

## Section I: Introduction

*Democracy should be a celebration of an involved public. Democracy requires an active citizenry because it is through discussion, popular interest, and involvement in politics that societal goals should be defined and carried out. Without public involvement in the process, democracy lacks both its legitimacy and its guiding force.<sup>1</sup>*

The past several decades have witnessed a general decline in voter turnout throughout the world, and, while there is little agreement as to what specifically constitutes a good level of turnout, recent declines in many countries have raised concern among governments, electoral management bodies (EMBs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and citizens. It is widely acknowledged that global voter turnout has dropped slowly but consistently in recent years.

Figure 1 plots average voter turnout, as a percentage of registered voters, in each year from 1945 to 30 June 2006. This figure uses data from elections in the 214 countries and territories in the IDEA database, and includes both parliamentary and presidential elections. It takes no account of the circumstances of individual elections. It includes all regions of the world. The figure therefore contains a certain amount of fluctuation from year to year because of

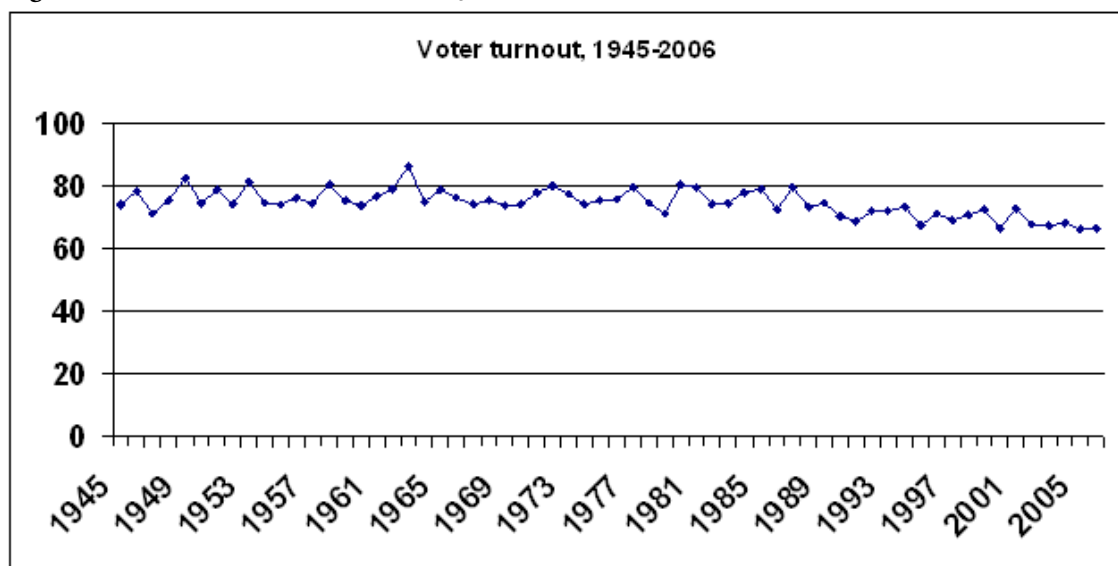
the particular elections included in that year's total. Nevertheless, it provides a good illustration of the situation of declining turnout which has occasioned many of the programmes described in this book.

Elections in the years prior to the late 1980s show an average turnout which generally fluctuates in the mid-to-higher 70 per cent range. From 1945 to 1960, the average turnout was 76.4 per cent. This increased slightly in the period 1961–75, to 77.1 per cent, but then declined somewhat, to 74.8 per cent, in the period 1976–90. Then, from 1990 to 2006, the average turnout declined substantially, to 69.7 per cent. In the decade to 2006, it was less than 69 per cent. Furthermore, the standard deviation in these numbers has also declined, from over 3 per cent in the earlier time periods to about 2.5 per cent now. These numbers show not only that the overall world turnout rate has declined, but that country turnout rates are now more uniform, with less variation between the highs and the lows.

This book will examine some of the efforts made throughout the world to stem and/or reverse the decline in voter turnout, and to encourage turnout at electoral events of all types, including elections, referendums and citizens' initiatives.

