Where Have All the Voters Gone?
A Discussion Guide

Many Americans express frustration and concern about poor and decreasing voter turnout rates in local and national elections. Discussion about why citizens aren't voting tends to focus on voter attitudes toward politicians and politics, and on the implications of a disengaged voting populace for the future of our democracy.
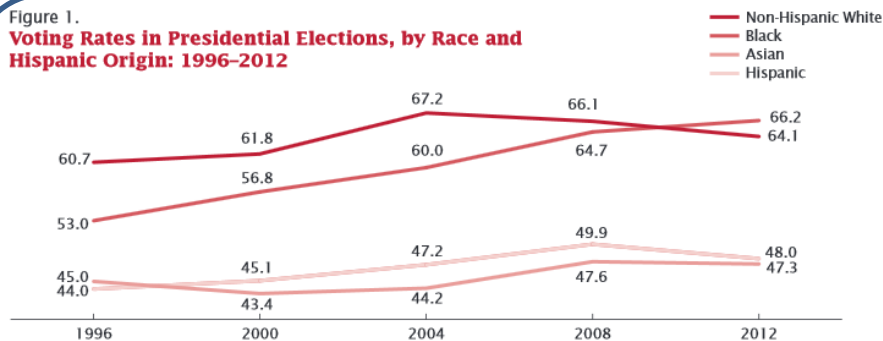
Given these concerns:

> *What, if anything, should be done to increase voter participation?*

> *What are the key elements of a "healthy democracy"?*

Consider the following:

Figure 1.
Voting Rates in Presidential Elections, by Race and Hispanic Origin: 1996–2012

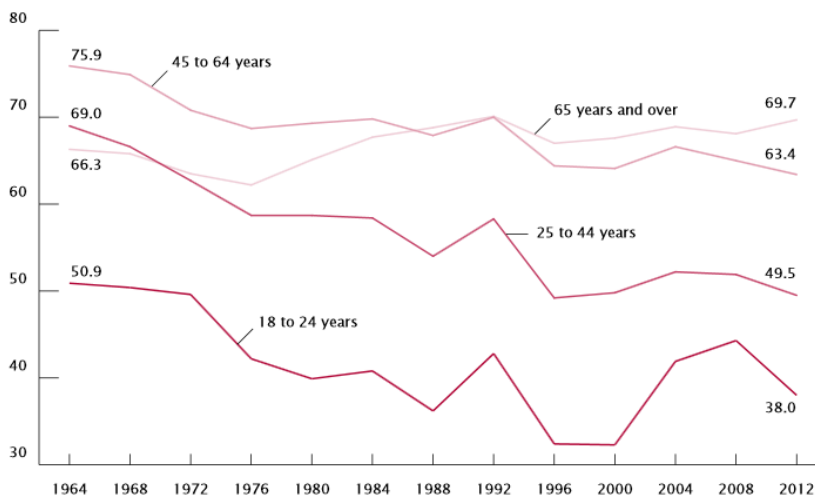Legend: Non-Hispanic White, Black, Asian, Hispanic

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2013. "The Diversifying Electorate – Voting Rates by Race and Hispanic Origin in 2012."

- Voting rates of Black, Asian, and Hispanic minorities are typically much lower than (Non-Hispanic) White voters.

- Asian and Hispanic voters have the lowest voter turnout rates.

Voting Rates Over Time for the Voting-Age Population: 1964–2012
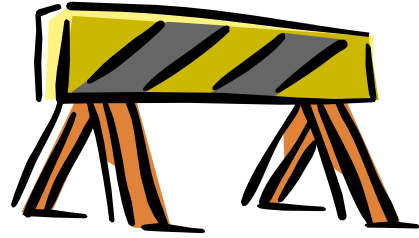(In percent)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2013. "Young-Adult Voting: An Analysis of Presidential Elections, 1964–2012."

- Voters in the 18-24 age range have much lower turnout rates *than any other age group.*

- Voters in the 45-64 and **65 years and over** age groups have the highest voter turnout rates of any other age group.

- Voting rates for *all* age groups have declined since the early 1960's.

APPROACH 1:

Eliminate the Barriers

Proponents of this approach say that the act of voting has become too complicated and poses obstacles and barriers that can prove challenging for some voters to overcome. They suggest changes to the voting and elections system to make it easier and more convenient for voters to participate in elections.

Some Examples & Suggestions:

- Repeal laws requiring burdensome voter ID and proof of citizenship requirements that make it difficult for many students, the poor, elderly, and rural voters to register and vote.
- Implement and promote the use of alternatives to voting at the polls, including voting by mail, online or phone-based voting or use of other technologies to allow voters to participate from home or work.
- Hold elections on Saturdays, or make the Election Day a national holiday.
- Allow for same-day voter registration, so that eligible citizens can register and participate on the day of an election.

