

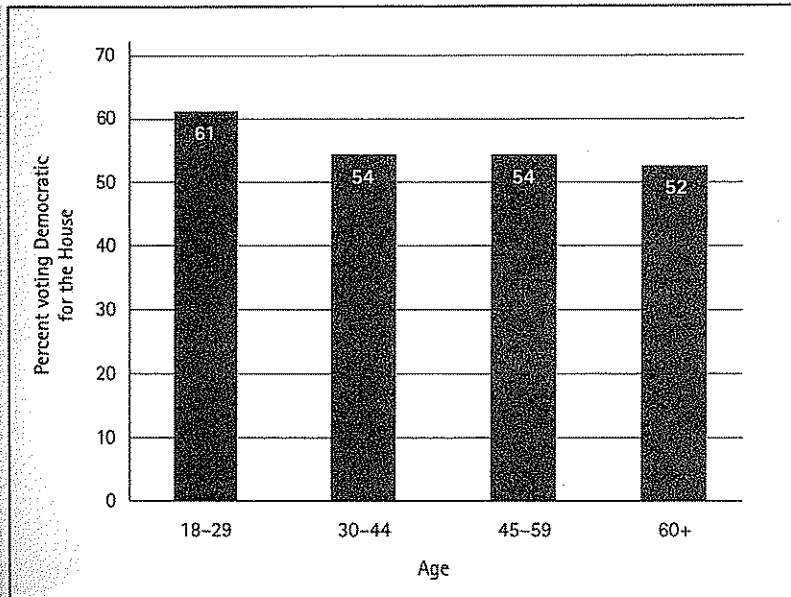
GREAT QUESTIONS IN POLITICS SERIES

# Is Voting for Young People?

With a Postscript  
on Citizen Engagement



MARTIN P. WATTENBERG  
*UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE*



New York • Boston • San Francisco  
London • Toronto • Sydney • Tokyo • Singapore • Madrid  
Mexico City • Munich • Paris • Cape Town • Hong Kong • Montreal

Tellingly, the countries that have the biggest generation gaps in terms of turnout, such as Great Britain and Japan, generally also have the largest age differences in opinion regarding the duty to vote. The correlation between the two age-difference measures is fairly strong, .56 ( $p < .05$ ). Thus, one of the reasons for the decline of youth turnout in so many established democracies is no doubt the relative lack among today's young people of a sense of a civic obligation to vote.

#### CONCLUSION: A WINDOW INTO THE FUTURE?

Besides providing insight into turnout problems in these countries today, attitudes concerning civic duty among recent entrants into the electorate may well provide a window into the future. Because the current generation of young people has a relatively weak sense of citizen duty, its current poor turnout rates may well be a constant state of affairs throughout their lifetimes. A generation who is relatively unlikely to see voting as an important civic responsibility is one who may well have many of its members lost as voters for the rest of its duration.

Short of implementing compulsory voting, which we will discuss in the final chapter, it is probably too late to convince people who have already entered early adulthood that it is their obligation as citizens to vote. But it is never too late to convince people that politics really matters. One way to do this is to illustrate that, by passing up opportunities to vote, they are ceding important decisions to others who have different values and interests. As will be seen in the next chapter, young people are indeed doing just that.

## CHAPTER 6



# Does Low Youth Turnout Really Matter?

Although much research has been done on the topic of nonvoting, there is a surprising lack of concern among scholars about its consequences. This is not to say that scholars don't care if everyone votes or not. Implicit in most studies of voter turnout is a generally accepted norm that in an ideal democracy, all adult citizens vote in all elections. The fact that most democracies fall far short of this ideal does not trouble many scholars because they judge the results of elections to be largely unbiased by who votes and who does not. Wolfinger and Rosenstone's classic book *Who Votes?* demonstrates that nonvoters are demographically different from voters, but argues that "these demographic biases do not translate into discernible overrepresentation of particular policy constituencies."<sup>83</sup> Ruy Teixeira's excellent book on the decline of U.S. turnout asks the question of "What if they gave an election and everybody came?" and arrives at an answer of "Not much."<sup>84</sup>

He also places much weight on the finding that demographic factors are not related to policy preferences closely enough to result in substantial differences in the political attitudes of voters and nonvoters. Most recently, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady say in their comprehensive review of participation in the United States that “our data support the conclusion that voters and non-voters do not seem to differ substantially in their attitudes on public policy issues.”<sup>85</sup> In effect, these scholars have posed the question of “Why worry about disappointing electoral participation rates given that there is little difference between voters and nonvoters in terms of political behavior?”

The answer of this book is that whenever young adults are substantially less likely to vote than their elders, the ideal of government of the people, by the people, and for the people is seriously compromised. Most importantly, a democratically elected government should be looking out *for* the interests of *all* the people. If politicians know that young people are far less likely to vote than the elderly, why should they care about young people?

Officeholders need to concern themselves with their *core constituency*—the people who put them in power in the first place, and whose support they’ll need to get reelected. According to David Mayhew, most politicians place reelection as their highest goal, and in order to reach it they engage in advertising and credit claiming aimed at their primary constituency.<sup>86</sup> From the perspective of this book, this means that politicians will be more likely to do something that will earn them credit with the elderly than with young adults. Thus, if there is a choice between passing legislation to reduce either the costs of prescription drugs or college

education, the reelection imperative will naturally bias politicians to focus their energies on the former.

As John Kingdon has shown, the process by which some problems more than others come to occupy the attention of governmental officials is an important key to understanding what the government actually does.<sup>87</sup> Part of that process involves rational calculations by politicians regarding who is likely to vote and who is not. If young adults don’t vote, then the issues that most concern them will often fail to make it onto the political agenda.

This chapter demonstrates that the concerns of young adults are indeed quite distinct from those of their elders. These divergent concerns translate into differences on the ideological spectrum and on various policy issues. Furthermore, evidence from recent U.S. elections, as well as elections from other established democracies, indicates that *more young people voting would definitely make a difference because the youth vote often favors different candidates and parties.*

#### DOES POSITION IN THE LIFE CYCLE AFFECT POLICY POSITIONS?

Winston Churchill is said to have remarked that “Any man who is not a socialist at the age of 21 has no heart, and any man who is still a socialist at the age of 40 has no head.” The first part of the quote can be taken as saying that it is easy to favor economic equality when one is a young adult in the process of getting educated, finding a job, and beginning a career. But the second part implies that the notion of equality of income for all looks far

different once one is middle aged and established in an occupation. In short, what the quote illuminates is that where one stands on the issues of the day depends in part on where one stands in life. An individual's place in the life cycle plays an important role in determining the kind of personal experiences that seem relevant at any given point in time, which in turn affects one's political priorities and values.

