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Thoughts on Elections

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September 11, 2001 was an election day in New York City. Thousands of New Yorkers will long remember that they were at a polling place to vote in the mayoral primary when they heard about the disaster at the World Trade Center. For a time the primary was forgotten as people struggled to deal with the tragedy. As preparations mounted for the rescheduled primary on September 25th, the New York City Elections Board put up a large banner on its web site reading "Vote. Or Liberty is History." By all accounts, New Yorkers, like Americans everywhere came to appreciate their liberties even more than usual in the shadow of September 11th. But most, apparently scoffed at the notion that their own personal participation in elections is necessary to preserve their treasured liberty. Only 13 percent of New York City's voting age population turned out for the rescheduled primary. And when Michael Bloomberg won the race to succeed Rudy Giuliani in the general election it was with the participation of just one-fourth of New Yorkers over the age of 18. This level of turnout was roughly equal to that of the previous mayoral election, but was substantially below the 34 percent turnout rate in 1993 when Giuliani was first elected. Furthermore, it was not just in New York City that the participation rates were disappointing. Two states held elections for Governor in November 2001. Just 36 percent of the voting age population voted in both New Jersey and Virginia (home to the damaged Pentagon). This rate of turnout was about the same as in the past two gubernatorial elections in Virginia, but in New Jersey it represented a significant downward shift in participation. Although polls showed that Americans felt more positively about their government after the terrorist attacks, such feelings had no impact on electoral participation rates.

American turnout rates in primaries, municipal elections, and special elections are often so abysmal so as to raise the question of what would happen if an election were held and no one voted. Here are some stunning examples of poor turnout in each type: 1) In New Ashford, Massachusetts, none of the town's 202 registered voters turned out to vote in the September 2000 primary election and statewide only 6 percent of the voting age population participated; 2) In Comfort, Texas an election for the local school board in 1998 motivated just 17 out of 720 registered voters to cast ballots; 3) In a 1997 statewide special election in Texas only 5 percent of the voting age population participated. This occurred even though Governor Bush stumped the state for a week, urging people to participate and promising that a "Yes" vote would result in a major tax cut. Ironically, one of the people who did not vote was Richard Cheney, then a registered voter in Dallas.

Poor turnout is hardly a news story in the United States. The last time the nation came to a halt and mourned for days on end – when John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963 – this problem had been squarely on the president's agenda. In fact, Kennedy was scheduled to receive a presidential commission report on registration and voting participation on November 26, 1963, shortly after he was expected to return from Dallas. Looking at this report today, one is struck by the fact that virtually all of the commission's recommendations were eventually implemented. Commission members focused on ways to make it easier to register, and they could hardly have imagined just how much these procedures would be improved in the coming decades. The Voting Rights Act made it possible for those who had faced discrimination in the past to register to vote and the abolition of the poll tax removed financial barriers to electoral

participation. Federal law now forbids states from closing the registration books more than 30 days before elections. And most recently, the 1993 Motor Voter Act required states to permit people to register when they apply for or renew drivers' licenses, and mandated that postal registration forms be made available at social service offices.

All of these legal changes have succeeded in making the registration process more user-friendly, but at the same time failed to deliver on the promise of greater electoral participation. Registration rolls have swelled, but these additions have consisted largely of people with marginal political interest who don't take advantage of their voting opportunities. You can take a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. Today, turnout rates are much lower than when JFK's presidential commission made its recommendations for streamlining the registration process.

When I am asked to identify the one factor that best predicts who votes, I always choose age. Young people have long had the lowest turnout rates, perhaps the reason why there was relatively little opposition to lowering the voting age to 18 in the early 1970's. But even the most pessimistic analysts could not have foreseen the record low turnout rates of today's youth. According to the Census Bureau, just 32 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 voted in 2000 compared to 68 percent among those over 65 years of age. The generation gap in primary election participation is even greater; official statistics provided by local registrars typically show older people being four to twelve times as likely to take part in nomination contests.

If one had to choose a single word to describe the current relationship between candidates for office and young citizens it would have to be "neglect". Politicians are not fools; they know who their customers are. Why should they worry about young nonvoters any more than the makers of denture cream worry about people with healthy teeth? Indeed, studies of political ads have found that candidates mostly place ads on shows with older audiences, such as "Jeopardy" or "Wheel of Fortune", and avoid placing ads on shows like syndicated reruns of "Friends", which draws a young audience. While some older voters might envy how younger adults are not exposed to political ads, especially harsh negative ones, studies have consistently shown that people learn from political ads - - both positive and negative. Furthermore, as political ads both shape and represent much of the agenda of any modern campaign, the concerns of young people are likely to be ignored. Rather than focusing their ads on programs that young people are likely to be particularly interested in, such as job training programs, candidate ads discuss health care and retirement issues.

