

A Passive America

Frank Vasgerdsian

Department of Social Studies, College Park High School

U.S. Government

Teacher – John Kropf

December 13, 2017

Abstract

The United States was established on the principles of active citizen participation. The founding fathers, along with the people of eighteenth-century America, fought for ordinary citizens to have the ability to get involved in the government and to have their voices heard when important issues were decided upon. As a result, the power of the people's voice was much stronger in the early decades of the United States' existence. But as America's influence over the world grew, so did the power of the government. Politics suddenly became more complicated, and the lives of the American public grew more hectic. This shift led the country to where it is now: citizens are more ignorant of political situations, voting rates are dwindling, and community and social interaction is lower than ever. We are now faced with the difficult challenge of getting Americans more involved in events and ideas outside of their own private lives. If a solution cannot be constructed soon, then the United States will continue to be a country without active citizen participation.

A Passive America

At the inception of the United States of America, the goal was to have a government in which the people ultimately controlled how the country was run instead of being dictated by a rich minority that had no stake in the well-being of the people. As such, an indirect democracy was established in which a representative body is chosen by the people to formulate public policy (Shea, 2016, 13). With this system, it is of utmost importance that the citizens hold even the most basic knowledge of how the government is run. Without this understanding, people cannot express their opinions on the state of the government and voters are not able to make good decisions on important political matters. This was not a problem in the 1700s, a time in which a democratic system of government was a pretty easy one to uphold. The country was more disconnected during this period, and governing was more commonly done at a local level. As the United States grew and expanded, so did the need for a more centralized government. With that, the world of politics became a great deal more complicated. Similarly, the once simple lives of the individuals became chaotic with the advent of industrial processes and world conflicts (Miroff, Seidelman, & Swanstrom, 2003). Consequentially, the post-war generations took a firmer interest in their personal responsibilities (e.g., care for oneself, care for one's family, and taking part in personal pleasures) (Shea, 2016, 30). With these new pursuits came a waning focus on politics, and what little free time that remained for the public was concentrated on enjoying life rather than being active citizens.

Presently, Americans are less politically active than they have ever been in the history of the country. But this lack of attention cannot be labeled as simply being a result of Americans finding politics "boring". This is shown quite clearly by the fact that, as a nation, Americans seem to be spending less time together in social activities. Over time, the American public has

become more and more secluded. People are so caught up in the stresses of everyday life (higher work hours, lower wages, increasing taxes, complicated healthcare system, etc.), that they can't make the time to get involved in the community (Loeb, 2003). Putnam (1995) notes that membership in once-thriving organizations is dropping. Church-going, at one time a well-practiced American tradition, has lessened over the decades despite the influx of various other religions to American society. As American government evolved, the number of unionized workers fell dramatically to 11.3 percent today. Even smaller volunteer associations such as PTA's, Boy & Girl Scouts, and Women's rights groups do not see the attendance rates they once did. It is further noted that:

More Americans are bowling today than ever before, but bowling in organized leagues has plummeted in the last decade or so. Between 1980 and 1998, the total number of bowlers in America increased by 10 percent, while league bowling decreased by 40 percent (Putnam, 1995).

The concept of people not bowling together may seem inconsequential, but a more serious issue lies beneath the surface. Bowling is a popular recreational way to get people together and to have a great time. This time with others allows people to let off some steam and destress after a long day at work. The ability to talk to other people about daily life allows one to better articulate his or her feelings about society as a whole, and this only aids in having stronger formative views about government.

Citizens cannot be expected to take an interest in political activities if they refuse to even do so in everyday activities. At the same time though, taking note of the importance of government involvement should be enough to get the public to realize that it is something that needs more focus. But that is clearly not enough, for political awareness is at an all-time low in

America and still dropping. The theory that dictates the basics of active citizen participation claims to yield many advantages to both the citizens and the government. The citizens receive the benefits of a stronger education, a more direct line to contact the government, and to have the ability to fight powerfully for their causes. Because of those advantages, the government gains the power to be better representatives, make real decisions that help the people, and make the system run smoother (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). Yet, quite plainly, citizens pay no mind to these potential improvements, and the causes of this are helpful in understanding people's views of government as a whole.