All electoral events involve many factors operating

**Figure 1. Voter Turnout Worldwide, 1945–June 2006**



1945	74.4	1956	76.3	1967	74.2	1978	74.7	1989	74.8	2000	66.7
1946	78.5	1957	74.9	1968	75.5	1979	71.3	1990	70.3	2001	73.2
1947	71.2	1958	80.7	1969	73.8	1980	80.4	1991	68.9	2002	67.9
1948	75.6	1959	75.6	1970	74.3	1981	79.7	1992	72.0	2003	67.5
1949	82.8	1960	73.7	1971	78.0	1982	74.2	1993	72.2	2004	68.4
1950	74.6	1961	76.8	1972	80.1	1983	74.7	1994	73.6	2005	66.3
1951	79.1	1962	79.2	1973	77.5	1984	78.0	1995	67.3	2006	66.5
1952	74.4	1963	86.5	1974	74.1	1985	79.2	1996	71.4		
1953	81.2	1964	74.9	1975	75.7	1986	72.8	1997	69.0		
1954	74.6	1965	79.0	1976	76.0	1987	79.6	1998	70.9		
1955	74.1	1966	76.3	1977	79.8	1988	73.4	1999	72.7		

Figures are percentages of registered electors who cast a vote.

at different levels, which have varying effects on voter turnout. Some factors are not easy to change, as they would require alterations to a country's institutional framework or electoral laws or are even the result of massive social transformation. Other elements, however, are more malleable, and it is at this practical level that this book presents a selection of ideas used throughout the world that may work to encourage voter turnout in suitable contexts.

## The Structure of This Book

This introductory section addresses some of the theoretical and practical concerns associated with declining political participation in general, with a focus on voting in particular. Next, in order to categorize the activities of a variety of governmental organizations and NGOs working to maximize voter turnout, section II of this book presents a broad framework. Six basic forms of activity are identified:

1. information campaigns that address the question of how to register (if applicable) and vote;
2. advertising campaigns that address why electors should participate;
3. grass-roots movements to mobilize citizens;
4. school/mock elections and other special purpose educational programmes;
5. entertainment; and
6. inducements designed to make voting more enticing.

Section III presents case studies for each of these types of activity drawn from the inventory of involved or-

ganizations (see annex B), which has been compiled from various international sources. It is clear that there has been some successful transplanting of ideas and approaches from country to country and even continent to continent. Section IV presents some preliminary conclusions and recommendations that may be drawn from this compilation.

## 1. Theories of Democracy

Democracy, as a theoretical concept, has long been the subject of deliberation, debate and dreams. The way in which democracy is defined speaks not only of the nature of government, elections and power, but also of the nature of society, community and humanity. In the political philosophy of more recent centuries, the concept of democracy has evolved through many incarnations. It has been used as the basis for a utopian society, a means to protect citizens from government, a tool for the advancement of human development, a form of free-market politics, and a way to ensure stability in a pluralist society. Democratic theory has envisioned humankind as a project, as consumers, and as a danger to peace and good order. Ongoing theoretical thought and the efforts of various democratizing groups continue to keep the long-standing questions of the very nature of democracy and politics at the forefront of the debate.

Viewed strictly as a tool or mechanism, representative democracy is defined only as a system of government in which people vote in order to select those who will determine policy and act as their political leaders. The act of voting provides all citizens with a direct interest in the actions of their government, an opportunity to participate and also to inform themselves and others. The results of the vote give those elected the entitlement to govern—or to oppose and oversee those who govern—until the next election, and the responsibility to decide political issues on

the behalf of their constituents. Voting becomes the key form of interaction between those elected and the ordinary citizens, it provides the fundamental foundation for the operation of the rest of the democratic system, and it provides great symbolic value. If voting turnout declines, the primary link between the citizen and the system is diminished, government actions are less likely to correspond with the desires of the citizens, and, on a larger scale, the legitimacy of the democratic system may be undermined.

Some theorists, however, contend that this common form of late-20th century democracy has emerged as something of a paradox—universal suffrage ensuring political equality within a system of society that emphasizes individual rights and an economy that retains very real inequalities of class, opportunity and affluence.<sup>2</sup> This form of democracy, they contend, is the very cause of the crisis exposed by widespread voter alienation and falling voter turnout.

