Introduction

The Vote and Democracy

Voting is the bedrock upon which democracy rests. Through the vote citizens convey information about their needs and preferences, they make important decisions about whom to elect, and they hold leaders accountable for their actions by either voting or not voting to return them to office. Democracy is unworkable and unthinkable without the vote (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 1961, Lijphart 1997, Piven and Cloward 1988, Verba et al. 1995).

Despite the centrality of the vote for democracy, we know that large numbers of citizens stay away from the polls.[1] In America, voter participation at every level of government is low and at every level except presidential elections is getting lower.Often the majority of citizens do not vote when given the opportunity. At best, slightly over half of all eligible voters vote in national contests.[2] The numbers are even worse for statewide primaries where turnout can hover around one-third of eligible voters. But nowhere is the problem worse than at the local level. Turnout in municipal elections around the country

[1] Many claim that this nonvoting is quite rational (Downs 1957). Citizens, according to this view, understand that their single vote will almost certainly not change the outcome of the contest. The fact that nonvoting may be rational on an individual level does not, however, mean that it does not lead to substantial harm to certain groups in society. The rationality of nonvoting also does not mean that the rate of nonvoting cannot be manipulated by reform to democratic institutions. These two possibilities are the subject of this book.

[2] In midterm congressional elections the figure usually falls to under half of all eligible voters.

averages half that of national elections (Morlan 1984), and local voter turnout often falls below one-quarter of the voting-age population (Bridges 1997, Hampton and Tate 1996). Moreover, trends over time suggest that voter turnout in local elections is declining (Karnig and Walter 1993, Verba et al. 1995).

What is most striking about nonvoting is that it does not occur evenly across the population. Those who do turn out to vote look very different from those who do not. Study after study of the American electorate has found that individuals with ample resources vote much more regularly than those with few resources – the poor, racial and ethnic minorities, the less educated (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, Verba et al. 1972, 1995). Often the skew is severe. In the 2004 presidential contest, for example, white adults were twice as likely to report voting as Asian American and Latino adults (U.S. Census Bureau 2005).[3] Educational differences are even starker. Those with advanced degrees are especially apt to vote (77 percent). By contrast, those with less than a high school diploma report voting only 30 percent of the time (U.S. Census Bureau 2005). A similar story can be told for income, occupation, or almost any measure of status. Those who are disadvantaged are much less likely to be involved in the electoral process than those who are privileged.

The skewed nature of the vote has raised widespread concern about how well the interests of different groups are served in democracy

[3] In this book, "white" refers to persons who identify as white and not Hispanic. The terms *Hispanic* and *Latino* are used interchangeably, as are the terms *African American* and *black*, reflecting the way they are listed in the 2000 Census questionnaire. While the following pages liberally refer to blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans, and whites as racial or ethnic "groups," I readily admit that these categories are problematic. There is little doubt that the population of each of these groups is diverse and that none of these groups is wholly unified in the political arena. There is, in fact, considerable doubt as to whether Latinos and Asian Americans should be grouped by these global pan-ethnic categories. Given divergent experiences related to national origin group, time of immigration, legal status, socioeconomic standing, and a range of other factors, identity as Latino or Asian American can and often is overshadowed by other identities (de la Garza 1992, Lien 2001). Future research would certainly benefit from more refined categorization that takes into account divisions within these larger pan-ethnic groups. Nevertheless, as we will see in Chapter 3, the empirical record suggests that each of these racial and ethnic groups acts cohesively enough in the local political arena to warrant being analyzed as a group. The interpretations that are presented here should, however, be read with the complexity of actual group experiences and opinions in mind.

(Cassel 1986, Guinier 1994, Verba et al. 1995). The fear is that individuals and groups who do not participate in the voting process will be overlooked and their concerns ignored (Bennett and Resnick 1990, Griffin and Newman 2005, Martin 2003, Piven and Cloward 1988). As V.O. Key noted decades ago, "The blunt truth is that politicians and officials are under no compulsion to pay much heed to classes and groups of citizens that do not vote" (1949:99). Or as Walter Dean Burnham put it, "The old saw remains profoundly true: if you don't vote, you don't count" (1987:99). If these fears are true, policies will be biased, outcomes will be unfair, and in the end American democracy will represent the interests of the privileged few more than the concerns of the masses (Mills 1956, Schattschneider 1970).

But are these fears founded? Conventional wisdom suggests that increases in turnout would fundamentally change the outcome of democracy. Just about everyone actively involved in politics acts as if turnout is critical. Before most elections, candidates invest precious campaign resources to get out the vote and in speeches regularly implore their supporters to turn out. Former President Bill Clinton, for example, in an effort to aid a fellow Democrat, urged on a crowd by exhorting, "It will all turn now on who comes and who stays home. If half of you stay home, we'll be out of business Wednesday morning" (Libit 2002). Before his election in 2002, Bill McBride, Democratic nominee for governor of Florida echoed that view, "If we have a big turnout, I'll win" (quoted in Canedy 2002). In the 2008 presidential election, the Democrats invested heavily in a turnout machine that they hoped would ultimately win them the election.

