

## APATHY TOWARD THE GOVERNMENT

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(1) The United States was initially settled by colonists who wished to escape both religious and political persecution. They sought a place where they could freely express their religious ideas and participate in their own government to a larger degree. When the time came for the colonists to choose a system of government, they chose democracy and wrote the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence as the foundation for their new government. Both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are major achievements, sustaining even today our sense of national pride and patriotism. The Declaration of Independence is based on three principles or ideals: human rights, political participation, and limited government. Perhaps the most important of these three, because it can be used as a means of achieving the other two principles, is political participation.

(2) Most Americans today are probably quick to say that they would rather live in this country than in any other. Yet, when the time comes for them to actually participate in the government, the citizens suddenly become apathetic. This problem of apathy is a serious one because it could easily serve to defeat the purpose of our democracy. The reason that our founding fathers chose democracy as the ideal form of government was to give the people the opportunity to be heard, to ensure that the ideas of the people could be expressed and their needs could be made known. Even so, now that all citizens have this opportunity to be heard, to elect representatives who will take a stand in accordance with the desires expressed by their constituents, the citizens are failing to do so. Because voting is probably the most prevalent sign of apathy toward the government, this essay will attempt to explain the causes of such apathy and to find solutions to this important problem.

(3) Such an examination must begin with the following question: How many citizens actually fail to vote? According to United States News and World Report (1983), only one-third of all 169.3 million eligible voters are going to the polls. "Eligible voters" refers to all voting-age citizens, not just those who are registered. Psychology Today (1983) reported that in 1980, this country had the lowest voter turnout for a presidential election in thirty-two years. Less than fifty-four percent of eligible voters were present at the polls. The average turnout since 1945 is a mere fifty-eight and one-half percent. This figure becomes even more alarming when it is compared to the percentages of voter participation which are achieved by other countries. A study by Ivor Crewe, a political scientist at the University of Essex in England, compared the voter percentages of twenty of the world's major democracies. The United States ranked sorely in last place, with the smallest percentage of eligible voters actually voting on election days (1983).

(4) It is difficult to estimate how large a percentage of voters will participate in the 1984 presidential election. Eleanor Smeal reported in her lecture at Valparaiso University on April 9, 1984, that forty percent of college students are registered to vote in the present election year. She also stated that an estimated six to nine million more votes will be cast by women in the next presidential election than in the last. This she attributes to the fact that many women are unsatisfied with President Reagan's views concerning the roles and rights of women and will therefore be at the polls in November to vote in favor of Reagan's Democratic opponent. Often a specific group of voters, such as women, blue-collar workers, or blacks, will turn out at the polls to vote against a candidate who would likely fail to support their ideas. This leads to the misconception that low voter percentages imply that the citizens are satisfied with the performance of the government. But this is rarely the case. Apathy does not equal satisfaction. Rather, apathy is based on the self-perception that one's single opinion is unimportant.

(5) The fact that citizens do not perceive that their individual votes make a difference is probably the most significant factor which causes lack of participation in government. Washington appears to be controlled by the wealthy and the powerful; and the average American probably seriously questions whether or not his or her vote could possibly make a difference--especially when the corporation owners, the leaders of big businesses, and the wealthy employers are organizing lobbies and activist groups to further their own causes. In these troubled economic times, it seems as if the wealthy business owners and the average Americans are on opposing ends of the scale because the businessmen are continually striving to earn more and more money--and this usually occurs at the expense of the average worker. The wealthy corporate owners organize the voices which are most often heard in Washington--their lobbies, not the voices of individual citizens. For this reason, the people might understandably come to the conclusion that their votes are pointless, and therefore fail to vote on election day.

(6) In addition to lobbies financed by big business, the political party system may also be fostering the lack of interest and participation in politics. Many people do not feel closely associated with either of the major parties, Republican or Democratic. Because the country is usually dominated by the party to which the President belongs, the citizens who do not link themselves to that particular party may conclude that their opinions and ideas are not as relevant as those of the people who do associate with that party. This problem becomes even more significant for the citizens who do not consider themselves a part of either party. Because they feel that their ideas are not as important as those of the members of the controlling party, they may refrain from voting.

(7) The difficult question which remains is: How can the citizens be encouraged to exercise their voting rights? The study which was mentioned earlier concerning voter

participation in twenty of the major democratic countries may offer a suggestion. The countries which had the highest participation percentages also had compulsory voting. This, however, might be too drastic a measure with which to begin. A more feasible solution might be to begin the practice of mandatory voter registration, rather than mandatory voting. Just as males are required to register for the selective service upon reaching the age of eighteen, so all citizens should be required to register to vote when they reach eighteen years of age.

(8) A second solution might be an "election holiday." Workers could be given a few hours off from their jobs on election days so that voting would seem less of an inconvenience. Because people lose work hours--and, consequently, pay--when they have to take time out to vote, voting procedures discourage the poorer citizens. The wealthy can better afford to take time out from their jobs and be unaffected by the loss of a few dollars; but this might be a real deterrent to the people who depend on the money earned during those few hours. Giving workers time off on election days would promote voting by employers and workers. Some countries have even gone so far as to hold elections on Sundays in order to solve the work-related problem.

(9) A third possibility which may encourage greater voter participation would be to educate the voters more concerning campaign issues. Many voters might feel somewhat uncomfortable at the polls because they are unsure about some of the issues. Many people probably share the attitude that those who do not know the issues should not vote. If the candidates were required to make their platforms more well-known and understandable to the citizens, the voter would not have such a difficult time when filling out his or her ballot. This change, however, would be difficult to enact because it might be detrimental to the candidates. They might be unwilling to take a strong stand on a certain issue and risk offending a specific group of people, thereby losing their votes.

(10) A final way to improve voter turnout would be to remove the Electoral College from our system of government and simply elect the President according to direct election procedures. One of the most controversial features of our Constitution, the Electoral College system tends to favor larger states, which are allowed a greater number of electors. But a more substantial argument against the Electoral College is the fact that nothing in the Constitution prevents a presidential elector from casting his or her vote for a candidate other than the one most favored by the voters in the elector's state. This violates even more clearly the principle of "one person, one vote" upon which our democracy rests. If the Electoral College were replaced with direct popular election of the President, this problem would be resolved, and the people would, once again, feel that their votes were important and meaningful. Therefore, they might be inclined to use their voting privileges more often.

(11) The political changes which have just been outlined might help to decrease the amount of apathy present toward our current government. The existing government is becoming controlled more and more by wealthy, powerful elites, and less and less by average American citizens. The increasing measure of power becoming concentrated in the hands of these elites is desirable to them--is, in fact, their primary goal. They are, unfortunately, not nearly as concerned with the welfare of the citizens as they are with their own well-being. The popular trend is toward only self-interest on the part of the politicians. Because a change in this trend would be detrimental to the elites, such change is unlikely to occur--unless the average citizens make their needs and opinions known. The best starting point would be to elect representatives who would be sensitive to the needs of the people. By doing so, they would be checking the growing power of self-interested elites and would be taking more of that power for themselves.

(12) Because the average citizens are most affected by the decisions made by the government, they should have greater input in the making of these decisions. If they feel that they are an important part of the system, they will probably become more involved in it and work more diligently for its betterment. This would make our democracy more stable. Increased participation in government affairs would help democracy perform the function which it was designed to perform: to be the voice of the people.

#### Bibliography

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