Some writers and some participants in democracy-building processes contend that, rather than just being an instrument of control or influence, politics must be viewed as a way of living and social decision making. Democracy thus becomes a moral concept—a way of life. Political participation also needs to be expressive, allowing a citizen to feel a part of the process. In this view, democratic participation is conceived of as a vehicle to build both citizenship and community. Substantial citizen participation in government decision making—or rather a form of direct democracy—is necessary in order to achieve a more equitable and humane society.<sup>3</sup>

Despite their differences, all theories of democracy maintain a place for voting as a fundamental component. Elections remain the primary basis of public influence within representative democracy, provide a form of collective decision making as to who manages the affairs of government and who oversees them doing so, and provide some degree of popular control over elected politicians. Referendums and citizens' initiatives enable direct involvement in popular decision making, with both advantages and disadvantages, and depend on the participation of citizens through voting as elections do. As a form of political participation, voting generally remains the easiest and the one that most commonly engages majorities of citizens.<sup>4</sup> Given this, the reasons why people appear to be increasingly willing to abstain from voting remain far from totally explained. Many potential factors have been put forward as partial explanations.

## 2. Why Voter Turnout Varies

Over time, there has been much deliberation as to why people do or do not vote. Various factors have emerged which scholars and theorists have shown to affect levels of voter turnout throughout the world. Here, these factors will be briefly considered under the categories of contextual and systemic considerations, and individual and social factors, both of which appear to contribute to turnout levels.<sup>5</sup>

### 2a. Contextual and Systemic Factors

As voter turnout varies, not only from country to country but also from one election to the next, **contextual and systemic considerations** are instrumental in determining political participation, particularly as they can affect the way an electoral event is viewed by the voters.

The context at national level can vary, sometimes greatly, from one election to the next. **Contextual** factors combine to make participation in an electoral event more or less attractive. Examples of such factors include:

- *perceptions of the effectiveness of political competition*—the degree to which citizens believe that different election outcomes lead to significant differences in the direction and impact of government;
- *the competitiveness and salience of the electoral event* at both national and local levels: if the electoral contest is believed to be close, voters may view the event as having greater importance, while the expected margin of victory may partially determine the perceived weight of a vote and may also factor into the electorate's expectations of governmental responsiveness;
- *the nature of the party system*. The degree of fragmentation may provide more varied options for the voters—although strong fragmentation may have the reverse effect, with voters confused or unclear as to the effect that their vote may have;
- *campaign spending*, which may raise the profile of an election and lead to a wider distribution of political information;
- *voting traditions in different communities*. The emergence of 'safe' seats may depress voter turnout, or specific communities may be a particularly profitable target for various interest groups or political parties;
- *strategic voting*. Voters may be more willing to

turn out to prevent an undesired outcome;

- *length of time between elections.* When elections are held with great frequency, it has generally been found that voter turnout suffers, although there are many theories as to why this is so;
- *weather* may be a more important factor in some climates than others; extreme weather conditions may work to hamper turnout levels; and
- *the nature of the electoral event itself.* Turnout in referendums and citizens' initiative voting is usually lower than it is in national elections, but there are exceptions (such as the Norwegian referendum on membership of the European Union or the Quebec sovereignty referendums) where this is not the case. Elections other than national elections, such as European Parliament elections or municipal elections, often see lower turnouts—as do elections to the legislature in presidential systems where they do not synchronize with presidential elections.

**Systemic** or institutional elements are generally more stable and often require considerable legislative and administrative effort to change. Many of these factors can be viewed best in terms of facilitation, or as things that make participation more or less troublesome. Examples of systemic considerations are:

- *electoral system choice.* Almost all electoral systems can generally be categorized as plurality/majority, proportional representation (PR), or mixed systems. It has been found that the more responsive the electoral system is in representing the choices made by the electorate, the higher voter turnout will be. Turnout in PR systems is often higher than in plurality/majority systems;
- *voter registration as a state or individual responsibility;*
- *compulsory versus voluntary voting.* Cross-national studies have generally found that countries with institutionalized compulsory voting experience high turnout, as long as the compulsion is backed by effective sanctions for non-voting;
- *single versus multiple polling days;*
- *elections taking place on a workday or a rest day,* the argument being that holding elections on holidays or weekends makes participation more convenient. Studies have reached differing conclu-

sions as to whether this is true in practice;

- *the availability of alternative voting procedures* (advance voting, proxy voting, postal voting etc.) allows voters who may be unable to participate on election day still to cast a ballot;
- *physical access to the polls.* If access is difficult, some would-be voters may be deterred from participating; and
- *the use of new technologies,* such as electronic voting, to complement conventional processes; some assessments of pilot projects, however, indicate that these may be more effective in providing more convenient channels for regular voters than in engaging new voters.

