Civic Indifference in Contemporary American Politics

Craig A. Rimmerman

> The steady decline in voting is the most visible evidence that something is wrong. Elections are the most direct link to governing power—the collective lever that is meant to make citizens sovereign and officeholders accountable to them. So why don't people use it, especially when they are so unhappy with government?
>
> —William Greider, *Who Will Tell the People?*

CHAPTER 3

It is indeed ironic that at the very moment that Eastern Europe is celebrating a transition to a Western-style liberal democracy, we in the United States are becoming increasingly critical of our own. Two recent books, William Greider's *Who Will Tell the People?* and E. J. Dionne's *Why Americans Hate Politics,* examine what Greider calls the betrayal of American democracy, albeit from different perspectives. Written by popular journalists, these books are important not only because of the substance of their arguments but also because of the attention they have received in the press. Dionne laments the polarization of elections around highly charged social issues such as abortion, school prayer, and affirmative action. A focus on these issues presents the electorate a set of "false choices" that fail to connect with practical problems faced by the citizenry. This polarization fosters an environment where citizens distrust politicians, "hate politics," and fail to vote in elections (Dionne, 1991). In sum, they display the civic indifference or civic disengagement that is a central characteristic of American politics.

Greider's analysis focuses more on structural explanations for the betrayal of American democracy. To Greider, the explanations for civic indifference largely emanate from "the politics of governing, not the politics of winning elections" (Greider, 1992, p. 13). Citizens fail to participate in the electoral arena because they do not see the link between their vote and the decisions made by those who hold power in the American policy process. Yet Greider accurately points out that although many Americans eschew voting, they participate in politics through a variety of alternative channels, such as town meetings and protest politics. It is the latter that potentially threatens overall system stability and raises the question germane to the core dilemma of this book: How does a polity strike a balance between the varieties of political participation engaged in by its citizens and residents?

One answer to that question is that if people had a greater chance to participate in meaningful ways, then perhaps they would not turn to the alternative forms of political participation that threaten to disrupt overall system stability. Another possible response is offered by the democratic theory of elitism, which we examined in Chapter 2: Civic indifference is functional for overall system stability to the extent that citizens do not participate at all in the American political system. This chapter will examine the implications of these two explanations within the broader context of the empirical literature on political participation.

The chapter also explores the empirical evidence for the claim that Americans are increasingly displaying civic indifference. I will evaluate both individual and structural explanations for that civic indifference, largely measured by the decline of voting in presidential and off-year elections. At the same time, I will provide alternative explanations for civic indifference by considering the explosion of citizen activism that has occurred in the United States in recent years. After exploring how civic indifference is manifested, I examine college students' attitudes toward politics and their political behavior as measured by various studies. Political participation in America cannot possibly be adequately explained by merely focusing on the individual characteristics of the participants and nonparticipants. The analysis must be broad enough to encompass many structural and individual explanations, as we attempt to explain the decline in voting at the same time as there is an increase in citizen activism.

Measuring Civic Indifference

The most traditional means for measuring civic indifference is voter turnout in elections. Fortunately, however, voting in elections is not the only criterion for measuring the health of a democratic society. If it were, the United States would be in big trouble, given voting-turnout rates in presidential and off-year elections (Hudson, 1995, p. 112). The United States ranks last among industrial democracies in average voter turnout in recent elections (see Table 3.1). Participation in even low in U.S. presidential elections, despite the fact that they generate the most attention and excitement among the voting public. Only 49 percent of all eligible voters actually turned out to vote in the 1996 election. This meager figure represented the lowest voter turnout since the 1924 presidential election (p.112). As Table 3.2 indicates, there was a gradual decline in presidential election turnout between 1960 and 1988, with a small increase in the 1984 presidential election between Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale. In 1992 there was a fairly substantial increase in voter turnout, though the turnout rate of 55.2 percent was still considerably lower than the average voter turnout in other industrial democracies. Some analysts have suggested that we can expect continued improvement in voting-turnout figures in presidential

Table 3.1 *Voter Participation Rates in Selected Democracies*

	Percent
Australia (1993)	90
Austria (1986)	87
Canada (1988)	75
East Germany (1990)	93
France (1988)	81
Hungary (1990)	64
Italy (1991)	85
Japan (1993)	75
South Korea (1992)	79
Switzerland (1987)	46
United States (1992)	55

Source: Bruce Miroff, Raymond Seidelman, Todd Swanstrom, *The Democratic Debate* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), p. 120.