In the days before a contest, the media also regularly cites turnout as critical. Examples from the highest office to the lowest office abound. "Voter turnout will be critical in this election" was the headline in the last presidential election.[4] "Win May Hinge on Turnout" was the sentiment expressed by pollsters in the last Los Angeles mayoral race (Finnegan 2005). After any close contest, commentators are likely to conclude that "turnout emerged as a decisive factor in [the] elections" (Bumiller and Nagourney 2002).[5] This was certainly the case in the

[4] Headline from a story in the *Midland Reporter-Telegram* on November 2.

[5] Likewise, Karl Rove, President Bush's top advisor, claimed that "strong turnout of churchgoers" was the key to the president's reelection (Rother 2004).

2000 and 2004 presidential contests but it is common for elections of any size.[6]

Finally, there is an almost iron-clad belief among party leaders and politicians that if a greater range of citizens turned out to vote, electoral results would favor the Democratic Party. This notion has been central to decades of efforts by the Democratic Party to make the vote more accessible and has motivated Republicans to oppose most such changes. Efforts by the two parties to pass and prevent implementation of motor voter legislation in the 1990s represent just one of the more recent examples. The presumption is also that if everyone voted or even if different demographic groups turned out at the same rate, racial and ethnic minorities and members of other disadvantaged groups would benefit disproportionately. Latinos and Asian Americans have, in particular, been singled out as being affected by low turnout (Pyle et al. 1998). One prominent report outlined the logic for Latinos: "Low registration leads to low turnout [which] leads to modest political clout at the polls. A practical consequence is the low numbers of Hispanics elected" (Yoachum 1987:3).

Because of these beliefs, millions of dollars and thousands of hours of campaign resources are expended mobilizing voters of one kind or another. Get out the vote drives are not the most expensive component of the typical campaign but they are often an important part of candidate and party strategies. In the 2004 presidential election, for example, the two parties lined up 2.2 million volunteers to try to increase participation on election day (Nichols 2004). The existence of groups like the Southwest Voter Registration and Education Project, which has registered more than 2.2 million Hispanic voters, is premised in large part on the notion that turnout matters. Ultimately, just about everyone involved in American politics acts as if turnout is important.[7]

Empirical studies of turnout by political scientists have, however, found limited support for this conventional wisdom.[8] The preponderance of evidence, at least in the American case, suggests that skewed

[6] "GOP's Ground Game Wins It" is just one of the examples from the last presidential election (Hull 2004).

[7] One famous and oft-cited example of the power of turnout is the purported ability of senior citizens to use high participation rates to secure a range of social welfare provisions for the elderly (Campbell 2003).

[8] There are some important exceptions to this general conclusion that I detail below. For example, see Hill and Leighley (1992), Griffin and Newman (2008), Fellowes and Rowe (2004).

electorate does not lead to biased outcomes. This conclusion rests largely on two different tests.[9]

First, when the political preferences of nonvoters are compared to the preferences of voters, the gap is generally small (e.g., Bennett and Resnick 1990, Erickson 1995, Gant and Lyons 1993, Highton 2004, Norrander 1989, Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). The range of empirical studies on this question is so uniform in their findings that Ellcessor and Leighley are able to state: "one of the least contested conclusions in the study of political behavior is that voters' political attitudes and policy positions are fairly representative of non-voters" (2001:127).[10] In other words, voters and nonvoters may look very different but they do not think all that differently.[11]

Second, and perhaps more important, when political scientists try to determine what would happen if everyone voted or if voting across different social groups was even, they tend to find that expanded turnout would make little systematic difference. There is little evidence to suggest that increasing or decreasing turnout would change who wins and loses in American politics. Although some studies have found that increasing turnout might alter the margin of victory slightly in some contests, the findings are often highly variable and the effects are never large (Citrin et al. 2003, De Nardo 1980, Erickson 1995, Nagel and McNulty 1996, Shields and Goidel 1997). There is even a prolonged debate over which party would benefit from expanded turnout. Roughly half of the studies find gains for Democrats while the other half suggests that Republicans would be the real beneficiaries

[9] A third, smaller set of studies attempts to see whether the policy views of particular groups who vote regularly are more closely correlated with the policy records of incumbents than the policy views of other groups who vote less regularly. The results here are more mixed. Bartels (2008) suggests that voter turnout does not enhance the influence of different groups on incumbent behavior but Griffin and Newman (2005, 2008) find that senators' roll call votes more closely reflect voters' preferences than nonvoters' preferences. Similarly, Verba and Nie (1972) find a closer link between public attitudes and local elite views in communities with higher turnout (their findings are replicated by Hill and Matsubayashi 2005).

