POLITICAL APATHY IN THE UNITED STATES COMPARED TO OTHER WESTERN DEMOCRACIES

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The United States of America has considerably high political apathy with voter turnout of around 53% of registered and eligible voters.¹ This is not just a feature of modern western democracies in general as the United States is an outlier with considerably high apathy compared to similar democracies. The democracies that are being examined- Canada, Austria, Belgium, France, U.K., Germany, Australia, Italy, and Sweden- are chosen for the similarity in culture and democratic practice. Switzerland is excluded in the comparison because like the United States it is an outlier with high political apathy.² Most other comparable western democracies have dramatically higher voter turnout percentages; the state with the highest voter turnout is Belgium at 89%.³

The phenomena of the United States unusually high political apathy has been occurring for over half a century. Data from 1971-1980 shows that all the western democracies in question had at least 10% higher voter turnout than the United States.⁴ Plato and Herodotus argued that the nature of democracy itself encouraged apathy meaning that the differences in political apathy between the United States and other democracies could be attributed the differences in the way the state modifies, limits, and expands democracy.⁵ In fact, “the ancients

⁴ Jackman. “Political Institutions and Voter Turnout”.
conceived of political apathy as a peculiarly democratic phenomenon that was likely to flourish in tandem with the expansion of egalitarian institutional structures and moral ideas.” The United States is an anomaly because it continuously has higher levels of political apathy than similar western democracies. This occurs because of a mixture of political institutional and cultural factors that separate the U.S. from other states, with the institutional factors seeming to carry more weight and have more effect on apathy levels.

There’re arguments that the way voter turnout manipulates the levels of political apathy. Voter turnout percentages are measured out of voter age citizens and not out of citizens who are eligible to vote.⁶ As an article from the Pew Research Center explains, “Since many hard-to-measure factors can affect eligibility (citizenship, imprisonment, residency rules and other legal barriers), in practice turnout calculations usually are based on the estimated voting-age population.”⁷ This means measures of political apathy can be skewed because the United States may have a high amount of ineligible voter age citizens.

_Cultural Explanations_

The first possibility is that subtle variances in culture cause the United States’ difference in political apathy compared to other democracies. One factor that has shown to not affect political apathy is political attitude. The United States has comparatively low levels of government trust. While this is different than most other democracies, Italy had even lower

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⁷ DeSilver. “US voter turnout trails.”
ratings of government trust and still had a significantly lower level of political apathy proving that political attitude doesn’t translate into levels of political apathy.⁸

Degree of variation in overall ideology may contribute to degrees of political apathy. The United States is unique in that an overwhelming majority share liberal ideology unlike most western democracies in which liberal ideology is only one of many. This makes elections seem very low stakes compared to other democracies and this is less compelling for citizens to go out and vote because they are not as concerned.

There are many other factors that researchers have found have at least some degree of effect on levels of political apathy. Higher political apathy occurs when elections lack choices that make voters choices meaningful.⁹ This could be attributed to the point earlier about the lack of variation in degree of ideology in the United States and the traditional domination of the political system by two parties. Another factor could be voter cynicism and disillusionment concerning the political system, partially due to the fact that political results don’t usually directly meet voters needs or it takes too long for them to do so.¹⁰ This may happen in America more than other democracies because of its political structure. Researchers found that, “social

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restraints, feelings of futility, and the absence of spurs to action all tended to inhibit participation in the democratic process.”

Current events affecting a state can encourage or discourage political discourse and activism which can lead to lower or higher levels of political apathy. For example, McCarthyism in the 1950’s discouraged political discourse and therefore lowered the degree of activism and ideological competition which could have led to higher voter turnout and may have effected voter attitudes toward the political system.

The rise of specific social issues and events that cause concern to citizens can affect citizens political engagement. Issues that concern or catch the interest of more citizens or events like war will create more political activism and lead to higher voter turnout. Specific generations have also shown to have higher or lower levels of political apathy, although age in general isn’t a reliable indicator of political apathy, with levels of political apathy steadily rising from the “Cold Warriors” generation to generation Y. Perhaps this is because of cultural changes throughout generations or the attitudes of generations based on current events.