Although many people seem to think it doesn't matter if they don't vote, it does. As Harold Lasswell wrote many years ago, "Politics is who gets what, when, and how." As long as young people have low rates of participation in the electoral process, then they should expect to be getting relatively little of whatever there is to get from government.

Of course, most everyone can look forward to getting older eventually. Thus, those who were neglected in the 2000 presidential campaign will probably be seriously courted in the campaign of 2040. From this perspective, it could be argued that most people eventually get the chance to be heard in the electoral process and to reap the political benefits. Such a perspective, however, assumes that there are not generational differences in attitudes that can influence the course of public policy - an assumption that is easily proved wrong by survey research. Striking differences between younger and older Americans can be found on a wide range of political issues. Young people are naturally much more supportive of government spending

that would particularly help them, such as for public schools and jobs programs. But they are also more in favor of spending to protect the environment, an equal role for women in society, and abortion rights. In terms of ideology, young people are virtually as likely to say they are liberals as conservatives, whereas among senior citizens conservatives outnumber liberals by 20 percent. In sum, if young people had turnout rates equal to older people, voting behavior and public policy would probably be shifted somewhat leftwards.

If election observers at Iraq's first post-Saadam election noticed that older people were several times as likely as younger people to vote they would no doubt call this to this fact, and suggest there was a problem that ought to be looked into. Here in the USA we are so accustomed to this pattern that it hardly attracts any notice at all. But it is something that should not be ignored, especially since we can probably do something to improve the situation. Let me suggest one possible change that might particularly improve participation rates among young people.

The #1 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, who are often busy juggling both school and work on Tuesdays. So why not change election day to a weekend or holiday? Research has shown that turnout is high in countries that vote on a leisure day. Indeed, it is doubtful that any American elections expert would recommend that Iraq emulate the American example and vote on a Tuesday. So if Americans wouldn't recommend Tuesday elections to other countries, why should we continue this practiced ourselves? By joining the modern world and voting on a leisure day, it is likely that we would experience an increase in election turnout, especially among young people.

Martin P. Wattenberg is the author of *Where Have All the Voters Gone?* (Harvard University Press).

"It Takes a Team"

Ann Abrams, MSW, LCSW
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Medical students, residents and fellows are taught the benefits of teamwork in caring for older adults through the University of California, Irvine Program in Geriatrics.

In clinical settings such as the Health Assessment Program for Seniors, these learners participate in an interdisciplinary medical team including geriatricians, pharmacist, neuropsychologists, an occupational therapist, a dietician, and a social worker. Here they see first hand what each discipline provides for accurate assessment and appropriate treatment planning for people who are in complicated medical situations.

In the hospice setting, these learners participate in another interdisciplinary model where nurses provide considerable leadership. Team members include social workers, chaplains, certified nursing assistants, and volunteers who share roles to meet the urgent needs of dying patients and their families.

At the Forensic Center, learners preview what a community collaboration of disciplines can accomplish by working together. In this setting, geriatricians, adult protective services social workers, gerontologists, professionals in mental health, housing, and forensics meet together to combat elder mistreatment in the community.

Learners also attend a community agency workshop where they are taught about government-funded and private agencies helpful to older adults, and how to make appropriate referrals to better meet the needs of these people. Through these experiences they begin to recognize the benefits of building their own networks to maximize a person's quality of life.

In the Student Senior Partner Program where medical students are matched with healthy seniors, the students are amazed to learn what healthy older adults value. These include resources to remain healthy such as senior centers, gymnasiums, and places to volunteer.

As medical students, residents and fellows evaluate their experiences in the Program in Geriatrics, they have consistently indicated the value of this particular rotation. "I would never have learned this anywhere else, and I know it is something I will need in my practice." Some learners even decide through these opportunities to pursue geriatrics as a specialty because they realize the opportunity to care for the whole patient and family.

Sad News

We were saddened to have learned as the summer began that our dear colleague, Paul Wherle, passed away. In mid-July we lost our dear colleague, Paul Silverman. A memorial was held for Silverman in October.