" *Social Science Quarterly* 97, no. 3 (September 2016), 492, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/ssqu.12327>

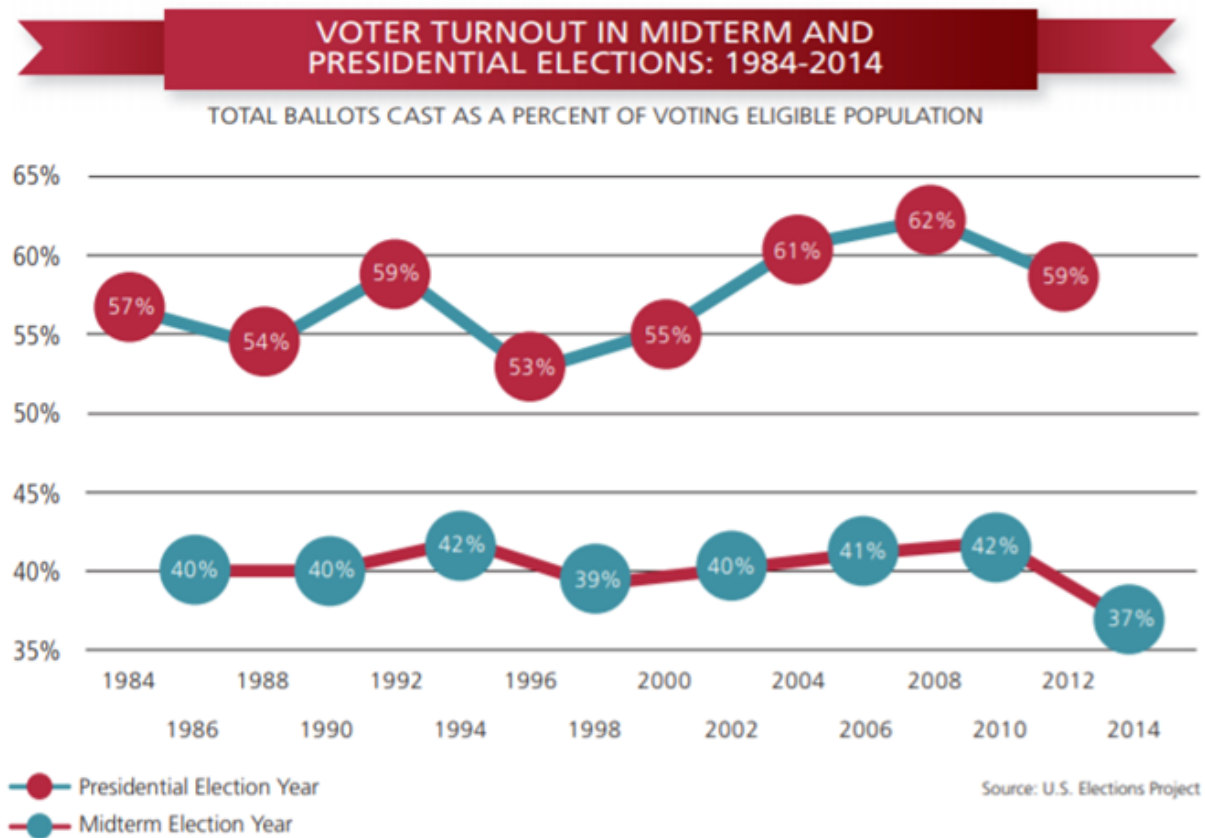
²² Bridgett A. King, "Introduction: Why Don't Americans Vote? The History of the Franchise in the United States," in *Why Don't Americans Vote? Causes and Consequences*, eds. Bridgett A. King and Kathleen Hale, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2016), xi.

shocking when compared to other similarly developed countries; for example, the United States' neighbors Mexico and Canada both experience well over 60 percent participation in their elections, and countries such as France and the United Kingdom have much higher participation than the United States with 67.9 percent and 68.7 percent, respectively.²³

Figure 2, included below, shows the percent turnout in American elections for both presidential and midterm elections since the presidential election of 1984. It shows that in the United States, participation has fluctuated a bit for presidential elections but has stayed between the low of 53 percent in 1996 and the high of 62 percent in 2008. Midterm elections have stayed more consistent over time, with the highest participation in 1990 and 2010 hitting 42 percent and the lowest being 2014's 37 percent.

²³ Alicia Parlapiano and Adam Pearce, "For Every 10 U.S. Adults, Six Vote and Four Don't/ What Separates Them?," *The New York Times* (September 13 2016) <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/09/13/us/politics/what-separates-voters-and-nonvoters.html> and "General elections turnout 1945-2017," *House of Commons*, Research Papers 01/37, 01/54, 05/33 & 10/36, <http://www.ukpolitical.info/Turnout45.htm>

Figure 2: “Voter Turnout in Midterm and Presidential Elections: 1984-2014”²⁴

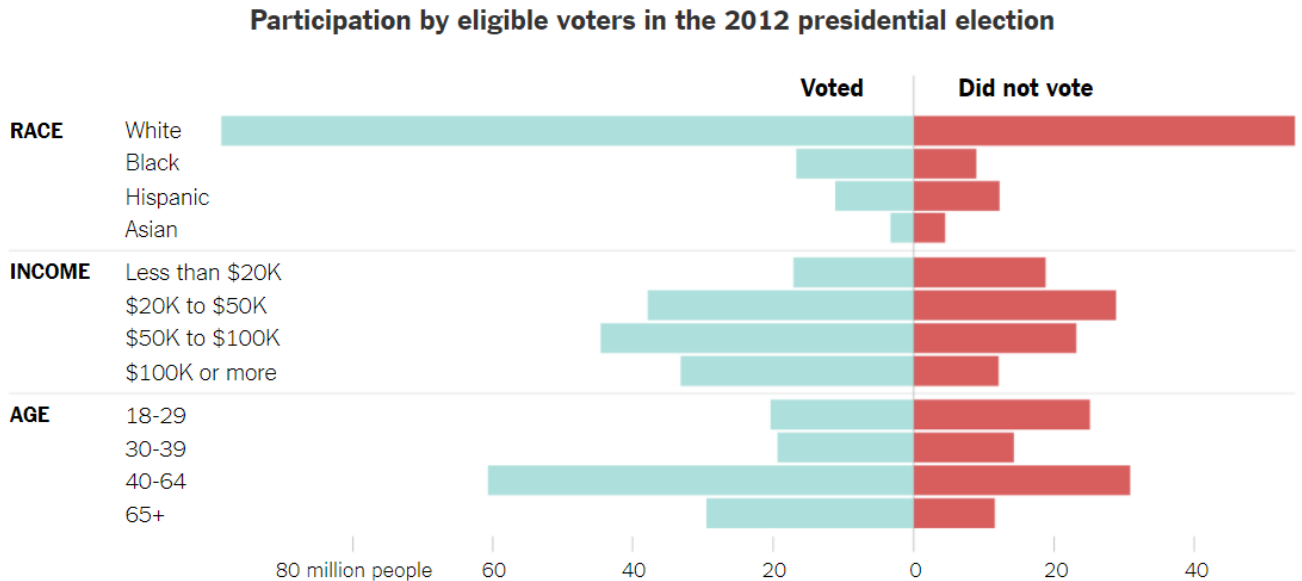


Presidential Elections

Those who show up to vote do not proportionately represent the impressive diversity that exists within the United States’ population; certain demographics are more likely to participate in elections. A graphic published by the New York Times in 2016, included below as Figure 3, displays some of the most obvious differences in how different groups participate in elections via voting, using the categories of race, income, and age.

²⁴ “America Goes to the Polls 2014: A Report on Voter Turnout in the 2014 Midterm Election,” *Nonprofit VOTE*, 1, <https://www.nonprofitvote.org/documents/2015/03/america-goes-polls-2014.pdf/>

Figure 3: Participation by eligible voters in the 2012 presidential election



From this graphic, it is apparent that there are differences in whether people vote or not, correlated with multiple identifying factors. Specifically, richer, older Americans are turning out to vote more than their younger, poorer counterparts. Benjamin Highton, a professor of political science at the University of California at Davis, attributes these tendencies to “motivational reasons- levels of political interest and engagement,” which he states are heavily connected to levels of education and income.²⁵ There are also variances in whether someone will turn out to vote based on racial and ethnic categories. Across the board, Hispanic and Latino people voted at a much lower rate than individuals from other racial groups, while Black Americans showed the highest percentage turnout of all racial categories.²⁶ Variances between racial and ethnic groups become especially pronounced when one considers intersectionality of voter identities through the combinations of race, education, gender, and/ or income, differences within and between racial and ethnic groups become even more pronounced. For example, about 90 percent of

²⁵ Parlapiano and Pearce, “For Every 10 U.S. Adults, Six Vote and Four Don’t. What Separates Them?”