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12 Rosenberg. “Determinants of Political Apathy”.
Political discourse is also avoided among citizens because its controversial nature can cause friction in interpersonal relationships.\textsuperscript{14} The absence of political discourse and awareness naturally leads to higher levels of political apathy.

Also, the role of media in the United States plays an important role in political apathy.\textsuperscript{15} For example, many political analysts attribute much of quasi-independent presidential candidate Donald Trump’s unlikely success to the media. Trump received over 23 million dollars in free media coverage in 2015 alone.\textsuperscript{16} Many of his supporters are citizens who are at other times not usually involved in politics or turn out to elections and political attitudes along with Trump’s media coverage have led to his success.

The media also influences political attitudes and opinions about politics often concentrating on negative aspects of politicians or government that may increase the feelings of cynicism and disillusionment. There may also be connections in the amount of coverage of politics and voter turnout in particular elections. Greater coverage of political events, scandals, issues and candidates can increase the amount of political discourse about them. This leads citizens to become more politically engaged the more they are aware.

\textsuperscript{14} Rosenberg. “Determinants of Political Apathy”.

Sociodemographic factors also play a role in political apathy. Levels of higher education and socioeconomic status result in lower levels of political apathy. Therefore, it could be concluded that the United States possibly has a larger percentage of citizens without higher education and with lower socioeconomic status. However, studies show that in western democracies apart from the United States sociodemographic factors are becoming less relevant to voter turnout.\textsuperscript{17} This may be because they have less of a history in voting restrictions or perhaps a more diverse and democratically accepting culture.

\textit{Institutional Factors}

The other explanation for the United States unusually high apathy is institutional factors. There are several institutional factors that increase political apathy. Among them are voting restrictions. Voting restrictions existed in the United States historically as poll taxes, education tests, and gender restrictions. Poll taxes and education tests in the past may still have lingering affects explaining why sociodemographic trends such as education and socioeconomic status effect political apathy in the United States today and also why sociodemographic factors have less of an effect on political apathy levels in other western democracies. Voting restrictions still exist today in the United States in the form of residency requirements which requires citizens to be a resident of a state for a period of time before being able to register to vote.\textsuperscript{18}


\textsuperscript{18} Jackman. "Political Institutions and Voter Turnout".
Another factor increasing political apathy is disproportionality voting. In winner take all systems, political power is not distributed proportionally according to numbers of votes and support for candidates. This discourages supporters of minority candidates and parties from voting, increasing political apathy. Also this limits the potential for independent candidates to gain any footing in the political system.

Many factors of the electoral system can cause voters to feel discouraged about voting such as registration rules, the electoral college, party primary rules, and the way seats and delegates are awarded. Many can see the voting system as distorted because of its winner take all nature, and the way party loyalty controls a lot of the election procedures.

This is also true in America where the domination of two major parties discourages the formation of third parties or independent candidates. Support for independent candidates is minimal because of the domination of the two parties and the party domination is supported by the winner takes all voting system. However, in most other western democracies there is some form of proportionality to representation which encourages supporters of minority candidates and parties to vote. Seats in districts are proportionally handed out to give each party a certain amount of power based on their support.

Another factor is periodicity and frequency of elections. Having many separate and frequent elections leads to voter fatigue which creates political apathy, while having less frequent, encompassing elections is easier for voters. Also having long stretches of time

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19 Jackman. “Political Institutions and Voter Turnout”. 7
between elections discourages political activism because it takes too long for voters to take political action about occurrences that displease them.²⁰

Some institutional factors discourage political apathy including the structure of government. Unicameral governments discourage political apathy because they are more effective.²¹ As mentioned earlier about cultural factors, disillusionment and cynicism is fostered by ineffectiveness in government. This is prevalent in the United States which has a bicameral legislature. The bicameral legislature is much slower and does not support quick political change. The legislature is also often gridlocked and progress is further slowed by the partisan, deeply divide two party system.