[10] Even those who lament the distortion created by the unrepresentativeness of nonvoting forms of political participation nevertheless tend to conclude that "Voters are relatively representative of the public" (Verba et al. 1995:512).

[11] More recent work that disaggregates preferences down to the state level or lower does, however, find more significant opinion differences between voters and nonvoters (Citrin et al. 2003, Griffin and Newman 2008). This work suggests that we should be less concerned about the skew at the national level and more focused on bias at the local level.

(De Nardo 1980, Nagel and McNulty 1996, Petrocik 1987, Tucker and Vedlitz 1986). Most important, the elections examined would rarely have ended with a different victor. "Simply put," say Highton and Wolfinger, "outcomes would not change if everyone voted" (2001:179).

If these studies are correct, then politicians, the media, and the Democratic and Republican parties are unnecessarily worried about turnout and its effects. If it is true that higher turnout does not translate into different electoral outcomes, then American democracy is functioning reasonably well and the status quo is quite acceptable.

Turnout Does Matter

In this book, I challenge the basic conclusion of the existing literature. I offer an alternative account that not only explains why existing studies have failed to find turnout effects but also reveals where the effects are likely to be the greatest. I then look at a large set of elections where theory tells us to expect turnout to have consequences. Using these cases I demonstrate that turnout can have dramatic consequences in the United States.

The argument is straightforward. I maintain that the reasons existing studies have largely found that turnout does not matter is because they have been narrowly focused on the national electorate and a handful of presidential and congressional elections. I contend that national elections are the last place we are likely to observe skewed results due to uneven turnout. There are two reasons to think that national elections are more representative, and thus, that focusing on national elections reduces the possibility of finding bias.

First, simple logic dictates that the *possible* extent of any skew produced by uneven turnout decreases as overall turnout levels increase. As detailed in Tingsten's (1937) "law of dispersion," the chances of skew are inversely proportional to overall electoral participation. If almost everybody turns out, there can be very little skew. If, however, only a small fraction of the population turns out, the distortion can be severe. Thus, if we are interested in revealing just how much turnout matters, we should not confine our research to national elections where turnout is relatively high. Bias could certainly exist at the

national level, where only about half of all eligible voters turn out, but it could be that much worse at the local level where turnout averages half or less than half that of national elections (Hajnal, Lewis, and Louch 2002, Karnig and Walter 1983).

Second, by looking at the national electorate as a whole researchers ignore substantial variation in group size across geographic boundaries and almost necessarily diminish the role that small minority groups can play. In national contests, only a few very large groups can have a significant effect on the outcome of the vote. Asian Americans, for example, are the third largest racial and ethnic minority group but they make up only 5 percent of the total national population. Whether they vote is almost immaterial to the outcome of national contests.

The same is not true for smaller geographic localities. Because people are distributed unevenly across geographic boundaries, groups that are small minorities and largely insignificant at the national level can be major players within the many states, districts, or cities in which they are concentrated. This kind of geographic segregation is especially pronounced for race and ethnicity. African Americans, for example, make up about a third of the population in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago and almost two-thirds of the population in New Orleans and Atlanta even though the national population is only about 12 percent black. In fact, segregation by race and ethnicity is the rule rather than the exception. The average Latino lives in a city that is 39 percent Hispanic, the average African American in a city that is 35 percent black, and the average Asian American in a city that is 7 percent Asian American, even though nationwide the population is only 14 percent Latino, 12 percent African American, and 5 percent Asian American.[12] Since minorities make up a substantial proportion of the electorate where they live, their voting (or nonvoting) is likely to have a much bigger effect at the local level. If we are concerned about the effects of a bias in the electorate we need to look not just at the national electorate as a whole but at a series of smaller political units where the effect of different groups could be more easily observed. Only by examining each of these smaller units separately will we begin to get a

[12] These figures are derived from the American Citizen Participation Study, a recent nationwide survey, and the 2000 Census.

second, perhaps more revealing look at the effects of uneven turnout on voting outcomes.[13]

Although there are strong reasons to suspect that turnout is critical at the local level, there is, to date, little empirical evidence addressing this possibility. A number of studies briefly report on participation rates for different racial, ethnic, and demographic groups in local elections but there appears to be no research that looks at the *consequences* of a skewed electorate systematically across cities (Leighley 2001, Verba et al. 1995). We do not know, therefore, whether turnout matters in the numerous elections that occur at the local level.

