

**Weidenbaum Center on the Economy, Government, and Public Policy
Breakfast Presentation**

October 4, 2004

Voter Turnout and Participation

By Curtis Gans

Director, Committee for the Study of the American Electorate

I am sometimes known as the Chicken Little of American politics. I get up there every election because I am an expert in voter turnout and I say the sky is falling because our voter turnout is so low. I can't say that for this election.

This election, thanks to the lightning rod nature of the Bush presidency, is going to be a high turnout election. It is going to be a high turnout election that rivals that of the 1992 election and perhaps exceeds it, but it won't go back to the levels of the 1960s. I think it will be an election in which every group will increase their turnout, except for moderate Republicans. Many are offended by the Bush presidency and will either vote for Kerry or just stay home. Every other group is likely to be voting at a higher rate, which does not change the condition that I am going to remind you about for the next half an hour or so. This is a temporary change driven by the polarizing policies of this particular president, but the general condition of the American electorate is awful.

We had a slight rise in voter turnout in 2000 and 2002, but we are still pretty close to historically low levels. For instance, the 1996 election had the lowest turnout since 1924, the second lowest since 1824, and outside the South the lowest turnout since 1824. The 1998 election had the lowest turnout since

1942, but outside the South the lowest since 1802. We have 25 million people in our midst who used to vote who no longer do. We have young people aged 18 to 24 voting at a 15% rate in midterm elections and first time voters under 19 voting at under a 10% rate. Our democracy stands 139th out of 172 democracies in voter turnout, because we have not addressed many of the problems that have caused voter turnout to be so low. We can expect after this election for a return to these low levels.

There are people who do not worry about that and think that low voter turnout is a sign of voter satisfaction. There are people that think that non-voters would vote the same as voters, so what's the difference? And there are people who say that low voter turnout doesn't mean a thing, because government goes on and decisions get made and I would like to start off by disabusing people of all those notions.

Voter turnout is lowest and has been declining the most for people at the lower end of the income scale, the lower end of the age scale and the lower end of the education scale. This is hardly a picture of a happy mesomorphic electorate. And while voter turnout did go down moderately during the mid-90s period of economic expansion, which was the 2nd longest in our history, the longest was in the 1960s when we had the highest voter turnout. There is not one poll of non-voters that shows their non-participation due to satisfaction and level of satisfaction. Because non-voting is a sign of inattention, it used to be that at least at the level of president, non-voters would have voted the same as voters, only more so. For instance, in 1984, Ronald Reagan won with 60% of the

vote and won non-voters with 64%. But let's flash to 1996. The actual results were 48% Clinton, 42% Dole, 10% Perot. The non-voter poll taken on election day by Frank Luntz was Clinton 47%, Dole 18%, and Perot 32%. We are now dealing with a much more alienated set of non-voters and while government goes on, there are certain societal risks with a continuing decline in political participation. Voting is in essence a lowest common denominator political act. If you don't vote, you're likely to not participate in any sustaining societal activity. Yes, we have a rise in sporadic volunteerism, partly driven by compulsory civic service programs in schools. But by and large, the reservoir of volunteers as we decline in voter participation is growing smaller and smaller.

The obverse result of declining participation is probably even more important. As the number of people in the political system decreases, those left tend to be the interested or the zealous, those who have a particular interest in a policy outcome or are zealous about a single issue. At this point we see this particularly in the Republican Party. Two factors combined create a problem. The first factor is that we are increasingly drawing districts that are safe for one party. We're now down to 44 districts in the house that can be called vaguely competitive and the same is true for state legislatures. That makes the primary in those districts the relevant election. The average turnout in statewide primaries for governor or Senate in the Democratic Party is 10%. The average turnout for Republican primaries statewide is 8%. People vote less for Congress and state legislature districts. That essentially means that an organized minority of 3.5% can win those primaries. And you want to know why the Republican

Party has moved so far to the right and their policies have polarized? That's why! The organized minority in the Republican Party is the religious and secular right. The same thing could happen to the Democratic Party except there's no left *left*. Were there one you would have the same danger.