A Pew Research Center survey from October 2004 allows us to quantify the degree to which age differences exist on a variety of experiences that may have some political relevance. The findings displayed in Table 6.1 largely confirm commonsense expectations but are nevertheless instructive. Young adults by far are the most likely to be facing the challenges of paying for a college education and finding a job. On the other side of the coin, they are the least likely to own a small business or trade stocks and bonds. These economic experiences (or lack thereof) should make young people more likely to support activist policies of governmental intervention in the economy and to be less supportive of a probusiness policy agenda. Additionally, young people have a notably different lifestyle from the elderly on three key aspects of the new Right agenda. They are 1) less inclined to be a born-again or evangelical Christian; 2) more likely to have a friend, colleague, or family member who is gay; and 3) less likely to have a gun or rifle at home.

Based on these findings, one would expect that young adults in the United States should be substantially more liberal than older people. Because this expectation stems from young people's position in the life cycle, such a pattern should be consistent at various points in time. Yet, it should also be the case that as people progress from young adulthood to middle age, they will turn more conservative.

**TABLE 6.1**  
Lifestyle Differences by Age (percent responding affirmatively)

	18-29	30-44	45-64	65+
DO YOU HAVE A FRIEND, COLLEAGUE, OR FAMILY MEMBER WHO IS CURRENTLY SERVING IN THE MILITARY, RESERVES, OR NATIONAL GUARD?	67	61	53	40
DO YOU HAPPEN TO HAVE ANY GUNS, RIFLES, OR PISTOLS IN YOUR HOME?	31	35	45	44
ARE YOU THE OWNER OF A SMALL BUSINESS?	6	22	18	9
DO YOU TRADE STOCKS OR BONDS IN THE STOCK MARKET?	14	36	40	27
OVER THE PAST 12 MONTHS, HAS THERE BEEN A TIME WHEN YOU OR SOMEONE IN YOUR HOUSEHOLD HAS BEEN WITHOUT A JOB AND LOOKING FOR WORK, OR NOT?	48	38	36	21
OVER THE PAST 12 MONTHS, HAS THERE BEEN A TIME WHEN YOU HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO AFFORD NECESSARY HEALTH CARE FOR YOURSELF OR A FAMILY MEMBER, OR NOT?	22	30	27	16
ARE YOU CURRENTLY PAYING FOR THE COSTS OF COLLEGE TUITION OR STUDENT LOANS FOR YOURSELF OR SOMEONE IN YOUR FAMILY?	44	30	23	9
DO YOU HAVE A FRIEND, COLLEAGUE, OR FAMILY MEMBER WHO IS GAY?	49	52	48	25
WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOURSELF AS A "BORN AGAIN" OR EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN, OR NOT?	29	32	34	37

Source: October 2004 Pew Research Center survey.

All of these expectations are confirmed by the 1972-2004 General Social Surveys data presented in Table 6.2. The data collected in the early twenty-first century reveal that among people born in the 1980s, there are substantially more liberals than conservatives,

**TABLE 6.2**  
Cohort Analysis of Political Ideology, 1972–2004  
[entries are % conservative – % liberal]

	2000–2004	1990s	1980s	1970s
BORN IN:				
1980s	–14			
1970s	+1	–5		
1960s	+11	+4	–1	
1950s	+9	+5	–4	–21
1940s	+13	+8	+5	–9
1930s	+24	+19	+16	+13
1920s	+17	+20	+18	+15
1910s		+18	+14	+14

Source: General Social Surveys, 1972–2004.

whereas just the opposite is the case among those born in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>88</sup> Interestingly, the latter group grew up during the height of liberalism when New Deal policies advocated by Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman reshaped the nation. The fact that this generation of New Dealers is now a mainstay of conservatism supports the theory that people move away from liberalism as they age. Indeed, there is clear evidence of a rightward shift of opinion among all the cohorts whose ideology we can track for decades, starting from a relatively young age. Americans like myself born in the 1950s provide a perfect example: Children of the 1950s were clearly quite liberal in the 1970s; by the 1980s their liberalism had moderated; as of the 1990s they were more likely to be conservatives than liberals; and in the twenty-first century their conservative tendencies have increased further.

To more fully understand why political conservatism increases with age, it is helpful to look at a wide range of specific issues. The 2000 National Annenberg Election Study is particularly useful for examining age differences on issues because it has such a large sample size (over 94,000) and because over the course of the year many issues were asked about. Table 6.3 displays data from this survey on a wide range of issues that elicited a clear generation gap. As expected based on their economic stage in life, young people are the most supportive of government policies that will

**TABLE 6.3**  
Age Differences on Public Policy Issues in 2000

	18–29	30–44	45–64	65+
LIBERAL	31	23	21	16
MODERATE	39	41	40	39
CONSERVATIVE	29	36	39	45
FAVOR GOVERNMENT POLICIES TO REDUCE INCOME DIFFERENCES	61	53	46	42
SPEND MORE MONEY ON MILITARY	35	42	54	65
SPEND MORE MONEY ON EDUCATION	81	74	62	53
SPEND MORE MONEY ON AID TO MOTHERS WITH YOUNG CHILDREN	59	49	43	43
SPEND MORE MONEY ON SOCIAL SECURITY	61	60	59	50
FAVOR INVESTING SOCIAL SECURITY IN STOCK MARKET	71	68	60	45
FAVOR SCHOOL VOUCHERS	44	40	35	30
FAVOR GAYS IN MILITARY	64	62	59	53
GOVERNMENT SHOULD DO MORE TO PROTECT THE ENVIRONMENT	77	69	62	59

Source: 2000 National Annenberg Election Study.

reduce income differences. Specifically, they are naturally more in favor of increased government spending on items such as education and aid to mothers with young children. But the biggest generational gap on spending priorities is on the military budget, with only about a third of young adults favoring more spending for American armed forces and weaponry compared to two-thirds of senior citizens. Young people thus seem to realize the trade-off between social services spending and defense spending, with a clear preference for the former. Interestingly, their preference for more social services applies even to something that most of them believe they will never benefit from—Social Security.

