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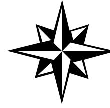
AMERICAN DEMOCRACY AT THE DAWN OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM



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On March 22, 2000, in a speech to the Indian joint session of the parliament, U.S. President William Jefferson Clinton made a point of saluting India's fifty-two years of democracy. It is likely that, by referring to India's two million elected officials in local government and to her disproportionately high voter turnout among the destitute, Clinton intended almost exclusively to make a courtesy gesture toward his host country. Yet the American president's public appreciation of another people's democracy was somehow unconventional for the leader of a nation that has long regarded itself as the one embodiment of democracy worldwide. In particular, Clinton's stress on one of the "very basic lessons" which India "teaches us" – that is, the existence of democracy in a relatively backward society – seemed to take issue with Talcott Parson's thesis, based in part on the case of the United States, that industrial development and democracy come hand in hand (Clinton 2002; Parsons 1967, pp. 514-19).

Indeed, one could easily suggest that Clinton's words reflected the late-twentieth-century reassessment of the effectiveness of American democracy in a global perspective. After the demise of popular democracies as a viable alternative to the American model in the wake of the fall of eastern-European communist regimes, such an attitude has characterized not only traditional critics of U.S.

liberal capitalism like Noam Chomsky or Michael Parenti but also scholars nourished by this latter ideology (Chomsky 1991; Parenti 1995). In the early 1990s, several political scientists asked themselves whether the United States could still provide other countries with a model to establish liberal democracies and promote political pluralism there, too. Their answers were often in the negative (Gurr 1991; Allison and Boschel 1992). Likewise, Francis Fukuyama acknowledged that the successful working of liberal democracy in the United States cannot be necessarily reproduced in other societies. He also suggested that liberal democracy has not been particularly effective at home, too, in the case of African Americans (Fukuyama 1992, pp. 117-18). R.J. Johnson has recently remarked that, throughout the Americas, only Belize and Canada use the U.S. system for electing members of Congress to vote for candidates to their respective national legislatures. More specifically, Kazakstan alone among all the former Communist countries has adopted the U.S. electoral system, in spite of the significant efforts to promote the American model of democracy in Eastern Europe (Johnson 1999, p. 160).

American electoral democracy itself has come under scrutiny, too. For instance, commenting on the fact that the average reelection rate to Congress was above 90 percent in the 1980s, Marjorie Randon Hershey could not refrain herself from observing that “there was a bigger turnover in the old Soviet Politburo” (Hershey 1993, p. 159).

Indeed, if we interpret modern mass democracy as a system in which the power is vested in the people and exercised by them through elections (Dahl 1998, pp. 85, 91-96), it seems that democracy is at least in trouble in turn-of-the-millennium United States. This paper elaborates on this argument by examining the progressive marginalization of most American people from policy making. In particular, it focuses on the steady decline of voter turnout and examines the shift of the decision-making process from the voting booth to spheres outside the electoral arena.

Elmer E. Schattschneider has suggested that "a greatly expanded popular base of political participation is the essential condition for public support of the government." In his opinion, this is the challenge to test the effectiveness of democratic regimes in general and of American democracy in particular (Schattschneider 1960, pp. 112-13).

Yet voter turnout underwent a substantial decline in the United States during most of the twentieth century. In the 1896 presidential contest, 79.7 percent of the eligible electorate went to the polls. This level of political participation has never been reached again. In the subsequent years, the turnout rate steadily fell to a low of 48.9 percent in 1924. Two brief periods of resurgence occurred before and after World War II. First, electoral participation rose from 56.9 percent in 1928 to 62.5 percent in 1940. Then, after dropping to 55.9 percent in 1944, turnout increased from 53.4 percent in 1948 to 65.4 percent in 1960. But the secular downward trend resumed after this latter postwar peak and nonvoting eventually ended up affecting more than half of the eligible population in 1996. In this year, turnout in a presidential race was again as low as 49.0 percent for the first time since 1924. The degree of insulation from the electoral process has been even higher in mid-term contests. Voter participation was 62.0 percent in 1898 but only 36 percent a century later, which meant an additional drop from the 38 percent of 1994. Significantly, 1914 was the last off-year that witnessed a turnout rate above 50 percent (Burnham 1987, p. 113-14; Abramson, Aldrich, and Rhode 1999, pp. 65, 258).

