

why you voted

by andrew j. perrin

On November 4, 2008, probably 140 million Americans cast votes in the election for President of the United States. Nearly as many citizens, although eligible, chose not to vote, whether out of inertia, disgust, or apathy.

From one point of view, not voting is a rational thing to do. Political scientist Anthony Downs showed decades ago that voting costs time, energy, transportation, and more, and the chances one's own vote will actually change the election's outcome are vanishingly small. It makes sense to stay home.

And yet 140 million of us do it. We take time away from our responsibilities, travel to a place we might never otherwise go, wait in line, and emerge with nothing more than a tiny lapel sticker proclaiming "I Voted" and a feeling of superiority over our non-voting fellow citizens.

Moreover, roughly 20 percent of the eligible population will lie about voting. In an enduring puzzle of public opinion research, more people will tell survey researchers they voted in any given election than actually did so.

This happens because voting is more than straightforward choice-making. Voting is never just the educated, emotion-free weighing of issues and the subsequent casting of a ballot. Indeed, it is a ritual in which lone citizens express personal beliefs that reflect the core of who they are and what they want for their countrymen, balancing strategic behavior with the opportunity to express their inner selves to the world.

In other words, voting in America has two faces: the first, a ritualistic expression of personal belief without regard to strat-

egy; the second, a cold, calculating form of citizenship where what anthropologist Julia Paley calls the "choice-making citizen" weighs the costs and benefits of particular policies and votes accordingly.

We can't understand who votes, and how, without understanding the two faces of voting that come together in citizens' minds and activities.

we don't vote over the phone

The standard approach to studying voting decisions generally ignores the ritualistic face of democratic decision-making.

The modern study of voting dates most prominently to *The American Voter*, a 1960 study by political scientists Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes. Building upon earlier studies that had considered voting patterns in specific cities or regions, *The American Voter* mobilized newly available techniques of scientific public opinion research to understand how Americans made such decisions.

The authors explained voting decisions as a "funnel of causality" pushing in on individuals, a hierarchy of influences on their decisions that grew progressively stronger as the act of voting drew near. To predict whether any given individual would vote, and for whom, one only needed a few known

criteria—essentially, what kind of person you were, how much you knew, what you believed, and whom you knew.

This approach was to become the gold standard of voting studies. But it's important to understand some of the decisions these innovative researchers made. First and foremost, they conceived of the voting decision as essentially an individual activity.

They mounted an extraordinary polling effort, asking a national sample of voters a series of well-crafted questions that have become the staples of the American National Election Studies (NES). These surveys, funded by the National Science Foundation and taken every two years, form an immense proportion of what we know about voting and political participation. They are, in fact, the basis of more than 5,000 articles and books published between 1960 and 2008.

Surveys of individual voters, however, as we all know from the barrage of polls we witness each election cycle, rely on contacting individual citizens by telephone and asking them a standard set of multiple choice questions. But this is a pretty poor approximation of how people actually vote, because it takes voters outside their normal social contexts—the neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, unions, clubs, and religious groups in which they actually live their lives and form their views.

As productive as the *American Voter* model of studying voting has been, conceiving of voting as decisions made by individual citizens who understand the issues, weigh them, and dispassionately select a candidate has put limits on how scholars have understood voting and how Americans have decided whether, and how, to vote.

the evolution of the modern voter

Not so long before the 1950s, voting was altogether different. In the late 1800s citizens voted in the open, their choices available for all to see. Political parties mobilized their supporters, told them whom to vote for, got them to the polls, and even printed the ballots themselves. Voting was social, collective, exciting, and fraught with corruption (at least to our modern sensibilities), a reality illustrated by George Caleb Bingham's classic painting, *The County Election* and documented in Michael Schudson's magisterial book *The Good Citizen*.

The Progressive movement of the early 20th century changed this, applying the then-overwhelming faith in scientific rationality to reforms in the political arena. Progressive reforms included the "Australian Ballot," the secret, government-provided ballot voters now see and consider utterly obvious. They prohibited personal rewards from being handed out by elected officials, substituting objective rules and expertise for the personal networks and influence of the prior era.