In initial observations, it seems that Americans take a "someone else will do it" or "bystander" approach to issues in politics. It now looks as though it takes someone with iron resolution to even get a proposition submitted to local government. This backseat approach to getting things done in the political sphere is a prime example of how passive American citizens now are (Loeb, 2003). Perhaps though, it is not that Americans are too lazy to take action, but that they are too ignorant to see it as a rational option. The concept of rational ignorance is that United States citizens see being "smarter voters" as the only positive effect of being educated in political issues. This is compounded by the view that their votes do not really matter. As a result, it is not a "rational" choice to spend time studying politics (Somin, 2013). This is a very possible explanation for the lack of political knowledge in America. As previously stated, personal time is precious to the public. Getting involved in a system that produces no instant pleasure for most would not make sense to the average person.

As a result of this political ignorance, knowledge of the most basic ways in which the United States government works is severely lacking. A 2014 survey showed that only 36 percent of those surveyed knew all three branches of the United States government. Furthermore, a

whopping 35 percent of them could not even name one of the branches. Only 27 percent knew it takes a two-thirds vote in the House of Representatives and Senate to overrule presidential vetoes. Lastly, only 38 percent knew that Republicans controlled the House of Representatives, and that Democrats controlled the Senate (Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2014). These are decidedly dismal numbers, and a vast majority of Americans lack the basic understanding of how their own government works. If they are not able to get informed about issues affecting their lives, then they will not be effective voters. Another concern is voting in America, which brings up a whole new layer of evidence supporting the idea that American citizens are no longer active participators.

Another form of citizen participation is going out and voting on Election Day. If Americans have already fulfilled the most basic form of participation, gaining knowledge, then they should naturally use that knowledge to make their reactions to this information heard. Of the nearly 240 million American citizens of the voting age of 18, only about 133 million (56.5 percent) voted in the 2012 presidential election. Even fewer, 122 million (50.8 percent) voted to fill the House of Representatives seats in the same election (Shea, 2016, 440). These numbers are clearly not enough to accurately reflect the wants and needs of the people in a government that is supposed to be partially controlled by them. In the following off-year federal election in 2014, “Just 36.4 percent of the voting-eligible population cast ballots...The last time voter turnout was so low during a midterm election cycle was in 1942, when only 33.9 percent of eligible voters cast ballots” (DelReal, 2014). As shown in the data, voter turnout in national elections is incredibly low. In fact, voting rates are at the lowest point that they have been in decades. Since the 1960 presidential election the voting rates have been on a steady decline, dropping nearly 10 percent over that time (info, 2015).

The most shocking evidence supporting the lack of active voter interest is the extremely low voter turnout rate in local elections.

University of Wisconsin researchers provided *Governing* with elections data covering 144 larger U.S. cities, depicting a decline in voter turnout in odd-numbered years over the previous decade. In 2001, an average of 26.6% of cities' voting-age population cast ballots, while less than 21% did so in 2011 (Maciag, 2014).

These results are the most important in determining the public's views on voting and their participation levels. Ballot fatigue, the concept that the lower the position officials receive less votes than the higher ones, is particularly apparent when analyzing voting rates in America (Shea, 2016, 441). Local elections have the most effect on the voters' everyday lives, yet the public seems to care more about the popular positions. The representatives that are elected have a direct impact on the goings-on of local government. Any buildings that are built, parks that are planned, or ordinances that are decided upon are controlled by these representatives of the city or county government.