Young Americans do not reject every conservative idea out of hand, however. When it comes to President Bush's proposal to allow people to invest some of their Social Security contributions in the stock market, young adults are by far the most supportive age group. In addition, they are substantially more in favor of the conservative-backed proposal for school vouchers that would enable parents to receive public funds to send their children to private schools. What these two examples illustrate is that young people are the most open to new ideas, regardless of the ideas' ideological origins. Indeed, on two relatively new liberal ideas—gay rights and government action to protect the environment—young people are also the most in agreement.

Perhaps surprisingly given that young adults bear the physical risks of waging war, their willingness to embrace new policy endeavors applies to foreign commitments of American military might as well. When asked whether we did the right thing going into Iraq, Pew Research Center surveys in 2003, 2004, and 2005 consistently found young adults to be more approving of the war

than senior citizens were. It might be thought that such an age pattern is due to the unique circumstance of America's now living under the threat of terrorist attacks. Yet, as Table 6.4 demonstrates, young people were also the most likely to say that we had done the right thing in getting into Korea and Vietnam.

Today, many antiwar activists yearn for the spirit of protest seen during the 1960s, when many of America's youth spoke up loud and clear in opposition to the Vietnam War. The lack of a very vocal opposition to the Iraq War among today's youth is sometimes seen as yet another indicator of their seeming political apathy. These

TABLE 6.4  
Percent Saying We Did the Right Thing Getting into  
Various Wars by Age Group

	18-29	30-44	45-64	65+
KOREA 1952	55	48	37	29
VIETNAM 1964	59	55	42	31
VIETNAM 1966	56	55	44	35
VIETNAM 1968	39	40	25	19
VIETNAM 1970	42	38	26	16
VIETNAM 1972	36	38	27	16
IRAQ JULY 2003	66	67	63	54
IRAQ SEPTEMBER 2004	59	56	53	42
IRAQ JULY 2005	55	53	47	37

Question wording: Korea: "Do you think we did the right thing in getting into the fighting in Korea two years ago or should we have stayed out?"; Vietnam: "Do you think we did the right thing in getting into the fighting in Vietnam or should we have stayed out?"; Iraq: "Do you think the U.S. made the right decision or the wrong decision in using military force against Iraq?"

Source: 1952-1972 American National Election Studies; 2003-2005 Pew Research Center surveys.

stereotypes are clearly exaggerated, however. The survey data from both eras reveal that young Americans supported the war more than their elders did. Ultimately, going to war in a democracy involves trusting the judgment of the country's leaders that the cause justifies the sacrifices. Just as young Americans are known to be more generally trusting of government, so are they also apparently more likely to say that their government is doing the right thing in going to war.

Once the Vietnam War turned unpopular overall, it was naturally the young people who turned out to demonstrate, as throughout world history taking to the barricades has been the province of youth. Should the Iraq War turn equally unpopular, demanding sacrifices from the country that appear unjustified, then antiwar activities are likely to pick up again among young Americans. When George W. Bush ran for reelection in 2004, such a state of affairs did not exist, as evidenced by the fact that Democratic nominee John Kerry had voted for the war and continually said that the country needed to keep its troops in Iraq. Young people thus had many policy reasons for being more against President Bush than other age groups were in 2004, but the Iraq War was not prominent among them.

#### IS THERE A GENERATION GAP IN AMERICAN VOTING BEHAVIOR?

From these various data, two hypotheses can be drawn concerning the types of candidates whom young Americans should be particularly inclined to support. First, because of their openness to new policy approaches, they should be more susceptible to the appeals of third-party candidates. Second, given that their policy stands are generally more in line with liberal principles than are their

elders', they should be more likely to have supported the Democrats in recent elections.

Having grown up with multiple choices in virtually every aspect of American life, today's young adults should be particularly likely to want more choices in the political arena. Young adults would hardly be content with having a choice between just Coke and Pepsi given all the choices they have become accustomed to. The same is true for the choice between Democrats and Republicans. In the 2000 U.S. National Election Study, respondents were asked which of the following outcomes regarding political parties best represented what they would like to see happen—a continuation of the two-party system, elections in which candidates run as individuals without party labels, or the growth of one or more parties that could effectively challenge the Democrats and Republicans. People under the age of 30 were the least supportive of the political status quo, with only 28 percent saying they wanted to retain the current two-party system, as compared to 55 percent of senior citizens. Young adults were more in favor of both candidates running without party labels—as Ross Perot did in 1992—and the development of a viable third party.

Such attitudes have been regularly translated into votes for presidential candidates running outside the two-party system. As can be seen from Table 6.5, in every case where a significant independent or third-party candidate emerged, young voters were the most likely to cast their ballots for him. Notably, this age pattern occurred regardless of the ideology of the insurgent contender. Young voters were the most supportive of liberals Ralph Nader and John Anderson, centrist Ross Perot, and conservative George Wallace alike. These results should not be taken as indicating that

**TABLE 6.5**  
Percent Voting for Prominent Independent/Third-Party Candidates  
for President, 1968–2000

	18–29	30–44	45–64	65+
GEORGE WALLACE 1968	15	11	12	8
JOHN ANDERSON 1980	16	11	8	3
ROSS PEROT 1992	28	19	17	12
ROSS PEROT 1996	14	11	7	5
RALPH NADER 2000	5	2	2	2

Sources: 1968, 1980, 1992, and 1996 National Election Studies; 2000 National Voter Exit Poll.

young adults in recent years have had no ideological anchoring. Rather, what is operative in each case is that young people have felt less tied to the *traditional* ideological choices. When conservative third-party candidates appear, they can expect to get disproportionate support from young conservatives, and liberal third-party candidates can expect to get disproportionate support from young liberals. Were more young people to turn out at the polls, it is likely that more prominent individuals would challenge the two-party system, knowing that more voters would be open to their appeals. Thus, the lack of young voters at the polls really does matter in that it helps perpetuate America's two-party system. Some will see this effect as a good thing, whereas others will see it as unfortunate; but everyone should agree that it is consequential.