American political attitude toward the legislature is very negative, with citizens often feeling that little to nothing gets down within congress or the house. This leads to high levels of political apathy especially during purely congressional elections. Many members of legislature prevail for many terms because of this high level of political apathy, leading to the legislature to continue to change very little often staying in gridlock. The legislature is often deeply divided because of party loyalties which in recent years have led to governmental failures in the legislature such as the government shutdown.

This leads to the political system becoming stale, and ineffective. When little political change occurs citizens become more and more dissatisfied and it often seems like their participation in the political system is futile. The result of the political system becoming stale is

²⁰ Rosenberg. “Determinants of Political Apathy”.
²¹ Jackman. “Political Institutions and Voter Turnout.”
that citizens start to view the government and the political system with even more cynicism and they focus on the corruption that results in part from politicians long held power in a system where many of their constituents are not politically engaged. This corruption can lead to stigmas that the nature of politicians is that they are corrupt.

Another institutional factor is compulsory voting. Compulsory voting helped create high voter turnout in Australia, Belgium, and Italy. In the 1980’s, Italy got up to 98% voter turnout.\textsuperscript{22} In many states, they may not even be able to fully enforce the penalty for the compulsory voting law but having it in place is still effective.

The United States does not have any compulsory voting laws in place, which may help encourage citizens to vote. Compulsory voting disincentives those who would otherwise not vote creating high voter turnout. Whether this would work in the United States or not is questionable since many compulsory laws like this have been tried in the country before like the mandatory healthcare law which taxes people for not having healthcare. However, voting is less strenuous on citizens than paying for healthcare they otherwise would not get so it is like that compulsory voting would work.

Alternative Explanations

There are a few unique explanations that don’t quite fit either of the two categories that will not be taken into consideration in the conclusive explanation for America’s unique political

\textsuperscript{22} Jackman. ”Political Institutions and Voter Turnout”. 

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apathy but are worth noting and exploring. These explanations deal with the idea of alienation, political equality theory, and some explanations from the field of political psychology.

The first alternative explanation that deviates from the cultural and institutional fields is the concept that political apathy is positively correlated to alienation. Alienation is a state defined by three characteristics. The first is powerlessness, meaning “the growth of alienation implies that the range of choice open to the individual, the area of discretion available to him, is declining,” therefore giving them less power within politics.\(^{23}\) Normlessness is when an individual lives a lifestyle or in a society with a lack of clear norms or conflicting norms. Social isolation occurs when the individual loses contact with social and community groups.\(^{24}\) The combination of these characteristics logically would create conditions for an individual to become politically apathetic. Research so far has shown that correlation coefficients between measures of alienation and political apathy were statistically significant in several instance but the general measurement was so low that the explanation wasn’t proven.\(^{25}\)

Another alternative explanation distinguishes between political theory’s idea of “political equality” and what political scientist Tom DeLuca calls, “real political equality”. DeLuca writes, “Theoretic politicians have erroneously supposed that by reducing mankind to a perfect equality in their political rights, they would, at the same time, be equalized and assimilated in their possessions, their opinions, and their passions.”\(^{26}\) The argument is that “real

\(^{24}\) Dean. “Alienation”.
\(^{25}\) Dean.”Alienation”.
political equality” takes into account the remaining individual differences by requiring equality in availability of political resources, in the setting of political agenda, clarified issues and the development of a public sphere for “genuine democratic politics”. This explanation is a theoretical redefinition of political equality and to be tested would need to be studied and proven would have to be tested in a political system that meets the requirements of DeLuca’s “real political equality” but the characteristics of “real political equality” do coincide with factors that have been proven to affect political apathy such as political discourse and the way political resources are allocated. This introduces the idea that it could be that not only are other western democracies more politically equal than the United States but that they are closer to “real political equality”.

The final two definitions fit into the field of political psychology. One of them is a proposal by psychologist Dr. Geoffry White to make Political Apathy Disorder (PAD) and DSM mental disorder. He argues that individuals who fail to develop a social conscience develop high levels of political apathy as a result and meet all the criteria of having a DSM mental disorder, which are distress, disability, and increased risk of suffering. This concept introduces the explanation that the United States may have higher levels of people suffering from PAD as a psychological mental disorder than other western democracies, such as how some areas of the world have higher levels of depression and other mental disorders among their population.