²⁶ Ibid.

highly educated black Americans turned out to vote in the 2012 presidential election, as compared to about 30 percent of white Americans who had not graduated from high school.²⁷ It is also worth noting that across all racial groups, women turn out to vote at higher rates than men do, with black women turning up in the highest frequency at almost 80 percent.²⁸

In the 2016 presidential election, turnout was slightly higher than in 2012 at about 60 percent of eligible voters.²⁹ The proportion of young people participating in the 2016 election was similarly low when compared to older Americans; less than one half of eligible voters aged 18 to 29 voted, while about 70 percent of voters in the 45 to 59 and the 60 and older categories showed up to vote.³⁰ Hispanic and Latino voters, along with Asian voters, showed up at much lower rates than their white and black counterparts; both white and black voters participated at rates over 60 percent, whereas approximately 45 percent of eligible Hispanic and “other” race and ethnic groups voted.³¹ In regards to education, individuals with higher level attained voted in much higher proportions. For example, about 35 percent of people with no high school diploma turned out as compared to approximately 80 percent of those with education beyond college.³²

Midterm Elections

36.6 percent of eligible citizens voted in the 2014 midterm elections, which was the lowest percent participation since World War II.³³ According to Nonprofit VOTE, demographic breakdown by age shifts the most in participation from presidential to midterm years. In the 2012

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ George Pillsbury and Julian Johannesen, “America Goes to the Polls: A Report on Voter Turnout,” *Nonprofit VOTE and US Elections Project*, <http://www.nonprofitvote.org/america-goes-to-the-polls-2016/>

³⁰ Michael P. McDonald, “Voter Turnout Demographics,” *United States Elections Project*, <http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/demographics>

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Pillsbury and Johannesen, “America Goes to the Polls 2014,” 1.

presidential election, voters under age 40 represented 36 percent of the total voting pool; yet in the 2014 midterm election, that representation fell to 26 percent.³⁴ In the race and ethnicity category, the Latino population has steadily increased in prominence in midterm elections; in 2014 they represented 8 percent of all voters as compared to just 3 percent in 1994.³⁵ However, that improvement only reaches the halfway marker to the 16 percent of the American population who identified as Hispanic or Latino in the 2010 census. Income demographics also shifted from presidential to midterm years. In 2012, 41 percent of the electorate made less than \$50,000 per year while 59 percent made more than that, but in 2014, those percentages changed to be 36 and 64, respectively. This shift matches the electoral data from the midterm elections of 2010, where 37 percent of the electorate made less than \$50,000 and 63 percent made more than that.³⁶

Overall, peoples' backgrounds seem to be connected to how likely they are to show up on Election Day. Factors like race and ethnicity, education, wealth, and age are all relevant, both when looked at independently of each other and also when looked at in combination with each other. Furthermore, those demographics do not remain across different kinds of elections. Unfortunately, neither the American population as a whole nor the American voting population demographically matches the bodies that seek to represent them. In the next section, I look specifically at the composition of the chambers of the United States Congress.

Who Gets Elected to Congress?

Although the population of the United States is very diverse in terms of its racial components and the ratio of men and women is fairly close to equal, this diversity in the

³⁴ Ibid 13.

³⁵ Ibid 15.

³⁶ [Ibid](#) 19.

categories of gender and race are not proportionately represented in the governing bodies in the United States. White males comprise approximately 34 percent of the population as a whole; however they have a highly disproportionate access to federal positions, such as those in the House of Representatives and the Senate.

In the current session of the House of Representatives, 105 out of 435 seats are held by people of color.³⁷ It is worth noting that there is a stark contrast in representation of minority groups that falls along party lines; of the 42 total Hispanic members, 30 are Democrats and 12 are Republicans. Similarly, of the 14 Asian American representatives, 13 are Democrats and 1 is a Republican; of the 47 African American representatives, 45 are Democrats and 2 are Republican, and finally both of the 2 Native American representatives are Republicans.³⁸ In the Senate, just 10 out of 50 senators are people of color, with 4 Hispanic senators, 3 Asian American senators, 3 African American senators, and no Native American senators.³⁹ With so few senators of color, it is a bit more difficult to make concrete observations about their party affiliations, but they are as follows: the Hispanic senators split in half with 2 Democrats and 2 Republicans; all 3 of the Asian American senators are Democrats, and 2 of the African American senators are Democrats and 1 is a Republican.⁴⁰ As discussed above, close to 40 percent of the American population does not identify as white, which does not come close to matching 24 percent representation in the House of Representatives or 20 percent in the Senate.

³⁷ “Demographics: 115th Congress,” U.S. House of Representatives Press Gallery, Last Updated 2017, <https://pressgallery.house.gov/member-data/demographics>

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ “Ethnic Diversity in the Senate,” *The United States Senate*, <https://www.senate.gov/senators/EthnicDiversityintheSenate.htm>

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Representation of women in Congress is similarly skewed along party lines; 88 seats in the House are occupied by women, 65 of which are Democrats.⁴¹ In the Senate, there are 23 women, 17 of whom are Democrats.⁴² Combined, there are 111 women in the 115th Congress, which translates to just over 20 percent of Congressional lawmakers. This percentage is drastically lower than the proportion of women who are Americans, which as mentioned above, compose more than one half of the population.

Data from the 114th Congress provides us with more detailed background data of Congress' Representatives and Senators. With regards to education, the vast majority- 94 percent of House Members and 100 percent of Senators- held Bachelor's degrees.⁴³ This is a significantly higher proportion than that which represents the American people (which is 32.5 percent). In regards to age, the average age of Representatives was 57 years old, while Senators averaged 61 years old.⁴⁴ For House Members, that number has stayed fairly consistent over the most recent preceding Congresses (111th, 112th, and 113th); however the average age of Senators has decreased slightly during that same period of time, from 63.1 years during the 111th Congress.⁴⁵ Overall, the average age of elected officials in Congress is "among the highest of any Congress in recent U.S. history."⁴⁶ As previously mentioned, about 65 percent of the United States' population is less than 45 years old. This goes to show that Members of the House of

⁴¹ "Women: 115th Congress," U.S. House of Representatives Press Gallery, Last Updated March 16, 2018, <https://pressgallery.house.gov/member-data/demographics/women>

⁴² "Woman Senators," The United States Senate, <https://www.senate.gov/senators/ListofWomenSenators.htm>

⁴³ Jennifer E. Manning, "Membership of the 114th Congress: A Profile," *Congressional Research Service* (December 5 2016), 4.

⁴⁴ *Ibid* 2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*.

⁴⁶ *Ibid* 1, citing Alex Lowe, Kurt Wilberding, and Ana Rivas, "The Capitol's Age Pyramid: A Graying Congress," *Wall Street Journal*, http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/CONGRESS_AGES_1009.html

Representatives and the Senate are both much more highly educated and much older than most of their constituents.

All of these different demographic breakdowns go to show that the federal bodies elected to represent Americans do not really match the American population or even the voting population up in terms of race, gender, education, or age.

Why does it matter if people vote?

About 60 percent of the American population is turning up to vote in presidential elections, and around 40 percent shows up in midterm years. This means that a large amount of Americans are not choosing those who go on to represent them in office. As I showed in the previous section, those who do choose to vote tend to fall under certain categories, especially depending on factors such as level of education, income, and race or ethnicity. While some scholars, researchers, and other experts assert that low turnout indicates that the American people are content enough with the government to not feel the need to actively participate,⁴⁷ others argue that politicians who know what populations they must cater to in order to enter or stay in office will act and respond with those groups in mind, potentially leaving out the groups that show up to vote at lower frequency.

Scholar Larry M. Bartels lends legitimacy to this concept, by exploring legislators' relationship with higher income voters. In his book *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*, Bartels discusses the preference politicians give to more affluent constituents, finding through his own analysis of senator votes and activity in the 1980s and 1990s that constituents in the "upper third of the income distribution received about 50% more

⁴⁷ Parlapiano and Pearce, "For Every 10 U.S. Adults, Six Vote and Four Don't. What Separates Them?"

weight than those in the middle third, with even larger disparities on specific salient roll call votes. Meanwhile, the views of constituents in the bottom third of the income distribution received no weight at all in the voting decisions of their senators.”⁴⁸ The easy explanation for this disparity in representation is that poor Americans vote much less often than their wealthy counterparts, but Bartels cautions that even if they were to vote in higher numbers, they may not see an increase in attention from their political officers, as he finds that increased poor voter turnout did not seem to increase their influence on their senators’ votes.⁴⁹ While exploring another possible explanation, Bartels’ findings support the notion that campaign contributions seem to correlate to the unfortunate preference given to the wealthy,⁵⁰ and since wealthier Americans are more likely to contribute to campaigns, it would make sense that they are the ones being represented by those in office. Based on Bartels’ study of the subject, it thus seems irrational for poor Americans to participate in elections, as they are not being represented anyways. However, Bartels asserts that while poor people are unlikely to have a direct impact on their elected officials’ voting habits, they can indirectly make a difference by making their voices heard at the ballot box; poor people showing up on Election Day could potentially influence the outcome of elections and therefore influence the direction of politics.⁵¹

Author Sean McElwee supports the idea that poor voters could affect the current course of politics in “Why Voting Matters: Large Disparities in Turnout Benefit the Donor Class,” where he suggests that the groups that are under-voting “tend to be more or substantially more in favor of progressive economic policies and government intervention in the economy” when

⁴⁸ Larry M. Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008), 253-4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid* 279.

⁵⁰ *Ibid* 280.

⁵¹ *Ibid* 282.

compared to affluent, white voters.⁵² In his research, McElwee finds that “our country’s cumulative voter turnout gaps... [are] an important factor in the growing misalignment of public policy with the concerns and needs of working-class and low-income people, particularly in communities of color.”⁵³ E.E. Schattschneider, writing in 1960, similarly asserts that “all political equations would be revised” if nonvoters “intervened” in the political system via voting.⁵⁴ Effectively, following these two authors’ thinking, groups with low turnout are being excluded from the political process and are therefore disproportionately underrepresented in policymaking decisions. It is possible that if they were to vote in larger numbers, they could shift the political leanings of governmental bodies to be more aligned with their beliefs and eventually to pay more attention to the issues that affect them the most.