The extraordinary closeness of the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections has made it clearer than ever before in recent memory that who votes can make a big difference. A variety of changes in group turnout rates in the key states of Florida in 2000 and Ohio

**TABLE 6.6**  
Percent Voting for George W. Bush by Age in Key States

	18–29	30–44	45–64	65+
2000 FLORIDA	40	51	49	52
2004 OHIO	42	52	52	58

Source: Voter News Service Exit Polls.

in 2004 could have swung the outcome in favor of the Democrats in both cases. In particular, if more young people had voted, there is good reason to believe that George W. Bush would *not* have won. As can be seen from the exit poll data displayed in Table 6.6, only 40 percent of Floridians under the age of 30 cast their ballots for Bush in 2000 compared to 52 percent among senior citizens. Given the razor-thin margin of victory, it is readily apparent that if turnout rates among young people had been just slightly higher, Gore would have carried the state, and hence won the White House. If turnout rates had been equal across generations, and if nonvoters had voted like actual participants of the same age,<sup>89</sup> Gore's share of the two-party vote would have been approximately 50.8 percent, thereby making a recount unnecessary. Four years later in the key state of Ohio, the generation gap was even greater, with 42 percent of the youngest voters supporting Bush compared to 58 percent of seniors. In this case, if all age groups had voted at the same rate, Bush's narrow 51.1 percent of the two-party vote would have been transformed into a dead heat requiring a recount. In short, the low turnout rate of young adults in 2000 and 2004 really mattered, denying crucial votes to Al Gore and John Kerry that could have changed the course of history.



### ARE THERE AGE GAPS IN IDEOLOGY AND VOTING BEHAVIOR IN OTHER COUNTRIES?

Further evidence that low turnout among young adults really makes a difference can be found by examining recent survey data from other established democracies. If, as Churchill said, socialism looks a lot better to young people, then there should be a relationship between age and ideology where socialist principles have long been instrumental in defining the ideological spectrum, such as in most of Europe. In addition, young people are more in tune with post-material concerns such as the environment, which have increasingly come to shape left-wing thought in many established democracies.<sup>90</sup> The data on average ideological self-placement by age group displayed in Table 6.7 confirm these expectations. In 16 of the 18 countries, young adults are substantially more likely to place themselves to the left than older people.

Interestingly, the countries that have the sharpest age differences on ideology are also where the turnout disparity between young and old is most pronounced. In other words, not only are young Japanese, British, Irish, and New Zealand adults particularly less likely to vote compared to their grandparents' generation, but they are also substantially less right-wing. Austrian, Swedish, and Italian youth, by contrast, are fairly similar to their elders in both turnout rates and ideology. The correlation between the two difference measures is a striking .72, far too great to be due to chance ( $p < .001$ ).<sup>91</sup> Correlation does not necessarily imply causation, and there is no clear answer to the question of why these two phenomena are related. It may be that when young people feel differently from older people on the issues, the choices offered by the parties lack an appeal to the young. In contrast,

**TABLE 6.7**  
Left-Right Positioning by Age in Established Democracies, Circa 2000

	<30	30-44	45-64	65+	DIFFERENCE BETWEEN 65+ AND <30
JAPAN	5.0	5.4	6.0	6.1	+1.1
GREAT BRITAIN	4.8	4.9	5.0	5.7	+0.9
IRELAND	5.2	5.5	5.8	6.1	+0.9
NEW ZEALAND	5.1	5.9	5.8	6.0	+0.9
AUSTRALIA	5.0	5.2	5.6	5.7	+0.7
CANADA	5.2	5.6	5.6	5.9	+0.7
SWITZERLAND	5.1	5.1	5.4	5.8	+0.7
USA	5.6	5.7	5.8	6.3	+0.7
FINLAND	5.7	5.6	5.8	6.2	+0.5
BELGIUM	5.1	5.1	5.4	5.5	+0.4
DENMARK	5.6	5.4	5.3	6.0	+0.4
FRANCE	4.7	4.6	5.1	5.1	+0.4
GERMANY	5.6	5.4	5.3	6.0	+0.4
NETHERLANDS	5.1	4.9	5.0	5.5	+0.4
NORWAY	5.5	5.4	5.7	5.9	+0.4
ITALY	5.4	5.3	5.2	5.7	+0.3
AUSTRIA	5.3	5.3	5.4	5.4	+0.1
SWEDEN	5.3	5.3	5.3	5.4	+0.1

Question wording: "In political matters, people talk of 'left' and 'right.' How would you place your views on this scale, generally speaking?" 1 = Left; 10 = Right

Source: 1999-2001 World Values Study.

where there are few ideological differences between generations, the same appeals can mobilize all age groups to go to the polls. In any event, the very existence of this relationship certainly implies that low youth turnout matters. In countries where young people's

turnout rates are well below average, their views are not likely to be well represented at the polls by their elders who do vote.

Indeed, there are sizable age differences in voting behavior in these countries. Table 6.8 presents survey data on voting choices by age for the countries where there is a considerable generation gap in electoral participation. In order to streamline the presentation, only parties for which there was at least a 5-percentage-point difference in support between the youngest and oldest voters are shown in the table. For example, voting for the British Labour Party in 2005 is not shown because there were only slight differences by age group, whereas young people were clearly more likely to vote for the Liberal Democrats and less inclined to support the Conservatives. In Canada, age differences are found across the partisan spectrum, with young people far less likely to support the two largest parties. Were more young Canadians to vote, it seems probable that the party system would be even more fragmented than it is at present, further increasing the pressure for some form of proportional representation.

