Voter Turnout
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by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

According to research reported in U.S.A. Today, more than twice as many people believe astrologers can predict the future as believe pollsters can. That sounds about right. But even pollsters can predict one future with confidence: Voter turnout in the upcoming election cycle, measured by any contemporary standard, will be low. One can predict with confidence the future because of the dismal recent past. Since relatively high levels of turnout in the 1960s, voters have remained home in droves during the past two decades. Last year’s presidential contest only reaffirms the trend.

The 2000 presidential election was the fourth closest popular vote election in American history, the third closest since 1960, and Bush’s victory in the Electoral College, the second narrowest. Despite high interest in the campaign, national turnout remained dismal, about 51.2 percent of the nation’s eligible voters cast a ballot. Since 1960, only the 1988 Bush/Dukakis and the 1996 Clinton/Dole elections proved less appealing to voters. And in Pennsylvania, the turnout rate in 2000 was only slightly better, 53.7 percent.

Think the Florida vote controversy will spur greater voting in the future? Think again. Everyone knows the Florida vote controversy has spawned a zillion (actually more than 60) election commissions, each designed to prevent a re-occurrence of the voting problems encountered there. But making sure that every vote counts will not ameliorate the far more serious problem in the decline of voting. Not a single reform proposal now being discussed under the rubric of “election reform” is likely to encourage one new voter to cast a vote.

In recent years, efforts to make it easier to vote have had a perverse effect on voter turnout, causing election officials to have serious doubts regarding the efficacy of their voter-roles. The most important reform, commonly referred to as motor voter, was foisted upon the states by Congress in 1993. The motor voter law’s purpose was to make voter registration easier by making voter registration a part of the driver application process, and by placing restrictions on when states could remove inactive voters from voter roles.

Part of the reform worked as planned—unfortunately, not the important part. Voter roles have swelled to record numbers, creating an unanticipated nightmare for county election officials. By 2000, more than 7,700,000 Pennsylvanians were registered to vote, almost 2,000,000 more than were registered for the 1992 presidential election, the vast majority of whom signed-up through motor voter.

Who can vote and where they should vote are problems of major proportions. Ironically, there is no evidence that motor voter has produced anything remotely resembling the increased voter turnout its congressional sponsors promised. The new federal mandate, naturally an unfunded one, has placed an enormous burden on election officials for monitoring and implementing motor voter. As one might expect, in many Pennsylvania counties no one can be sure who is actually qualified to vote and how election fraud can be reasonably prevented.

In the good old days, Pennsylvania had reasonable rules for removing inactive voters, verifying the residence of voters, and preventing people from voting in jurisdictions in which they did not reside. Nowhere is the
situation more strange than in Philadelphia, which now appears to have as many people registered to vote as it
has people eligible to vote, a virtual impossibility. Also, many suburbanites actually returned to Philadelphia in
last year’s election to cast votes in election districts in which they no longer resided. True, sometime county
officials were not as rigorous in the application of these rules and fraud did occur, but Congress has created a
new nightmare, which only it can end.

No one can argue about the goal of encouraging voter turnout. Indeed, low voter turnout since the 1960s is
troubling. But palliatives like motor voter are misguided. It is naïve to believe that if a few rules are changed
somehow Americans will suddenly care about voting. First, no one overwhelming reason explains nonvoting.
It is what social scientists call a multivariate problem. It has many causes; many of them interrelated.

1) People don’t care about political parties. Political scientists call loyalty to one’s party partisanship. Levels of
partisanship have been shrinking over the course of recent decades. There is a positive correlation between
strongly believing in and supporting one’s party and voter turnout. The highest voter turnout in American
history occurred during the 1876-1896 period when party loyalty rates were the highest in history. Turnout
then ran between 75-80 percent.

2) Public interest in politics is low. Maybe people just don’t like politics anymore. After decades of
government bashing, party bashing in the media, and the loss of civic obligation, the American people seem
not so much angry or alienated but numb and uninterested in matters purely political.

3) What happens if you know who wins in advance? When election outcomes are known in advance voter
turnout by necessity will be depressed. The American political system and democracy itself have become
dangerously jeopardized by the lack of competition. When incumbent reelection rates are so astronomical at all
levels of electoral non-competition, there is little reason to vote if people believe their votes will make no
difference in an election outcome.

4) Negative advertising reduces voting. One of the dirty little secrets about the now ubiquitous negative ads in
modern campaigns is their purpose. They do not aim to attract support, but to suppress voting for an opponent.
Some, and maybe a large part, of the decline in voting is because of the effect these commercials have on
voters.

5) Are we socially diseased? One common theory postulates that people don’t vote because they are more
isolated and disconnected from many social institutions that voting appears just another meaningless social
exercise. Many of these non-voters are more likely to be poor, less educated, and minorities, though new
profiles of non-voters include middle-class and better-educated citizens.

There are factors that certainly do matter in encouraging turnout, such as allowing for “same day” registration.
But, probably nothing can be done in the short run to motivate non-voters to active status. Many of the more
promising solutions seem draconian, if not outright un-American. They include automatic voter registration
(the ultimate nightmare for election officials), compulsory voting (the ultimate nightmare for Montana
militiamen), and a national voting holiday (the ultimate dream for Wal-Mart).
Motor voter should have taught us that simple solutions and quick fixes do not work. The causes of nonvoting are deeply rooted in the pathologies of modern American life. Let’s diagnose properly and prescribe the best remedy for the disease.

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Politically Uncorrected™ is published twice monthly. Dr. G. Terry Madonna is a Professor of Public Affairs at Franklin & Marshall College, and Dr. Michael Young is a former Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Penn State University and Managing Partner at Michael Young Strategic Research. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any institution or organization with which they are affiliated. This article may be used in whole or part only with appropriate attribution. Copyright © 2001 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.