

Is nonvoting a Social Disease?

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Abstract

The article studies the question whether voluntary nonvoting in the U.S. harms basic principles of democracy, government, country as the level of voter participation has decreased since 1960s, and is lower than in democratic countries; the paper underlines the importance of the role of public opinion in elections. We attempt to clarify the reason of public opinion's inconsistency; causes why some people don't participate in elections-whether they are uninformed of crucial issues of government and public policy, or they voluntarily prefer to stay uninformed, or their traits might play the role; finally, does the policy predisposition of nonvoters significantly differ from voters, and whether the same is true of their candidate selection that could create a major threat to the future stability of the American political system.

Keywords: involuntary, nonvoting, polls, information, apathy, turnout

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Introduction

As a republic, the topmost power inside the American system stays with the people. This power is utilized through regular, scheduled elections in which voters select the President, members of Congress, and various state and local officials. These functionaries and their staffs formulate policy, make laws, and direct the day-to-day activity of government.

We have to underline that the level of voter participation has declined since the early 1960 in the United States. According the statistics the rate of voting is, largely, from 10 to 40 points lower than in democratic nations of Western Europe, Scandinavia, and the British Commonwealth. All models of involuntary nonvoting – happening by either legal or extra-legal obstacles – are infringements of the most crucial principles of democracy and impartiality. It's far from positive thing if citizens willing to vote are blocked from doing so by law or intimidation. But what about voluntary nonvoters – approximately the 30 % of U.S. adult citizens who could vote, but who rarely or never do so? What it means if millions of Americans who could vote choose not to? Before considering the effects of nonvoting, we presume it's worth analyzing the specificities of public opinion.

Public Opinion and Elections in the U.S.

Political scientist V.O. Key underlines the importance of public opinion: “those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed. Even if public opinion is silent, or latent, public officials may act or fail to act because they fear arousing it. This is the so-called law of anticipated reactions, whereby elections influence government even though they do so indirectly and passively” (Freidrich, 1963, p. 199). It means that public opinion can use power precisely.

In the 19th century, measuring public opinion was an art form. Politicians considered informal polls, consulted community leaders, or regarded the newspapers' editorial pages to

understand the public attitude. But the process was not science, but “reading tea leaves” (Geer, 1996).

The appearance of modern survey research in the 1930s (initiated by a former journalism professor – George Gallup) refined the system, making public opinion strong political power. Main factor to this shift was the scholarly design and operation of randomized surveys that have turned into a criterion of the modern election campaign.

Public opinion is very susceptible to how it is measured, but the awareness about survey tools has enhanced immensely over time. The more leaders get informed about exactly what the public wants, the more strength they have to respond to those preferences. For the most part, leaders do that. Although, the boundary on “governing by public opinion” do not depend on defects of pollsters measuring public attitudes. Leaders may decide to ignore public opinion polls for other reasons. Public views may not be a trustworthy foundation for picking good policies. And besides, most elected officials are not representing the nation as a whole; they exemplify a specific set of constituents whose opinions differ in their concentration. Poll outcome is sensitive to how people advance in political life, as on the majority of issues people are uninformed, unconstrained by ideology, and unpredictable because of their inconsistency. (Fiorina, Peterson, Voss, & Johnson, 2007).

Americans are Uninformed

On many issues people have limited or no information. Ignorance spreads around crucial issues of government and public policy. During the 2004 election campaign, for instance, two-thirds of 18 to 29-year-olds said that one or both presidential candidates supported restoring the draft, when both President Bush and his contender John Kerry had insistently rejected to such a measure (National Annenberg Election Survey, 2004).

Why do people have so little knowledge of important data and topics? The thing is, most people

hardly pay attention to politics. News magazines sell fewer copies than entertainment and lifestyle magazines do. Far more are concerned about who becomes their next U.S. senator. Some politically informed students criticize the indifferent Americans, describing them as thoughtless people who are not close to the democratic ideal. Such reflections miss the causes why people are so uninterested in public affairs.

A) The thing is, most people have not enough time for politics, many consider it an indulgence. Interest, they work to attend to essential requirements – paying the bills, family chores, cultivate personal relationships. They might not have time or energy for *New York Times* after dozing off and picking up children, commuting, working, housekeeping.

The attempt to remain informed collides with human necessities like amusement and leisure. Those who denounce ordinary citizens for disregard public affairs, mostly have jobs, that enable them to remain informed with little endeavor. For instance, at universities political conversation is an ordinary deviation, and for many professors and students, being informed is necessary for academic purposes. Moreover, many journalists have jobs that require following politics: if they are not informed, they are not competent. But most Americans do not have this motivation, a fact that critics in academia and the media tend to forget.