Additionally, in studies and research done concerning federal employees, specifically judges, it has been found that having diverse officials allows for a more complete representation of different demographic groups and ideologies, which can ultimately help to mitigate the problem of underrepresentation discussed in the paragraph above. In *Diversity Matters: Judicial Policy Making in the U.S. Courts of Appeals*, authors Haire and Moyer assert that “a diverse judiciary allows historically excluded groups an opportunity to advance perspectives, issues, and interests that had been previously excluded.”⁵⁵ In a comment included in the book made by Judge Edward M. Chen, judges are acknowledged to be individuals with identities that can influence how they rule on cases. Chen says that “... judges draw upon the breadth and depth of

⁵² Sean McElwee, “Why Voting Matters : Large Disparities in Turnout Benefit the Donor Class,” *Demos* (September 16 2015) <http://www.demos.org/publication/why-voting-matters-large-disparities-turnout-benefit-donor-class>

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist’s View of Democracy in America* (New York: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, 1960), 111.

⁵⁵ Susan B. Haire and Laura P. Moyer, *Diversity Matters: Judicial Policy Making in the U.S. Courts of Appeals*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 1.

their own life experience, upon the knowledge and understanding of people, and of human nature. And inevitably, one's ethnic and racial background contributes to those life experiences."⁵⁶ Federal judges are individuals who are influenced by their life experiences and personal biases, and can therefore, either consciously or subconsciously, act in ways that benefit certain groups more than others. For example, female judges have been shown to support plaintiffs in sex discrimination cases at rates higher than their male colleagues,⁵⁷ and black judges similarly tend to decide in favor of plaintiffs in race discrimination cases more often than their white and other-race colleagues.⁵⁸ These tendencies connect to the idea that individuals who have experienced such forms of discrimination personally are more likely to understand and believe plaintiffs bringing discrimination cases to the court system. Without female or of color judges on the bench, these kinds of cases may be decided upon by a judge without experiences that allow them to identify with the plaintiff, and thus give them a ruling that may effectively allow practices of gender and race discrimination to continue.

Although federal judges are not directly elected by the population, their experiences and the different points of view that they bring to their workplace can also be applied to elected officials; for example, women in Congress are more likely to be in tune with gender-related issues and as a result act to ameliorate gender imbalances. Research done by Craig Volden, Alan E. Wiseman, and Dana E. Wittmer supports this assertion.⁵⁹ Similarly, Congressmen and – women of color who have experienced race-based discrimination will be more likely to work to improve those areas than individuals who have not experienced it. It is thus very important for

⁵⁶ Ibid 14.

⁵⁷ Ibid 48.

⁵⁸ Ibid 31.

⁵⁹ Craig Volden, Alan E. Wiseman, and Dana E. Wittmer, "The Legislative Effectiveness of Women in Congress," *Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions* (2010), 24-29.

<https://www.vanderbilt.edu/csdi/research/files/CSDI-WP-04-2010.pdf>

Congresspeople and Senators to embody more closely the variety of Americans that they are charged with representing. With only a certain number of seats, it would be essentially impossible for the two chambers of Congress to incorporate all possible identities that are contained in the American population, but increasing access for peoples who have historically been marginalized, such as people of color, women, and others that I have not mentioned here such as members of the LGBTQ community or the disabled, is an important step in giving them more of a voice in the lawmaking process.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to outline some of the more relevant data relevant to voting, including how the American population is broken up into certain categories, which demographic groups participate more and less in federal elections, demographic information on how the chambers of Congress are composed, and why it matters that some participate less. This chapter helps in accomplishing the larger endeavor of this thesis project, as it lays the groundwork for the following chapters that will examine in greater depth some of the most prominent factors that keep Americans from taking advantage of their right to vote.

Chapter 3

Why Aren't Americans Voting? The Conundrum of the Eligible Nonvoter

In the last chapter, I discussed the discrepancies in what demographic breakdowns exist in the American population as contrasted with which demographic groups are overrepresented in both the voting pool and elected federal positions, as well as why it matters that population of elected officials does not reflect the diversity that makes up the population of the United States. This chapter seeks to explore some of the major factors that deter eligible people from voting in federal elections.

The United States Census Bureau estimated that following the 2008 presidential election, about 71 percent of U.S. citizens who were 18 years or older were registered to vote.⁶⁰ This indicates that the vast majority of Americans, almost three quarters, see voting as important enough to take the time to register. However, only 63.8 percent of the adult citizen population actually made it to the polls to cast their vote in the 2008 election.⁶¹ In 2016, America hit a milestone of 200 million registered voters, and yet in November of that same year, less than 140 million people made it to the polls.⁶² Why is there such a gap in the proportion of people who register to vote and who actually do? Why do people who went through the effort to register fail to follow through and actually vote? There is of course no one blanket explanation for why

⁶⁰ Guido H. Stempel III, "Why People Vote: A Discussion of Motivations for Participating in Elections," in *The 21st Century Voter: Who Votes, How They Vote, and Why They Vote*, eds. Guido H. Stempel III and Thomas K. Hargrove, (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2016), xv.

⁶¹ *Ibid* xv.

⁶² Shane Goldmacher, "America hits new landmark: 200 million registered voters," *Politico* (October 19, 2016), <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/10/how-many-registered-voters-are-in-america-2016-229993> and "2016 November General Election Turnout Rates," *United States Election Project*, <http://www.electproject.org/2016g>

people do not take advantage of their right to vote, and the plethora of possible explanations are daunting and can even seem contradictory to each other. However, there are some explanations that are cited with more frequency than others and which are identified by nonvoters themselves; these reasons are the primary focus of this chapter.

It is helpful to begin by first identifying some reasons why people feel the need or responsibility to vote in elections, as these reasons can often be examined and turned around to determine at least in part why some Americans do not feel the need or responsibility to take advantage of one of their most basic civic duties. Some of the most common reasons given to explain why people do choose to vote include voters feeling a basic sense of duty or responsibility, feeling that a vote matters or could change the outcome, feeling strongly about a certain issue, candidate or event, loyalty to a party, or even how engaging the voter finds the candidates or major issues being addressed in the campaign.⁶³ Unfortunately, a sense of duty or engagement with the issues and candidates are also commonly cited reasons as to why individuals do not participate; E.E. Schattschneider sums this situation up well in saying that “abstention reflects the suppression of the options and alternatives that reflect the needs of the nonparticipants.”⁶⁴ In this vein, nonvoters thus feel that their votes do not matter, or they do not feel strongly enough about the candidates, parties, or issues at hand to spend some of their time voting.

This idea of voter disengagement is one of the most common explanations given for low voter turnout in the United States by media sources, politicians, and even some areas of academia. A common narrative is that Americans simply are not interested in politics and the

⁶³ Stempell III, “Why People Vote,” xxxvii-xxxviii.

⁶⁴ E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist’s View of Democracy in America* (New York: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, 1960), 105.

political process; Megan M. Ruxton and Kyle L. Saunders express this viewpoint well by saying that “[nonvoters] do not care, they do not believe their individual actions will make a difference, they do not know enough about political officeholders to hold them accountable for their records, and they do not trust those who are running for election.”⁶⁵ At the surface it is easy to accept this reasoning that Americans just don’t care enough about politics to be engaged in them, however apathy and low engagement are much more complex than the standard narrative leads one to believe.

Several scholars who focus their efforts on voting and non-voting tendencies in America have sought to address the concept of voter apathy in our political system, and many have relied on the concept of “political efficacy” to attempt to understand voter disengagement. Anne M. Cizmar examines efficacy in her article “Why Bother? Apathy in the American Electorate,” where she explains that there are two types of political efficacy- internal and external- which when combined are used to explain and even loosely predict whether an individual will make it to the polls on Election Day. Internal political efficacy is related to an individual’s level of awareness and understanding of the political process,⁶⁶ while external political efficacy addresses an individual’s feelings regarding the political system’s responsiveness or accountability to the public at large.⁶⁷ In essence, following the thinking behind political efficacy, if an individual feels that the government is responsive and accountable to them as a citizen, they are likely to have more faith in the political system and participate via voting. If an individual experiences

⁶⁵ Megan M. Ruxton and Kyle L. Saunders, “Declining Trust and Efficacy and Its Role in Political Participation,” in *Why Don’t Americans Vote? Causes and Consequences*, eds. Bridgett A. King and Kathleen Hale, (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2016), 2.

⁶⁶ Anne M. Cizmar, “Why Bother? Apathy in the American Electorate,” in *Why Don’t Americans Vote? Causes and Consequences*, eds. Bridgett A. King and Kathleen Hale, (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2016), 51.

⁶⁷ Ruxton, “Declining Trust and Efficacy and Its Role in Political Participation,” 4.

low internal and/ or external political efficacy, they are more likely to feel apathetic or disengaged, and thus be less likely to vote.

Every two years since 1964, the United States Census Bureau has collected an extraordinary amount of data on the topic of citizen voting and nonvoting.⁶⁸ The survey, called the Current Population Survey (CPS) Voting and Registration Supplement File, in part involves respondents reporting whether they had voted in the most recent election, and if not, selecting from a list of potential options to indicate why. The results from this survey provide a view of what nonvoters themselves see as the main issues that prevent them from participating in elections. The responses to choose from in the survey are listed below.