Scholars disagree on the meaning of nonvoting in western democracies. Samuel Martin Lipset has maintained that citizens do not go to the polls whenever they are satisfied with the way the government runs their own country (Lipset 1981, p. 185). Specifically, in Heinz Eulau's opinion, the "politics of happiness" that prevents eligible voters from casting their ballots on election day is a peculiarity of the United States (Eulau 1956). Conversely, other studies have argued that nonvoting results from the decay of democratic regimes. In other words, democracies are based on popular consensus and this later is expressed primarily by people's participation in the political process by

means of the ballot. Therefore, it is distrust in the level of democracy in one's country which makes citizens shun the polls (Pomper 1970, p. 246; Riker and Ordeshook 1973, p. 63; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, p. 7; Teixeira 1992, pp. 101-5).

It seems that one can hardly apply the former interpretation to the case of the United States. Not only did Eulau elaborate his thesis in the mid 1950s, namely during a decade of widespread consensus in American society that, contrary to his view, came hand in hand with an increase in turnout. But nonvoting has usually affected those cohorts of the American eligible electorate that are also the most economically and socially impaired groups in the country and, therefore, the least likely to be happy with the existing policies of the United States. In 1964, for instance, the turnout rate of middle-class and white-collar voters was 83.2 percent as opposed to the 66.1 percent of manual workers and the 56.9 percent of the unemployed. Likewise, in 1976, while 62 percent of the employed eligible population voted, 56 percent of the unemployed stayed home (Burnham 1987, p. 126; Stanley and Niemi 1995, p. 80).

Since the mid 1970s, several states have eased registration requirements and liberalized absentee voting procedures in order to boost electoral participation. Yet even such efforts have generally failed to reverse both the downward trend of American voter turnout and its class bias. Between 1976 and 1988, for instance, nationwide participation dropped from 62 percent to 58 percent among the employed and from 44 percent to 39 percent among the unemployed (Wattenberg 1990, pp. 154-55; Wayne 2000, pp. 307-8; Stanley and Niemi 1995, p. 80).

Data for the last presidential election of the millennium clearly show that nonvoting was disproportionately higher among the more disadvantaged components of the American population. In 1996, turnout was 73.0 percent among citizens who attended college for at least four years, 65.2 percent among Americans in the highest third of their respective family income brackets, 60.7 percent among non-manual workers, 56.0 percent among white people, and 55.2 percent among

individuals employed in a gainful occupation. Instead, the rate of electoral participation was 50.6 percent among African Americans, 39.1 percent among manual laborers, 37.2 percent among the jobless, 29.5 percent among Americans in the lowest third of their respective family income brackets, 28.1 percent among people who had spent less than eight years at school, and 26.7 percent among Hispanics (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1997, p. 288; Martinez 2000, pp. 220-21).

Remarkably, socio-economic factors had the greatest positive effect on electoral mobilization even within this latter cohort of voters. Indeed, a recent survey for the states of California, Florida, and Texas has demonstrated that Latinos with high income were more likely to go the polls than their fellow ethnics with low income in 1996 (Shaw, Garza, and Lee 2000).

Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter have suggested that political knowledge is key to political participation (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, pp. 224-27). Yet survey data are at odds with the stereotypical view of nonvoters as politically uneducated people. Jack C. Dopplet and Ellen Shearer, for instance, have found that about 50 percent of nonvoters watch news broadcasts on television six or seven nights per week and 28 percent read a newspaper with the same frequency. In particular, 53 percent of the largest group of nonvoter, representing 29 percent of the 1,001 individuals reached in their polling, were daily newspaper readers and 58 percent were daily television news viewers. Among these latter, 73 percent tuned in to government and public affairs news (Dopplet and Shearer 1999, pp. 26-28).

