

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT*Do Nonvoters
Really Matter?*

"Nonvoting is Not a Social Disease" by Austin Ranney, in *Public Opinion* (Oct.-Nov. 1983), American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1150 17th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Most political scientists see the steady decline in U.S. voter turnout for presidential and congressional elections since the early 1960s as a sign of failing national political health. Ranney, a political scientist at the American Enterprise Institute, is not so sure.

In 1980, only 53 percent of voting-age Americans bothered to go to the polls to elect a president; in 1982, only 38 percent cast ballots in the congressional elections. But, Ranney asks, do the high turnouts in such nations as Venezuela (94 percent), Switzerland (64 percent), or Canada (76 percent) make them better democracies?

The notion that American politics would be radically different if Americans voted at the same rate as, say, Canadians, is also faulty. Public opinion surveys show that nonvoters are no more cynical about the honesty and responsiveness of government officials than are their more conscientious fellow citizens. Moreover, nonvoters' opinions on policy issues, both foreign and domestic, differ very little from those of voters. A study of the 1980 presidential election showed that the outcome would not have changed even if the groups that had the lowest turnouts—blacks, Hispanics, poor whites—had voted at the same rate as middle-class whites. The additional voters would have added only one-and-a-half percentage points to Jimmy Carter's share of the total.

Voter registration drives have been most effective among blacks, 1.1 million of whom have been added to official voter rosters since 1980. Other targets of such drives are Hispanics and religious fundamentalists.



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Ranney concedes that it may be right to worry that Americans who don't vote are "less than full citizens," and that nonvoting is a blemish on "democracy's high ideals." Yet if it is such a major ill, why not make voting *compulsory*, as Australia, Belgium, Italy, and Venezuela have done? Because, Ranney responds, "many of us also feel that the right to abstain is just as precious as the right to vote."

Lectures on citizens' civic duties won't raise voter turnout much, Ranney avers. He favors both get-out-the-vote drives and liberalized voter registration laws—allowing registration by mail, for example—but doubts that they would boost turnout by more than 10 percentage points. Blacks, Hispanics, and poor whites, the main stay-at-homes, won't be lured to the polls, he writes, until they "come to believe that voting is a powerful instrument for getting the government to do what they want it to do."

City Hall Symbolism

"The City Council Chamber: From Distance to Intimacy" by Charles T. Goodsell, in *The Public Interest* (Winter 1984), 20th & Northampton Sts., Easton, Pa. 18042.

Public buildings, from the White House to town meeting halls, are full of symbolism. In the changing interior designs of city halls during the past two centuries, Goodsell, who teaches at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, sees a chronicle of America's political evolution.

City council chambers built between 1800 and 1930, he writes, "openly asserted public authority." Massive staircases led from the lobbies to the legislators' domain, creating the impression of an ascent to a "civic sanctuary." Citizens could watch only from upper-level galleries with no access to the chamber floor. Ornate furnishings of dark, carved wood and plush upholstery reinforced the "majesty of authority" in the municipal buildings of older cities such as Baltimore and Pittsburgh.

A more egalitarian post-New Deal style is evident in municipal structures erected between 1930 and 1960. Spectators sat on benches on the chamber floor itself. In the "great turnabout," city councilmen no longer sat with their backs to the audience, facing the presiding officer, but looked out toward the audience. Such designs stressed government's accountability. Sparse furnishings "downplay[ed] the officials' superior status," Goodsell observes. But all trappings of authority did not vanish. Officials still sat on raised platforms, and railings separated the governors from the governed.

Since 1960, a new inventory of civic symbolism has been created. Growing city bureaucracies are often housed in office towers, adjacent to a low city council building, as in Phoenix or Wilmington. The bureaucracy is, symbolically, out of reach; the low-lying council building belongs to "the people." Inside, the council chambers are smaller and more intimate. In many cases, the legislators sit in a "pit," *below* the citizens, with minimal physical barriers between them. Mindful of the presence of TV cameras, many architects create, "in effect, a television