- Illness or Disability
- Out of town
- Forgot to Vote
- Not interested
- Too busy, conflicting schedule
- Transportation problems
- Did not like candidates or campaign issues
- Registration problems
- Bad weather conditions
- Inconvenient polling place
- Don't know
- Other reason

These response options portray a variety of different issues that deter individuals from making it to their polling places on Election Day, and some of them provide the opportunity to address larger topics. For example, the response options “Not interested” and “Did not like candidates or campaign issues” are most likely the options chosen by individuals with low levels of political efficacy and apathetic feelings towards the elections or the political process more

⁶⁸“Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2016,” *United States Census Bureau* (May 2017), <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-580.html>

generally. Following the 2012 presidential election, 16.24 percent and 13.32 percent of respondents, respectively, chose those reasons.⁶⁹ That indicates that in 2012, almost 30 percent of nonvoters did not participate in the election because of a lack of engagement with either that specific election or the political process in general. In 2016, 15.4 percent of nonvoters selected “Not interested,” and 24.8 percent chose “Did not like candidates or campaign issues.”⁷⁰ This adds up to more than 40 percent of nonvoters feeling unpersuaded to participate in the political system. It is also fascinating to note that the percent that said they did not vote because they did not like the candidates or the issues jumped over 10 percent from 2012 to 2016; the ability of candidates and issues to entice voters is clearly a huge factor in people deciding whether or not to cast their vote.

As discussed in the last chapter, some demographic groups, as broken down by age, race and ethnicity, gender, education, and socio-economic status show up to the polls in higher proportions than others. Unfortunately, levels of voter efficacy and apathy also appear to be somewhat correlated with demographic identities. For example, in “Why Bother? Apathy in the American Electorate,” Cizmar uses the CPS Voting and Registration Supplement File data from the 2012 election to calculate the probability of how likely people were to blame their nonvoting on being “Not interested.” Cizmar found that there was a 19 percent chance that 18-year-olds did not vote due to lack of interest, as compared to just 12 percent among adults over 84, while controlling for other potential sociodemographic characteristics.⁷¹ She had similar findings when looking at education, where those without high school diplomas had a 19 percent probability of

⁶⁹ Cizmar, “Why Bother? Apathy in the American Electorate,” 57.

⁷⁰ “Table 10. Reasons for Not Voting, By Selected Characteristics: November 2016,” *United States Census Bureau* (May 2017), <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-580.html>

⁷¹ Cizmar, “Why Bother? Apathy in the American Electorate,” 57.

abstention due to lack of interest as compared to those with at least a college degree, who had only a 12 percent chance.⁷² Cizmar reported similar distinctions between demographic groups depending on race and gender as well. Surprisingly, the outcomes of her calculations did not return any significant differences in groups reporting apathy as a cause for nonvoting based on the category of income.⁷³

One area that is connected to voter apathy and can contribute to individuals choosing to participate in voting or not is that of location; if potential voters live in swing or battleground states where the contests tend to be closer, voters tend to show up more. In 2016, this amounted to an average 5 percent higher turnout in battleground states as compared to 60 percent in non-battleground states.⁷⁴ Accordingly, in states where people perceive the outcome of an election as less certain, they will be more likely to see their individual vote as more influential and will therefore tend to show up to vote at higher rates.

Looking beyond apathy, the other reasons addressed by the CPS for not voting are also worth exploring. In 2012, 19.42 percent of nonvoters reported that they did not vote because they were too busy or had a conflicting schedule. 14.57 percent reported that illness or disability prevented them from casting their vote. 5.33 percent had issues with registration, 9.32 percent were out of town, 3.86 percent forgot to vote, 3.45 percent had transportation problems, 2.72 percent stated that the polling place was inconvenient, 0.69 found the weather to be their main inhibitor, and 11.08 percent selected “Other.”⁷⁵ There are interesting differences between the spread of responses from 2012 to 2016; where in response to the 2016 elections, 14.3 percent

⁷² Ibid 58.

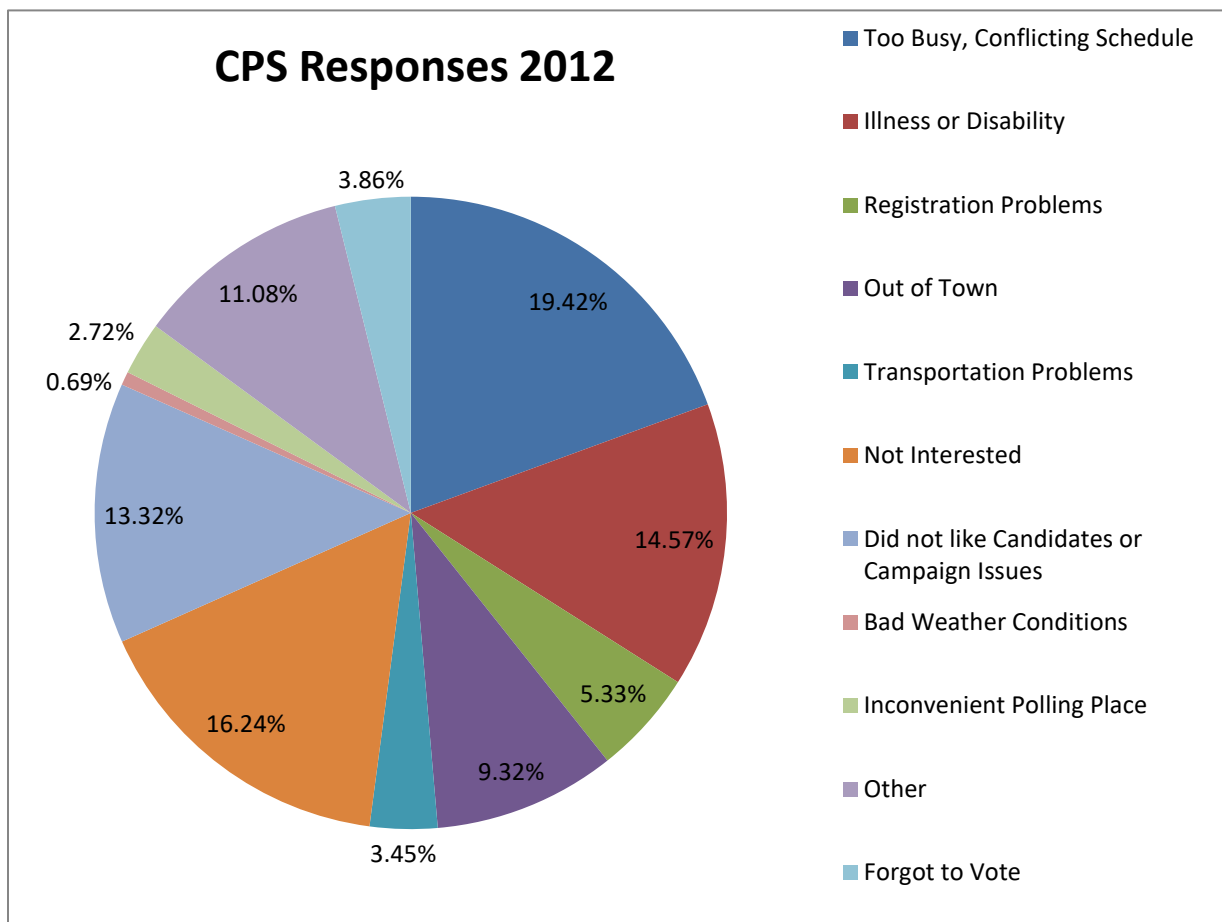
⁷³ Cizmar, “Why Bother? Voter Apathy in the American Electorate,” 58.

⁷⁴ George Pillsbury and Julian Johannesen, “America Goes to the Polls: A Report on Voter Turnout,” *Nonprofit VOTE and US Elections Project*, <http://www.nonprofitvote.org/america-goes-to-the-polls-2016/> 12.

⁷⁵ Cizmar, “Why Bother? Voter Apathy in the American Electorate,” 56.

