

## Why Don't More Americans Vote?

For a half century, participation in American elections has been distressingly low. In 2012, just 58 percent of potential voters bothered to cast votes in a presidential election. As a result, the United States has by far the lowest voter turnout of any western society.

It wasn't always this way. As recently as 1960, 72.8 percent of the electorate cast ballots in a presidential election. And back in the mid-nineteenth century, voter participation rates of more than eighty percent were common occurrences.

Why don't Americans vote? Is it because they are voters are generally content with the status quo? Or because of legal obstacles that obstruct participation? Or is it due to the absence of candidates who might mobilize the disaffected voters by addressing their interests? The decline in voter turnout did not emerge overnight. It has been a long-term development. It began during the late nineteenth century and was only temporarily reversed during the 1930s and 1940s.

According to a study of American voting patterns as voter participation rates have dropped, class differences and age differences in voter turnout have increased. The typical voter today is relatively well off financially and over fifty years of age. Better educated, higher earning Americans vote at seventy to eighty percent levels, while less than two-fifths of the working class bother to vote—a forty percent gap.

Class differences in voter participation have partisan political implications. At the highest end of the income distribution, Republican votes outnumber Democratic votes by as much as five-to-one, while the lowest income voters tend to vote overwhelmingly Democratic.

So why don't Americans vote? Some say because of legal impediments. When voter registration was first instituted at the turn of the century, participation dropped by about ten percent. The overwhelming majority of registered voters go to the polls—85 to 90 percent. So, according to this view, easing registration requirements should increase voter turnout.

Others say it's due to weak political stimuli. Voter participation began its long-term slide during the period between 1896 and 1930, a period when the Democratic Party dominated the "Solid South" and the Republican Party held the Northeast. Voting Republican in the South or Democratic in the North had little impact, and voter participation flagged.

During the Great Depression, voter turnout increased sharply as the two parties sparred over Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Economic hardship and the rise of labor unions helped to mobilize voters. The electorate grew increasingly polarized along class lines, with the Democratic share of the working class vote rising sharply and the Republican share of the upper class vote climbing.

Since 1960, voter participation has once again fallen, particularly among lower class voters. There are many current issues that may explain why, such as negative campaigning, the decline of party organizations, the unwillingness of the major parties to address issues of concern to lower class voters There's also growing estrangement from politics traceable to the Vietnam war and political

scandals, such as Watergate, and the increasing conservatism of the mainstream of the Democratic party.