At the same time, progressive reforms made voting less exciting, harder to figure out, more dependent on individual rather than collective knowledge, and, certainly, more isolat-

ed. These are the characteristics voting maintains today. This was a classic case of "rationalization," the double-edged sword sociological giant Max Weber considered the centerpiece of modern life.

By the 1980s, political pundits were increasingly worried that low turnout—typically around half of registered voters in presidential elections, and much lower in local elections—was a bad omen for American democracy. The so-called "me generation" was chastised for caring little about the concerns of community or society, and the decline in voter turnout was a prominent symptom.

A wide variety of answers to why this happened surfaced, including the complexity of ballots, the influence of big money and special interests in politics, perceived lack of difference among the candidates, and the logistical hassles of registering and voting. A prominent set of studies found that voters were likely to be white as well as more educated and wealthier than the average population. The effects of this inequality were exacerbated by the fact that people were more likely to vote if they were contacted personally by a campaign or party—and the people most likely to be contacted were also white, wealthy, and educated.

Convinced that registration barriers were keeping particularly low-income and African-American citizens from the polls, social scientists Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward argued for making registration easier in their influential 1988 book *Why Americans Don't Vote*. In 1993 their campaign paid off with passage of the Motor-Voter Bill, which required states to allow citizens to register to vote when they applied for driver's licenses, thereby substantially reducing the burden of registration. The same impulse is behind recent trends to allow "no excuses" early voting, "vote by mail," "one-stop voting," and other reforms designed to make it easier for citizens to vote. Interestingly, most studies have found little evidence these reforms have, indeed, increased voter turnout.

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voting and expression

Voting in America is among the most cherished ways of expressing political individuality, and in many cases it's the only way citizens actually participate in their political communities. To take part in this ritual, citizens must often decipher complicated ballots in carefully created and guarded isolation. This isolation is not just physical, it's also psychological. We work hard to give citizens the idea that the vote they will cast is *their own*, that the vote says something important about what they truly believe, who they are, and that it is among the most important things they can do as citizens.



Image courtesy St. Louis Art Museum, Gift of Bank of America

The County Election by George Caleb Bingham.

And it works. Consider, for example, the candidates who periodically run for president as independents or nominees of minor parties. In virtually all such cases, the independent candidate stands no real likelihood of winning and is often accused of being a “spoiler”—a candidate who, by virtue of being in the race, distorts the outcome from what it otherwise should be. Voters are regularly implored not to “waste votes” on such candidates, since their votes would be ineffective or even counterproductive.

Yet voters continue to cast ballots for such candidates in substantial numbers, and both the 1992 and 2000 elections were probably significantly affected by these votes. In recent elections with a significant third-party candidate, 4 million voters (about 4 percent of the total) in 2000 and a striking 20.4 million (nearly 20 percent) in 1992 “wasted” these votes. Even in the closely contested 2004 election, in which there was no serious third-party candidate, more than 1.2 million voters (about 1 percent) voted for a candidate other than George W. Bush or John Kerry. Why?

If we understand a vote as a strategic resource, something like a purchase—exchanging something of symbolic value for one selection among several—it’s impossible to figure out why citizens would “throw away” their votes by casting them for a candidate with no possibility of winning. But if we instead consider voting as individuals’ opportunity to express their own

private, core beliefs, it is priceless.

Consider, too, the controversy over the so-called butterfly ballots in the 2000 Florida presidential election. In heavily Jewish and Democratic Palm Beach County, an unlikely proportion of citizens voted for right-wing candidate Pat Buchanan, whom many Jews considered an anti-Semite, rather than the more likely Al Gore.

If you tell me who you are, what you know, whom you know, and what you believe, chances are good I can tell you (and the world) whether you will vote, and for whom.

In an important analysis, political scientist Henry Brady and colleagues showed that most of that vote was probably due to confusing ballot design—a conclusion shared by Buchanan himself. Apart from the strategic value of these votes, the idea that the voter’s core beliefs might have been (falsely) expressed as a preference for Buchanan was the stuff of anxiety and jokes alike. A spate of humorous bumper stickers and other materials proclaimed “Jews for Buchanan” and “Don’t Blame Me, I Voted for Gore... I Think.” This anxiety persists with reformers’ insistence that electronic voting machines leave a “paper trail”—a way, if all else fails, to presumably rescue future elections from technical snafus.