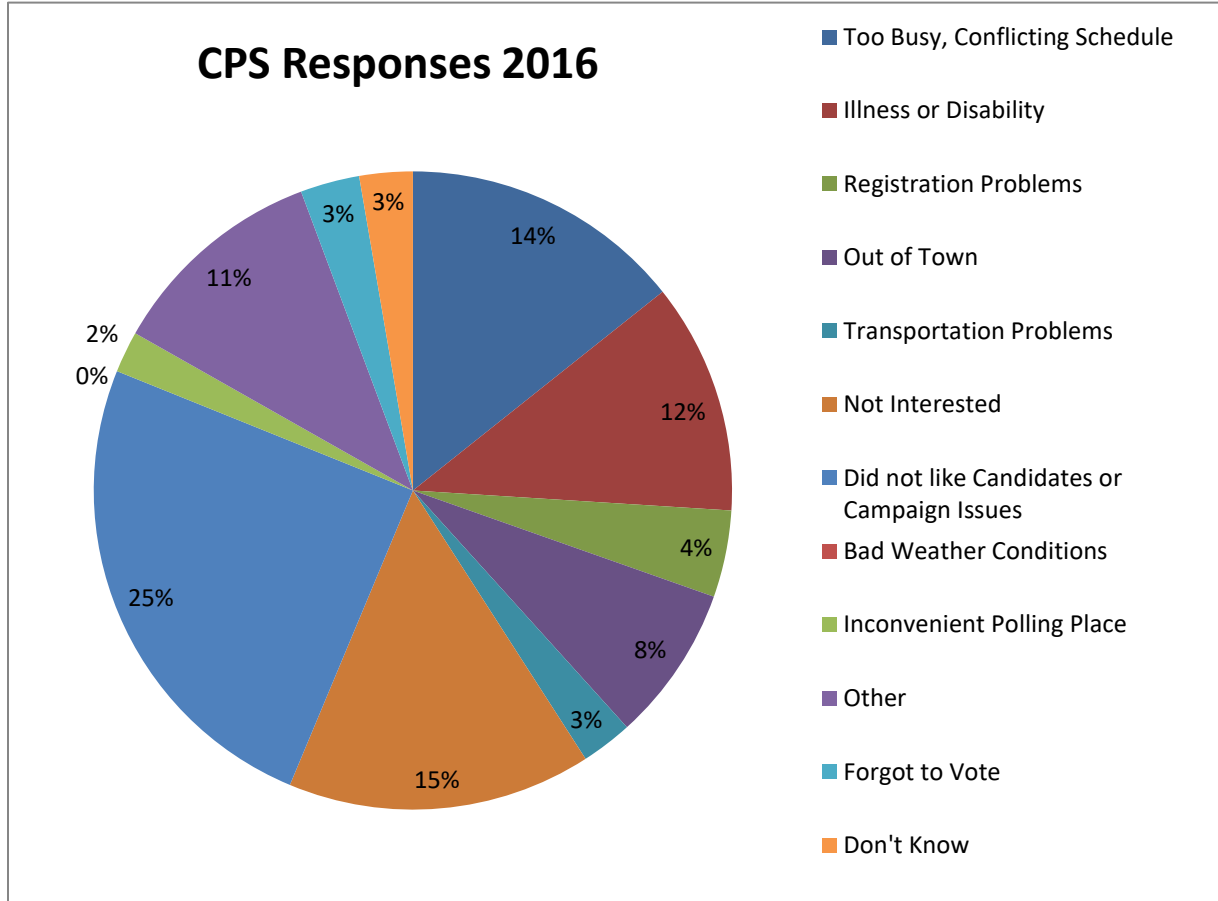
chose “Too busy, conflicting schedule,” 11.7 percent chose “illness or disability,” 4.4 percent had registration problems, 7.9 percent were out of town, 3.0 percent forgot, 2.6 percent reported transportation issues, 2.1 percent chose “Inconvenient polling place,” 11.1 percent selected “Other,” the results from the weather option were negligible, and a new option was included this year for “Don’t know or Refused,” which represented 2.7 percent of responses.⁷⁶ Notably, “Too busy, conflicting schedule” dropped by about 5 percent, but still remained the most popular option. Both sets of data are included below as figures 4 and 5.

Figure 4: CPS Responses 2012



⁷⁶ “Table 10. Reasons for Not Voting, By Selected Characteristics: November 2016,” *The United States Census Bureau*, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-580.html>

Figure 5: CPS Responses 2016



One response worth exploring further is that of weather. Some sources assert that Americans are less likely to attend their polling places if the weather is poor.⁷⁷ For example, Gomez, Hansford, and Krause adamantly argue in their article on the subject that conditions such as rain or snow have an extraordinarily profound impact on the likelihood of individuals making it to the voting booth and even go so far as to say that weather conditions may have influenced the outcomes of the presidential elections in both 1960 and 2000.⁷⁸ This explanation is very interesting, and it is easy to imagine individuals opting to stay indoors if the conditions outside

⁷⁷ Brad T. Gomez, Thomas G. Hansford, and George A. Krause, “The Republicans Should Pray for Rain: Weather, Turnout, and Voting in U.S. Presidential Elections,” *The Journal of Politics* 69, no. 3 (August 2007), 649.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

are unpleasant, especially if they'd be leaving the house or work for an activity that is voluntary such as voting. However, according to the CRS data collected following the 2012 election, less than 1 percent of respondents who reported that they did not vote cited that the weather was a factor in their decision.⁷⁹ Following the presidential election of 2016, even fewer respondents stated that they did not vote due to the weather.⁸⁰ This indicates that weather is not a major factor in deterring voters, but it is also possible that the effects of weather may influence potential voters in more subtle or subconscious ways.

Poor voter turnout is also occasionally blamed on the fact that American elections always take place on a Tuesday. For many would-be voters, leaving work or school to cast a ballot is not possible or easily accessible, so it would make sense that holding Election Day in the middle of the week would obstruct many from participating. Among other countries with much higher rates of participation than the United States, voting is often organized so that it happens over the weekends, and most exceptionally, India has designated its voting day as a national holiday.⁸¹ It therefore seems as though the timing of American elections may be a factor that inconveniences many individuals. This lines up with the fact that in 2012 and 2016, 19.42 percent and 14.3 percent, respectively, claimed that their reason for not voting was connected to being too busy or having a conflicting schedule. It would therefore make sense to try to find an alternative solution to the current execution of the voting schedule system. However an Ohio-University-Scripps Howard News Service poll revealed that a majority of those surveyed preferred having Election

⁷⁹ Stempell III, "Why People Vote: A Discussion of Motivations for Participating in Elections," xxxviii.

⁸⁰ "Table 10. Reasons for Not Voting, By Selected Characteristics: November 2016," <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-580.html>

⁸¹ Adam Taylor, "American voter turnout is still lower than most other wealthy nations," *Washington Post* (November 10, 2016), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/11/10/even-in-a-historic-election-americans-dont-vote-as-much-as-those-from-other-nations/?utm_term=.3278e01b7f89

Day on a Tuesday as opposed to on the weekend.⁸² This poll information complicates the narrative of how problematic Tuesday voting is and indicates that although it may deter a decent proportion of Americans from voting, simply switching from a Tuesday to a weekend day may not be the best answer.

It is important to account for the costs of registering and going to the polls when considering why Americans might choose not to participate. Although both registration and casting a ballot are technically free, monetary costs of factors such as missing work or transportation, as well as non-tangible costs such as missing work, class, or family obligations, can dissuade people from casting their ballots. These costs become even more relevant when combined with people's levels of political efficacy; if individuals don't see the government as accountable or responsive to the people, they are more likely to view the various costs of registering and voting as much higher and the acts of registering and voting as a waste of time and thus ultimately choose not to participate. This may tie back into the questions I posed at the beginning of the chapter, where I wondered why there was a gap in how many Americans were registered to vote as compared to how many actually did. Efforts such as the "Motor Voter" legislation of 1993 sought to facilitate the voter registration process, namely by being able to register to vote while completing tasks such as receiving or renewing a driver's license at local DMVs;⁸³ combining registration with another necessary task follows the "two birds with one stone" ideology and makes registration less "costly" for potential voters. Since individuals can now complete voter registration while completing other tasks, but they still must cast their actual ballots as its own task, it makes sense that there would be a gap between the number of

⁸² Stempel III, "Why People Vote: A Discussion of Motivations for Participating in Elections," xxxviii.

⁸³ Stephen Knack, "Does 'Motor Voter' Work? Evidence from State-Level Data," *The Journal of Politics* 57, no. 3 (August 1995), 796.

Americans registered and the number who actually vote, especially when factors such as difficulty with scheduling, being out of town, and others come into play. In 2016's presidential election, turnout averaged 7 percentage points higher for states with services such as Same Day Registration than in states without it,⁸⁴ which confirms the toll that the registration process takes on potential participants.

Conclusion

In all, there is no one simple answer as to why individuals who are registered do not vote. A variety of factors, from lack of interest to weather to personal and financial costs, along with many others, appear to deter Americans from casting their ballots. In the next chapter, I look at the distinct challenges that inhibit Americans from voting that are beyond their control, including issues such as voter suppression and discrimination.

⁸⁴ Pillsbury and Johannesen, "America Goes to the Polls: A Report on Voter Turnout," 11.

Chapter 4

Discrimination and Suppression at the Ballot Box

For much of America's recent history, the common perception is that all Americans have or ought to have an equal right to political participation via voting, but unfortunately, political disenfranchisement has a long history in the United States. It specifically targets minority groups, especially racial minorities, those with disabilities, the poor, and others. Many methods have been used over time to exclude people from participating at the ballot box, from laws barring people based on race or gender, to laws that required voters to own property or pay taxes, to the use of literacy tests and grandfather clauses, to intimidation and legal subterfuge.⁸⁵ The list goes on. It was not until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that "blacks finally won formal legal and political recognition,"⁸⁶ and yet despite this monumental legislation, though it made great headway into many issues, the voting franchise continues to be manipulated and restricted to certain populations over others. As Michelle Alexander asserts in *The New Jim Crow*, "the arguments and rationalizations that have been trotted out in support of racial exclusion and discrimination in its various forms have changed and evolved, but the outcome has remained largely the same."⁸⁷ The focus of this chapter is voter suppression tactics as they exist in modern day America; I begin by outlining why certain actors work to exclude specific Americans from the political process and prevent them from exercising their right to vote. I then elaborate on

⁸⁵ Frances Fox Piven, Lorraine C. Minnite, and Margaret Groarke, *Keeping Down the Black Vote: Race and the Demobilization of American Voters* (New York: The New York Press, 2009), 2.

⁸⁶ *Ibid* 1.

⁸⁷ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 1.

some of the primary ways that this is accomplished, including registration and ballot problems; voter purges and caging; intimidation; and felon disenfranchisement.

Why does voter suppression and disenfranchisement continue to exist today?