Other data corroborate this interpretation. With an average voter participation of 54 percent, the United States ranked thirty-fifth in an analysis of turnout at elections for lower houses in thirty-seven democracies between 1960 and 1995, while participation was above 76 percent in as many as twenty-six countries. Nonetheless American citizens are generally among the most aware and interested people in the world as for other forms of political activities than voting (Franklin 1996; Powell 1986).

In his seminal studies on the transformations of the American party system at the turn of the twentieth century, Walter Dean Burnham has contended that Republican William McKinley's 1896 election to the White House marked the establishment of an industrial-corporate political order that insulated the business elite from the challenge of ordinary people's pressures. In his opinion, the "conversion of a fairly democratic regime into a rather broadly based oligarchy" that let the GOP control the presidency for twenty-eight out of thirty-six years before the Depression of the 1930s caused, among other effects, the initial slump in turnout that has subsequently characterized the United States for most of the twentieth century. As Burnham's argument goes, the awareness that the outcome of the presidential elections was an almost foregone conclusion resulting in the success of the Republican candidate prevented a growing number of eligible voters who did not identified themselves with the platforms of the GOP from casting their ballots. Burnham has also contended that the Democratic candidates' increasing neglect of the claims of the working class and the co-optation of prevailing business interests by the Democratic Party itself helped curb voting participation. This phenomenon occurred as the Democratic Party moved toward the ideological center in the hope of remaining viable at the polls in the aftermath of McKinley's 1896 landslide triumph over William J. Bryan. It is hardly by a chance that the all-time nadir of turnout in U.S. history was reached in 1924, when the Democratic Party slated a corporate lawyer for president, John W. Davis, on the supposition that, as Douglas B. Craig has pointed out, its only chance of recapturing the White House was to look as Republican as possible in the eyes of the participating voters (Burnham 1965; Burnham 1986; Craig 1992).

One can easily suggest that the decline in party competition of the early decades of twentieth century emerged again at the end of the millennium. As in the case of Bryan's 1896 "Cross of Gold" speech, both the devastating defeat of archconservative Barry Goldwater in 1964 in the aftermath of his praise of "extremism in defense of liberty" and the sounding debacle of liberal standard bearer

George McGovern in 1972 demonstrated that radical policies were not viable options to win the White House and forced the two major parties to adopt more moderate stands (Ashby 1987, p. 53; Edwards 1995, p. 275). The Democratic Party had already begun to neglect the concerns of the blue-collar electorate by the mid 1970s in order to enter competition with the GOP for white-collar votes (Shafer 1983, p. 530). This search for middle ground gained momentum especially in the 1980s and 1990s. In those years, the swing middle-class voters who had bolted the Democratic Party and had gone over to the GOP became pivotal to winning elections in the views of most political analysts and consultants. As a result, with few but doomed remarkable exceptions such as Pat Robertson or Patrick J. Buchanan on one side and Jesse Jackson or Tom Harkin on the other, Republican and Democratic presidential candidates sought the support of that specific cohort of the American electorate (Greenberg 1995; Baer 2000). President Clinton's free-market and smaller-government policies marked the coronation of this strategy in both his successful presidential bids in the 1990s (Clinton and Gore 1992; Clinton 1996).

That Jackson gave up his presidential hopes after 1988 and Buchanan sought the nomination of the Reform Party in the year 2000 contribute to demonstrating that the two-party system has progressively become insulated from radicalism by the turn of the millennium. Furthermore, Buchanan's bolt to the Reform Party and the ensuing loss of his conservative supporters let the GOP further retreat toward the center in the year 2000 and show off the "compassionate conservatism" of its presidential candidate George W. Bush. Such an orientation shaped, for instance, the declaration of the Republican platform that "for every American, there must be a ladder of opportunity, and for those most in need, a safety net of care" (Squitieri 2000; Mayer 2001, pp. 28-29, 40-41; Bush 1999, pp. 226-43; Thommas 2000; Toner 2000).