In the following chapters I seek to answer this question. A series of different tests that focus on who wins the most critical local offices and how local governments spend their money demonstrate that turnout has wide-ranging consequences in American politics. The analysis reveals that low and uneven turnout, a factor at play in most American cities, leads to less than optimal outcomes for racial and ethnic minorities. The tests indicate that low turnout results in losses in mayoral elections, less equitable racial and ethnic representation on city councils, and spending policies that are less in line with the preferences of racial and ethnic minorities and other disadvantaged groups.

Fortunately, there are solutions. In the penultimate chapter of the book, I consider different avenues through which we might expand voter turnout. Although a range of different reforms have been proposed, I focus on changes in local electoral structures. Since these institutions are easier to alter than individual socioeconomic status, individual attitudes, or patterns of mobilization, the three other main factors driving turnout, they represent the most viable and potentially the most effective target for reform. The analysis suggests that small changes to the local electoral structure – moving the timing of local elections to coincide with statewide or national elections, for example – could dramatically expand local voter turnout. These changes would by no means ensure even turnout across groups and they would not be able to expand turnout beyond the already low rates evident in

[13] Another concern with local elections is that they often get less critical scrutiny than national or state elections. This means that there may be more room for electoral discrimination against minorities at the local level. This phenomenon has been highlighted in a number of Voting Rights Act cases against different localities (Davidson and Grofman 1994).

national elections but they nevertheless could boost local turnout rates enough to substantially affect local electoral outcomes.

This represents an important addition to existing national level studies. Although presidential and congressional elections get much of our attention, local politics represents a key component of American democracy. More votes are cast in the multitude of local elections than in national contests and more elected officials emerge from local contests. Even more important, policy decisions at the local level affect citizens in profound and immediate ways (Judd and Swanstrom 1994, Pellissero and Krebs 2003). Local governments control basic services like public safety, education, and water and make critical decisions about land use and development. Moreover, in an era of policy devolution, more and more policies are both initiated and implemented at the local level (Sellers 2001). Social welfare decisions, for example, are increasingly designed and executed at the local level. All of this results in massive spending locally with the nation's municipalities spending over a trillion dollars annually (U.S. Census Bureau 2003). In a political arena that touches more and more regularly on the lives of residents, it matters who wins elections and how those winners spend the public's money.[14]

Finally, it is likely that inequities present in today's local political arenas are harbingers of what is yet to come in national political contests. By the mid-century, the Census predicts that white Americans will no longer represent the majority of the nation's population. As immigration continues and America becomes more diverse, racial and ethnic minorities will be large enough to influence national contests. If minorities continue to vote less regularly than whites, their impact will be diminished at the national level as well.

A Book about Race

This is a book about turnout but it is also very much a book about race and the representation of racial and ethnic minorities in American

[14] Moreover, it is not just local elections where this could matter. A similar story could be told for other elections where turnout drops and minorities make up a larger share of the population. A range of statewide contests and state legislative elections, for example, could fit these conditions. In short, we cannot and should not judge American democracy on national elections alone.

democracy. In assessing the effects of voter turnout, I will focus on the political well-being of racial and ethnic minorities and will ask one simple question: are minorities losing out because they vote less often than whites?

Most studies concerned with the implications of uneven turnout have focused on whether differences in turnout affect partisan outcomes (e.g., Citrin et al. 2003, DeNardo 1980, Tucker and Vedlitz 1986, but see Griffin and Newman 2008). There are, however, important normative, theoretical, and practical reasons to shift the focus to race and ethnicity. To begin with, we might want to focus on racial and ethnic minorities because these groups often do not fare well in America society. On most basic indicators of well-being there are substantial gaps between the status of the minority population and the status of the white community. Blacks and Latinos, in particular, are much more likely than whites to end up near the bottom of America's racial hierarchy. Members of the black and Latino communities are three times more likely than whites to be poor (Blank 2001). Blacks and Latinos are also three times more likely than whites to be unemployed (Blank 2001). On basic indicators of educational achievement, wealth and earnings, health, criminal victimization, and a host of other important measures, African Americans and Latinos lag far behind the majority white population (Smelser et al. 2001). Even the Asian American population, who for the most part fare well on many of these basic measures, contains several national origin groups that fall well below national averages on key indicators of welfare. If we are concerned about the well-being of any group in American democracy, we probably should be concerned about the well-being of racial and ethnic minorities.

Moreover, there are reasons to suspect that ongoing racial inequality stems in part from public policy. By most measures, the United States spends less on direct aid to the poor and disadvantaged than most other countries. As a percentage of median income, the size of public transfers to the poor is lower in the United States than in almost all other Western industrialized nations (Smeeding et al. 2001). The United States is also the only advanced Western nation that does not have either a family allowance or universal health insurance. The United States has tried to address racial inequality by instituting a series of antidiscrimination laws and by enacting a range of affirmative action