

**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
AND
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

Posc 105

VOTING AND ELECTIONS

- I. THIS MORNING:
 - A. Film on the media and politics
 - B. Voting and elections
- II. THE MEDIA AS WATCHDOGS:
 - A. A reassuring image: freedom of the press and American journalism, acting as watchdogs, preserve liberty by keeping close tabs on power holders.
 - 1. An excellent example: film and book "All the President's Men."
 - B. Film today questions this reassuring image.
- III. ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRACY - SOME BASICS:
 - A. Elections are the mainspring of "democracy by accountability."
 - 1. Instruments for holding representatives accountable
 - 2. Educational and motivational functions.
 - B. Elections American style:
 - 1. Number of separate choices
 - a. Sheer number of offices to be filled can be overwhelming
 - 2. Selection of candidates: the nomination process
 - a. Conventions and caucuses versus primaries
 - 3. General elections
 - a. Presidential and "off year" elections
 - C. Recall a major effect of the constitution: the creation of independent power centers.
 - 1. Members of the White House, House, and Senate are elected separately.
 - 2. Geographical representation
- IV. DISSATISFACTION WITH THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM:
 - A. Three general concerns
 - 1. The turnout conundrum: participation in **presidential** and **off-year** elections has declined during the last 100 years despite improvements in communications and transportation and rising level of education.
 - a. In 1996 less than half of the eligible electorate bothered to show up at the polls.
 - b. In 1998 it was less than 40 percent.
 - c. See the graph at: <http://www.state.wv.us/sec/Info/stats/turnout.htm>

2. Lack of voter interest and knowledge.
3. Election practices leave nearly everyone unhappy.

V. EXPLAINING THE DECLINE IN TURNOUT:

- A. First what are the reasons for the decline?
 1. Individual characteristics (the “Hamilton school”): interest, knowledge, concern, civic-mindedness, ability to “pay the costs of participation” (i.e., social-economic standing).
 2. Structural factors (the “Jefferson school”): general proposition: political institutions and practices keep the “cost of participation” too high for many citizens.
 - a. What are these institutions and practices that discourage voting?
 - (1) Mass media and “quality” information.
 - (2) Registration laws
 - (3) Campaign practices
 - (4) Structure of elections
 - (5) Decline of political party grass roots organizations.
 - (6) Growing size and complexity of government.

VI. REGISTRATION AND TURNOUT:

- A. In order to vote citizens in most states must **register**. But specific registration requirements vary from state to state. Some make it easier to register 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.

VII. MODERN CAMPAIGN PRACTICES AND TURNOUT:

- A. Major proposition: despite their growing technical sophistication, modern campaign techniques actually discourage interest and participation.

VIII. NEXT TIME:

- A. Voting and elections
 1. Campaign practices discussed and illustrated with films.
- B. Reading:
 1. Patterson, *We the People*, Chapter 7.
 - a. Read and understand the material on voter turnout, pages 203 to 215.
 - (1) How does turnout in this country compare with that in others?
 - (2) How is turnout related to social class?
 - (3) In what parts of the country is turnout lowest?