

# An Election with No Voters: The Decline of American Voter Turnout

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Although the American presidential election was one of the most controversial and divisive elections in the country's recent history, tens of millions of Americans did not practise their democratic right. Democracy depends on citizen participation, and is therefore in danger of falling apart due to low voter turnout. Discovering what is causing low democratic participation in its most basic form is the first step to solving this problem. This paper will focus on the causes of low voter turnout, how it impacted the 2016 presidential election, why it is a problem, and potential solutions to the problem.

To understand the problem, however, it is important to first focus on the 2016 presidential election. The 2016 presidential election was arguably the most publicized event of that year. Even the primaries were controversial: Republicans failed to prevent Donald Trump, a reality television star and billionaire, from winning the nomination, while the Democrats chose Hilary Clinton over the grassroots socialist Bernie Sanders. Each presidential candidate had traits that would alienate voters, as will be demonstrated later in this paper. The election itself was intense, with each side accusing the other of being debased and corrupt, pitting Americans against each other: left-wing against right-wing, democrat against republican, and rich against poor. This election was the focus of all major media outlets, and also held the spotlight on social media. Even though this election was extremely heated and publicized, only 139 million, or 60.2%, of 231 million eligible voters took part in electing their next leader of the United States of America on November 8, 2016.<sup>1</sup> This means that in the country which is seen as the champion of democracy, about 92 million eligible citizens did not exercise their

democratic right.

Historically, though the 2016 presidential election was not the first to have a low voter turnout, nor does it have the lowest recorded turnout.

The highest voter turnout was 81.8% in 1876, while the lowest was 48.9% in 1924.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, the lowest voter turnout was in 2000, with 76% of registered voters, representing only 51.2% of the total eligible population.<sup>3</sup> While 76% seems like a sizeable turnout, only 156 million Americans were registered to vote out of 205 million eligible voters.<sup>4</sup> In 1996, there was a 49% overall voter turnout, representing only a 0.1% difference from the lowest voter turnout in American history.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the political engagement of the American citizenship is at best stagnant and at worst declining. This can be attributed to voter suppression and voter disillusion.

Voter suppression dates back to the signing of the American Constitution and founding of the United States. Most commonly, it took the form of the belief that only privileged white males had the right to vote. Voter suppression took many forms and targeted various groups throughout the history of the United States. For example, in the mid-nineteenth century, voter suppression was used for the purpose of getting voters, regardless of background, to cast their ballot for a particular political party. This was carried out with tickets that were not concealed, allowing for violent intimidation and bribery to influence voting behaviour.<sup>6</sup> Voter suppression has also taken a racial and socio-economic form, favouring particular parties or candidates. This is best exemplified in the treatment of African-American voters. Poll taxes and literacy tests are forms of racist voter suppression, meant to prevent African-Americans

from voting as many were poor or illiterate due to the lasting effects of slavery and systematic racism.<sup>7</sup> These tactics were meant to prevent African-Americans from voting for the Republicans, who were associated with a war to end slavery. Note that the Republicans used similar tactics to secure their hold in the North, through literacy tests administered to recent immigrants, among other means.<sup>8</sup> These examples of voter suppression occurred more than one hundred years ago. However, they demonstrate how voter suppression is not a recent phenomenon, but rather a deeply rooted problem in the American electoral system. In fact, such tactics are still being used by political parties to suppress the vote of the same demographics as in the nineteenth century.

Voter suppression in the twenty-first century takes the form of disenfranchisement of particular demographics, registration laws, voter ID laws, and the manipulation of polling stations. The most severe form of voter suppression is the disenfranchisement of particular groups. In his book *The Politics of Disenfranchisement*, Richard Scher outlines the major groups still disenfranchised in the electoral system: incarcerated individuals, non-citizens, mentally and physically impaired individuals, youth (under eighteen), language minorities, and homeless people.<sup>9</sup> These large disenfranchised groups of American citizens dramatically bring down the Voting Age Population (VAP), a statistic often used to calculate voter turnout.<sup>10</sup> One of the largest segments of this population is non-citizens. These people are simply recent or undocumented immigrants to the United States. Around 2011, about 20 million immigrants were denied the vote in federal elections.<sup>11</sup> This is significant: the laws preventing non-citizens from voting are still in place, largely because of the dramatic impact such an influx of voters could have on election results.<sup>12</sup> For example, non-citizens made up a quarter of California's population in 2011 and in Los Angeles, a third of the VAP was composed of non-citizens.<sup>13</sup> This largely serves the interests of the Republican Party, as minority groups often support the Democratic Party.<sup>14</sup> The number of disenfranchised voters is further inflated by other groups who are denied the vote.