B) A small number consider that they have enough strength to impact the conflicts in Middle East, or other parts of the world to be solved. Some scholars think from a logical point of view, the question is not why so many Americans are unaware; the paradox is why so many are informed as they are (Fiorina, Peterson, Voss, & Johnson, 2007, p. 105)

C) In addition, the advantages of information are not the same for all people around all topics. Most people will be better informed on issues, that directly influence their lives. Parents and teachers are more aware than other citizens about school operations and budgets. Human Services

agents are more informed about welfare and other public aid.

D) Moreover, the price and advantages of being well-informed may change over the years. When crucial events seem to be better informed, information level boosts. During the fall 2001, after an anonymous terrorist posted envelopes involving the deadly disease anthrax to members of Congress and the news media, about 80% of the American public reasonably responded to the question, “As far as you know, which form of anthrax is more often fatal: the skin form, the inhalation form, or do you think they are equally likely to be fatal” (Downs, 1972).

E) Some people admit it their duty as citizens to be informed, so they accommodate to public affairs, just because they believe it is the “right thing” to do. Other people find politics to be interesting, in the same way that some like sports or arts. For such people, maintaining the position of being informed is a matter of savor or principles, not the outcome of any solid benefit from being informed. (Morris, 2024, pp. 38-50)

Ultimately, it should be mentioned that Americans are not exceptional to pay little attention to public issues. Citizens in other countries are likewise not concentrated and have insufficient knowledge. According 1998 British Gallup poll, for example, only 40 percent of Britons knew that the United States once was part of British Empire! (King, 1997).

Americans Are Independent

Another trait that facilitates misrepresentation of public opinion is the fact that American people are not bound by political ideology. Political elites, activists, or office holders are generally called political elites and have well-organized ideologies that unite their attitudes on policy issues. They may be “liberals”, or “conservatives”. Another case is ordinary citizens, called the mass public. Instead of having a consistent belief in activism or government that distinguishes liberals and conservatives, common citizens normally approve of federal spending in some spheres but oppose it in others.

They are patient with some groups in some circumstances, but not with other groups in other conditions. Given the choice, one-quarter to one-third of the population will not even categorize themselves on a liberal-conservative balance and another one-quarter position themselves precisely in the middle: "moderate." (Miller & Traugott, 1990).

Americans Are Unpredictable

It's no wonder that people's considerations are often incongruous and self-contradictory. Disparity of views bewilders political debate, misrepresenting voters' message sending by voters during an election. President George W. Bush introduced a tax-cut plan at the initial stage of his administration that a major part of voters backed in polls, simultaneously they favoured expanding spending on social security & education. In each case, both parties could decline accommodating or adjusting to their policies, believing that public opinion backed up most of their principles (Miller & Traugott, 1990).

What's the reason of public opinion's inconsistency? Presumably, lack of knowledge is one reason. People are clueless about how little is being spent on welfare & foreign aid. So, they suppose, mistakenly, that cutting such unimportant programs will empty space for more popular ones. Some voters showcase inconsistency, However, not all cases of inconsistency showcase their inadequacy or inexactness. Citizens are unsteady when applying general fundamentals to specific cases. As we have seen, people support cutting "spending" in general but not specific programs. They also disapprove of amending the Constitution but support amendments to demand a stabilized budget, limit congressional terms, and ban flag burnings. Most noteworthy is that they back up fundamental rights but constantly make exceptions. (Prothro & Grigg, 1960)

What's the Damage of Voluntary Nonvoting?

One of the wide-spread arguments against nonvoting is that it results in unrepresentative bodies of public

officials. It implies—if most of the middle-class WASPs vote and most of the African Americans, Hispanics, and poor people do not, then there will be notably lower numbers of African Americans, Hispanics, and poor people in public office than in the general population. Why is that not good? For two reasons. First it makes the public officials unrepresentative. On the other hand, it's not doubtful that when interests of African Americans are not best introduced by African American officials, the concerns of women by women officials, and etc., many presume that the policy preferences of the underrepresented groups will get little consideration from the government. Second, it not only harms the underrepresented groups, but weakens civil order — it promotes the underclasses' feelings of isolation from the system. However, some studies considering voters and nonvoters ratio, do not agree with this argument. They presume, that the dissemination of policy choice among nonvoters are about the same as those among voters, and pressures on public officials by constituents for some definite policies, are approximately the same as they would be if everyone, WASP and minorities, voted at the same grade. Furthermore, other researches have revealed, that the degree of cynicism about the government's honesty, competence, and responsiveness is about the same among nonvoters as among voters, and an enhanced level of nonvoting does not mean an increased level of alienation, isolation, or lawlessness. We can bring a paradoxical example: Is the degree of civic virtue or the level of lawlessness lower in the countries below: Venezuela, no, but there is 94 percent average voting turnout, Austria, 94 percent, Italy, 93 percent than in the United — 58 percent, Switzerland — 64 percent, Canada — 76 percent. If the answer is no, and it is so, then we have to deduce that there is no outlined relationship between high levels of voting turnout and high levels of civic duty (Ranney, 2007). Another argument according for example Arthur Hadley, is linked with the future risk to the Republic, political system might be brought by "refrainers." (Ibid, 2007, p. 82). According to Hadley, if millions of the present non-voters in some forthcoming elections

would vote for persons, parties, and policies completely different from those selected by the regular voters, it would cause radical shift of power. According many, his consideration, is highly dubious. It is observed that the policy predisposition of nonvoters does not differ significantly from voters, and the same is true of their candidate selection.

