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PATTERNS OF VOTER DISENGAGEMENT

Steven Alan Samson

The data I have found suggest the following very general conclusions:

1) **The original growth of voter turnout in presidential elections (1828-1860) resulted from opening the electoral process to direct participation through national parties.** Voter participation in presidential elections grew dramatically after presidential nominations by congressional party caucuses were replaced, first, by state and local nominations in the 1820s, then by national nominating conventions in the 1830s. Under the old congressional party caucus system, no one was nominated in 1820. James Monroe ran unopposed for reelection. In the 1824 election, Andrew Jackson was nominated by the Tennessee state legislature; Henry Clay by the Kentucky legislature; William Crawford by a small congressional caucus; and John Quincy Adams by the Boston town meeting. The Democratic Party was born during this election. Martin Van Buren, who had earlier organized the Albany Regency, the New York state political machine, helped Jackson organize the new party. As Wilfred Binkley comments: "The traditional revolutionary machinery of the committees of correspondence was utilized in order to overthrow the ruling class [i.e. the Adams-Clay coalition]. The Jacksonian politicians organized the now enfranchised masses through conventions, caucuses, and committees down into the county, the township, and even the rural school districts."[1] The first national nominating convention was held in 1832 by the Anti-Masonic Party. The Whig Party was born two years later and was successful to the extent it imitated the Democratic electoral strategy -- that is, nominating old generals from frontier areas who, unfortunately, both died in office. Other minor parties, like the Liberty Party, the Free Soil Party, and the American Party (Know-Nothings) came and went. The rise of the Republican Party during the mid-term elections of 1854 launched a new spurt of direct voter involvement.

2) **The high level of voter turnout from 1860 to 1900 coincided with a period of unrestricted two party competition and well-defined ideological differences.** Elections involving crucial issues, like the realigning elections of 1860 [national unity] and 1896 [hard vs. soft money], showed the highest levels of participation. Walter Dean Burnham notes that late nineteenth century politics was characterized by such features as: 1) party-activist control of nominations ands platforms through the

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[1]Wilfred E. Binkley, American Political Parties: Their Natural History, 4th ed., enlarged (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), pp. 114-15.

convention; 2) partisan printing and distribution of ballots on election day; 3) large numbers of elective offices at all levels; 4) partisan patronage control of most appointive offices; and 5) an extremely full mobilization of the potential electorate which was related to the intensity and rigidity of party competition.[2] On the other hand, fragmentation of one or both major parties, as during the 1872, 1884, 1892, and 1912 elections, tended to reduce voter turnout. Following the Civil War, voting in the southern states rebounded to pre-war levels once they were restored to their original status. The Democratic Party became competitive again by 1876.

3) **The decline of voter turnout in presidential elections in this century is due in large part to the discouragement of popular involvement.** Voter turnout is greatest where the issues are most salient, as in presidential elections. By contrast, midterm congressional elections have averaged 37% participation lately. School board elections, which are usually held separately, have the lowest levels of participation (usually under 10%). Voter turnout for primary elections has always been comparatively low but strongest where party competition is strong. Voter turnout is lower in nonpartisan than partisan elections. When voter participation is restricted, either directly or indirectly, incumbent political elites hold the advantage. Progressive reformers who represented what has been called the middle class ethos (as opposed to the immigrant ethos) promoted the direct primary, presidential preference primary system, and other structural innovations early in this century in order to weaken or break the grip of political party machines. As a result, the "militarist" politics associated with urban machines was replaced by a blander, issueless, managerial-style of "good government" politics that emphasized consensus building through the fragmentation of voting blocs. Walter Dean Burnham contends that "many of the 'best men' associated with progressivism and deeply imbued with traditional old-stock American middle-class values (individualism, anticorruptionism, nativism, and antiurbanism) came to regard the ascendancy of party organizations and the rigidity of mass voting behavior as the enemy to be attacked."[3] Progressive reforms introduced between 1890 and 1920 resulted in the following: 1) the erosion of functions performed by political parties through the Australian secret ballot, the direct-primary system, at-large elections of city council members, nonpartisan local elections, and the city-manager movement; and 2) manipulation of voting qualifications and requirements through personal-registration requirements (at first primarily in the larger cities), the women's suffrage movement (which had the effect of diluting

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[2]Walter Dean Burnham, Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), p. 72.

[3]Ibid., p. 74.

immigrant political power in the short run), and various Jim Crow laws in the South, such as the poll tax, long residence requirements, and the discriminatory literacy test.[4]

4) **Conclusion: Voter participation is naturally highest among political elites. It will be high among the general population only when the political machinery for getting out the vote is in place.** It may be true that voter turnout was traditionally high in the New England colonies, but it must be remembered that the franchise was restricted to church members and property owners who had a direct responsibility for government and thus a greater stake in the system. Servants, squatters, recent immigrants, women, and children would have been less aware of the issues. Once these groups became eligible to vote, roughly between 1820 and 1970, they did not immediately become full participants.

Consider the evidence. Property requirements were dropped in the major states during the 1820s. The figures for 1824-1840 in **Table 2** reflect this change as well as the rise of a genuine two party system. Black suffrage -- the Fifteenth Amendment (1870) -- appears to have resulted in an initial drop in participation followed by a return to previous levels. The struggle between supporters and opponents of the Reconstruction in the early 1870s may have been a factor in these results. Voting patterns were also affected by Black Codes and Jim Crow laws that were introduced at different times between 1890 and 1904. Women's suffrage -- the Nineteenth Amendment (1920) -- resulted in an initial drop (1920-1924) followed by a steady rise in turnout. The 18-year-old vote -- the Twenty-Sixth Amendment (1971) -- resulted in a more profound drop in participation.