This trend reflects an economic interpretation of party competition that Anthony Downs elaborated in the mid 1950s at the apparent height of consensus politics in the United States.

According to Downs, the greatest cohort of the participating electorate is moderate. Therefore, in two-party political systems, vote-maximizing purposes tend to make parties converge toward the center and to render the ideological contrast less intense (Downs 1957, pp. 114-51).

However, it has been calculated that the working-class population makes up about 55 percent of U.S. eligible voters. Thus, the growing attention of the two major parties to the claims of the middle class has led to the progressive confinement of the bulk of the electorate to the margins of both the political debate and the policy-making process (Teixeira and Rogers 2000).

In addition, by choosing the same group of prospective voters as their common target, the Democratic Party and the GOP have not only subdued sharp programmatic differences but have also brought up “non-issues” like the stand on the pledge of allegiance to the flag in the 1988 presidential race, the dispute on family values that Republican Vice President Dan Quayle’s remarks about *Murphy Brown* ignited during the 1992 campaign, or Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore’s efforts to focus attention on the nomination of justices to the Supreme Court by the next president in the year 2000. This strategy has helped both major parties to differ somewhat from each another. Yet it has also caused a polarization of the political spectrum along cultural lines that are not of prime concern to the great bulk of the eligible electorate and has contributed to the apathy of many nonvoters. Gore, for instance, pursued his 2000 campaign strategy although the issue of the Supreme Court nominees was clearly hypothetical and, at that time, only 36 percent of prospective voters considered this matter “very important” in the selection of a candidate for the White House (Dionne 1991; Germond and Witcover 1993; McWilliams 1995; Pooley 2000; Taylor 2000).

The case of African Americans may offer a revealing example. Notwithstanding his eventual defeat to Walter Mondale in the 1984 Democratic primary, as the first black whose presidential candidacy had to be taken seriously (the first African-American presidential contender was Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, who ran unsuccessfully in the 1972 Democratic primary

[Chisholm 1973]), Jackson managed to channel the discontent and claims of his own fellow ethnics through the electoral process and boosted black turnout to 55.8 percent, the highest level of participation since the 1960s. Conversely, Jackson's withdrawal from the field of the presidential hopefuls caused a slump in African Americans' turnout. Their electoral participation fell to a nadir of 50.6 percent in 1996 after an initial drop to 51.5 percent in 1988. This latter followed black voters' frustration over their leader's second unsuccessful bid (Tate 1994, pp. 109-26; Wayne 2000, p. 72).

At the urging of polling experts and campaign strategists, in order to minimize the costs of election campaign, the Republican and Democratic Parties have also ended up refraining themselves from mobilizing likely voters who have not aligned themselves to fit the existing partisan cleavages along cultural lines. Conversely, both major parties have started concentrating their efforts on their respective stalwarts. Not even the potentialities of the Internet for broad targets (roughly 70 percent of the voting-age population had access to the Web at the time of the 2000 campaign) at low costs (ten cents for address as opposed to the thirty to forty cents of traditional mail) has apparently changed this trend and persuaded politicians to reach out to a larger cohort of the eligible electorate than groups that are likely to share their stand on most issues (Harwood 1998; "The Human Touch" 2000).

The dynamics of the U.S. party politics itself have contributed to the marginalization of voters from the decision-making process. As Benjamin Ginsberg and Martin Shefter have repeatedly argued, following the present-day decline in partisanship and turnout, party leaders no longer consider the pursuit of popular support at the polls as a priority to wage successful battles in the political arena. Conversely, in order to defeat their own opponents and challengers as well as to retain or seize political power, they resort to means beyond the electoral sphere, and rely on revelations, investigations, and prosecutions rather than on the mobilization of voters (Ginsberg and Shefter 1990; Ginsberg and Shefter 1995a; Ginsberg and Shefter 1995b).