When you have increasingly lower voter turnouts, political policy becomes an increasingly adjudicated for those who do vote heavily. I bet almost all of you in this audience remember the catastrophic health insurance bill that passed in 1990. It was one of the first things that got repealed in the first half of Congress in 1991. It wasn't a good bill. Wealthier, older people didn't like the co-insurance payments and organized, since people who are over 65 vote a little over twice as much as people under 30 in presidential elections and close to 3 times as much in midterm elections, Congress acceded to their wishes — quickly. Or take the fact that public employees constitute one-sixth of the nation. When half the nation votes in a presidential election that one-sixth becomes one-third. When one-third of the nation votes as it does in mid-term Congressional elections, that one-sixth becomes close to one-half. Then try to revise civil service or abolish agencies and it can't be done. If young people vote at a rate of 15% in midterm elections we're looking at a bleak future for both leadership and participation. If allegiance and strong allegiance to either major party decline, we're looking at a weakening in the cohesion of American politics. If non-voting is a sign of inattention, as it is, then the potential for unchecked demagoguery and authoritarianism becomes that much greater. If people don't learn how to make changes within the political system, although there is no clear and present

danger except for things like Timothy McVeigh, they may choose to make changes outside the political system.

Finally, government matters. You can serve food at as many soup kitchens as you want, but only the government can address poverty. You can recycle as many cans and bottles as you want to, but only the government can address air and water pollution. I'm not suggesting solutions, only that these are the types of problems that only government can fix or at least partially address. And for all of those reasons I think you have to be concerned that the government that prides itself in being the best example of government of, for, and by the people is increasingly becoming government of, for, and by the interested few.

A few words about the nature of the problem: the nature of the problem is essentially two problems. One is low-level turnout. Even when we had our highest turnout about 65% in and if you factor in the reality that blacks were considered eligible and yet disenfranchised in the South, the turnout was 67%. , we were still lower than most democracies. People are essentially agreed on the two sources of that. One is essentially everything having to do with registration and voting. In almost every other democracy, the state conducts registration and in the United States we not only make the citizen qualify for voting, except in North Dakota, which has no registration, but also re-qualify every time they move. So voting here is a two step act and everywhere else it's one step act. So part of it is procedure, but the other part has to do with the unique nature of American society. We are not a class-identified society. We're a society that

believes even at the lowest level that they can win the lottery, push yourself up by your bootstraps. We are all part of the incipient middle class. And because of that, we have not had, as parliamentary democracies have, socially or ideologically-embedded parties. We are probably more ideological now than in any other time in my lifetime. But by and large, we have had more heterogeneous parties, one slightly more conservative than the other. And we have a system of government at various levels and branches and all of that conspires to make one person's vote seem less instrumental than in parliamentary democracies where one essentially votes their convictions and the results of the election are translated into the type of government policies mandated by the people.

The more serious problem we face is not why our base was so low, but why we have been declining since then by 20% or more nationally and more than 25% outside the South. That occurred while we have arguably made all the procedural problems dealing with base level participation easier. In 1963, President Kennedy, for reasons of principle — he thought participation rates were too low; and for reasons of politics — he looked at the demography of non-voters (poorer, less educated, more minority, younger and more southern) and said, “Hey, these people might be Democrats,” created a Commission on Voter Participation. It reported shortly after his untimely death and recommended the abolition of the poll tax, literacy tests, the enfranchisement of blacks, shortening the gap between the close of registration and elections so that last-minute interest could be translated into votes, the creation of voter outreach programs,

bi-lingual ballots, mail registration, among others. There were 18 recommendations, 17 of which were adopted in whole or in part and still voter turnout went down. Subsequently, we have had major change to ease registration and voting — the Motor Voter registration bill, election day registration in six states, no excuse absentee voting, early voting, Oregon mail voting and turnout has gone down.