The tendency of young voters to be more supportive of new parties is found in many countries besides Canada. In Norway, young voters are more likely to direct their votes to the relatively new Socialist Left Party rather than to the traditional left-wing choice of the Labor Party. In Ireland, Sinn Fein gets its votes primarily from the young, whereas the traditional parties of Fianna Fail and Fine Gael are more favored by older voters. Japan's long-time ruling party of Liberal Democrats depends greatly on gaining votes from older voters in order to stay in power, whereas the newer parties like the Democratic Party of Japan draw well among younger voters.<sup>92</sup> And in a variety of countries—Germany, Switzerland, France, Ireland, New Zealand, and Canada—the

TABLE 6.8  
Recent Differences in Voting Behavior by Age in Various Democracies

	<30	30-44	45-64	65+	DIFFERENCE BETWEEN 65+ AND <30
GREAT BRITAIN 2005 CONSERVATIVES	26	29	29	35	+9
GREAT BRITAIN 2005 LIBERAL DEMOCRATS	32	25	24	23	-9
CANADA 2004 LIBERALS	31	28	39	40	+9
CANADA 2004 CONSERVATIVES	23	35	30	40	+17
CANADA 2004 NEW DEMOCRATS	24	20	15	11	-13
CANADA 2004 BLOC QUEBECOIS	16	11	12	7	-9
CANADA 2004 GREENS	6	5	4	1	-5
JAPAN 2003 LDP	25	36	38	52	+27
JAPAN 2003 DEMOCRATIC PARTY	36	44	44	28	-8
JAPAN 2003 NEW KOMEITO	27	14	11	14	-13
SWITZERLAND 2003 RADICAL DEMOCRATS	12	11	16	20	+8
SWITZERLAND 2003 SOCIAL DEMOCRATS	27	37	32	21	-6
SWITZERLAND 2003 PEOPLE'S PARTY	18	19	23	29	+11
SWITZERLAND 2003 GREENS	16	8	6	2	-14
GERMANY 2002 CDU/CSU	32	33	31	39	+6
GERMANY 2002 GREENS	17	14	12	8	-9
FRANCE 2002 CHIRAC (RPR)	24	17	18	42	+18
FRANCE 2002 MAMERE (GREENS)	14	10	5	0	-14
NEW ZEALAND 2002 LABOUR	35	41	42	52	+17
NEW ZEALAND 2002 NZ FIRST	2	8	10	14	+12

(Continued)

TABLE 6.8 (Continued)

	<30	30-44	45-64	65+	DIFFERENCE BETWEEN 65+ AND <30
NEW ZEALAND 2002 ACT NZ	9	6	10	3	-6
NEW ZEALAND 2002 GREENS	17	12	5	3	-14
IRELAND 2002 FIANNA FAIL	35	46	51	49	+14
IRELAND 2002 FINE GAEL	17	17	21	26	+9
IRELAND 2002 GREENS	8	6	3	1	-7
IRELAND 2002 SINN FEIN	11	8	3	2	-9
NORWAY 2001 SOCIALIST LEFT	24	16	13	6	-18
NORWAY 2001 LABOR	15	20	25	27	+12
NORWAY 2001 CHRISTIAN PEOPLE'S	10	15	11	19	+9

Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems; 2004 Canadian Election Study; 2003 Waseda University Japanese Election Study.

data in Table 6.8 show that the Greens do substantially better with young people than with older voters.

Many of these countries practice some form of proportional representation, thereby giving all parties that exceed a minimal threshold (e.g., at least 5 percent of the national vote) representation in parliament roughly equal to their vote share. However, the fact that young people are so much less likely to vote in these countries means that support for these new parties is under-represented at the polls. Who votes does make a difference in many established democracies, shaping the alternatives that are presented to the voters as well as affecting the outcome of elections.

### CONCLUSION: A GOVERNMENT FOR OLDER PEOPLE?

As I wrap up my discussion of low youth turnout with students in my American voting behavior class, I like to read them the following newspaper editorial that I found online not long ago:

*When it comes to jobs and other issues as well, the manifestoes of the political parties devote surprisingly little space to policies targeting young people. Instead, their pledges are heavily weighted to the concerns of seniors, with this tendency extending to how the budget should be allocated as well.*

*Some of the responsibility for this situation lies with the younger generations themselves. The voter turnout rate among young people is abysmally low. In the last election, for example, the turnout rate for those in their early 20s was a mere 35 percent. In contrast, 80 percent of people in their 60s cast ballots. To politicians, it is clear which of these two groups demands closer attention and lip service.*

*If this situation continues, the bills for the nation's massive fiscal budget deficit and the dawdling progress in pension reform will be passed on to the younger generation. The low turnout rate among young voters may very well be viewed as tacit approval for this course of action by lawmakers. We believe that an increase in the ballots cast by those in their 20s would prompt a shift in the leanings of the nation's politicians.*

*The first step in this journey can begin with this election. We urge all young people of voting age to get out to the polls and exercise their right of choice with a close eye on the future.<sup>93</sup>*

I then ask the students what newspaper they think published this editorial. The answers I get are always the usual suspects, that is, the most prominent U.S. newspapers. So when I tell them that this was published in the *Asahi Shimbun*—Japan's largest newspaper (which has an English-language version)—they tend to take special notice. Seeing such an article in a foreign newspaper helps drive home the point that the problem of low youth turnout is not a uniquely American one. The basic arguments made in this Japanese newspaper editorial could easily be made in a wide variety of established democracies around the world.

It has often been said that politics is about answering the question of "Who gets, what, when, and how?" Based on the results of this book, young adults are not likely to figure prominently in the answer to the "who" part of the question. As the *Asahi Shimbun* editorial points out, a significant aspect of the political bias in favor of the elderly involves the issues that make it onto the political agenda. How to take care of a rapidly aging population is dominating political discussion in many countries, whereas concerns regarding young people who face difficulties in starting careers and families often are shunted aside. As American journalist Jane Eisner writes, the generational differences in turnout explain "why the U.S. is a nation where poverty among the elderly was addressed by Medicare and Social Security decades ago, and poverty among children remains a persistent and shameful reality."<sup>94</sup>

The bias toward older people that results from turnout differences between age groups is certainly not intentional on anyone's part. Yet, that does not make it right. Nor does the fact that everyone gets older eventually make the situation any better.

A democracy should always strive to ensure that the views of all eligible voters are represented. Young adults should find that the government listens to them when they are young, not decades later after their needs and views change. The danger inherent in the developments discussed in this book is that if these trends continue unabated, many established democracies will be heading toward "a government of older people, by older people, and for older people."