Today, older (45-64), highly educated (college graduates), upper income voters consistently show the greatest level of participation.

Table 1

Year	Voting Age Population (millions)	Registered Voters (%)	Percentage of Eligible Voters Who Voted
1988	178.1	66.6	57.4
1984	170.0	68.3	59.9
1980	157.0	66.9	59.2
1976	146.5	66.7	59.2

Source: Current Population Survey

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[4]Ibid., pp. 74-90.

Table 2

Year	U.S.	Mass.	R.I.	N.Y.	Miss.	Virg.
1824	26.9	29.0	12.0	----	41.3	11.6
1828*	57.6	25.7	17.1	80.2	56.6	27.7
1832	55.4	39.4	26.3	84.2	28.0	31.1
1836	57.8	43.4	23.8	70.5	64.4	35.2
1840	80.2	66.7	33.2	91.9	88.2	54.7
1844	78.9	65.8	45.1	92.1	86.1	54.2
1848	72.7	64.6	41.1	79.6	80.7	47.3
1852	69.6	57.8	57.8	84.7	61.7	63.3
1856	78.9	69.8	62.9	89.9	78.3	67.8
1860*	81.2	65.8	59.4	95.5	89.5	71.5
1864	73.8	63.8	58.8	89.3	----	----
1868	78.1	66.9	46.6	91.7	----	----
1872	71.3	62.0	40.2	80.5	71.1	66.2
1876	81.8	72.3	49.4	89.6	79.7	77.6
1880	79.4	71.2	48.7	89.3	50.1	64.1
1884	77.5	69.3	48.1	87.5	49.2	81.7
1888	79.3	71.7	53.4	92.3	43.8	83.2
1892	74.7	74.6	63.0	86.3	18.8	75.3
1896*	79.3	70.6	59.2	84.3	22.1	71.0
1900	73.2	67.4	56.2	84.6	16.9	59.6
1904	65.2	67.6	63.4	83.3	15.6	27.7
1908	65.4	65.1	62.4	79.7	16.5	27.4
1912	58.8	63.4	62.7	72.1	15.1	25.7
1916	61.6	62.8	65.8	71.6	20.0	27.1

1920	49.2	53.3	57.8	56.4	9.4	19.4
1924	48.9	56.6	66.3	56.3	12.0	18.1
1928	56.9	74.0	68.9	68.3	15.2	24.0
1932*	56.9	69.5	71.7	66.1	13.8	22.1
1936	61.0	75.9	78.0	72.6	14.4	23.0
1940	62.5	78.7	75.6	75.7	14.7	22.1
1944	55.9	71.0	65.0	70.9	15.0	22.3
1948	53.0	71.5	66.0	65.0	16.0	21.6
1952	63.3	75.0	79.8	71.2	23.8	29.9
1956	60.6	72.0	73.2	67.9	21.0	31.8
1960	64.0	76.9	77.3	66.9	25.7	34.4
1964	61.7	68.4	69.3	64.4	34.1	41.6
1968	60.6	66.4	65.6	59.7	53.3	50.5

* denotes a critical election or party realignment

Source: Historical Statistics of the United States, 1970

Table 3

1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988
61.9	60.9	55.2	53.5	54.0	53.3	50.3

Source: World Almanac, 1992

Table 4

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH HIGH VOTER TURNOUT

1. **Sociopolitical Characteristics**

   a. the form and the degree of **media involvement** (newspaper reading has the strongest correlation)
   b. partisanship or **party identification**
   c. **political efficacy** (sense of having power to affect governmental actions)

2. **Social Structural Characteristics**

   a. **socioeconomic status** (SES)
      -- the higher the level of educational attainment
      -- the less manual the occupation
      -- the higher the level of income
   b. **age** (higher), **residential mobility** (lower), and **marital status** (married and living with spouses)
   c. **race** (white rather than nonwhite), **region** (non-Southerners rather than Southerners), **sex** (men rather than women)

Source: Ruy A. Teixeira, Why Americans Don't Vote: Turnout Decline in the United States, 1960-1984 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987).

PLEASE NOTE: The figures on these charts vary according the source and methods of measurement. The absence of a uniform voter registration system and the variety of state and local laws and circumstances makes it difficult to accurately estimate voting participation.

The statistics in **Table 2** were compiled by Walter Dean Burnham and involve a number of assumptions. Adjustments in the statistics were made on the basis of age, sex, race, and citizenship. American citizenship did not become a universal prerequisite for voting in presidential elections until 1928.

The aggregate figures are also misleading, so I have provided statistics for several individual states. This way it is easier to see some of the changes that might otherwise be missed in the aggregate. This way it also becomes evident that state political culture is a relevant factor, although the figures themselves are mute. Rhode Island, for example, had severe property restrictions until the 1840s. Immigration changed the state's political character afterwards. Only later during the Progressive Era did Rhode Island catch up with its neighbor, Massachusetts, in voter turnout.

I believe the changing patterns of voter turnout reflect several factors: 1) the dropping of property restrictions on the right to vote (Massachusetts, New York, and finally Virginia in the 1820s; Rhode Island in the 1840s); 2) the rise of urban and statewide political machines in New York in the 1820s and elsewhere after the Civil War; 3) late 19th century Jim Crow laws and other barriers to voting in the South; 4) the anti-populist Progressive reform movement that preceded the First World War; and 5) the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s). The addition of new blocs of voters -- blacks in 1872, women in 1920, and 18- year-olds in 1972 -- appears to have had a negative initial impact on these figures.