

U.S. Voting Patterns & Ideas for Improvement

Be sure to vote and encourage others to vote! Our members are typically voters, but are our friends, acquaintances and younger family members likely to vote? Currently, same day registration is permitted during early voting. I was heartened to see the number of people, including younger men and women, in line during early voting.

The United States has a poor voter turnout even for presidential elections. According to the University of California, Santa Barbara *American Presidency Project*, the highest percentage of the voting age population (all white men—the few freed black men faced hostility and violence at the polls, and Native Americans and other non-white people were not considered citizens) who voted was 81.8% in 1876. The winner of the popular vote, a Democrat (Tilden), lost to Rutherford B. Hayes in the Electoral College vote. 1840 (80.2%) and 1860 (81.2%) were also standout years. The percentage of eligible voters who did vote in the presidential elections from 1840 through 1900 ranged from 69.6 to 79.3 percent—most years were in the 70 percent range except for the 3 years in the 80's.

Starting in 1904, voter participation declined—even after 1920 with women gaining the right to vote. Of course, the voting age population (VAP) had increased after passage of the nineteenth amendment. In 2012, 54.9% of VAP voted, and in 2016, the current estimate is 55.5% of the voting age population cast their ballot. Prior to the establishment of poll taxes and literacy tests in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, African-American voters (all male) voted despite violent clashes at the polls. African-Americans ran for local and state offices, and some won their elections. But the advent of polling taxes and literacy tests put an end to black participation for almost seventy years in the south, and eventually disenfranchised poor whites as well. In Alabama, for example, J. Morgan Kousser, a historian, wrote in *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South* that, "They disfranchised these whites as willingly as they deprived blacks of the vote. By 1941, more whites than blacks in total had been disenfranchised."

Nihil sub sole novem! There is nothing new under the sun! The same political attitudes with the aim to curb voter access are trying to prevail today. What can we do to improve voter participation? Australia defines voting as a civic duty and therefore compulsory; fines are levied against the non-voters. Four to five percent of eligible Australians don't vote. Short of punishing non-voters, what can we do to encourage voting?

1.) *Veterans Today* suggests that we will attract the young voters only if we meet them where they are. In 1998, Oregon transitioned to a vote-by-mail system—and the results are impressive. In the 2014 mid-term, more than 69% turned in ballots in Oregon versus what the *New York Times* termed "The Worst Voter Turnout in 72 Years"—an average of 36.4 percent.

2.) We need to make registration easier. People who move often (young people, renters) and people (mostly women) who change their names, may find it difficult to keep their registration current. Filling out an on-line registration form or access to mail-in forms should be available to everyone.

3.) Eliminate strict voter ID laws. Voter fraud is extremely rare. These laws target people of color, the poor and the elderly by making it a burden to vote.

4.) Make polls convenient and prevent unnecessary poll closures. In 40 counties in NC with large African-American communities, there were 158 fewer early polling places in 2016 than there were in 2012. I do not know if they have been reinstated for the current election.

5.) Prohibit harmful voter purges. Purges particularly target legitimate voters with common names or the same names (sometimes a father and son). In *Husted v. A. Philip Randolph Institute* (2018), the Supreme Court gave states the right to strike inactive voters from the polls. This practice hits African-American and low-income voters the hardest. It is unclear to me what qualifies as “inactive”—how many voting cycles would one have to miss?

6.) Make voting day a national holiday.

7.) What can be done to spark interest in the voters who feel that no one cares about them? Candidates should prioritize people of color, the poor, the struggling, and the young to encourage voter engagement in these groups, by learning from, listening to, and crafting proposals and policies that serve these communities. Political parties should strive for inclusivity and encourage diversity in their candidates. Voters are likely to respond to these overtures.

In a true democracy, we, the voters, should feel that we are participants in our government. There should be discussion, disagreement, and compromise. “We need to recover government as us rather than government as them.” (Joseph L. Ellis, *9 Questions*, *Time*, Oct. 29, 2018) The power of individuals is being diminished in this era of *Citizens United*, powerful lobbies and dark money used to influence elections.