Since President Richard M. Nixon resigned in August 1974 in the wake of the Watergate after securing a landslide reelection less than two years earlier, scandals and inquiries have become major political weapons that parties and politicians have increasingly used in the effort to overturn the voters' choices at the polls. From the Iran-contra affair to the Whitewater and the Sexgate, a number of probes have been exploited to destabilize the incumbent presidents and paralyze their administrations. Remarkably, unlike the case of Donna Rice, the exposition of the extramarital relationship that doomed Colorado Senator Gary Hart's 1988 bid for the Democratic presidential nomination, almost all the major scandals that incumbent presidents from Ronald Reagan to Clinton faced emerged after voters had cast their ballots. Consequently, voters were not only silent witnesses to the attempts at nullifying their decision on the previous election day. They were also deprived of the means to pass their own judgment on such specific issues (Woodward 1999).

Besides fueling the flames of distrust in politicians, as the chief executives' fates were decided outside the voting booths, those endeavors to violate people's sovereignty clearly have contributed to making going to the polls a futile gesture and, thereby, have helped the decline in turnout. So has done the commonly shared perception that the ubiquitous presence of corporate organizations and special interests manipulates the policy-making process in the United States (Greider 1992; Judis 2000). It has been calculated that 1.26 billion dollars were spent in 1997 to lobby Congress, while the figure of 3 billion dollars is the estimated whole cost of the year 2000 campaigns of presidential and congressional candidates (Glasser 2000). Former Goldman, Sachs & Company co-chairperson Jon S. Corzine actually spent 35 million dollars just to win the 2000 Democratic primary for the U.S. Senate in New Jersey. Against this backdrop, one can easily suggest that the responsiveness of elected officials to the needs of the average voters is negligible and that being involved in politics and casting one's ballot on election day are irrelevant deeds (Halbfinger 2000).

The defeats of Democratic Bill Bradley and Republican John McCain to Al Gore and George W. Bush, respectively, in the 2000 presidential primaries may further demonstrate the shift of American politics toward elitism. Not only were Gore and Bush the candidates of the establishments of their own party against maverick challengers whose degree of independence was such that Bradley had even considered running for the White House on a third-party ticket. Along with Democratic Senator Russ Feingold, McCain was also the cosponsor of a doomed campaign finance reform bill that would have outlawed the nowadays largely unregulated soft-money contributions to candidates and, therefore, would have reduced the impact of Big Money on election outcomes. Bush's subsequent bypassing of McCain to the benefit of such a consummate Washington insider and Big Money representative as former Congressman, White House Chief of Staff, Defense Secretary, and chief executive of an energy conglomerate Dick Cheney in the choice of his own running mate offers additional evidence of the shrinking opportunities for insurgents to challenge the entrenched leaderships of the two major parties and for independent voters to find candidates who can stand by out-of-mainstream political interests (Menard 1993; Timberg 1999; Hutcheson and Thommas 2000).

In 1986 Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson elaborated a theory of issue evolution that downplays the voters' initiative in the timing of the transformations of the political agenda and stresses the role of party leaderships. According to their model, the process of policy reorientation begins with political elites and ends with the mass electorate. Since the public is usually either dissatisfied with institutional politics or even apathetic as for casting ballots, issues are first polarized among elite actors. Voters participate in the process only at an advanced stage, after leaders have outlined the alternatives in the political agenda and supplied the electorate with clues about their own positions. Consequently, the voters' main function is primarily limited to deciding whether or not to respond to the clues of the political elites (Carmines and Stimson 1986).

