

**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE  
AND  
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

**POSC 105  
THE AMERICAN ELECTORAL SYSTEM**

I. THIS MORNING:

- A. Campaigns and elections
  - 1. Why voting turnout has decreased during the last 100 years.
- B. Hamilton and Jefferson-type explanations
- C. “Taking on the Kennedy’s”

II. THE DECLINE IN TURNOUT:

- A. Turnout in **presidential** and **off-year** elections has declined during the last 100 years.
  - 1. In 1996 less than half of the eligible electorate bothered to show up at the polls.
- B. What are the reasons?
  - 1. Individual characteristics: interest, knowledge, concern, civic-mindedness, ability to “pay the costs of participation” (i.e., social-economic standing).
    - a. But a question remains, why are so many Americans apparently disinterested?
  - 2. Structural factors:
    - a. General proposition: political institutions and practices keep the “cost of participation” too high for many citizens.
    - b. What are these institutions and practices that discourage voting?
      - \* Mass media and “quality” information.
      - \* Registration laws
      - \* Campaign practices:
        - Strategy of ambiguity
        - Lack of specificity
        - Negative ads and personal attacks
        - Nature of television advertisement
      - \* Structure of elections
      - \* Decline of political party grass roots organizations.
      - \* Growing size and complexity of government.

III. REGISTRATION AND TURNOUT:

- A. As noted in a previous class, citizens in most states must **register** in order to vote. But specific registration requirements vary from state to state. Some make the process easier than others.
- B. Proposition: turnout is related to registration requirements: the “easier,” the higher the turnout; the harder, the lower, other things being equal.

- C. The politics of **motor voter** legislation.
- IV. MODERN CAMPAIGN PRACTICES AND TURNOUT:
- A. Major proposition: despite their growing technical sophistication, modern campaign techniques actually discourage interest and participation in electoral politics.
  - B. The film, “Taking on the Kennedy’s,” illustrates this and many, many other points about American electoral politics..
    - 1. The setting: election for congress in the first district of Rhode Island
    - 2. Protagonists (candidates):
      - a. Dr Kevin Vigilante, Republican
      - b. Patrick Kennedy, Democrat
        - \* Son of Edward Kennedy, Senator from Massachusetts and brother of John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy.
        - \* Supporters, among others, Caroline Kennedy, daughter of John Kennedy
    - 3. A campaign’s blood supply: money
    - 4. Its voice: the media
    - 5. Its content: judge for yourself.
    - 6. The bottom line: after viewing this race, which I argue represents a typical American campaign, can you understand why politics might not be interesting to lots of Americans?
- V. NEXT TIME:
- A. The Electoral system: primary and general elections.
  - B. More on election campaign structures and practices.
    - 1. Essays under “Elections and Voting” on the web site.

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