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Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma

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ABSTRACT

Low voter turnout is a serious democratic problem for five reasons: (1) It means unequal turnout that is systematically biased against less well-to-do citizens. (2) Unequal turnout spells unequal political influence. (3) U.S. voter turnout is especially low, but, measured as percent of voting-age population, it is also relatively low in most other countries. (4) Turnout in midterm, regional, local, and supranational elections -- less salient but by no means unimportant elections -- tends to be especially poor. (5) Turnout appears to be declining everywhere. The inequality problem can be solved by institutional mechanisms that maximize turnout. One option is the combination of voter-friendly registration rules, proportional representation, infrequent elections, weekend voting, and holding less salient elections concurrently with the most important national elections. The other option, which can maximize turnout by itself, is compulsory voting. Its advantages far outweigh the normative and practical objections to it.

This article has been removed from the eRepository website since it is now published: [American Political Science Review](#) vol. 91 (March 1997): 1-14.