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POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

The Myth of Voter Apathy

"What If They Held an Election and Nobody Came" by Martin Plissner and Warren Mitofsky, in *Public Opinion* (Feb.-Mar. 1981), c/o American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1150 17th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

In the 1980 presidential election, voter turnout dropped to a 32-year low of 53.9 percent. Is democracy in trouble? Does "voter apathy" diminish Republican claims of a popular mandate? Plissner and Mitofsky, directors of CBS News's political and survey divisions, respectively, say no.

The 1980 turnout was only 0.5 points lower than in 1976, they note. The continuous decline since 1960 seems to be leveling off. Participation peaked that year at 63.1 percent of the electorate and dropped to 60.7 percent in 1968. In 1972 (when incumbent Richard Nixon routed Democratic challenger Senator George McGovern), turnout sank to 55.4 percent.

But such data are misleading. The "turnout rate" represents voters as a percentage of the total number of voting-age individuals—including aliens, prisoners, and mental patients, who are barred from participation. It does not include citizens who voted at the polls but who made no presidential choice or who accidentally cast invalid ballots. The 1980 turnout figure approaches 60 percent when both elements are factored in, the authors say.

Still, why is voter turnout so much below 100 percent? The oft-cited "political alienation" explanation does not hold up. CBS News/*New York Times* surveys found that in both 1976 and 1980, about one-fourth of voters and nonvoters alike expressed dissatisfaction with the candidates or with "the system." Two-thirds of the 1980 nonvoters even said they "cared a lot" about the election. Registration problems account

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for most nonvoting, the authors contend, notably among the one-fifth of Americans who move each year. Turnout in 1980 was 20 percent lower for movers than nonmovers.

Voter participation may soon be on the rise, the authors say. The post-World War II Baby-Boom generation, which has disproportionately shunned the ballot box, is nearing the peak voting ages of 30 to 60. Recent vigorous Democratic-Republican competition may boost turnout in the South. And rising gasoline prices and mortgage rates may keep more Americans from moving and bring them back to the polls.

Welfare and Inflation

"Children and Welfare Reform" by Daniel P. Moynihan, in *The Journal of the Institute for Socioeconomic Studies* (Spring 1981), Airport Road, White Plains, N.Y. 10604.

In 1964, Moynihan, then a Labor Department policy-planner, made an astonishing discovery that inspired the first of many failed efforts to reform the U.S. welfare system. Since 1962, he reported, the number of recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) had been growing even as unemployment shrank.

Moynihan's conclusions—that his data reflected the breakdown of the black family and the emergence of a permanent "welfare class"—are still bitterly disputed. Critics of welfare claim that AFDC encourages fathers to leave families. Moynihan himself contends that the evidence for cause-and-effect is inconclusive. Now a Democratic Senator from New York, he writes that the issue of incentive has, in any event, been overshadowed by more pressing concerns: Inflation is eroding the value of AFDC benefits while the number of children who depend on them is skyrocketing.

Today, 13.5 percent of American children live in female-headed households; two-thirds of these families are on welfare. And the number of female-headed homes is growing. Moynihan predicts that fully one-half of the children born in America in 1979—including 75 percent of minority children—will live in a fatherless household at some point before their 18th birthday (up from 35 percent of 1960 babies). At least one-third of all children born in 1979 will live in female-headed families that receive AFDC payments (up from 22 percent).

Seven million children are now helped by welfare. But, unlike Social Security or federal pensions, AFDC benefits do not rise with inflation. Consumer price increases have eaten away 56 percent of the value of the average monthly welfare payment (now \$272) since 1969.

Aid to Families with Dependent Children must keep pace with inflation to help *children*, Moynihan argues. That it incidentally helps parents "is beside the point." To welfare's critics, Moynihan declares: "AFDC is not a program to subsidize leisure; it is a program to enable a hard-pressed woman to keep a roof over the heads, clothes on the backs, and food in the mouths of her children."