Research into why voting rates in the United States are dropping is paramount in aiding the understanding of the lack of citizen participation. Some of the most common answers that people give when they are asked why they do not vote are: long lines, bad weather, and loss of work time (Shea, 2016, 442). These excuses are not acceptable reasons for not participating in elections though. There are a few main underlying causes of voter apathy, and one is the influence of the media in the perception of government. The process of an election is a vicious cycle of lies and corruption that ultimately corrupt the democratic process. "Such is the case in the United States, where less than 9 corporations own more than fifty percent of all media (including both print and electronic) ..." (Street, 2002). In this system, the corporations that own

the media skew their reporting to make it act in their own best interest, not the public's. By controlling the way government and politics are discussed in the media, these corporations are able to win support for the candidates that will in turn back them. This results in a government that is not representative of the people's voice, but of the capitalist one-percenters whose singular interest is to make money. In order to fix this problem, the private financial support of candidates and policies must be abolished. This would help to put an end to elections won by money and influence, thus allowing constituencies to have a real sense that they are making smart decisions in voting.

Another cause of lowered voting rates is the convoluted nature of the campaign for office. The circus of the campaign system is defined by insults, debates, and infighting (Piven & Cloward, 2006). Because of this, the public's focus on the issues that matter are obscured by the celebrity of the political race. As the 2016 presidential election looms, American citizens are beginning to research the candidates. However, they are not looking into the candidates' foreign policy or their stances on immigration and the economy. Instead, voters turned their focus to "Hillary Rodham Clinton's age, Jeb Bush's height, Chris Christie's weight, Donald Trump's net worth, Carly Fiorina's marital status and Bobby Jindal's birthplace" as the most Google-searched topics for each candidate (Bauder, 2015). The fact that the public is most interested in the surface information on the candidates shows a critical lack of understanding of the important political issues that have an impact on the country. Citizens are not taking an active role in the gathering of political knowledge and the application of that knowledge through voting.

Other smaller problems that negatively impact voting in America are straight-ticket and bandwagon voting. Straight-ticket voting is the practice of voting for all candidates of a particular party in every position on the ballot. Some states even provided a single selection to

vote straight-ticket for in an election. In fact, “A total of 10 states allow or offer straight-ticket voting...These states are: Alabama, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas, and Utah” (NCSL, 2015). This method of voting is not only lazy, but a prime example of how inactive citizens are in elections. If those that are voting straight-ticket are not doing so because they cannot bother to take the time to carefully fill out the ballot, then they must be blindly supporting a party. Doing this is not being active in government, since they are not taking into consideration that there are other candidates outside their own party that might be better for the position. By removing the straight ticket voting option from the ballot, citizens will be forced to really take an effort in choosing. Similarly, bandwagon voting provides uninformed voters with an easy choice of who to vote for in elections. In this process:

A small but significant number of swing voters tend to support whichever side seems to be winning, partly because they want to be identified with a winner and a party because of a sense that whoever seems to be winning might well be the best person for the job for that very reason. Bandwagon voters are unlikely to make a decisive difference in an election where one side has an overwhelming edge to begin with. But they can be decisive in a closer race (Somin, 2015).

The act of bandwagon voting is clearly a prime example of passive participation in government. This act comes as a result of the United States government allowing the release of early poll results while the polls are still open in some states. By delaying the release of these results until later, lethargic voters would not have the ability to bandwagon vote.

One of the most viable ways to increase voting rates is to introduce an automatic voter registration system. The current registration system is fractured, causing almost 2.2 million votes

to go uncounted from inaccuracies and misfiled data in registrations. An automatic registration system would take any information provided to a government agency (DMV, Social Security, etc.) and data-mine it to create profiles for every American voter. As information is updated, these profiles would be too (Gerken, 2013). It is every citizen's constitutional right to vote; so it should be made as easy as possible to do so. Other countries, specifically European democracies, have found great success with automatic voter registration systems. France and Sweden have voter turnout rates of 71.2 percent and 82.6 percent respectively, with both having an automatic registration system in use (Keyes, 2013).