The most notorious revocation of the vote is that of incarcerated individuals in the United States. While level of suppression depends on the state in question, southern states have the most severe restrictions. The level of disenfranchisement from state to state is as follows:

All states but Vermont and Maine disenfranchise the incarcerated; 34 do not allow voting while on parole, 30 of which also forbid voting during probation. Finally, ten states do not allow ex-felons to vote even upon completion of the sentence. The remaining 41 states and DC either re-enfranchise felons at the end of their sentence or have a procedure in place allowing ex-felons to apply for reinstatement of their voting rights.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, many individuals are denied the right to vote when in prison and upon their release. In 2004 alone, 5,250,000 individuals were denied the right to vote because of their imprisonment.<sup>16</sup> As is the case with non-citizens, the Republican Party believes that those in prison or who were convicted of a crime are more likely to vote for the Democrats.<sup>17</sup> The disenfranchisement of inmates is a further example of how political interests are manipulating the electoral process and hindering democracy in the process.

Furthermore, the inaccessibility of polling stations is a form of voter suppression for disabled people. In 2011, 1 in 17 Americans had a mental health condition, while another 6.2 to 7.5 million were cognitively disabled.<sup>18</sup> Forty-four states have laws in place to deny the vote to those with some level of mental impairment.<sup>19</sup> In 2002, 13.5 million Americans were physically disabled, and this population is "10 percent less likely than the non-disabled to register to vote and, of those who are registered, 20 percent less likely to vote."<sup>20</sup> There is an overall inability to vote because of the lack of accessible polling stations—many lack ramps, elevators, and Braille ballots.<sup>21</sup> The reason for voter suppression among this group is likely no different than among the previous two demographics, as disabled people are more likely to vote for the Democrats, seeing as they may rely on the state for support.

Sadly, these four groups are not the only disenfranchised populations in the United States. Youth are denied the right to vote based on an argument similar to the one used to deny the vote to women and racial minorities; the claim is that youth do not know how to vote nor do they understand the importance of doing so. This segment of the population, comprised of people younger than the legal voting age of eighteen, made up 22.8% of the United States population in 2016.<sup>22</sup> Granted, a substantial portion of this population is comprised of young children. Nonetheless, a sizable portion

of this population are over sixteen years of age, the current marker for those wishing to further decrease the voting age.<sup>23</sup> Allowing this segment of the population to become involved in politics could increase the total voter turnout and instill political participation in youth at an early age. Lowering the voting age is a complex argument, and one which cannot be fully explored within this paper. I simply point out that younger individuals compose a substantial portion of the potential voting population.

The last two major disenfranchised groups are language minorities (53 million in 2006), and homeless people (2.15 million adults in 2011).<sup>24</sup> Again, it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully examine the particularities of the individuals who fall within these groups—I simply flag them for the reader.

It is important to note that the issue of voter fraud is used to justify stringent voter registration laws. The actual rates of voter fraud are extremely low; for instance, in the 2016 election alone there were only four cases of voter fraud. Prior to this election, there were only thirty-one cases recorded in American history.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, voter fraud is only an excuse for oppressive laws—the real goal is to prevent minority groups and disenfranchised individuals from voting in order to secure a particular political party's chances of winning elections.<sup>26</sup> The major problem of voter registration is that “the process of registering to vote is long, cumbersome, and fraught with pitfalls.”<sup>27</sup> These registration laws affect voters in manifold ways; for example, in the 2008 election, Colorado's Republican Secretary of State implemented a voter registration law that rejected registration applications for tenuous reasons.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, rules and regulations vary from state to state. Voting officials at all levels have discretionary powers to determine who does and does not have the right to vote.<sup>29</sup> Matters are additionally complicated for homeless Americans because voter registration laws require applicants to provide proof of residence.<sup>30</sup> This also impacts citizens who simply do not have the required proof of residence for any given reason.