In both of these cases our votes are understood as expressions of who we are, our deepest ideals and values. But this presents a strange paradox. Why should such a thoroughly social behavior, a practice that expresses our core values about how society should be structured, be practiced in enforced privacy? The answer lies not only in the history of voting, but in the importance of ritual. As political theorist Danielle S. Allen writes, the ritual of voting *simultaneously* allows us to imagine ourselves as members of an abstract national community and as effective, thinking, competent individuals.

the ritual

Rituals like voting are the practices we use to hold society together—to help us, in the words of the anthropologist Benedict Anderson, imagine ourselves as a community. We carry with us the memories of elections past, refracted through the collective imagination provided by the news media and everyday conversations. Voting connects citizens to these memories, making us a part of them and infusing them with meaning.

When Americans went to the polls this month, we engaged in just such a public ritual. And we use electoral ritual to understand the world around us—precisely the function of ritual in society.

Nearly 50 years after *The American Voter*, a team of political scientists analyzed the 2000 version of the NES, which the original book had launched. The basic model, they found, remains unchanged. Interviewing thousands of voters in isolation (and also separate from their voting booths and their feelings on voting day), they found that the most important elements of the voting decision remained individual in character.

It still holds true that if you tell me who you are, what you know, whom you know, and what you believe, chances are good I can tell you (and the world) whether you will vote, and for whom. Who we are as citizens—our class, race, sex, region of the country, and education—does say a lot about whether we are likely to vote and for whom. Stable political identifications—particularly identification with a political party, the importance of which *The American Voter* first demonstrated and which remains crucial—tell us yet more.

But voting and citizenship are about more than who you are and whom you know (the bread-and-butter concepts of studies like these). They're about what you believe, what you can imagine, and what communities you are part of.

As we move farther away from the narrow end of *The American Voter's* funnel, it becomes increasingly important to understand how people imagine these communities and their own interests within those communities. In essence, it becomes important to understand how we become who we are, how we learn what we know, how we meet those we know, and how we come to believe what we do.

ritual and reform

There are often calls for major reforms to fix some of the perceived problems with voting. Two of the most common are adding direct or deliberative features to our democratic practice and making it easier to vote by encouraging early voting, voting by mail, and easing registration requirements.

Americans have long been excited by the ideal of direct democracy, whether by town meeting, electronic plebiscite, or ballot initiative. What could be more democratic than bringing an issue directly to the demos—the people—to decide for themselves instead of relying on a clumsy, hierarchical system of representation? Similarly, the idea of some sort of national conversation—whether by town meetings, public forums, or electronic debates—sparks Americans' ambitions to improve democratic practice.

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But the ritual aspect of voting complicates all these pictures.

If direct democracy allows citizens to answer questions more directly, who gets to ask the questions? How do citizens sort themselves into groups when deliberating? How do these groups help determine the outcome of deliberation?

None of this means voting reforms—whether institutional, “direct,” or deliberative—should be off the table. But none will be successful unless it takes into account both faces of the curious practice of voting in America. The ritual face of American democracy is every bit as important as its procedural face.

recommended resources

Danielle S. Allen. *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education* (University of Chicago Press, 2004). Discusses how Americans imagine voting and citizenship in the political culture the civil rights movement helped develop.

Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities*, 2nd ed. (Verso, 1991). This classic work shows how people use everyday experience and the news media to imagine themselves as part of groups whose members they've never seen and will never meet.

Michael S. Lewis-Beck, William G. Jacoby, Helmut Norpoth, and Herbert F. Weisberg. *The American Voter Revisited* (University of Michigan Press, 2008). In this ambitious book, the original *The American Voter* is carefully reconstructed using data from 2000 to evaluate how voting has stayed the same and changed since the 1950s.

Michael Schudson. *The Good Citizen* (Harvard University Press, 1999). This historical study details how the ideas and assumptions behind American citizenship have changed since the writing of the Constitution.

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