In 1980, a friend of mine named Raymond Wolfinger and a non-friend of mine named Steven Rosenstone wrote a book called *Who Votes*. Using census data, they tried to identify the groups that voted most and there were essentially four: 1) People who were more educated 2) People who were older 3) People who were more residentially stable and 4) people who were married. Well, since 1960, two times as many people have gone to college and graduated and voter turnout has gone down. Our population has been aging since 1969 and voter turnout has gone down. Our mobility rates with the exception of 3 years in the 1980s are lower than they were in the 1960s and voter turnout has gone down. Only in the area of marriage does theory correlate with fact: we are marrying less, marrying later, more of us are living single, more raising kids single, more living in other combinations, some which are sanctioned or not sanctioned by law. I hesitate to say that marriage is the cure for non-voting. I also don't recommend George Bush as a cure for non-voting.

Our elections have also gotten more competitive. The elections that people vote for most are president, governor, Senate, and occasionally mayor, and in the 1960s they were decided in the South by a one-party, whites-only

primary. Those types of elections are now potentially competitive in every area of the country, except where I live, the District of Columbia, and perhaps Utah, and still, voter turnout has gone down. So if the structural factors of American democracy have remained relatively the same, our procedures have improved and should have favored higher turnout, and the higher competition should have favored high turnout as well, then it is clear that the core of non-voting lies in declining motivation.

Very little until recently has been written about the motivational factors with respect to voting. But we do have two clues. The first clue is a pair of books. In 1992, Ruy Teixeira wrote a book called *The Vanishing American Voter*. 1992 was the first year of significant voting increases and as such his book sale suffered accordingly. In 1987, he wrote a book called *Why Americans Don't Vote*, which should not be confused with another book of the same name that was written in the same year, about which I am correctly quoted in the *San Francisco Chronicle* as saying it wasn't soft enough for its appropriate use. Teixeira's book is a good book, because it tried to identify the changes in voter polling responses for the entire electorate. He identified three things: 1) a decline in voter perceptions of the efficacy of their vote 2) a decline in allegiance or strong allegiance to either major political party and 3) a decline in newspaper reading as the primary source of information about public affairs.

The second clue comes from polling data of non-voters. What you find in the polling data is a generational divide around the age of 50. Those non-voters who are over 50 tend not to vote due to some sort of alienation, higher than other

non-voters and higher than the rest of the population. People below 50 gave a portrait of indifference higher than those older than them and higher than the rest of the population. Those people over 50 grew up before the age of TV, when we had strong political parties and felt good about government, when we had civility in our dialogue, and they are now unhappy with the directions things have taken since. The other group grew up at a time when the quality of education, particularly in urban America declined, because people like me, wanting the best education for my individual child, took my child to the suburbs or private schools eroding the base for urban education. And the quality of education declined in California, where the effect of proposition 13 which limited taxation for education, was to turn one of the country's best educational systems into one of the worst. They grew up at a time of declining civic education in the schools. They grew up in a time when school no longer studied, debated and tested on current events. They grew up at a time when commitment to the mediating and training institutions for the young – student government, student newspapers, Hillel, Wesley, Newman club – weakened. They grew up in a time when we abandoned the draft and male civic obligations. They are now growing up in households in which a majority of their parents don't vote, a large majority don't discuss politics and a large minority are civically illiterate.

They grew up in a time when there were significant value shifts. One is generational. My parents generation were either immigrants and or suffered during the Depression or both and their values were to ensure that their children didn't suffer the same privations that they did. And my generation, which grew

up in relative security after World War II and into the 60s, translated those parental values into making life better for future generations. The later baby boom generation, generation x, generation y and whatever the current generation is called is into making their own lives better, which is not conducive to participation. Since 1972, politicians have used the bully pulpit to demagogue against government. As Tom DeLay says, "Government is bad and business is good," and that's not conducive to participation in government. The third value change is kind of the shift towards libertarian and consumerist values, which undermines civic engagement values.

So for the young in our society, their indifference is honestly bought. They're not getting a political socialization in the home, the school, the curriculum, the co-curriculum or the values ethos. And then they face the same politics that we face, a post-Cold War government without central national goals, subject to the centrifugal force of interests, a politics in which our major integrating institutions, the churches, political parties, and unions, have all grown weaker.