Other registration issues include same-day registration and third-party registration.

Same-day registration is simply the ability to register at a polling station on election day. Currently, only sixteen states, most of them Democratic, have allowed for same-day registration, and the federal government does not offer such services as of yet.<sup>31</sup> Because same-day registration and voting tends to

favour those who are of a lower socio-economic status, some have argued that Democrats favour it, while Republicans oppose it because of the likelihood of more voters supporting the Democrats.<sup>32</sup> Even so, in 2004, states that had same-day voting had a 10% higher voter turnout than those who did not, and in 2008 these states had an 8% higher turnout.<sup>33</sup> In the 2016 election, those fifteen states with same-day registration had an average voter turnout of 67%, while those without had a 60% turnout.<sup>34</sup> This would suggest that states that do not enact same-day voting complicate matters for a large section of the American population. One must also consider the limitation of third-party registration, specifically in terms of non-local voting offices and political parties who attempt to run voter registration drives.<sup>35</sup> Many tactics to restrict third-party registration efforts are often along partisan lines, such as Republican efforts to limit the registration of minorities and those of lower economic status.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, partisan actors are attempting to limit the abilities of third-party actors to register voters who would not have registered to vote otherwise.

Identification (ID) laws further prevent Americans from voting.

Such laws prohibit Americans from voting, depending on the level of personal identification they own. The level of identification needed varies greatly from state-to-state. The vast majority of states with ID laws are located in the southern United States, with the strictest laws being in Republican states.<sup>37</sup> For example, in Georgia, Tennessee, and Mississippi, if a piece of ID is not presented, a voter may fill out a provisional ballot, which is only counted if the voter returns within a certain number of days with a valid piece of ID.<sup>38</sup> Obviously, this method only works for those who own the required ID. The states that do not strictly require a form of ID still require a home address.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, those without a long-term residence are less likely to be able to vote. This legislation has been shown to impact numerous demographics who do not have the required identification, such as “elderly, minority, immigrant, and poor voters.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, groups found to support one particular political party have been suppressed for the benefit of the opposing political party.

Further suppression tactics include the manipulation of polling stations. Throughout the twenty-first century such tactics have influenced election results and have impacted citizens' ability to vote in the United States, though much of the evidence

is highly circumstantial. In some instances, officials did not notify voters of a change in the location of their polling stations; in others, stations were arbitrarily moved on short notice.<sup>41</sup> Voter turnout is also impacted by the operating hours of polling stations. In the United States, elections usually take place on weekdays, and the polling stations are open from anywhere between 5:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m., depending on the state.<sup>42</sup> A study done by Sebastian Garmann on polling station hours in German states highlights this issue. The states in question are Saarland, which reduced its polling stations operating hours from thirteen to ten in 1994, and Rhineland-Palatinate, which consistently had a ten-hour polling station operating time.<sup>43</sup> The results indicated that a three-hour reduction in the time-span caused a reduction of voter turnout by 1.5%.<sup>44</sup> This is significant, as Germany allows for postal voting and its elections are usually on Sundays, compared to the United States, where elections are usually on business days.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, short operating hours for polling stations on business days hinder the voting ability of poor individuals and members of the working class. This all means that the United States would benefit from the extension of polling station hours. As the political philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote:

In a well-run city everyone flies to the assemblies; under a bad government no one wants to take a step to get to them, since no one takes an interest in what happens there, for it is predictable that the general will won't predominate and that in the end domestic concerns absorb everything.<sup>46</sup>

Even though this was written in the eighteenth century, it is still relevant for the United States today. Voter apathy in the United States can be described as citizens choosing not to vote because they believe that the act has little value given their repressed and disadvantaged position in society.<sup>47</sup> This is especially true in the twenty-first century, with the economic effects of neo-liberalism and rising populist groups. The majority of these groups are the minorities affected by suppression policies such as African-Americans and Hispanics, who have relatively low voter turnout.<sup>48</sup> Many apathetic voters do not vote because they do not believe the establishment will serve their interests.<sup>49</sup> In a time of systemic racism, rising populist movements, and widespread economic hardship, many voters have lost their faith in democracy's ability to represent

their needs. This only worsened in the 2016 presidential election.