## CHAPTER 7



### What Can Be Done?

What can be done to ensure that voting is for young people just as much as it is for other age groups? There is no shortage of ideas among scholars and political commentators. All of these ideas are certainly well intentioned, and I have no qualms in recommending any of them. But if one really wants to solve the problem, and not just make a dent in it, then only one proven solution exists. In the end, I have to agree with Arend Lijphart, who has persuasively argued that “Compulsory voting is the only institutional mechanism . . . that can assure high turnout virtually by itself.”<sup>95</sup> This chapter explains how I arrived at this conclusion, first reviewing the other major proposals and then explaining why compulsory voting appears to be the only proven answer to the problem.

#### HOW TO IMPROVE TURNOUT RATES WITHOUT COMPULSORY VOTING

When I discuss with my students the topic of low youth turnout, one of the most common suggestions they offer is that society

should focus on improving civic education. No doubt this could only help boost turnout. As Niemi and Junn's careful research shows, a school civics curriculum enhances what students know about government and politics.<sup>96</sup> And as this book has shown, the lack of political information among young adults is certainly a major source of the problem. In particular, students could benefit greatly from an educational program that teaches them why politics matters to all citizens, as well as to them personally. Even if everyone were to suddenly vote, we would still want to work on civic education in order to foster better-informed voters. The fact that so many young adults don't vote makes the imperative for increased civic education all the more vital.

Yet it must be kept in mind that a concerted effort to increase civic education will yield results only among those who are fairly receptive to being educated. It could thus further accentuate the socioeconomic bias at the polls that was Lijphart's primary concern when he addressed the problem of unequal political participation. Furthermore, any impact from improved civic education is bound to take a long time before becoming evident. The generations who have already left school without picking up the habit of following politics need to be brought into the political system as well, and even the best civic education programs are unlikely to reach many of these young adults.

Because most of my students are Americans, they naturally tend to mention aspects of U.S. campaigns that could be improved so as to facilitate citizen participation. One item that always comes up is making the process of voter registration easier. Because young Americans must register in order to cast their first ballot, and are

then likely to be faced with reregistering due to their high levels of mobility, the barriers posed by American registration laws fall most heavily on them. Therefore, anything that can be done to make registration procedures more user-friendly should theoretically benefit young people more than other age groups. State laws that continue to require citizens to register 30 days prior to an election now seem like a product of twentieth-century record-keeping technology. With twenty-first-century computer technology making it possible to update registration files far more expeditiously than in the past, everyone should be given the maximum opportunity to register to vote.

Although it seems good sense to make registration as easy as possible without inviting fraud, even the best registration procedures are unlikely to solve the problem of low youth turnout. Registration has been made significantly easier in the United States over the last three decades—most notably by the passage of the 1993 Motor Voter Act, which required states to permit people to register when they apply for or renew their driver's licenses. Nevertheless, just 52 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds were registered to vote in 2004 as compared to 59 percent in 1972.<sup>97</sup> The next major step in registration reform would be to provide for election day registration, or a comprehensive voter list compiled by the government. Canada permits election day registration throughout the whole country, but it has seen a substantial age gap in turnout develop nonetheless. The governments of Japan and Switzerland compile comprehensive voter registration lists that could serve as models for any country, but getting their young adults to vote has proven far more difficult than getting them registered in recent years.

If the problem of getting young people to vote stems mostly from lack of exposure to politics, as this book argues, then it is no wonder that the results from registration reform have been disappointing. Removing barriers to voting will not have much of an effect if potential voters are not learning much about campaigns for office. Thomas Patterson focuses his attention in *The Vanishing Voter* on the obstacles to learning imposed by the poor design features of American campaigns.<sup>98</sup> Interestingly, Patterson argues that Americans are *overexposed* to presidential campaigns that seem to go on endlessly, concluding that "Nothing would breathe more life into the campaign than shortening it substantially."<sup>99</sup> However, an examination of the survey data collected for Patterson's project reveals that young adults were the least bothered by the length of the 2000 presidential campaign. Forty-nine percent of respondents under 30 said that they preferred a long campaign because it gave them a better chance to know the candidates, compared to 41 percent among respondents aged 30 to 64, and just 28 percent of senior citizens.<sup>100</sup> If one wants to see how shorter campaigns work in practice, one has only to turn to Britain and Canada. Both countries are noted for practicing short electoral campaigns on the order of four to six weeks; yet, their turnout rates have recently fallen to modern lows due to the poor participation rates of their young adults.

This is not to challenge Patterson's basic argument that American turnout rates could be marginally improved via a variety of good government reforms. A system of regional primaries would give the people of every state a meaningful role in choosing the major party candidates. Eliminating the electoral college would

give the parties incentive to mobilize voters in every state rather than focus on just the battleground states. And blocks of free TV time for the major parties on every channel could get information about the issues out to more voters.

My own favorite suggestion for improving American turnout involves a simple change in election timing. With an ordinary act of Congress, the date for federal elections could be moved to a leisure day, thereby giving more people more time during election day to vote. The number-one reason that people who are registered but fail to vote give for not participating is that they were too busy with work or school on election day. This excuse is particularly prevalent among young people.<sup>101</sup> So why not change election day from a Tuesday to a weekend or holiday? It is doubtful that any expert on elections would recommend that Afghanistan and Iraq emulate the American example of voting on a Tuesday; so if we wouldn't recommend Tuesday elections to other countries, why should we continue this practice ourselves? By joining the modern world and voting on a leisure day, it is likely that we would experience some increase in election turnout, especially among young people. Yet this suggestion also falls far short of being a panacea when viewed in comparative perspective. Although countries that vote in the middle of the week such as the United States, Canada, Britain, and Ireland are experiencing low turnout among young people, so are a number of other countries that vote on the weekend such as New Zealand, Norway, Japan, and Switzerland.

Much the same case can be made for proportional representation, which has become part and parcel of a modern electoral system. Few experts today would suggest that a new democracy

adopt a single-member district system such as long practiced in Britain, Canada, and the United States. Electoral systems that use some form of proportional representation ensure that votes for all the major parties end up counting, especially those for newer protest parties who tend to draw support primarily from young people. However, New Zealand's experience as the first Anglo-American country to change to proportional representation would seem to indicate that such a switch has no more than a marginally positive impact on turnout.<sup>102</sup>

In sum, all of these proposals are worthy suggestions, but even combined they do not amount to a cure-all for generational disparities in turnout. This conclusion should hardly be surprising in light of the findings of Chapters 1–3 of this book, which demonstrated that recent generations have established modern lows for newspaper reading, TV news watching, and knowledge of public affairs. These new generation gaps in following politics are beyond the ability of any governmental reform to reverse. A government of a free country can hardly mandate that people pay attention to political news.

