The New Patriotism & The Old Voting
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"Patriotism," eighteenth century lexicographer and author Samuel Johnson has famously proclaimed, "is the last refuge of a scoundrel." Dr Johnson’s cynicism may have captured the essence of his own times, but he certainly wasn’t anticipating the America zeitgeist circa 2001. Indeed, today on the threshold of what President George Bush has called the "first war of the 21 century" we seem to be experiencing a virtual renaissance of patriotic expressions and feelings.

The pride in country, rekindled by the horrific events of Sept 11, has been truly remarkable. Despite a national recession, Americans express support for their leaders and their nation at levels not evidenced since World War II. All American major institutions have been effected by this so-called rallying effect. Approval of the over all direction of the country itself has soared. Satisfaction with the direction of the country has increased from 43% to 67% as reported last week by Gallup—a remarkable jump attributed to patriotic fever.

Both the President and Congress are enjoying similar striking improvements in support. President George Bush, whose job approval hovered around 50% for an extended period, found his popularity growing by almost 40% in a two-week span And Congress, an institution recently held in a disdain bordering on contempt, now has an historical approval rating of 84%. Even Black Americans, who cast less than 10% of their vote for Bush, have rallied behind him, with 77% approving of the way he’s handling his job.

But while a remarkable change in public spirit has occurred, no one seems certain the New Patriotism will lead citizens to actually increase their political participation, especially by voting this year. Certainly voting turnout is a worrisome problem. Turnout rates in the United States are low relative to that achieved in other western democracies—and they have been steadily declining for several decades. Turnout in presidential elections has hovered around 50% of the electorate in recent years. Statewide elections are worse. They typically bring out less then 50%, while local elections and primary elections record turnouts as low as 25% and even lower. An off year election like this year’s might record a 20% turnout.

So an eminently reasonable question is being posed: will America’s newfound patriotism fix the voting turnout problem? Will it lead more voters to the polls beginning with the November 6 off-year election?

Those who answer yes argue that the events of September 11 will get people interested in politics and public affairs again—and this will include voting. Voting itself they argue has always been linked to patriotism and national spirit. How many speakers on how many fourths of July have reminded Americans that the right to vote is our most fundamental component of democracy, and one purchased with the blood of patriots across the generations who fought our wars. Won’t American’s, spurred by swelling national pride and chastened by the looming national emergency, begin to turn out more for elections? Won’t voting increase because we feel more patriotic?

If history serves as a guide, the answer unfortunately is no. It is unlikely that voter turnout will significantly increase as a consequence of the new patriotic spirit sweeping across the land. In fact, it may decrease.
Why this is so needs some explanation. The short answer is that the factors that increase voting turnout—sharp policy differences, hard fought campaigns, and close contests—are absent or weaker during times of national crisis. Paradoxically, higher voting turnout occurs in peacetime.

Consider the evidence from World War II and the post World War II era. Larger turnouts actually occurred during the relatively tranquil late 1950s and early 1960s than during the wartime 1940’s. In fact, the highest presidential turnout since 1924 was in the Kennedy-Nixon Cold War election of 1960, not the hot war election year 1944, which was seven percentage points lower. The second highest turnout presidential election was in 1964, during peace and economic stability, when Lyndon Johnson politically decimated Barry Goldwater in a lopsided election result.

As these elections indicate higher turnouts usually figure in elections that stress partisan differences—and occur in peace not wartime. This is very different from our current moment—a time of splendorous bipartisanship in matters of war, security, and foreign policy.

True, bipartisanship does not mean the absence of all partisanship. Differences do exist on some domestic policies. But the public is not transfixed on an economic stimulus package or prescription drugs at the moment. Nor is it likely to become so as long as the national emergency continues. Instead, the bipartisan tone in Washington will continue to reduce and minimizes differences in a way likely not to excite voters. Broad consensus on the issues and concerns of Americans can energize government and move legislation, but it rarely energizes voters nor moves them to the polls on Election Day.

What is true about elections in general is also true about this year’s election. In particular, this year’s off-year election is unlikely to record increased turnout, which in part is cyclical. Off-Year elections are largely local in nature. Without high profile top-of-ticket races, they seldom excite voters. And this year many of these races are even more low profile than usual owing to the events of September 11.

Candidates seeking office this year, from judicial to municipal contests, put their campaigns on hold for weeks in the period after Sept 11, reducing direct face time with voters, halting their fundraising, and eliminating much of the negative advertising that has in recent years become more of an integral part of local campaigns. The bottom line here is that only hard-core partisans will vote, and marginal off-year voters will stay at home without the excitement of real campaigns.

Other forces post September 11 reinforce this tendency. Foremost among these is reduced media coverage of the ongoing campaigns themselves. The media’s focus on the events surrounding the national tragedy and subsequent health scares have relegated print coverage of local campaigns to the inner pages of newspapers while electronic coverage on local TV stations has been virtually extinct.

And so in an ironic turn of fate—in the aftermath of tragedy and tribulation—Americans are more upbeat and positive about their government. They applaud the bipartisanship they find in their political leaders. They find politics more relevant in their lives. And they feel good about their country. America is again patriotic.

But in the end, the renewed patriotism will not translate into increased political participation. Americans will not vote more; indeed, they may vote less. And if Americans do not vote more or even vote less, it will not be because elections are not important or that voting is not valued. It will be that, for many, elections are about the
great issues of peacetime. And in wartime, the unity and consensus that prevails obliterates any differences that exist. Peace may return before many Americans get upset enough to feel the need to vote again.

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