Table 3.2 *Voting Turnout in U.S. Presidential Elections, 1932–1996 (in percentages)*

1932	52.4
1936	56.0
1940	58.9
1944	56.0
1948	51.1
1952	61.6
1956	59.3
1960	62.8
1964	61.9
1968	60.9
1972	55.2
1976	53.5
1980	52.6
1984	53.1
1988	50.1
1992	55.2
1996	49.0

Sources: 1932–1992 data from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1993), p. 284. 1996 data estimated by the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate.

elections. But before we get too excited about these improved figures, we should remember that nearly one-half of the eligible voting electorate chose to stay home rather than cast their ballots in the 1992 presidential election. In addition, we should also "remember that President Clinton's 44 percent plurality of the voters translates into an endorsement by only 24 percent of the citizenry" (Mathews, 1994, p. 29).

Voter turnout in midterm elections is even lower. As Table 3.3 indicates, voter participation in statewide midterm elections reached a high of 48.4 percent in 1966 before declining. Even in 1974, the first time that eighteen-to-twenty-year-olds participated in an off-year election, turnout in statewide elections was only 38.3. After 1974, turnout continued falling slowly, declining from the 1974 percentage in every year but 1982. In 1990, just over one-third of the eligible voting electorate voted in statewide elections (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993, p. 58). In sum, if we use voter turnout as an indicator of citizen participation and citizen interest in American politics, then these figures reveal a detached and apathetic citizenry, one that displays a remarkable amount of civic indifference.

What factors account for this low voter turnout in presidential and off-year elections? In answering this question, we are indeed constrained by the kinds of information that pollsters and social scientists have gathered over the past forty years (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993, pp. 4–5). Political scientists have offered both individual and structural explanations.

At the individual level, a number of explanations have been suggested. All emanate from the belief that "the key to the puzzle of why so many people do

Table 3.3 *Voting Turnout in Off-Year Elections, 1962–1994*

	U.S. Total[a]
1962	47.5
1966	48.4
1970	46.8
1974	38.3
1978	37.3
1982	40.5
1986	36.3
1990	36.4
1994	38.8

[a]Average of state turnout percentages in statewide or congressional elections.

Source: Compiled from Ruy Teixeira. *The Disappearing American Voter* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1992), p. 6 and *New York Times.*

not vote lies in one or another of their attitudes and preferences, or their lack of necessary resources" (Piven and Cloward, 1988, p. 113). One explanation is that people fail to vote because of a sense of political ineffectiveness, which is measured by a decline in political efficacy. Political efficacy refers to "both a sense of personal competence in one's ability to understand politics and to participate in politics, as well as a sense that one's political activities can influence what the government actually does" (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993, p. 15). A second explanation is that people lack the required sense of civic obligation. The decline in political parties and the concomitant decrease in partisan attachment, a strong relationship to political parties, is a third explanation. The lack of educational resources provides a fourth reason for the decline in voting turnout. Those who are more highly educated are more likely to vote in elections because "education imparts information about politics and cognate fields and about a variety of skills, some of which facilitate political learning. . . . Schooling increases one's capacity for understanding and working with complex, abstract and intangible subjects, that is, subjects like politics" (p. 14). Political mobilization by elites can also enhance voting turnout. Some scholars contend that in recent years we have seen a decline in political mobilization, fostering lower voter turnout in elections (p. 229). Perhaps the most important factor is the socioeconomic status (SES) of individual voters. Individuals with high SES, which is generally measured by education level, occupational status, and income, are more likely to vote than those with lower SES. Finally, political scientists claim that the electorate exhibits some combination of the above factors that prevents them from participating in elections (Piven and Cloward, 1988, p. 113).