#### WANT A SOLUTION? CONSIDER COMPULSORY VOTING

Some democracies do, however, require that adult citizens participate in elections or face a small fine.<sup>103</sup> This practice is commonly known as “compulsory voting,” but it should be noted that this term is actually somewhat misleading. The secrecy of modern ballots makes it impossible to tell whether an individual has actually voted as opposed to just turned in a blank ballot. Thus, all that can really

be required is that citizens show up for elections, not that they actually vote. But given that almost all people who go to the polls under this requirement do indeed make a choice of whom to vote for, and that “compulsory voting” is the commonly used phrase, it seems reasonable to use it with this caveat.

Compulsory voting laws may seem strange to the American ear, but it is an idea that has been tried in a fair number of other countries. Of the 18 established democracies that have been covered in this book, Belgium and Australia have practiced compulsory voting throughout the post-World War II period. If one broadens the sphere a bit to all advanced industrialized societies, then Greece (a democracy since 1974) and tiny Luxembourg can also be added to the list of countries that presently require election attendance by law. In addition, Italy, Austria, and the Netherlands had compulsory voting laws on the books for at least part of the modern era, though enforcement in each of these countries was always weak. By comparison, among the same set of countries, only France, Finland, and the United States elect a president who plays a major role in governing. Thus, presidential government is actually rarer in wealthy democracies than is the practice of requiring citizens to go to the polls.

The best argument for the adoption of compulsory voting is simply that it works extremely well. As Arend Lijphart writes, “Compulsory voting is a particularly effective method to achieve high turnout,” even with low penalties and lax enforcement.<sup>104</sup> In particular, the data displayed in Table 7.1 demonstrate that *compulsory voting laws get all age groups out to vote in very high numbers*. The relationship between age and turnout is negligible in all four advanced industrialized countries that currently



TABLE 7.1

Percent Reporting Casting a Ballot by Age in Advanced Industrialized Countries that Currently have or Recently had Compulsory Voting Laws

	<30	30-44	45-64	65+	OLDEST/YOUNGEST RATIO
AUSTRIA 2002*	82	90	92	90	1.1 : 1
NETHERLANDS 1998*	88	91	92	94	1.1 : 1
ITALY 2001*	89	92	93	86	1.0 : 1
AUSTRALIA 2004**	97	98	98	99	1.0 : 1
BELGIUM 2004**	89	98	97	92	1.0 : 1
GREECE 2000**	90	93	95	93	1.0 : 1
LUXEMBOURG 1999**	91	93	95	86 <sup>v</sup>	.9 : 1

\*Recently had a compulsory voting law, but it is no longer in effect.

\*\*Compulsory voting in effect.

<sup>v</sup>Voting is voluntary for citizens aged 70 and over in Luxembourg.

Note: Age is as of the election (not the survey) for Luxembourg, Greece, Italy, and Austria.

Sources: Netherlands, Australia, Belgium: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems; Luxembourg, Greece, Italy, Austria: European Social Survey 2002/3.

practice compulsory voting. Unlike many other democracies that are suffering from abysmally low youth turnout, these four countries have recently experienced turnout rates ranging from 89 to 97 percent among citizens aged 18 to 29.

Furthermore, the impact of compulsory voting laws seems to leave a participatory imprint on societies that continues to be felt even after this practice lapses. Austria, Italy, and the Netherlands no longer require their citizens to vote, but the fact that they formerly did has probably contributed to their continued very high participation rates. Even young people in these countries are voting

at high rates, as shown in Table 7.1, perhaps because they have grown up in a country where the government made turnout a high priority at some point and actually required citizen participation.

#### HOW MUCH SUPPORT IS THERE FOR COMPULSORY VOTING?

One of the most common arguments against the adoption of compulsory voting is that the public just won't stand for it in countries where it is not already in place. How much truth is there to such an assertion? And how much support is there for compulsory voting in countries such as Australia, Belgium, Greece, and Luxembourg where it is being successfully practiced at the present time? The answers are difficult to ascertain given that no cross-national survey has yet asked a question about compulsory voting. However, some country-specific data are available for Australia, Great Britain, Canada, and the United States, which are displayed in Table 7.2.

The survey data from Australia demonstrate that compulsory voting has proven to be a widely popular policy there. Seventy-four percent of respondents to the 2004 Australian Election Study thought that voting at federal elections should be required, and of these people about two out of three said they strongly favored compulsory voting. Such high levels of support have consistently been the case in Australia, with support never falling below 60 percent in data compiled by Mackerras and McAllister dating back to 1943.<sup>105</sup> Interestingly, even young Australians clearly favored compulsory voting in 2004. At the same time, these young respondents were also the least likely to say that they definitely

**TABLE 7.2**  
Support for Compulsory Voting in Australia, Canada, the UK,  
and the USA by Age (in percents)

	18-29	30-44	45-64	65+	ALL
<b>SUPPORT COMPULSORY VOTING</b>					
AUSTRALIA	75	76	75	74	75
GREAT BRITAIN	37	47	48	56	47
CANADA	40	46	43	58	45
USA	—	—	—	—	21
<b>STRONGLY SUPPORT COMPULSORY VOTING</b>					
AUSTRALIA	39	49	47	50	47
GREAT BRITAIN	20	24	32	42	29
CANADA	15	20	19	34	20

Question wording: Australia—"Do you think that voting at Federal elections should be compulsory, or do you think that people should only have to vote if they want to?" Canada—"In Australia, Belgium, Brazil, and a number of other countries, people are required by law to vote. How supportive would you be of a law like this for federal elections? Would you be very supportive, somewhat supportive, somewhat opposed, or very opposed?" Great Britain—"Which of these policies do you support or oppose? Make voting in elections compulsory." USA—"In a few countries every eligible citizen is required by law to vote in national elections. Those who don't have a good excuse for not voting are subject to a small fine. Do you think this would be a good law or a poor law to have in this country?"