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27 DeLuca. “Two Faces of Political Apathy”.
However this isn’t a topic that has been studied enough to even be recognized as a true disorder and has no empirical data to back its relativity throughout western societies.

The last alternative explanation deals with the process of political socialization which political scientist and sociologist James Davies argues happens within in the family. The father of a family is a prototypical authority figure and the process of the family is a construct of how a child will see the political system in the future. In America, political socialization is complete at thirteen.29 This idea opens up to the explanation that American families are fundamentally different than families of other western democracies and this has developed into a level of high political apathy in the United States. However, this topic hasn’t been researched enough to have a strong enough backing to be integrated into a conclusive explanation.

These alternative explanations all may prove to be more valuable in the future and will probably be able to be integrated into the conclusive explanation that connects institutional and cultural reasoning. Psychology, theory, and alienation are all factors that can affect and be affected by this reasoning after all. However, for now they are too new or obscure and haven’t been researched, studied or validated.

Conclusion

The most compelling answer to the question of why the United States has such high political apathy is in its political institutions. The setup of its political institutions create the cultural conditions that do effect levels of political apathy. The United States bicameral, two

party system limits its ability to function efficiently and meet its citizen’s needs in a timely and direct manner. This therefore creates disillusionment and cynicism among voters. Voters don’t have enough incentive or disincentive unless there are unusual conditions that compel them to vote. Voters will only act in the case they feel there will be direct effects on their quality of life or the quality of life of those close to them.

Also historical voting restrictions may still be present as a lingering affect shown in socioeconomic status links with voter turnout. Education tests taken at polls may explain why higher educated citizens tend to vote more than those less educated. Also, poll taxes may explain why those with lower socioeconomic status tend to vote less. This may also explain variances in voter turnout among different ethnicities who were subjected to more voter restrictions than others.

While these restrictions are no longer in place, they may have had a lasting impact on voter behavior which would explain why sociodemographic factors are less relevant to voter turnout in other western democracies. The United States still has voter restrictions in the form of residency requirements which adds difficulty for those citizens who move often or are not residents of any particular state. Party system and voter registration laws also may effect voter turnout by as much as 13-14%.30

The lack of degrees of variation in ideology are apparent in the domination of the political system by two parties that share the same liberal ideology. The lack of variation in ideology mean that elections can often seem more low stake than they are in elections in

30 Powell. “Voter Turnout in Comparative Perspective.”
democracies with a wide variety of ideologies. Elections with a wide variety of ideologies often have more high stakes decisions and can mean more drastic changes in the political system. Low stakes elections lead to higher amounts of apathy as well as a lack of competition. Citizens need to feel that election results will meaningfully impact them or else they will not take time to go out and participate in them.

Lack of competition in the United States can be contributed to the domination of the Republican and Democratic parties. There’s been party dealignment among voters and this further discourages them from voting because there is little to no chance of independent candidates or third parties gaining power in the system.

These explanations make clear that institutional factors are at the root of the issue of high political apathy and create the cultural factors that further effect it. This revelation is important because it reveals that in order to increase voter turnout and decrease political apathy in the United States there needs to be a move to change political institutions. Political apathy is dangerous because it leaves an entire state in the hands of a politically affluent few when democracy was designed to be a rule of the many. Those that vote may come to be in a positions of power that is dangerous to democracy. Also, this can result in the political system becoming stale or decisions being made that a majority of the state citizenry will be dissatisfied with that could lead to political conflict.

The optimal conditions to decrease political apathy would be a unicameral legislature, a political system open to more competition beyond the two parties, less registration and voting restrictions, as well as less time between and less frequent elections. These solutions however
in themselves are hard to implement because the alteration of political institutions themselves in a democracy must happen through politicians need to serve their constituency and so changing institutions to create higher voter turnout would require citizens to be more politically engaged in the first place and can only happen in a healthy, effective, and active political system.
Bibliography