Voting-turnout rates, however, cannot be explained entirely by the characteristics or beliefs of individual citizens. A number of political, institutional, and structural factors deserve serious consideration as well. For example, scholars contend that legal and administrative barriers to voting depress voting-turnout rates. These legal and administrative barriers, such as complicated voter registration forms, are important because they impede the well-off and well-educated much less than they do the poor and the undereducated (Piven and Cloward, 1988, p. 119). Therefore, there is a bias that favors more highly educated and wealthy voters. Historically, the political parties in power have supported antiquated voter registration procedures as a way to protect incumbent members of their own parties. Voter registration laws supported by the Democratic and Republican parties do impede challengers who would seek the support of voters whose views are perceived to be unrepresented in the American policy process. This obstruction occurs at all levels of government. In 1983 a number of political activists formed Human Serve as a way to reform voter registration laws in the United States. The goal was to "enlist public and private nonprofit agencies to register their clients to vote." Under the Human Serve plan, citizens would be able to register to vote at hospitals and public health

centers, motor vehicle bureaus and departments of taxation, unemployment and welfare offices, senior citizen centers and agencies for the disabled, day-care centers and family planning clinics, settlement houses and family service agencies, housing projects and agricultural extension offices, and libraries and municipal recreation programs. With the program, the founders of Human Serve hoped to make access to voter registration virtually universal (p. 209). Despite the political and legal obstacles. Human Serve claims to have registered a considerable number of previously unregistered voters, many of whom have little education, have never participated before in elections, and are living in or near poverty. In 1993, with the support of President Bill Clinton, Democrats in Congress were able to pass the "Motor Voter" bill, despite strenuous Republican party opposition. This legislation enables potential voters to register as they stand in line to get their driver's licenses. The Motor Voter legislation requires all states to simplify their procedures for voter registration, requires states to allow potential voters to register when they renew or apply for licenses at State Departments of Motor Vehicles offices, permits voters to register at military recruitment, social service, and other public agencies, and allows voters to register by mail (Dreier, 1994, p. 490). Piven and Cloward's analysis suggests that since the National Voter Registration Act went into effect in January 1995, "people have been registering or updating their voting addresses at the rate of nearly one million per month in 42 states." Early estimates were that the voter registration rolls would increase by twenty million before the 1996 election and twenty million more by the 1998 midterm election (Piven and Cloward, 1996, p. 39).

In sum, the attributes most likely to be associated with a willingness on the part of individuals to vote—"from education to positive feelings about politics—are more likely to be present among the more affluent" (Hudson, 1995, p. 121). For these reasons, then, the electorate is hardly representative of all citizens.

Political scientist Robert Putnam addressed the broader implications of civic indifference for the quality of American public life and overall system stability. To Putnam, the vitality of civil society—networks of civic associations and social trust that contribute to high levels of voluntary cooperation and participation—in the United States has declined considerably over the past twenty-five years or so. In his analysis, Putnam incorporates the work of the French diplomat, Alexis de Tocqueville, who visited the United States in the 1830s and reported that Americans' participation in civic associations was a central element of their democratic experience. In *Democracy in America,* Tocqueville wrote:

> Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types—religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute. . .

> Nothing in my view, deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America. (Putnam, 1995b, p. 66)

Putnam suggests that over the past two decades Americans have witnessed a decline in civic engagement. The metaphor that he employs to describe this trend toward greater isolation is that more Americans are "bowling alone." Reports that millions of Americans have withdrawn from community affairs support Putnam's claim that there has been a decline in civic engagement. Additional factors include the decline in voter turnout, a reduction in the number of Americans working for political parties, and a decline in the number of Americans attending a political rally or speech. To Putnam, these trends are disturbing because they lead to a decline in what he calls "social capital—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives" (Putnam, 1996, p. 34). In the end, Putnam believes that technological developments, such as television and computers, have contributed considerably to the decline in civic engagement. He worries that television and the computer revolution have served to isolate individuals from their communities to the point where technology might be "driving a wedge between our individual interests and our collective interests" (Putnam, 1995b, p. 75). These technological developments have had particularly deleterious consequences for the typical college-aged student of today, who most likely has spent a considerable amount of time watching television and interacting with computers in virtual isolation from others. Putnam warns that "high on America's agenda should be the question of how to reverse these adverse trends in social connectedness, thus restoring civic engagement and civic trust." How this might be accomplished is a central theme of the present book. But any attempt to restore civic engagement and civic trust must also be placed within the broader dilemma of this book: how to foster a more meaningful and participatory democracy, one that also promotes overall civility.