Neither of these lists should be considered comprehensive for all voting environments. Many of these factors may be well beyond the immediate reach of electoral administrators or government agencies, and still further from that of citizen groups and civil society organizations. Such factors fall outside the realm of this book: the impact of electoral context and law, for example, is discussed in *Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook*.<sup>6</sup>

## **2b. Individual and Social Factors**

In terms of **individual characteristics**, **age** is the most important factor, and is found to have the most substantial relationship to turnout. Recent studies have consistently shown that the younger members of a voting population are less likely to vote. Age is often used as a measure of social connectedness based on the idea that as a person ages he or she gains more experience, becomes more rooted, and recognizes more of what is at stake in the future of his or her community and country. This is discussed further in part 3 of this introduction below. Marital status, residential mobility, and religious involvement are other variables often used to measure social connectedness whereby those who are married, are less apt to move frequently, and observe a religious lifestyle are also more likely to vote.

The other consistently important **social-demographic variable** in predicting turnout is **education**, although the extent of its impact tends to vary from country to country, and establishing equivalent measures across education systems in different countries can be difficult. A positive relationship generally exists in much of the world: those with higher levels of education tend to be more likely to vote. It is of-

ten pointed out that those who are better educated may have the resources, opportunities and means to participate in politics which those with less education lack. It should be noted, however, that this relationship does not hold everywhere. Some research has shown that the effect is the opposite, that higher levels of education are linked to a lower likelihood to vote (e.g. in India), and high levels of education are not necessarily linked with high turnout levels (witness Switzerland and the United States). Other dynamics may thus be at work, with the relationship between education and voting not being one of cause and effect.<sup>7</sup> Despite these exceptions, it should be noted that literacy has been found to be an important factor in transitional democracies.<sup>8</sup> Other factors frequently associated with education are income, occupation and social class.

Other common social–demographic variables relating to voter turnout have been considered in studies throughout the world. They include gender, regionalism, urban/rural divisions, and the impact of immigration and immigrant communities. Some of these factors produce opposite effects in different countries, and others are simply not applicable in certain national contexts. Some may involve other, wider societal issues at a given time in a given place. Changes in some factors may take many years for their full impact to be felt: countries where women gained the vote earlier tend to have higher turnout than those that made this reform more recently.<sup>9</sup>

In general, social–demographic characteristics may be considered in order to seek out kinds of people who are less likely to vote and may need encouragement. This is certainly a common practice, as the inventory of active vote-maximizing groups (annex B) shows. However, the impact of social–demographic factors on their own in explaining voter turnout and political behaviour is generally moderate, except for age. Other factors must also be considered.

**Attitudinal factors**, which may have psychological and sociological foundations, predispose the individual to participate or not. They include **political interest**, political knowledge, and commitment to politics, all of which can be clearly linked. Simply stated, the more interested a person is in politics, the more likely it is that he or she will participate, whether by gathering knowledge, by voting and/or by taking part in other political activities. This relationship also tends to be reciprocal in that the more one participates, the more interested in politics one will be. It may be that a particular election or political event demands an individual's attention, or that a person

will vote simply in order to express his or her beliefs or loyalties. In this respect, political systems where strong party loyalties are widespread may possess a cushion against turnout decline that is not found in systems where citizens are less attached to parties and are therefore more inclined to judge the parties anew at each election.<sup>10</sup>