At the most basic level, to win an election, a candidate must win the most votes. This can happen as a result of appealing to the most people in the electorate, but Frances Fox Piven, Lorraine C. Monnite, and Margaret Groarke assert in their book *Keeping Down the Black Vote: Race and the Demobilization of American Voters* that it also happens by deterring those who would support a different candidate.⁸⁸ Candidates may also target “socially discordant” voters, groups whose issues or representation the candidate or party does not want to be charged with.⁸⁹ These discordant voters, produced by the social and economic inequalities in American society are seen as a threat to the status quo. According to Richard K. Scher in *The Politics of Disenfranchisement: Why Is It So Hard to Vote in America?*, discordant voter participation may undermine the stability that both major political parties seek to maintain,⁹⁰ as they are considered “weird, unacceptable, or- most importantly- unpredictable.”⁹¹ E.E. Schattschneider reiterates this idea in *The Semisovereign People*, where he says that “... the assimilation of newcomers into the old organizations has become a major problem, made difficult by the fact that every expansion of an association tends to re-allocate power.”⁹² Both deterring the supporters of the opposition and avoiding attracting “undesirables” can be seen in party politics in the United States. Perhaps

⁸⁸ Piven, Minnite, and Groarke, *Keeping Down the Black Vote*, 16.

⁸⁹ Ibid 21.

⁹⁰ Richard K. Scher, *The Politics of Disenfranchisement: Why Is It So Hard to Vote in America?* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc. 2011), 9.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 16.

unsurprisingly, one of the most “undesirable” groups that has been and continues to be targeted by these activities is African Americans.

“The Great Migration” of African Americans from the South to the North, heightened during World War II, helped to bring blacks into the sphere and the base of the Democratic Party. In response, the Republican Party took advantage of white Americans’ general dislike of African Americans to recruit white voters to their ranks,⁹³ and instead of capitalizing on the potential to solidify black and black allies’ support, the Democratic Party chose to follow suit and similarly develop their own strategy to appeal to whites over blacks.⁹⁴ At the same time, Democrats sought to fill the void left by the white flight, which bolstered their support of the Immigration Act of 1965. Abrajano and Hajnal discuss Democrat relations with immigrants and immigration in their book *White Backlash: Immigration, Race, and American Politics*. They find that throughout the 1970s and 1980s, a majority of white Americans supported the Democratic Party, but that party support shifted in the early 1990s.⁹⁵ By 2010, that shift had become so dramatic that 60 percent of white Americans voted for Republicans;⁹⁶ Democrats had to find support elsewhere, hence their inclusion of minority groups such as immigrants and people of color. Unsurprisingly, legislation that improved voting access for these minority groups, often championed by Democrats, was not welcomed by the Republican Party, and to some extent also threatened the status quo within the Democratic establishment.⁹⁷

Following the Voting Rights Act of 1965, appeals to voters on the basis of race had to become more subtle. Gone were the days of the poll tax and literacy test, but new or rethought

⁹³ Piven, Minnite, and Groarke, *Keeping Down the Black Vote*, 2.

⁹⁴ *Ibid* 128.

⁹⁵ Marisa Abrajano and Zoltan L. Hajnal, *White Backlash: Immigration, Race, and American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 91.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*.

⁹⁷ Piven, Minnite, and Groarke, *Keeping Down the Black Vote*, 105.

legal and administrative strategies to exclude certain voters emerged to replace them. Now, practices of limiting the franchise and dissuading unwanted voters are made possible primarily through claims of fraud that pave the way for heightened security and laws that address voter fraud, by making accessing the institutions more difficult.⁹⁸ Accusations abound of stuffed ballots, dead people and pets voting, the same people voting multiple times, to name a few, and Scher points out that generally, these claims have been proven to be unfounded or not at all prevalent on the scale that one might think.⁹⁹ In the elections in Ohio in 2000 and 2002, more than 9 million votes were cast, and of those, only four cases of fraud were found.¹⁰⁰ Following the whirlwind election of 2000, Florida was unable to produce any known cases of voter impersonation.¹⁰¹ However, adamant accusations of fraud, originating mostly within the Republican Party, continue, lending legitimacy to practices and the passage of laws that make it harder for people, especially people of color and the poor, to access the polls.¹⁰²

Public opinion helps to make this possible; in studies conducted by Stephen Ansolabehere and Nathaniel Persily in 2007 and 2008, about 25 percent of survey respondents were found to be under the impression that voter fraud and vote theft were very common, and close to 40 percent thought that these issues happened occasionally.¹⁰³ A Rasmussen poll conducted around the same time found similar results, with about a quarter of respondents reporting that they agree that “large numbers of people [are] allowed to vote who are not eligible

⁹⁸ Ibid 42.

⁹⁹ Scher, *The Politics of Disenfranchisement*, 52.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid 104.

¹⁰¹ Lorraine C. Minnite, “Voter Fraud Allegations and Their Consequences,” in *The Myth of Voter Fraud* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2010), 135.

¹⁰² Ibid 129.

¹⁰³ Stephen Ansolabehere and Nathaniel Persily, “Vote Fraud in the Eye of the Beholder: the Role of Public Opinion in the Challenge to Voter Identification Requirements,” *Harvard Law Review* 121, no. 7 (May 2008), 1746.

to vote.”¹⁰⁴ However, when asked about the practices that constitute vote fraud, such as noncitizens voting or people voting multiple times, respondents believed that they occurred at much lower frequencies than when the activities were simply defined as “vote fraud.”¹⁰⁵ The fact that buzzwords like “vote fraud” incite a different response from participants indicates that the rhetoric dedicated to addressing fraud leads individuals to consider it to be a larger issue than it is. This in turn allows politicians to justify legislation that at the surface works to limit fraud when in reality it works to limit the voting franchise. The relationship is essentially cyclical; officials draw lots of attention to accusations of fraud, ramping up constituent perceptions of its occurrence, and as a result that heightened perception justifies legislative action on the part of officials.

Voter Registration and Problems at the Ballot Box

“There are numerous structural and administrative hurdles placed in front of potential voters that limit their ability to cast ballots. Without doubt, the single most important one is archaic registration rules.”¹⁰⁶

- Richard K. Scher

Perhaps the strongest deterrent to those who wish to vote but cannot is the daunting and complex registration process. Each state has its own methods of registering voters, most of which require individuals to register well in advance of Election Day, require individuals to navigate multiple pages of complex forms, and provide proof of residency that many individuals,

¹⁰⁴ “National Survey of 800 Likely Voters, January 2-3, 2008,” *Rasmussen Reports*, http://rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/current_events/general_current_events/general_current_events_toplevels/toplines_voter_id_january_2_3_2008

¹⁰⁵ Ansolabehere and Persily, “Vote Fraud in the Eye of the Beholder,” 1747.

¹⁰⁶ Scher, *The Politics of Disenfranchisement*, 11.

especially poor and minority groups, cannot provide.¹⁰⁷ The challenging process is “fraught with pitfalls,” and a mistake at any level of the process could result in rejection, disqualification, or delay of approval for potential voters.¹⁰⁸ Piven, Minnite, and Groarke report that surveys conducted in 1983 and 1984 indicated that almost half of unregistered voters considered themselves Democrats.¹⁰⁹ Unregistered voters continue to lean Democratic today; in 2015 Jackman and Spahn found that 39 percent of unregistered individuals identified with the Democratic Party as compared to 14 percent with the Republicans and 37 percent as independent.¹¹⁰ The Republican Party thus stood and continues to stand to gain from the continued exclusion of these nonvoters from the ballot box, however the Democratic Party are by no means innocent of pursuing similar outlets to prevent certain members of society from casting their vote. In this section I discuss several of the ways both the registration process and aspects of casting a ballot work to deter certain potential voters, usually ethnic minorities and the poor.

The National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) of 1993, also commonly referred to the motor voter law, sought to address some of the complexities of registering to vote by making states offer voter registration materials in DMVs and other public assistance and disability offices.¹¹¹ It also requires states to permit registration through mail-in applications. To pass the bill a few key provisions had to be dropped and others introduced; more specifically the inclusion of a mandate for same-day registration could not be part of the final Act, while a provision that made voter

¹⁰⁷ Laughlin McDonald, “The Quiet Revolution in Minority Voting Rights,” *Vanderbilt Law Review* 42 (May 1989), 1293-1296.

¹⁰⁸ Scher, *The Politics of Disenfranchisement*, 84.

¹⁰⁹ “Piven, Minnite, Groarke, *Keeping Down the Black Vote*, 105.

¹¹⁰ Simon Jackman and Bradley Spahn, “Unlisted in America,” *Stanford University* (August 20, 2015), 7, http://images.politico.com/global/2015/08/20/jackman_unlisted.pdf

¹¹¹ “THE NATIONAL VOTER REGISTRATION ACT OF 1993 (NVRA),” *The United States Department of Justice*, updated August 7, 2017, <https://www.justice.gov/crt/national-voter-registration-act-1993-nvra>

role purges mandatory was included.¹¹² An FEC report showed that by 1996, the proportion of Americans registered to vote had increased to 76.25 percent, as compared to 70.6 percent in 1992.¹¹³ This increase, although substantial, is drastically lower than original estimates; Steven Knack predicted that as a result of the Act, registration would increase by about 13 percent.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, although the NVRA included requirements for offering registration materials in public assistance and disability offices, Scher affirms that “what has become increasingly well recognized is the disparity in registration rates between the poor (defined as those on public assistance) and the non-poor. Demos estimates the gap at over 19 percent.”¹¹⁵ In more recent years, registration has not seemed to have been positively impacted by the legislation; in 2002 and 2004, only 61 percent and 65 percent, respectively, of eligible Americans were registered.¹¹⁶ This may be to blame in part on states dragged their feet in implementing the required changes, and the lack of follow up by the Clinton Administration in terms of prosecuting states that did not comply.¹¹⁷

Perhaps one of the most well-known and most disputed elections in recent American history is that of the 2000 presidential election. Many of the problems experienced in the election were related to registration and issues at the ballot box. A Census Bureau Survey that took place following the presidential election in 2000 found that 1.3 million registered voters across America were prevented from voting in the election due to problems with records of registration.¹¹⁸ In Florida, the state that “won” the election for George W. Bush, the problems

¹¹² Piven, Minnite, and Groarke, *Keeping Down the Black Vote*, 125.

¹¹³ *Ibid* 123.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid* 123.

¹¹⁵ Scher, *The Politics of Disenfranchisement*, 85.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*.

¹¹⁷ Piven, Minnite, and Groarke, *Keeping Down the Black Vote*, 133.

¹¹⁸ “Current Population Survey: Voter Supplement File, November 2000,” *The Census Bureau* (2001).

with registration and voting were especially pronounced and seemed to target the African American community specifically. Of the 180,000 ballots that were submitted but not counted, more than half came from African American voters, a group that made up just 12 percent of the state population.¹¹⁹ George W. Bush won the state by just 537 votes;¹²⁰ if even a fraction of those votes had been counted, the outcome of the presidential election may have been different. There were many individuals who did not even make it as far to be able to cast a vote that would later not be counted, due to issues with machine technology, inaccurate records of who was registered or not and who was registered but who had been marked as felons (when they weren't); some African American individuals were asked for multiple forms of identification when others, mostly white voters, were not, and the list goes on.¹²¹

Following the messy election of 2000, Congress passed the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002, which mandated that states overhaul many areas of their voting systems, most notably by requiring them to implement minimum election administration standards (Such as Voter ID laws), as well as updates to their voting equipment, and establishing and maintaining up-to-date state-wide registration lists.¹²² The ID portion of HAVA is important in this study, as it required states to demand either photo identification or another form that contains both the name and address of the potential voter if it is the individual's first time voting and if they'd registered by mail. However, many states have interpreted the rules to be stricter and demand all voters,

¹¹⁹ Piven, Minnite, and Groarke, *Keeping Down the Black Vote*, 138.

¹²⁰ Todd S. Purdum, "Counting the Vote: The Overview; Bush Is Declared Winner In Florida, But Gore Vows to Contest Results," *The New York Times* (November 27, 2000), <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/11/27/us/counting-vote-overview-bush-declared-winner-florida-but-gore-vows-contest.html>

¹²¹ Ibid 153.

¹²² "Help America Vote Act," U.S. Election Assistance Commission, <https://www.eac.gov/about/help-america-vote-act/>

regardless of whether it's their first time voting or not, to show photo ID.¹²³ Seemingly harmless, this provision disproportionately affects poor and minority would-be voters, who are much less likely than white and/ or wealthy individuals to have photo ID. Research conducted in Wisconsin reveals that African Americans are only about half as likely as white people to have a driver's license, and that same study found that in Georgia, just 22 percent of black men aged 18-24 had a driver's license.¹²⁴ It is worth noting that the biggest supporters of ID laws are those who assert that fraud is rampant in America's elections, who argue that having stricter ID laws would prevent the scores of unregistered (often undocumented) residents from tainting the political system. Furthermore, the strict application of the photo ID aspect of HAVA is most often implemented in states where Republicans and Democrats are much more competitive;¹²⁵ this makes sense, as greater competition would lead to efforts on behalf of the Republicans to limit the Democratic voting base wherever possible.

In 2013, Supreme Court Case *Shelby County v. Holder* de-toothed one of the most influential sections of the Voting Rights Act, the section that requires certain states and local governments to get pre-clearance from the federal government before being able to change their voting laws. Without this section of the Act, governments with histories of discrimination are able to implement new voting laws and restrictions without federal oversight. This section of the Voting Rights Act has been crucial since its passage, and many Democratic leaders have relied on the Act to secure and bolster minority access to the ballot box. Adriane Fresh, in her article "The Effect of the Voting Rights Act on Enfranchisement: Evidence from North Carolina," finds that

¹²³ Alec C. Ewald, *The Way We Vote: The Local Dimension of American Suffrage* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2009), 137.

¹²⁴ Scher, *The Politics of Disenfranchisement*, 105.

¹²⁵ William D. Hicks, Seth C. McKee, Mitchell D. Sellers, and Daniel A. Smith, "A Principle or a Strategy? Voter Identification Laws and Partisan Competition in the American States," *Political Research Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (March 2015), 18.

Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act increased “ black voter registration by 14–19 percentage points, white registration by 10–13 percentage points, and overall voter turnout by 10–19 percentage points.”¹²⁶ Unsurprisingly, since *Shelby County v. Holder*, many states and local governments have capitalized upon the opportunity to change their voting laws. Within hours of the decision, Texas announced that it would implement its previously-blocked voter ID law, North Carolina enacted a new law with a “laundry list” of new restrictions on voting, and a slew of other southern states and local governments have changed their rules on voting and representation since.¹²⁷ Based on this information, the nullification of that provision within the Voting Rights Act clearly endangers the right to vote for many minority groups even further.

Beyond registration, voters who make it to the polls often encounter difficulties when it comes to filling out their ballots correctly. States employ many different ballot formats, and some are much easier to understand and to complete than others. The three main formats of ballot are the Indiana ballot (party column ballot), the Massachusetts ballot (office block ballot), and Pennsylvania ballot. The Indiana ballot is set up so the candidates for each office are displayed in the same row or column as others from the same party; the Massachusetts ballot is set up so the candidates are displayed based on which office they’re running for, and the third option, the Pennsylvania ballot, follows the office block format but also includes a vote-by-party option.¹²⁸ These options are not equal in regards to whether voters tend to complete their ballots if they do decide to vote. The party column format allows voters to vote by party easily, therefore reducing the chance of simply leaving offices blank due to a lack of information or

¹²⁶ Adriane Fresh, “The Effect of the Voting Rights Act on Enfranchisement: Evidence from North Carolina,” *The Journal of Politics* 80, no. 2, (February 23, 2018), 714.

¹²⁷ William Yeomans, “After ‘Shelby County,’” *Human Rights* 40, no. 52 (July 2014), 3.

¹²⁸ Philip L. Dubois, “Voter Turnout in State Judicial Elections: An Analysis of the Tail on the Electoral Kite,” *The Journal of Politics* 41, no. 3, August 1979, 877.

experiencing voter fatigue and not finishing the process, whereas the office block format tends to contribute to voter fatigue, since it requires voters to make a lot of individual choices and therefore be less likely to finish filling out the ballot.¹²⁹ Voter fatigue has been shown to affect less-educated voters more drastically than voters with higher levels of education.¹³⁰ According to Oliver, Ha, and Callen, “the more educated putatively have greater resources and skills for clearing the various hurdles... involved in voting.”¹³¹ The difficult-to-understand structure of the different ballot formats specifically targets the less-educated individuals who wish to exercise their right to vote. Making the form hard for them to understand effectively serves as a deterrent and limits the ability of less-educated Americans to participate in elections. Following the election of 2000, a joint MIT and California Institute of Technology analysis of voting technology revealed that somewhere between 4 to 6 million votes out of the 111 million cast were lost due to poorly designed ballots that confused voters, equipment malfunctions, and incorrect registration records.¹³² The next section deals with registration records and the tactics used to manipulate them.

Voter Purges and Caging

Voter purging, where voters’ names are removed from voter rolls, has existed in American history for a long time, but became even more prevalent when the Help America Vote Act included a provision that states must conduct purges, with the reasoning being to keep voter rolls up to date.¹³³ Unfortunately, voter purges are not only used to maintain current voter rolls; they provide states with the opportunity to remove voters from rolls for many reasons. Most

¹²⁹ J. Eric Oliver, Shang E. Ha, and Zachary Callen, “Who Votes in Local Elections” in *Local Elections and the Politics of Small-Scale Democracy* (Princeton University Press: 2012), 55.

¹³⁰ Dubois, “Voter Turnout in State Judicial Elections,” 878.

¹³¹ Oliver, Ha, and Callen, “Who Votes in Local Elections,” 60-61.

¹³² Piven, Minnite, and Groarke, *Keeping Down the Black Vote*, 160.

¹³³ Myrna Perez, “Voter Purges,” *Brennan Center for Justice* (2008).

commonly, voters are purged if they fail to participate in an election for a prolonged period of time, if they are convicted of a crime, or if they move jurisdictions or pass away.¹³⁴ Additionally, purges can simply target individuals and claim misinformation. For the most part, individuals and registration officials are not notified when purges are conducted,¹³⁵ making it hard to re-register prior to elections. Scher relays one example of this happening in *The Politics of Disenfranchisement*; prior to the presidential election in 2000, Florida officials (notably the brother of presidential candidate George W. Bush, Florida Governor Jeb Bush), used a “notoriously inaccurate” list of alleged felons to purge close to 58,000 individuals from the registration rolls, half of which were African Americans, and 90 percent of which were wrongly included in the list.¹³⁶

First uncovered in 1958, voter caging is connected to purging and has been used to either directly purge or to challenge voters once they arrive at their polling places.¹³⁷ Caging is used to select individuals to be removed from registration records or to challenge at the polling place and is accomplished by sending mail to addresses of registered voters, and then purging the names of anyone whose mail is returned undelivered.¹³⁸ Brennan Center for Justice reports on voter caging assert that caging is “almost always pursued with partisan aims,”¹³⁹ and is often used to explicitly target poor and minority neighborhoods, where mail delivery services may be less reliable or people may be more likely to use non-traditional mail services.¹⁴⁰ The latter explanation can arise if an individual is registered to vote with their home address, but they receive mail at a PO

¹³⁴ Scher, *The Politics of Disenfranchisement*, 102.

¹³⁵ *Ibid* 89.

¹³⁶ Scher, *The Politics of Disenfranchisement*, 102.

¹³⁷ Perez, “Voter Purges,” 32.

¹³⁸ Justin Levitt, “A Guide to Voter Caging,” *Brennan Center for Justice* (June 29, 2007), <https://www.brennancenter.org/analysis/guide-voter-caging>

¹³⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁴⁰ Perez, “Voter Purges,” 32.

Box, for example. Thus mail will be sent to the home address of the person, since it is their “voting” address, but they are unlikely to receive it, resulting in them being caged.¹⁴¹

Intimidation

For the most part, people don't have to worry about being lynched on Election Day as in the past, but nonviolent forms of voter intimidation have persisted in American society. A few key ways intimidation is conducted is through fearmongering, harassment, and spreading false information, and although technically illegal, these practices continue to this day.¹⁴² Richard K. Scher discusses examples of intimidation in *The Politics of Disenfranchisement*. One story he tells is that in 2003 and 2008, African American voters in Philadelphia were met outside of polling places by official-looking individuals with clipboards and fake government insignias on their cars who demanded to see their identification before they were allowed to enter the polling locations.¹⁴³ This incident is not isolated; would-be black voters have shown up to vote around the country and have been required to provide multiple forms of identity when other voters have not had to and have generally been given a harder time in accessing their ballots than other voters.¹⁴⁴

Misinformation is a specific form of voter intimidation; for example African American voters in Louisiana have been sent flyers in the mail that advertised Election Day to be one day later than the real date.¹⁴⁵ In Maryland and Georgia, black voters got mail that told them that they could not vote without having paid their utility bills, rent, and parking tickets.¹⁴⁶ In the 2000

¹⁴¹ Levitt, “A Guide to Voter Caging,” 11-12.

¹⁴² “Voting and Election Laws,” USA.gov, <https://www.usa.gov/voting-laws#item-36047>

¹⁴³ Scher, *Politics of Disenfranchisement*, 159.

¹⁴⁴ Piven, Minnite, and Groarke, *Keeping Down the Black Vote*, 153.

¹⁴⁵ Scher, *Politics of Disenfranchisement*, 159.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

election in Florida, African Americans went to their regular polling places and were told by people waiting outside that the polls had moved.¹⁴⁷ In all of these instances, African American voters were targeted through campaigns to prevent them from getting to the ballot box.

Felon Disenfranchisement

Felony charges also assist in the project to exclude certain populations from the polls. For those who support it, felon disenfranchisement serves to punish those who would breach their “social contract,” and the underlying idea is that losing the right to vote is part of the convict’s punishment and repayment to society.¹⁴⁸ Unfortunately, some of the loudest supporters of felon disenfranchisement stand to gain from the exclusion of those who are currently being convicted of felonies at higher rates. Convicted felons are the largest group of disenfranchised adults in the United States,¹⁴⁹ an overwhelming proportion of which are people of color, especially African American men. Approximately 30 percent of black males can expect to lose the right to vote at some point in their lives; this proportion is about five times greater than the same statistic for nonblack males.¹⁵⁰ Additionally, felons, the majority of which are African American, have been shown to support the Democratic Party.¹⁵¹ The Republican Party therefore stands to gain from continuing to deny them access to the ballot. Felon disenfranchisement laws were crafted during Reconstruction as one method of many to prevent African Americans from filling out their ballots;¹⁵² they seem to serve the same purpose today, thanks in part to the War on Drugs that targets minority communities. Such a vast amount of voting-age Americans are currently

¹⁴⁷ Piven, Minnite, and Groarke, *Keeping Down the Black Vote*, 153.

¹⁴⁸ Scher, *Politics of Disenfranchisement*, 54.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid* 52.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid* 53.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid* 56.

¹⁵² Ludovic Blain III, “One Person, No Vote: Felony disenfranchisement strips people of color of political power,” *Race, Poverty & the Environment* 10, no. 2 (Fall 2003), 50.

disenfranchised due to their felon status, and sociologists Jeff Manza and Christopher Uggen assert that, even with their generally low turnout rates, felon participation in federal elections could have potentially altered the outcomes of seven different races for the U.S. Senate, and if ex-felons had been permitted to vote in the presidential election of 2000, the outcome may have been different.¹⁵³ Once individuals have completed their sentence, there is no guarantee that they will ever be allowed to vote again, even if they are technically eligible. In “Voter Fraud Allegations and Their Consequences,” Lorraine Minnite argues that the laws concerning felon disenfranchisement are “the hardest for officials and voters to understand and administer, and the most prone to both overly exclusionary and overly inclusionary errors.”¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, only a handful of states require that ex-felons be notified when their eligibility to vote is reinstated.¹⁵⁵ All of these factors combine to support the idea that felon disenfranchisement is a tool for suppressing undesired black votes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the voting franchise has been and continues to be manipulated so that certain actors can maintain control of the political system. These actions, which take many forms, have the effect of excluding portions of the population at much higher rates than others, especially African Americans and the less-educated, but also others that I did not focus on here, such as immigrants, the disabled and elderly, and Native Americans. Although in theory, a large proportion of America’s voting age adults may wish to vote, that by no means indicates that they are able to take advantage of that right. Complex registration processes and ballot formats, messy implementation at the polls, voter purges and caging, and felon exclusion laws are just a few of

¹⁵³ Jeff Manza and Christopher Uggen, *Locked Out: Felon Disenfranchisement and American Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁵⁴ Minnite, “Voter Fraud Allegations and Their Consequences,” 147.

¹⁵⁵ Blain III, “One Person, No Vote,” 50.

the many ways certain would-be voters are excluded from the political system and disenfranchised.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

In all, I find that there are many factors that contribute to why people do not exercise their right to vote and that voter apathy, although highly influential and important, is not the only deterrent to would-be voters. As shown in the third and fourth chapters, these many reasons include both conscious decisions on the non-voter's part as well systematic strategies employed by political parties and institutions to exclude certain populations from the voting booth. A variety of issues, ranging from weather to apathy to different types of voter suppression, along with the others discussed in this thesis as well as many more that I did not engage with, all burden the potential voter and hinder their ability and their desire to make their way to the ballot box. Yet, as asserted in the second chapter, exercising the right to vote is important in many regards, especially when it comes to diversifying political offices and helping make American democracy more representative of all citizens. As they stand now, federal positions are not representative of the wide array of diversity that the American population represents, and the current voting system benefits certain actors who work to maintain that system; one of their tactics is limiting the voting franchise to certain populations. E.E. Schattschneider, in *The Semisovereign People* says that:

The whole balance of power in the political system could be overturned by a massive invasion of the political system, and nothing tangible protects the system against the flood. All that is necessary to produce the most painless revolution in history, the first revolution ever legalized and legitimized in advance, is to have a sufficient

number of people do something not much more difficult than to walk across the street on election day.¹⁵⁶

Increasing voter turnout would thus help to overturn both the voting and political system as they exist today and would help to foster an environment where the American government could become both representative and responsive to those it represents. Although it would be impossible for every possible walk of life to be embodied by those in office, improving the diversity of those who vote would also help in the endeavor of increasing the diversity of those offices, making a greater variety of voices heard.

A few areas extended beyond the scope of this study, but are worth mentioning here. Firstly, education and access to information are extremely important in facilitating the voting process, and campaigns and projects geared towards increasing voter turnout are certainly worth further attention. Second, local elections experience some of the same but also their own unique issues when compared to federal elections. It was difficult to try to include them here, as each state has its own rules, procedures, and histories in regards to the voting franchise and elections. Diversity and inclusion in local elections are just as important if not more important as they are in federal elections. Finally, although I focused largely on African Americans in the final chapter, many other minority groups are particularly disadvantaged by the current electoral system's practices and experience additional or different tactics that lead to their disenfranchisement, especially Native Americans and Alaska Natives, immigrants, individuals with disabilities, and the elderly.

This project looks specifically at why Americans who don't vote are not, but it is important to address that even if all Americans were to vote, we still live in a system where for

¹⁵⁶ E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 98-99.

some elected positions, one person does not mean one vote. In the U.S. Senate, members are chosen based on territories and not population size or composition. This means that less-populated states with primarily white populations are overrepresented while more populous states with more diverse constituencies count for less. This notion also applies somewhat to the Electoral College. Thus, even if every American were to vote, their votes do not carry the same weight depending on where they live. Furthermore, the influence of money in politics is ever present and tarnishes the ability of elected officials to work with their constituents wants and needs in mind, as touched upon in Chapter 2. These structures, along with those that prevent people, especially people of color, from voting, all function to limit the ability of America's political system to be a true, representative democracy.

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