Ultimately, the key to getting American citizens to take part in more active citizen participation is to indoctrinate the concept in them at a young age (Somin, 2013). Currently, the core standards for Social Studies involve a heavy focus on history. World and U.S. History are taught from the end of elementary school all the way up until the junior year of high school, with very little focus on the way the United States government works. The introduction of these ideas to students at a younger age would allow them to internalize the importance of being active citizens. By comparing and contrasting the current U.S. government to the history studied throughout school, students would be able to determine their views on political issues at a younger age. This critical analysis in school would increase the number of active citizens in America.

Conclusion

The success of America's democratic system of government hinges on the participation of its citizens in it. Through examining American citizens' social and political activities, governmental knowledge, and voting rates, it becomes evident that active citizen participation is the lowest it has been in the history of the country. Individuals are more isolated and self-

centered than ever, with people participating in fewer group events (both societal and administrative). Political ignorance is rampant in the U.S., for Americans lack the basic knowledge of the running of their democratic system. All of this culminates in the most damning evidence: the lowest voting rates in America's record. A dramatic overhaul in both the way Americans are educated on the political system and the political system as a whole is the basis of reigniting citizens' drive to become active participators.

References

- Annenberg Public Policy Center. (2014). Americans know surprisingly little about their government, survey finds. <http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/americans-know-surprisingly-little-about-their-government-survey-finds/>
- Bauder, D. (2015). Google: What people search for most in presidential hopefuls. <http://bgstory.ap.org/article/b724dcc2090e48ea8446796d05364b3f1/google-what-people-search-most-presidential-hopefuls>
- DelReal, J. A. (2014, November 10). Voter turnout in 2014 was the lowest since WWII. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2014/11/10/voter-turnout-in-2014-was-the-lowest-since-wwii/>
- Gerken, H. K. (2013). Make it easy: The case for automatic registration. *Democracy Journal*. <http://www.democracyjournal.org/28/make-it-easy-the-case-for-automatic-registration.php>
- Infoplease. (2015). National voter turnout in federal elections: 1960-2014. <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0781453.html>
- Irvin, R. A. & Stansbury, J. (2004). Citizen participation in decision making: Is it worth the effort? *Public Administration Review*, 64, 55-57.
- Keyes, S. (2013, May 15). Seven voting reforms other countries have used to boost their turnout rate. *Think Progress*. <http://thinkprogress.org/justice/2013/05/15/2000621/international-voting-reforms/>
- Loeb, P. R. (2003). The active citizen. In Miroff et. al., *Debating democracy*. Houghton Mifflin.

- Maciag, M. (2014). Voter turnout plummeting in local elections. *Governing*.
<http://www.governing.com/topics/politics/gov-voter-turnout-municipal-elections.html>
- Miroff, B., Seidelman, R., & Swanstrom, T. (2003). *Debating democracy: A reader in American politics*, 4th Ed. Houghton Mifflin Company.
- NCSL National Conference of State Legislatures. (2015). *Straight ticket voting states*. d
- Piven, F. F. & Cloward, R. A. (2006). Why Americans still don't vote. In W. F. Grover & J. G. Peschek (Eds.), *Voices of dissent: Critical readings in American politics* (pp. 152-161). Pearson Longman.
- Putnam, R. D. (2003). Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American Community. In Miroff, B., et. al., *Debating democracy*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Shea, D. M. (2016). *Magruder's American government*. Pearson.
- Somin, I. (2013, October 11). Democracy and political ignorance. *Cato Institute*.
<http://www.cato-unbound.org/2013/10/11/ilya-somin/democracy-political-ignorance>
- Somin, I. (2015, March 16). Can laws restricting the publication of preelection poll results reduce the negative effects of political ignorance? *Washington Post*.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2015/03/16/can-laws-restricting-preelection-opinion-polling-help-offset-the-negative-effects-of-political-ignorance/>
- Street, P. (2002, November 6). Playing dumb? Dan Rather's curiously clueless take on why Americans don't. *Z Magazine*.