And what do recent qualitative surveys of voters' attitudes concerning politics and political participation suggest regarding civic indifference? One such study conducted by the Kettering Foundation in 1990–1991 found empirical support for David Mathews's claim that people think that "the political arena today is too large and distant for individual actions to have an impact" (Mathews, 1994, p. 34). The Kettering study, entitled *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America,* gathered citizen groups in ten different cities in an effort to understand what Americans think about their roles as citizens in the political system at large. For many of the participants in these focus group discussions, a sense of powerlessness and exclusion from government decisions translated into a feeling that they had a limited role in the political system. The Kettering study also identified the usual "popular dissatisfaction with government and politicians" (Mathews, 1994, p. 11). It found that participants believed

that they were "pushed out" of a political process dominated by special-interest lobbyists and politicians and that negative attacks and sound bites dominated public discourse in ways that turned citizens off from politics. People felt that debate on the issues of the day offered little opportunity for citizen participation and was generally remote from their concerns. One participant concluded, "I'm never aware of an opportunity to go somewhere and express my opinion and have someone hear what I have to say" (Hudson, 1995, p. 131).

At the same time, many of the citizens in the focus groups were far from apathetic or too interested in their own private matters to be concerned about politics. Indeed, they had a clear sense of their civic responsibilities and wished to have more-meaningful opportunities to participate in the political system (Harwood Group, 1991). But at the same time, they displayed frustration, anger, cynicism, and alienation toward politics in America. They were particularly worried about passing on their cynicism and alienation to their children. To these Americans, a professional political class of incumbent politicians, powerful lobbyists, the media elite, and campaign managers all hindered their ability from participating in the broader political system in a meaningful way. People in the study perceived that the system was dominated by money and that voting in elections simply would not make a difference because the overall system is closed to the average citizen (Mathews, 1994, p. 12).

There are additional signs of this citizen anger toward politics besides low voter turnout. As political scientist Susan Tolchin suggests in her recent book *The Angry American*, "political leaders from both parties worry about the absence of civility, the decline of intelligent dialogue, and the rising decibels of hate" (Tolchin, 1996, pp. 4–5). In recent years there has been an increase in the number of incumbents who have chosen to leave office voluntarily for fear of losing their seats. The loss would stem from the votes of a citizenry increasingly frustrated with professional politicians. Some of these same politicians have decided to leave office because they are increasingly concerned about the rise of incivility increasingly characterizing American politics. For example, Senators Bill Bradley (D-New Jersey), Hank Brown (R-Colorado), James Exxon (D-Nebraska), Nancy Landon Kassebaum (R-Kansas), and Tim Wirth (D-Colorado) have all declined to seek reelection at the height of their political careers. In addition, laws to limit terms at all levels of government have been passed by large margins in various states.

Citizens have also embraced the initiative and referendum as vehicles for addressing the problems that the political system at large has neglected. Through the initiative and referendum, citizens enact or reject laws directly rather than relying on elected officials to solve problems. An initiative, a proposed new law initiated by citizens, is placed on the ballot through a petition signed by a specified number of voters. Through a referendum, a law approved by elected officials is referred to the ballot either by the officials or by citizens

petition (Isaac, 1992, p. 171). The initiative and referendum process most approximates direct democracy in the United States. California's Proposition 13, which was ratified in the late 1970s, ushered in an era in which the referendum has been increasingly used. For example, in Long Beach, California, citizens called for a referendum on zoning ordinances. In Olympia, Washington, citizens decided state legislators' salaries by referendum. In Chicago, citizens proposed a referendum to limit school taxing power. Citizens in California's San Gabriel Valley attempted to block a controversial redevelopment project through the use of the referendum. The message of all these referendum efforts is that representative government has failed to tackle the policy issues under question, thus contributing to a more angry, alienated, and frustrated citizenry, one that will bypass the normal policy process in order to achieve its goals (Mathews, 1994, p. 12).