Political sophistication, as a form of intelligence or understanding, however, should not be considered as something entirely inborn. A voter needs to use a combination of means (capacity), motive (incentives) and opportunity (availability of information), relying both on his or her own capabilities and on the contextual structure, to become informed and be involved. This may not happen if **clear, plentiful information of good quality** is not available. If the available information is too sparse, is unclear, or comes at too high a price, potential voters may decide that the cost is too high and that voting is simply too great an effort.<sup>11</sup>

**Political efficacy** is another key determinant in voter participation. A sense of efficacy is developed when an individual feels well-informed enough about politics to believe that they can influence the make-up or activities of decision-making bodies. If an election appears to be meaningless or irrelevant, or an individual feels powerless or ineffectual in his or her interactions with the political system, the sense of political efficacy declines and abstention from voting is more likely. In its stronger forms, this can lead to political apathy and alienation.

As individuals do not exist in a social vacuum, social context is also a factor. Involvement in **social networks**, group activities, political organizations or parties can also promote political activity such as voting, and provide cues to individuals as to how, why and when to vote (and perhaps who to vote for). More fundamentally, social organization builds community and its accompanying norms of reciprocity, trust and cooperation among its members. The expectation is that individuals will make decisions considering the needs of the collectivity and not simply their own self-interest. A process of **socialization** of new members of a society, especially young people, thus takes place, and it is in this context that ideas of social capital,<sup>12</sup> collective action and civic duty emerge. Social pressure can work to encourage political participation in activities such as voting so that an individual can be held in high esteem by his or her peers, and wider conceptions of **civic duty** may further result in participation becoming a moral obligation apart from any cost–benefit analysis. Civic duty

arguments care not for whom an individual votes, but only that he or she casts a ballot. The idea of civic duty is deeply ingrained, present among certain groups and in certain countries more than others, but nonetheless a widespread phenomenon throughout the world.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. *The Issue of Young Voters*

While concerns over lower levels of turnout among younger people are not new, the degree of non-participation is becoming increasingly troubling. In countries, particularly developing countries, where young people form a substantial percentage of the overall population and poor youth voter turnout has a pronounced impact on overall turnout figures, non-participation by this demographic group may become an even greater threat to democratic legitimacy.

There are several generally accepted explanations for low voter turnout among young people. One is that life-cycle demands require young people to establish themselves and stabilize their education, occupation and relationships before time and motivation can be dedicated to political participation. As these elements stabilize, politics becomes more relevant to life. It is assumed here that a gradual cultural process of political socialization develops over a lifetime. The explanation may, however, relate rather to social embeddedness or lack of anonymity. Franklin contends that young people who reach voting age at a time when they are newly away from the parental home face great challenges in learning the voting process, and are therefore less likely to make the effort. Conversely, those who are known to and are part of a community of voters (e.g. family members in the same household or living in the place where they grew up) are more likely to have an appropriate support group to provide information and advice, which makes learning to vote a less costly and more beneficial process. It is the lack of anonymity that demands a very good excuse not to vote.<sup>14</sup>

Other explanations attribute low youth voter turnout to more immediate factors. Some claim that political parties and leaders fail to attend to, or even address, the concerns of young people—that there is a lack of representation. Others argue that there is a lack of information—that political concerns are not being adequately communicated to young people, leaving young potential voters unaware or misinformed; or, on a more practical level, that navigating the very process of casting a ballot is not being adequately taught. In his work on socializing young Australian voters, Print cites research showing that

civic education programmes in schools—and informal elements, in particular student government elections—can make a difference in the formation of the civic values and participation of students. He goes on to suggest that schools may well provide the best opportunity to teach balanced, non-partisan democratic values, but they need to go beyond the formal curriculum to make civic and political engagement meaningful to young people and thus produce adults who see voting as a consequential activity.<sup>15</sup>

Still other explanations put low turnout among young voters down to general feelings of apathy similar to those afflicting other segments of the population. All these explanations suggest that many young people perceive that the political system fails to attend to their needs and interests, or that the system itself has failed to integrate new voters or to provide them with opportunities to participate. Some researchers do suggest, however, that low youth voter participation actually has less to do with lack of interest than with young people's perceptions regarding the importance of the activity of voting. Zovatto finds that Latin American young people report the highest levels in society of interest in politics, but are more inclined to express their views through 'street democracy' (such as demonstrations) than through the formal political process.<sup>16</sup> The question this raises is whether or not today's young street activists in Latin America will become the voters of ten or 15 years' time.