This interpretation seems to be most suitable to account for the late-twentieth-century dynamics of American presidential elections. In the face of the continuing slump in turnout and following the voters' established tendency to cast split ballots, which has made divided government the prevailing characteristic of current U.S. politics, American presidents have come to lack a clear mandate. Actually, scholars have contended that, in recent years, even the overthrows of the dominant party in a presidential contest or landslide reelections were hardly based on people's ideological commitments and policy preferences (Dahl 1990; Wattenberg 1991, pp. 122-29; Fiorina 1996).

In this view, for instance, Ronald Reagan's 1984 triumph with 59 percent of the popular vote and 49 out of the 50 states resulted from the electorate's support for an administration that had witnessed a timely economic recovery and prosperity rather than from the voters' call for a conservative agenda (Schwab 1991, pp. 41-80). Likewise, Clinton's 1992 election marked less the forging of a new progressive majority than the rejection of a failed incumbent, and his 1996 reelection was primarily a reward for four years of continuous economic growth (Ladd 1993; Lacy and Grant 1999; Shafer 2000).

Even the Republican capture of both the Senate and the House of Representatives for the first time in four decades in 1994 fell short of a real mandate. Indeed, that year, electoral turnout was as low as 38 percent and only an overall shift of as few as 18,000 votes occurred in the Congressional districts as a whole nationwide (Tolchin 1999, p. 140; Gimpel 1996; Klinker 1996; McSweeney and Owens 1998).

These developments suggest a plebiscitary working of American electoral democracy. Presidential elections have become a sort of referendum on the incumbent's tenure and the voters' choice is confined to endorsing or rejecting his record as a whole by either voting to the candidate of the outgoing administration or casting their ballots for his opponent. In this view, however, divided

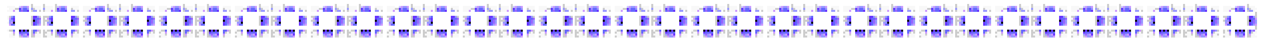
government has blurred the responsibilities of each major party in policy outputs in the eyes of the electorate. As a result, the control of the White House and Congress by different parties has further contributed to the decline in voter turnout (Franklin and de Mino 1998).

David S. Brody has recently suggested that dissatisfied voters, who think that politicians have neglected ordinary people's concerns to win the favor of special interests, may turn to the direct ballot initiative and bypass legislatures by making laws by referendum. A leading example was Proposition 13 on real estate taxation that the California electorate approved in 1978. Yet Brody himself has underscored the elitism of direct initiatives and their potential threat to electoral democracy. As he has shown, special interests pursuing their own agenda often initiated direct initiatives and sold voters pre-set legislation that the electorate was asked to ratify or reject with little or no debate. In addition, the impact of direct ballot initiative on the whole law-making process does not seem to be significant yet in terms of legislation outputs in the United States. Actually, direct initiative is available only in twenty-four out of the fifty states and in the District of Columbia as well. Furthermore, in the 1997-1998 election cycle, only thirty-nine initiatives out of the sixty-six on which voters cast their ballots became law (Brody 2000).

For the time being, it seems that the main referenda facing the electorate take place every four years in early November, when a shrinking number of voters, who are less and less representative of the multifaceted components of American society, go to the polls to cast their ballots. Against this backdrop, as both major parties are struggling to secure the support of the same moderate cohorts of the eligible electorate, the inability to integrate citizens on the radical fringes of the political spectrum into the electoral system has precipitated a class-skewed demobilization of voters that has made turnout slump, threatening the viability of democracy in the United States.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This article was originally presented as a paper at the Community Forum "America at the Third Century and Millennium: Where We Have Been, Where We Are Going, and What Does It Mean?," held at the Louisiana State University in Shreveport, October 5-7, 2000. The subsequent 2000 presidential election and the extremely controversial decision of the Supreme Court that effectively decided the outcome of the contest offered additional evidence of the increasing resort to means beyond the electoral sphere in political competitions and cast an even darker shadow on the viability of democracy in the United States (Nelson 2001; Bugliosi 2001; Dershowitz 2001; Dworkin 2002).



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