Voter Participation

BACKGROUND

The concept of voter apathy can now be seen as a misplaced explanation for low voter participation in the United States. Although voter apathy is the most discussed and accepted reason for the lack of voter participation, events in the 2000 general elections revealed that many citizens encountered obstacles in casting their votes. Numerous reports of systemic failures throughout the country prompted many calls for electoral reform. Which citizens are eligible to vote, which citizens do vote, how efficiently they can vote, and how effectively their votes are counted, both numerically and collectively, are a more dramatic story than many citizens realized before the fall of 2000.

The 2000 general election highlighted several irregularities in U.S. electoral systems that usually go unnoticed by citizens, public officials, political parties, and commentators. In particular, the Florida election illuminated old and enduring problems in the harsh light of a closely contested presidential race. None of these problems are new. All are fundamental to current voting systems throughout the United States. The anomalies require close scrutiny and strong corrective action. Although the exceptions center on voting problems, they are symptomatic of larger flaws in the U.S. political system, including how to finance campaigns and elections, media reporting and operations, how ex-felons are treated as voters compared with military absentee voters, and the differences in election administration between richer and poorer areas.

The U.S. Supreme Court ultimately resolved the Florida vote count. Nationally, one major candidate received 500,000 more popular votes than the other major candidate, but the candidate who failed to receive the popular vote became the nation’s 43rd president because he won more electoral votes.

The areas highlighted in the 2000 election included voting rights, voting mechanics, voting systems, and voter participation. Voting rights refers to issues such as which citizens are eligible to register to vote, how a citizen registers to vote, how a voter’s registration is processed within particular voting jurisdictions, and how a voter exercises his or her right to vote in elections without intimidation, interference, or confusion. Voting mechanics refers to matters such as voting in a precinct or polling place; early voting; absentee ballot programs; and the location, staffing, and equipping of polling places. Voting systems refers to how votes are counted and tallied for candidates—winner take all, proportional representation, instant run-off voting, and fusion (a candidate can be the nominee of more than one party). Voter participation refers to which citizens in the electorate vote and which do not vote.

Apathy may be a problem for some citizens, but it may not be the biggest problem depressing voter participation. Information, political party outreach and mobilization, and opportunities to register and vote easily and efficiently may be more important factors. Although “voter apathy” leads people to believe that voter participation is the individual voter’s problem, our government and elected officials, through their control over voting rights, voting mechanics, and voting systems, have a much greater impact over the participation of all voters. These four areas—voting rights, mechanics, systems, and voter participation—interact with each other in powerful ways to influence the outcome of elections and who will control the various offices of government throughout
the U.S. political system. For example, less than 52 percent of eligible voters voted in the 2000 general elections. There were numerous stories from Florida about voters unable to vote at polling places, although properly registered, because their names had not been transferred from central registration files to their neighborhood precincts. Others did not get to vote because lines were too long and understaffed polling stations could not accommodate them. Other citizens reported being harassed or intimidated by authorities when they attempted to go to the polls. In one county the design of the ballot confused some voters, causing them to cast faulty votes.

The structural problems and difficulties in these four areas add new dimensions and insights to perceived problems of voter apathy. Two commentators have ascribed low voter turnout to other factors, such as lack of specific voter mobilization programs by political parties and technical barriers to participation (Piven & Cloward, 2000; Rakove, 2001).

A historian on voting in the United States noted that “the two major political parties are in the business of winning elections rather than promoting democracy, and elections can be won by disenfranchising opponents, making it procedurally difficult to vote or not counting their votes at all. As political professionals learned long ago, an electorate that is predictable in size and composition is generally far preferable to large turnouts and mass participation” (Keyssar, 2001, sec. 4, p. 13).

In fact in the 1996 elections, 17 percent of nonvoting registered people reported that they did not vote in 1996 because of apathy (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998). However, voter apathy alone does not fully explain this problem. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1998), nearly 5 million registered voters said they did not vote because they could not take off from work or school or were otherwise too busy.

In surveying 601 voters and 602 nonvoters, the League of Women Voters (1998a) found that voters were more likely than nonvoters to recognize the effect of elections on issues of direct and personal concern. Voters were much more likely than nonvoters to perceive major differences between the parties on issues such as jobs and economic security, social security, Medicare, taxes, and the deficit. And voters were much more likely than nonvoters to see a positive role for government in their lives.

The survey also found that nonvoters were less likely than voters to believe that they had access to accurate information about the candidates and their positions on issues; in other words, information that would help them understand the importance of an election and compel them to vote. One-third of the nonvoters said that they had very little or almost no accurate information when they were thinking about candidates they would vote for, compared with 13 percent of the voters (League of Women Voters, 1998a).

The National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (Motor-Voter Law) was passed to simplify the process of voter registration for all citizens, with the hope of removing one of the major procedural barriers to voter participation. This federal law requires states to register voters in three specific ways:

1. simultaneous application for driver’s license and voter registration
2. mail application for voter registration
3. application in person at designated government agencies, including public assistance agencies and agencies that provide services to people with disabilities (League of Women Voters, 1998b).