The limits to the information available mean that it is often difficult or even not yet possible to give rigorous answers to questions of this kind, especially when they relate to newer democracies. EMBs and others may find it helpful to consider what data may assist such research while determining their policies for collection and availability of data.

Where such data do exist, their implications may not be encouraging. For example, the UK Electoral Commission's 2006 study 'An Audit of Political Engagement 3' shows that those in younger age groups and those groups deemed to be socially excluded tend to be the least politically engaged.<sup>17</sup> There is growing evidence that younger age groups are losing or never gaining the habit of voting, and are carrying their lack of interest through into later life. Young people are also the least politically knowledgeable; and those who are already politically involved are for the most part the same people who vote. It would be comforting to believe that those who do not vote participate in other, more directly active, ways, but at least in the United Kingdom this does not appear to be true. The

question is thus how to engage the disaffected and alienated young.

It is not always easy to know in which direction the causal relationships lie. Do young people cite a lack of interest because they lack the necessary information to participate? If attitudes can be changed, will behaviour follow? Alternatively, can behavioural conditioning promote more positive attitudes towards political participation? In any case, apprehension regarding low youth voter turnout levels may be well founded, particularly if it holds true that political participation is a habitual and self-sustaining activity.

It has indeed been suggested that the first three elections for which a voter is qualified are of defining importance, and that if voting does not become a routine event early in a person's life, the potential for that individual to participate consistently may be lost. This in turn suggests that voter turnout will remain relatively stable from one election to the next in the context of a particular country, with variation occurring as a result of the turnout levels of new voters.<sup>18</sup> Some voter mobilization studies have found further evidence to support the idea of voting as habit-forming in that the effects of mobilization seem to endure through subsequent elections.<sup>19</sup>

#### **4. Practical Concerns for Government**

While consideration of local context and culture is always essential, all democratic countries, whether established or establishing, need to ensure the health of their political system and the engagement of their citizens. This may require attempts to reverse recent declines in political participation and the growing scepticism about politicians and political institutions in general. Alternatively, concern may lie more with the fundamental task of educating a population on how elections and voting operate in a democratic forum.

Beyond the immediate preoccupation with democracy as a means of selecting a government and the fundamental exercise of creating credible and legitimate government within a country, there are also other practical motivations that justify debate and action aimed at increased voter participation. For example, the learning of voting behaviour can be seen as part of the process of integrating young people into society at large. The issue of political participation may also merge into other, wider societal concerns such as gender equality, economic change and multiculturalism, allowing representation of various groups and policies. Finally, democracy and its basis of a voting citizenry serve the highly symbolic func-

tion of presenting a face of legitimacy to the rest of the world.

What practical action can governments take? Changes in the contextual and systemic factors affecting elections are likely to have important and lasting effects. Amendments to institutional frameworks are rarely easy, however, especially as changes designed to bring more competitive elections may run directly counter to the natural inclination of existing elected members who may prefer systems which make it easier for them to keep their jobs.

As this introduction shows, there are many areas in which further knowledge is needed and further research is desirable to inform policy debate and recommendations. For example, the targeting of civic education programmes may need to be reconsidered. Considerable resources are being devoted in this area worldwide, some probably much more cost-effectively than others. Closer links between the global electoral community and the global educational community could lead to more detailed analysis of these issues, from which important messages for policy change may emerge.

However, governments and EMBs, citizens' groups, NGOs and other interested groups are not powerless pending institutional framework change or the creation of new knowledge and new tools. Each may take initiatives to encourage turnout which can be relatively easily implemented in the short term and which are likely to be less controversial than deep systemic change. There are limitations to the outcomes of such initiatives, which should not be viewed as cure-all solutions for low or falling turnout or as an alternative to the debate of systemic reforms. They do, however, have the potential to make a positive, if sometimes modest, contribution to turnout levels. The examples, case studies and suggestions in the remainder of this book are intended to contribute to facilitating and increasing engagement in the electoral process, and are presented in order to share ideas and approaches which may assist or inspire governments and other stakeholders seeking to take practical action to contribute to addressing turnout issues.

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