Throughout much of the 2016 presidential election, many citizens said they would not vote for either candidate because they were both undesirable or because their vote would not make a difference. This disinterest in voting impacted both party candidates. For Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, there was a dedicated group who opposed her campaign, spreading conspiracy theories, claiming she was a mass murderer, and defaming her based on her connections to Wall Street, the email scandal, and other issues.<sup>50</sup> This convinced many voters to either vote for Donald Trump or to not vote at all. Several controversies contributed to the negative image of Donald Trump, as is exemplified in a Rolling Stones article, listing his unpopular actions from A to Z. The list includes his anti-abortion views, his 'Muslim ban,' his ruthless attacks on Hillary Clinton, his claim Barack Obama was the founder of ISIS, and much more.<sup>51</sup> As for the personal feelings of voters, *Business Insider* provides some survey evidence collected by Morning Consult. Voters disliked Hillary Clinton for three main reasons: 47% believed she was untrustworthy, 39% believed she was corrupt, and 21% believed she changed her policy positions when it was politically favourable.<sup>52</sup> Voters also singled out the three principal flaws of Donald Trump: 25% believed he was racist, 20% believed he did not have the proper experience, and 16% believed he was untrustworthy.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, as with many American elections, both candidates were lacking in public support. We can infer that this apathy harmed Hillary Clinton more than it did Donald Trump concerning the results of the election.

It can be argued that Donald Trump was elected president not by getting more voters to support him, but rather by Hillary Clinton's inability to get Americans to vote: "aided by Republican-led voter-suppression efforts that overwhelmingly targeted Democratic constituencies, Clinton's loss was related to the unpopularity of her stance on trade and other issues among white working-class voters."<sup>54</sup> For example, if Clinton simply received one hundred thousand more votes in Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin she would have won the election.<sup>55</sup> In such an important and publicized election which was advertised as a battle of good versus evil, tens of millions of Americans stayed home or were unable to vote. This is a problem that could rot and degrade the very fabric of Amer-

ican democracy. Nonetheless, this damage is not inevitable—it can be reversed.

The most obvious solutions are those that limit voter suppression. This means revoking laws and regulations that disenfranchise particular groups, including the laws preventing incarcerated individuals from voting. Opening up the electoral process would allow millions of citizens to take part in electing the leader of the United States. Another solution calls for the political parties to accept voter inclusion. This would largely take the form of loosening the current restrictions and calling on the political parties to support and defend voter participation and inclusion. In her book *The Politics of Voter Suppression*, Tova A. Wang primarily focuses on how the Democratic Party should lobby and advocate for voter inclusion programs and state level voter reform.<sup>56</sup> Expanding the early-voting programs across the nation would also greatly open up the electoral process. These programs are already extremely effective; 12.6 million Americans had voted by October 28, 2016.<sup>57</sup> This opening up of the electoral process may cause a dramatic change

in the political landscape of the United States—it would empower the people and encourage them to become involved in the politics of their nation. As for voter apathy, public officials must regain the people's trust and work toward the well-being of their constituents. With these reforms, American democracy could be saved.

Even with the heated atmosphere of the 2016 election and initiatives such as early voting, the voter turnout was low. This paper argued that this was the result of institutionalized voter suppression and widespread voter apathy. Though it is a problem prevalent throughout many democracies, America is disproportionately affected. The 2016 election demonstrated that low voter turnout and citizen apathy can have a significant effect on the nation and its people. If these issues are properly brought to the attention of the American people, actions can be taken to reverse restrictive voter laws and to rekindle voter participation. Therefore, American democracy is not lost, and one day the United States may become the beacon of global democracy it claims to be.

## Notes

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