Many states fought implementation of the Motor-Voter Law by using old “state’s rights” arguments to inhibit temporarily increased voter registration throughout the country (Piven & Cloward, 2000). Only 66 percent of the voting-age population reported that they were registered in 1996, the lowest rate for any presidential election since 1968 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998).

Because several states resisted full implementation of the Motor-Voter Law, numerous people in those states encountered difficulties on Election Day 2000 with casting ballots in their local precinct. Often precinct records were inaccurate, and the process for checking central registration files was inadequate and became a barrier to voting for many citizens. Other problems at local polling places included under-staffing, unclear instructions on how to correct
4 SOCIAL WORK SPEAKS
a voting mistake, faulty voting equipment, and poorly designed ballots that confused some voters. The widespread manifestation of so many voting problems prompted urgent calls for electoral reform across the political spectrum. Efforts to make voter registration simple and easy need to be supplemented by other reforms that help get all citizens to the polls and all votes counted accurately.

It is important for social workers to reorient themselves from the perspective of voter apathy to an understanding that voter participation should be a central goal in a democratic society. A perspective focused on voter participation provides a way for virtually every social worker in the United States to contribute to the goal of better voter turnout. Many laws are passed that adversely affect those who do not exercise their right to vote.

**ISSUE STATEMENT**

The low level of voter registration and participation in the United States represents a serious challenge to the values and ethical principles that guide the social work profession—democracy, self-determination, informed decision making, social justice, inclusion, diversity, empowerment, and participation. Many citizens who are not participating by voting complain that their votes do not count. Yet many laws are passed that adversely affect them.

The electoral process itself often discourages voters. Months before an election voters are bombarded by negative campaigning and special-interest advertising that prevent them from making an informed vote. Antiquated voting laws and individual states’ indifference impede voters from obtaining equal access and opportunity to vote.

NASW has worked to expand social workers’ involvement in the electoral process. Many social workers also have been leaders in local community activities to register voters and make all government more accessible and responsive to the average citizen. Given this tradition of commitment and involvement and the deepening crisis over low American voter participation among U.S. residents, it is imperative that NASW address voter reform issues.

**POLICY STATEMENT**

Low voter registration in the United States is a threat to the democratic process and to the U.S. political system. Voting is a basic right, and citizens should be assisted in all possible ways to exercise that right; any action that denies access or discourages any citizen from voting should be prohibited. Access to voter registration and polling places should be improved for all citizens, with special consideration for people with disabilities, homeless people, people of color, and elderly individuals.

Social workers are encouraged to work with and support established organizations and entities to increase voter registration and participation in all elections. Registration is a beginning step in the political empowerment of clients. Social workers are encouraged to help educate clients to be informed voters and to mobilize them to vote in elections. Social workers have a responsibility to model informed voter participation and to be involved in all levels and aspects of the political process. Social workers have a responsibility to advocate in the local, state, and federal legislatures for voting rights and increased voter access for their clients.

In support of voter registration reform laws and voter practices:

- NASW supports full implementation of the National Voter Registration Act in all states, including voter registration activities by public and private social services agencies.
- NASW supports continued efforts to reform and liberalize registration election laws.
- NASW supports research into nontraditional methods of casting ballots to increase voter participation.
- NASW supports efforts to make Election Day a national holiday for federal elections.
- NASW supports the use of machinery and technology to assist individuals with disabilities in exercising their right to vote.
- NASW supports the use of ballots in other languages.
- NASW supports uniform national rules for all absentee ballots in federal elections.
• NASW supports a federal constitutional amendment establishing and protecting the right to vote.
• NASW supports the full restoration of voting rights for all ex-felons who have completed their sentences.
• NASW supports responsible and accurate media coverage to promote informed voter participation.
• NASW supports social workers who work to increase voter registration and to secure the electoral reforms outlined in this policy statement.
• NASW supports efforts to explore other voting systems such as proportional representation, instant run-off, and fusion (a candidate can be the nominee of more than one party).
• NASW supports federal and state campaign finance reform.
• NASW supports social workers working in polls and encourages active involvement in the administration of the electoral process.
• NASW supports the involvement of social work professionals and students in activities during the election process that work against the intimidation of voters, in particular in localities represented by historically oppressed populations.
• NASW supports the education of citizens on the importance of voting.
• NASW supports the extension of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

REFERENCES

SUGGESTED READINGS
Policy statement approved by the NASW Delegate Assembly, August 2002. This statement supersedes the policy statement on Voter Participation approved by the Delegate Assembly in 1990 and reconfirmed in 1999. For further information, contact the National Association of Social Workers, 750 First Street, NE, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20002-4241. Telephone: 202-408-8600; e-mail: press@naswdc.org