Ross Perot clearly capitalized on the citizenry's frustration with "politics as usual" in his quixotic 1992 campaign for the White House. Perot, running on the Independent party ticket, presented himself as an antipolitician, an outsider who truly understood the frustrations of mainstream America, one who could provide the leadership required to pass timely and meaningful public policies in response to the major issues of the day. To Perot, lobbyists, political action committees, and the elected officials who serve them are at the heart of what is wrong with the American political system. Perot was most effective in attacking the nation's political elites and rallying his supporters around the populist banner of "United We Stand." As one commentator pointed out, "Far more than most leading Democrats and Republicans, Perot has a feel for how millions of ordinary people actually experience life in contemporary America, and he expresses that understanding keenly" (Wilentz, 1993, p. 33). As a result, he was able to rally supporters who were concerned about undemocratic abuses of power at the same time that they wished to have more meaningful involvement in the political system. To his most avid supporters, many of whom had become angry and frustrated with American politics, it did not seem to matter that Perot increasingly appeared to critics as "an egomaniac with a clever sales pitch and a fortune to spend" (p. 29). In the end, both Democrats and Republicans recognized that the Perot phenomenon would not quickly disappear. In July 1993 the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), a group of elected officials who wanted to overhaul the party's liberal image and move the party to the center of the ideological spectrum, especially on social issues, published a document designed to provide Democrats with the building blocks for a leadership, policy, and electoral strategy to persuade Perot supporters to support the Democrats in future elections. It concluded, in part:

> The Perot bloc is for real and has considerable staying-power. Perot voters remain committed to the 1992 vote and, for the moment, want to stick with Perot in

> 1996—even if he were to run as a Republican. That is a measure of their indepei dence and alienation which will remain important in our future national election (Greenberg, From, and Marshall, 1993, p. II–2)

Perot's ability to win 19 percent of the popular vote in the 1992 presidenti election provides more empirical evidence for the claim that many Americar are increasingly disheartened with "politics as usual." However, his disappoint ing showing in the 1996 presidential election is a reminder of the barriers tha third parties face at the national level.

Citizen alienation and frustration has also manifested itself in the in creased popularity of television and radio call-in talk shows, which are often de voted to discussions of politics. *Newsweek* devoted a February 1993 cover stor to the popularity of the talk-show format and reported that call-in shows wer growing so fast that they numbered nearly 1,000 of the nation's 10,000 radi shows. At that time, *Larry King Live* was the highest-rated show broadcast o CNN (Fineman, 1993, p. 25). Rush Limbaugh has emerged as such an unre lenting critic of the Clinton presidency that the president saw fit to unleash barrage of public criticism against the conservative talk-show host in June 1994 The president recognized that he could not let Limbaugh's attacks go unan swered any longer.

What is the broader significance of all of this "noise" across the airwaves At one level, it surely signifies that a portion of the American electorate contin ues to be frustrated by the normal operation of American politics and desire more meaningful opportunities to participate in decisions that affect the quality and direction of their lives. At the same time, politicians who wince because o what they hear on television or radio talk shows are surely overreacting. To be sure, only the most outraged, motivated, and devoted listeners call in. They constitute only about 2 or 3 percent of the total audience (Fineman, 1993 p. 27). As a result, the angry voices often heard in the talk-show format are hardly representative of the larger public. What they do signify, however, is that attention is being paid to citizen disaffection at a time when both scholars and average citizens are discussing issues of democracy, citizenship, and account- ability. This is certainly true of the amount of recent attention devoted to young people's beliefs and values regarding politics, which I will discuss next.

American Youth and Civic Indifference

Many studies through the years have provided considerable evidence to sup- port the conclusion that young people are largely apathetic, uninterested, indif- ferent, and disengaged when it comes to politics. Indeed, recent studies of the political lives of today's youth provide additional support for this claim. Yet these studies also "reflect two contradictory stereotypes: that of an apathetic