Concerns, Trade-offs & Consequences:

- Online voting and other voting alternatives may pose serious threats to the security of the ballot and the integrity of the voting process.
- Holding the election on a holiday or on a weekend will detract from the seriousness of the election, and may lead people to take vacations or go on trips as opposed to voting.
- Voter fraud protection laws (including new requirements for voter ID and proof of citizenship) were passed to ensure the integrity of our elections. We need these laws to prevent tampering with our election outcomes.

Notes / Questions:

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APPROACH 2: Increase Election Issue Awareness

Some research suggests that a major factor contributing to low voter turnout is a lack of awareness or familiarity with the candidates, positions, or ballot measures that will be voted on in a given election. Critics point out a declining emphasis on civics education in public schools as a cause for this trend. Others point to a vicious cycle for voters in communities that vote in low numbers: Candidates and campaigns focus efforts on communities that vote in high numbers. So minorities and poor voters, for example, get less information about elections, which leads to low turnout.

Some Examples & Suggestions:

- Increase and improve civic instruction in public schools.
- Increase outreach efforts to educate voters about election issues and races.
- Increase nonpartisan coverage of election information in the news media, not limited to just the "hot races" or the most controversial issues.

Concerns, Trade-offs & Consequences:

- Schools and teachers are already over-burdened with existing curriculum priorities. It is not realistic to expect them to integrate a new area of focus without re-shifting priorities and providing significant new resources.
- Who should be made responsible (and can be trusted) to conduct objective and non-persuasive voter outreach? Who should provide the resources and funding to do this?
- Whose interpretation of election issues and races will be used to conduct "objective" informational campaigns?
- Serious voters should take it upon themselves to use existing, official sources of election information to inform themselves about elections, and should not need to have the information "spoon fed" to them.

Notes / Questions:

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APPROACH 3:
Reform the Election Process

Many voters and non-voters alike express concern and frustration about problems with the election and voting process. Some are concerned about security and accuracy issues relating to voter fraud and vote tabulation ("Will my vote even be counted?"), while others worry about the role and influence that the political party system, lobbyists and political campaigns have, and about the fairness and transparency of the election process.

Some Examples & Suggestions:

- Encourage moderate and independent voter participation and mitigate the influence of the political party system with measures such as 1) including a "None of the Above" (NOTA) candidate option on the ballot (if enough voters vote NOTA, the election has to be started over again); 2) ranked candidate selection (voters choose their #1 pick, their #2 pick, etc.); and other system changes to avoid having only the most extremely partisan candidates on the ballot.
- Expand the use and availability of publicly-financed candidate campaigns nationwide, in order to limit the influence of lobbyists and special interests.
- Implement independent redistricting commissions so that legislators cannot "pick their voters" and ensure that legislative and congressional districts are fair and competitive.

Concerns, Trade-offs & Consequences:

- Not everyone agrees that publicly-financed campaigns are a legitimate use of public funds, or that they are effective at removing the influence of lobbyists and special interests.
- Tampering with the election system could have dire outcomes for the validity and credibility of election results, may further confuse voters, and may cause more problems than they solve.

Notes / Questions:

APPROACH 4: "If it Ain't Broke, Don't Fix it"

Some policy leaders argue that it is not necessary or even ideal for *all* citizens to participate in every election. They say that voters will participate in elections that have particular interest for them, and will perhaps endure the consequences for not voting, and that that is the nature of democracy.

Some Examples & Suggestions:

- Many non-voters are not sufficiently well-informed to be making important election decisions and therefore should *not* participate in elections.
- Low voter turnout rates reflect a relatively content voting base, one that has confidence in the election system and the elected officials and decisions that it produces.
- Most voters won't vote consistently, but instead will vote in a more "ad-hoc" fashion in response to election issues that are particularly relevant to them. That's preferable to voting for the sake of voting, but without giving much thought or preparation beforehand.
- Voting tends to increase with age, signifying that more experienced and informed citizens are participating in elections compared to those who are less knowledgeable about the issues. This should lead to better outcomes than if everyone was simply pressured to vote.

Concerns, Trade-offs & Consequences:

- This approach ignores the lingering effects of historic efforts to deny the vote to specific groups within our society, specifically ethnic minorities and women.
- Low voter turnout rates reflect a complete loss of faith in the integrity of the election system and in elected officials. This signifies an alarming threat to the future of our democratic system of government.

Notes / Questions:

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CLOSING REFLECTION:

Personal reflection and action:

- How has your thinking about what should or should not be done with regard to this issue changed over the course of this forum?

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- What can individuals do about the issues raised in this discussion? What individual action are you prepared to take?

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- What else can or should be done about these concerns?

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Sharing your thoughts with others:

If you had a chance to address a group of non-voting citizens, what would you tell them?