Does Nonvoting Reveal Social Sickness?

Some politicians support the 20th century variant of the viewpoint that millions of Americans are politically vain, pointless – that they are too lazy, too preoccupied with their own affairs and interests, and too apathetic about welfare of their country and the quality of their government to make even minimum endeavor compulsory to vote. The question arises: Are not fatigue and apathy exhibited by the Americans? high level of non-voting the main reason for the country's decreasing military strength and economic productivity and blundering of the government? Austin Ranney tries to consider this question, saying "perhaps so, perhaps not. Yet the recent studies of nonvoters have shown that they do not differ significantly from voters in the proportions who believe that citizens have a civic duty to vote or in the proportions who believe that ordinary people have a real say in what government does." (Ranney, 2007, p. 83) The case may be that nonvoters are largely less loyal citizens, poorer soldiers, and less consequential workers than voters, but there is no enough validation to support such accusation. Can the presumption be accepted that the higher turnout rates for the Austrians, the French, and the Irish reveal that they are much better on any or all of these calculations than the Americans? If it is not true, then obviously there is no persuasive reason to believe that a high level of nonvoting is an indication of ailment in American society.

What Basic Fundamentals Does it Offend?

There is a category of Americans who believe that a big number of voluntary nonvoting in America is of concern not so much with regard to harm, or social ailment, but with reference to nonvoting hurting basic principles of democracy. According them the main

principle of democratic government is government by the people, government that acquires its "just powers from the consent of the governed." The fundamental institution of the democratic government is holding free elections. The right to vote is the principal right of every citizen in a democracy, and the exercise of that right is the most basic duty of every democratic citizen. Many have brought evidence for that from the report made by John F. Kennedy in 1963, as an 11-member Commission on Registration and Voting Participation. The report, delivered after his death ran as follows:

"Voting in the United States is the fundamental act of self-government. It provides the citizen in our free society the right to make a judgement, to state a choice, to participate in the running of his government... The ballot box is the medium for the expression of the expression of the consent of the governed." (Ranney, 2007, p. 83).

However, not everyone holds a strict view towards the nonvoters. The issues between the two viewpoints are positioned vigorously when the suggestion for compulsory voting is considered. If we follow the logic of convinced rejection of voluntary nonvoting violating of fundamental democratic philosophy and major social ailment, then why not to comply with the supremacy of Australia, Belgium, Italy and Venezuela and authorize laws calling for people to vote and punish them if they do not?

The logic seems flawless, and still most Americans are against mandatory voting laws for the United States. Americans want to eliminate all the remainder of involuntary nonvoting, and many are annoyed by the high rate of voluntary nonvoting. Still many consider that the right to refuse to vote is as valuable as the right to vote, and in the framework of the above-mentioned considerations Ivor Crewe (Crewe, 1981) asks the question: how much should Americans worry about the high level of voluntary nonvoting in the U.S.? His response is: "There are reason(s) for not worrying-too-much." The same opinion is shared by Austin Ranney, who considers that while Americans can and most likely should ease registration and voting laws and intensify register-and-vote push funded by political parties,

civic organizations, schools of government, and broadcasting companies, the most Americans can pragmatically expect from such endeavor a humble increase of 10 or so percentage points, in average turnouts. He presumes, that even the best planned and most appealingly introduced encouragement to people to behave like decent democratic citizens, can have just meagre outcome on their conduct.

Another strong reason not to worry, according Ranney, is that Americans are presumed to observe a significant increase in turnouts, for example 70 or 80 percent, in case most of the people in main nonvoting groups – African Americans, Hispanics, and poor people – become convinced that voting is a prominent tool for making government do what they want it to do. The “register-and-vote press by the NAACP and other African American mobilization organizations have already had consequential success in bringing previously inert African American citizens to the polls. “Organizations like the Southern Voter Registration Education

Project have had certain achievement with Hispanic nonvoters in Texas and New Mexico.

Conclusion

According many politicians if Americans put an end to the last remainder of institutions and attitudes that generate involuntary nonvoting, and if they ease registration and voting laws and methods to make voting in the U.S as uncomplicated as it is in other democracies, if the group-mobilization trends advance, then most probably level of voting participation in the U.S. may become much more like that of Canada or Great Britain, however, it's doubtful to be similar to the levels in the countries with compulsory voting or even those in West Germany or the Scandinavian countries. But yet if that does not happen, Americans feel optimistic that their low voting turnouts are not damaging their politics or country, or that they disinherit Americans of the right to call themselves a democracy.

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