Teixeira talks about people's strong allegiance to political parties. Parties used to have grass roots precinct organizations all over the country and they formerly separated the wheat from the chaff of interest group advocacy to coherent choice for the public. Now those parties only serve essentially as fundraisers for the dispensing of consulting services and the targeting of campaigns. And our parties are misaligned. The Republican Party is way to the

right of the American center and the Democratic Party doesn't have a durable message. People face right-wingism vs. mush.

I think political efficacy started to decline with "I am not going to send American boys to do what Asian boys should do" and continued with "I am not a crook," "I did not know anything about Iran-Contra," "Read my lips, no new taxes," "I did not have sexual relations with that woman," and "We are in imminent danger of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq." We have a lower level of trust in our leaders than, perhaps, at any time in our history. The efficacy question is also a question of responsiveness. The biggest issue was of course Vietnam, which the public turned against in 1968, and finally ended in 1974 with an additional 30,000 American lives lost and the destruction of the promise of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and precipitated the largest year to year decline in voting in the last 60 years.

We also don't have what I call anticipatory government. We are great at responding to crisis. But, I don't know anyone who was in a 20-minute traffic jam 10 years ago going to work who isn't in 30-minute traffic jam now and it doesn't matter who gets elected. That's because we don't have the mechanisms for government to plan out across disciplines for the long range. People feel a decline in the effectiveness of their vote.

Teixeira wrote about the decline in newspaper reading. I happen to believe that is due to TV and its offspring. I think the most important positive technological development for participation in the last 50 years was the birth control pill. It allowed women some control over their bodies and they can now

participate in economic and political life in ways they couldn't before. I think the least felicitous development is the coaxial cable. They like to talk about how it brings the world community into your living room, but its most profound effect is it brings you into your living room. It atomizes our society, which makes people spectators and consumers and wastes an enormous amount of time. If *TV Guide* is to be believed the average American watches TV 7 hours a day. If he or she works 8 hours, sleeps 8 hours, and eats and commutes 1-½ hours, that's 24-½ hours, which leaves no time for participation and involvement. Then there is cable and satellite television which gives you such good things as CSPAN or CNN. But it also gives you more than 200 self-selecting channels, ninety percent of which you can watch all day, every day without any intersection with politics and public affairs and fragments our information base. To which you add the Internet with millions of self-selecting websites of which politics is the first choice of only a few and further fragments our shared knowledge. We've had a decline in television's commitment to political coverage. Networks devoted only three hours of convention coverage for each convention. Fully 82 percent of network broadcast outlets failed to cover any debates for governor, Senator and U.S. House in the 2002 election. Political coverage, both locally and nationally, is at its lowest level ever (although that was temporarily reversed by the highly emotive election of 2004). Presidents can no longer if they want to, except in times of war, hold prime-time news conferences because the networks won't grant them the time.

You have the way we conduct our campaign — in thirty-second attack ads which for one to two hours a day on every major broadcast outlet tell you how awful each candidate is and subliminally or directly tell people not to vote for X or Y, and in the end drive people from the polls.

I could go on, but I'm going to end with three last things. First, while it has been fashionable in some quarters to blame citizens for their lack of participation during this period of significant voter decline. But during this period of decline there have been elections with record high turnouts, including a likely high turnout this time. When all the first African-Americans ran for senator or governor or mayor we had a record turnout. When Jane Byrne beat Michael Bilandic in a referendum on the first Daley machine and snow removal in Chicago, we had a record turnout. When David Duke and Ollie North ran, we had a record high turnout. When the genteel but highly respected Sanford and Broyhill competed for the Senate in North Carolina, we had a record high turnout. People will come out and vote when they feel there is something important to be decided or if they feel our political system can be counted on to deliver and that sense of importance has been eroding. Second, voting is a religious act. I have actually participated in an election that was decided by one vote. A friend of mine ran for delegate in Virginia and after three recounts he won by one vote. But the majority of elections are not decided by one vote, so on some rational level, your vote does not count. But people have wanted to vote to participate in a Rousseauian general will to give assent or withdraw assent from an individual, an issue or a national direction. And it is precisely that religion of civic responsibility

that has been eroded by all the things I have talked about. Third, there is no quick fix. We either address the major issues or have a continuing decline in civic engagement. In closing, the problem we face is large, the remedies are large, and about both, we should not think small.