Sources: 2004 Australian Election Study; 2001 MORI survey of Great Britain for the UK Electoral Commission; Elections Canada 2002 survey of voters and nonvoters; June 2004 ABC News survey of USA <http://abcnews.go.com/images/pdf/883a44CompulsoryVoting.pdf> (accessed August 11, 2005).

would have voted had participation been voluntary.<sup>106</sup> Were it not for mandatory voting, there would be a significant age gap in electoral participation in Australia similar to that found in many other countries. The widespread support for compulsory voting among young Australians indicates that they would rather not see their country slip into this pattern.

Whenever I talk to political science classes in Australia, I find that many Aussie students are amazed to learn how low turnout is for American elections. They immediately ask me why the United States doesn't just emulate their country's example and fine people who fail to participate. The best response I can think of is simply that most Americans object to the government telling them to do something, even if it is good for them. American political culture is based on John Locke's views of individual rights, which differ from Jeremy Bentham's concept of the greatest good for the greatest number, which shaped Australian culture. Most Americans would probably assert that they have an inviolable right not to show up at the polls. As former U.S. Attorney General Griffin Bell remarked during a brief discussion of compulsory voting at a 2001 hearing of the National Commission on Federal Election Reform, "That is not a free country when you are doing things like that."<sup>107</sup> While Griffin Bell's comment may be an extreme reaction, it is apparent from Table 7.2 that there is currently not much support for requiring people to vote in the United States. Only 21 percent of Americans interviewed in a 2004 *ABC News* poll supported the idea of a compulsory voting law like that practiced in Australia.

As Table 7.2 shows, attitudes toward compulsory voting in Canada and Great Britain fall in between the strong support for compulsory voting in Australia and the clear hostility to the idea in the United States. In both countries it is noteworthy that support for compulsory voting increases with age. Among senior citizens in Canada and Great Britain, a majority actually support making voting mandatory. The high level of support for compulsory voting among older citizens can be explained by the facts that voters are

substantially more likely than nonvoters to favor it and of course that older people have the highest turnout rate.

Citizens who vote apparently do not want to monopolize political power. Roughly half of voters in both Britain and Canada support the notion that participation by everyone is so important that the government should require it. If politicians listen primarily to those who vote, then they may well start to consider compulsory voting if turnout rates continue to fall, especially among young people. Indeed, a serious rumbling in this direction could be seen after the low turnout in the British general election of 2005. The leader of the British House of Commons, Geoff Hoon, publicly stated that he thought a move to compulsory voting was necessary to reinvigorate UK democracy, arguing that "we need to get people more engaged in political processes."<sup>108</sup>

#### IS TALK OF COMPULSORY VOTING AT ALL REALISTIC?

When Arend Lijphart called for compulsory voting in his presidential address to the American Political Science Association, he wrote that "The danger of too much pessimism about the chances for compulsory voting is that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If even the supporters of compulsory voting believe that its chances are nil—and hence make no effort on behalf of it—it will indeed never be adopted!"<sup>109</sup> I wholeheartedly agree. Political scientists have been far too cautious in recommending compulsory voting despite what we know about the seriousness of the turnout problem among young people and how well this solution works to correct it.

Engineering safety experts have not backed off their recommendations calling for mandatory seat belt laws for motorists just because many people think that whether to buckle up or not should be a matter of personal choice. Nor have researchers on secondhand smoke backed off on recommendations to ban smoking in public places just because many people think that such restrictions would be a violation of their individual rights. Rather, these researchers have continued to try to educate people and shift public policy, with the result being a fair degree of success. For example, in 2005 Gallup reported that for the first time, a majority of the American public supported banning smoking in restaurants, up from a mere 17 percent in 1987.<sup>110</sup> As attitudes have changed, so have laws, with 11 U.S. states currently banning smoking in restaurants, and the likelihood is that more will follow suit. The campaign to increase use of safety belts in automobiles has been equally impressive. Every state except New Hampshire now has a law requiring the use of seat belts.<sup>111</sup> Data compiled by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration on actual usage of seat belts finds that between 1994 and 2005, the percentage of passengers using seat belts increased from 58 to 82 percent.<sup>112</sup> In sum, attitudes and behavior can change as people become more aware of a problem; and once such changes are put into motion, politicians feel compelled to take actions that they never would have even considered a decade earlier.

Ironically, one of the obstacles to the adoption of compulsory voting is the fear of success. Some analysts have trepidations about forcing people with limited political interest to appear at the polls. Once compelled to vote, these citizens may make choices the same way some people choose lottery numbers. Or worse yet, they may be particularly susceptible to demagogic appeals by irresponsible

politicians with antidemocratic tendencies. Granted, these are serious concerns. But which is the worse scenario—a low and biased turnout with the participation of only those who follow politics, or a broad and representative turnout with the participation of people who follow politics as well as those who do not? Consider the situation in Italy as of 1959, when the Civic Culture Study found that about two-thirds of Italians said they *never* followed accounts of political and governmental affairs. Italy then had a compulsory voting law, and though it was not rigorously enforced, turnout nevertheless ranged between 92 and 95 percent. Looking back, can one really make a case that it would have been better if only the one-third of the Italian population who followed politics had voted?<sup>113</sup>

In his recent book *Culture War?*, Morris Fiorina writes that his students express outrage at the prospect of being forced to go to the polls even if they don't like any of the candidates.<sup>114</sup> My students, who are of course heavily exposed to the findings reviewed in this book, tend to be more outraged at the fact that older people are running the government while their generation is ignored due to its low turnout rate. The answer to the question posed by the title of this book—*Is Voting for Young People?*—is that it certainly *should* be but all too often is not.

## CHAPTER 8



### Postscript: A New Civic Engagement Among Young People?

Within the wide range of debate over the state of citizen engagement in the United States, the topic of turnout is only one element, albeit a very important one. Since the original publication of this book, some scholars have argued that although young people may not be showing up at the polls in high rates, they are participating at high levels in community affairs and politics. According to this line of thinking, there is a new kind of political participation that is more attractive to young people: a hands-on type of involvement requiring more effort than the simple act of casting a ballot.

The most detailed discussion of this argument to date can be found in the 2006 book by Cliff Zukin et al. entitled *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing*