Why Don’t More People in the U.S. Vote?

In the 2016 presidential election, voter turnout fell nearly to a 20-year low. And voter turnout in the United States consistently lags far behind that of many other countries. But Americans still consider democracy one of their most cherished principles. Our Constitution has been emulated by many emerging democracies. Given the value and importance of democracy to American values, principles, and institutions, why don’t more people in the United States vote?

The Voters

Generally, the older you are and the more wealth you have, the more likely it is that you will be a voter. However, young-adult voters turned out in record numbers in the 2018 midterm election, increasing early voting rates 188 percent over the 2014 midterm election.

Aside from age, education and income level remain the best predictors of a person’s likelihood to vote. According to the New York Times, those most likely to vote have an annual income from $50,000–$100,000. White people and those between the ages of 40–64 are the most likely to vote in the race and age groups, respectively. However, black voter turnout has increased at least 20 percent since the mid-1990s.

Throughout the 1800s, about 80 percent of those qualified (i.e., white males) actually voted. Toward the end of the century, particularly after the Civil War, many states set up obstacles to voting such as poll taxes, literacy tests, residency requirements, and annual registration fees. These obstacles were primarily directed against Southern blacks as part of segregationist state laws (known as Black Codes and, later, Jim Crow laws). In the 19th century, many Northern states also enacted laws that prevented black men from voting and passed laws to make voting more difficult for white workers who were recent immigrants and who spoke little English. As a result of these obstacles, voting levels nationwide went down from 79 percent in 1896 to 49 percent in 1920.

The 15th Amendment prohibiting racial discrimination in voting in 1870 and the 19th Amendment giving women the vote in 1920 expanded the franchise to more and more Americans. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 protected minorities’ right to vote in the South where state laws had deliberately undermined and violated the 15th Amendment since 1877. In 1971, the 26th Amendment lowered the voting age from 21 to 18.

Still, voter participation in the United States has declined. Compared to other developed nations in the world, the U.S. has very low voter turnout. Belgium leads the world in voter turnout with a rate of 87.2 percent of eligible voters in a recent national election. The U.S. trails far behind with its rate of only 55.7 percent in 2016.

Voting Laws: Is Easier Registration the Answer?

Some experts link the decline in voting to bureaucratic obstacles. In their 1988 book Why Americans Don’t Vote, sociologists Frances Piven and Richard Cloward point out that when Americans are registered to vote, they show up at the polls 80 percent of the time. They argue that despite
legislation that potentially opens the polls to nearly everyone, obstacles to voter registration continue to affect turnout at the polls. Poor people and minorities tend to be less likely to register to vote. Their lack of voting tends to create a vicious circle. When the poor and minorities refrain from voting, politicians do not feel obligated to address their concerns. Because politicians don’t speak to their needs, these groups risk becoming even less interested in politics.

The National Voter Registration Act of 1993 was based on the assumption that voting is a fundamental right and that it is the duty of government to promote the exercise of that right. The act was designed to encourage potential voters to register and to remove discriminatory and unfair obstacles to voter registration. It requires states to register voters with three methods. Eligible citizens can register:

- When applying for or renewing a driver’s license. This so-called “motor-voter” method is used in about a dozen states.
- With a mail-in application.
- At public assistance agencies and agencies that provide services to people with disabilities. In addition, election officials must send all applicants a notice informing them of their voter registration status.

Supporters of the National Voter Registration Act, mostly Democrats, argued that the measure would help register 90 percent of all eligible Americans. Because non-voters tend to be poor, young, or from racial or ethnic minorities, many election observers believed that an increased voter population would aid the Democrats, traditionally the party of choice for those citizens.

Opponents of the bill, mostly Republicans, expressed concern that it would dictate to the states how they must register their citizens. They also predicted that multiple registrations would contribute to fraud. Other opponents contended that voters who aren’t interested enough to participate in the electoral process would not make informed decisions on candidates.

Despite the controversy, the law went into effect in 1995. Voter registration increased just before the 1996 presidential election. But voter turnout continued to fall. By the time of the U.S. presidential election in 2016, the gap between the number of registered voters (86.8 percent) and actual votes cast by eligible voters (55.7 percent) had widened considerably.

That gap can be partially explained by voter suppression tactics that were either not contemplated, or not resolved by the 1993 law. Too few polling places or insufficient ballot resources can cause voting lines to take hours, too long for those who vote during lunch breaks from work. Certain states have passed legislation requiring voter IDs, and many of these laws restrict the kinds of IDs that qualify. For example, Texas allows gun permits but not student IDs to qualify. And the process for obtaining such voter IDs can be difficult and expensive.

Certain states, like Idaho and Nebraska, have cut 5–7 days from early voting dates. In Arizona, it is a felony to turn in another person’s mail-in ballot, even with the voter’s permission. Iowa and South Dakota have made it more difficult for people with criminal convictions to re-establish their voting rights. Some states do not allow a person to vote early at all without an excuse. These restrictions – requiring significant time, money, or both to address – tend to have discriminatory effects on people from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds and on people of color.

**Writing & Discussion**

1. Why don’t people vote? List as many causes as you can for the decrease in voter turnout. What do you believe is the main cause?
2. In the 2020 U.S. presidential election, voter turnout was 66.8 percent. What do you think caused the increase from 2016? What do you think the consequences might be to American democracy if the trend of declining voter turnout continues?