

Is low turnout in
democracy
something we should
be worried about?



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

With virtually every major country on the globe using some form of democratic system, elections are held regularly and can be thoroughly important; it can often be said that turnout is key in deciding the outcome of those elections. In this essay, I will lay out how we can explain what turnout actually is, why it is people vote, whether it is undemocratic not to vote, as well as some thoughts on how turnout could be improved, eventually coming to a conclusion as to whether low turnout in a democracy truly is something we need to worry about.

Firstly, I think it's important to define turnout and what we actually class as 'low turnout'. Mark Franklin defined turnout as a 'habit' which leaves a 'footprint' based a lot around age (Franklin. M. et al, 2004, pp. i). He goes on to say that this habit is something which is learned over time the more that one votes, and that generally the best way to measure whether voting turnout is low is based on a country's turnout history and its average, therefore anything below the average would be classed as 'low turnout'. Yet as pointed out by Meredith Rolfe, this issue can be more complex than that, as people turn out to vote for many differing reasons, whether it be for self-interest, a sense of duty or patriotism, or even just because of a person's 'deep and abiding interest in politics' (Rolfe. M, 2012, pp 1)

Turning now to the issues raised by low turnout, I believe it's important to look at both sides of the argument about whether low turnout is something to worry about, so I now let's take the view that there is cause for concern and investigate why. In any functioning democracy you would want the government of the day to be representative of the people for which it claims to stand, and Mark Franklin, as previously referenced, highlights how low

<https://assignbuster.com/is-low-turnout-in-democracy-something-we-should-be-worried-about/>

turnout can ' call legitimacy into question' and ' suggest a lack of representation of certain groups and inegalitarian policies (pp. 2-6). Equally, as Michael Martinez points out, it is not unfair to say that low turnout can be an indicator of the declining health of a political or democratic system (Martinez, M. 2010, pp. 9-12) I interpret this as meaning that due to how reliant democratic systems are on elections, if fewer and fewer people come out to vote in those elections then not only does the government start to represent fewer and fewer people, but the whole democratic system which depends on political participation also starts to fail.

Continuing with the premise that low turnout is in fact worrying, many writers also offer ideas as to how turnout could be increased in order to avoid the issues I've just identified. For example James Fowler et al. identify how they believe that voter patience and the perceived cost of voting plays a role in whether people will go out to vote, explaining that the ' cost of processing information' has an effect where ' if people must bear the cost of participation long before the effects, then patience should also effect individual turnout decisions' (Fowler, J. et al, 2009, pp. 103-111). He goes on to say that to avoid voters coming to the decision that the benefit does not outweigh the cost of voting, parties and governments need to make clearer the benefits of their policies, as well as incorporating more policies which have a direct and viewable benefit to the electorate. However, alternatives to this include Jeffrey Karp et al with a focus on party mobilization wherein it is said that candidate-based systems with an incentive to mobilize voters would improve turnout and participation, but even then the piece itself identifies issues how the varying natures of electoral systems can create

inconsistencies, and this to me brings to the light the difficulties academics and writers can have in explaining the complexity of turnout patterns and solutions.

Looking back at what Meredith Rolfe says, she identifies that there is not enough focus on the impact of social context, explaining that 'individual reasoning does not take place within a social vacuum' (pp2) and that the causes of low turnout can go much deeper than it first appears on the surface. In fact Mark Franklin, in the same work previously mentioned, argues that the causes of turnout are to do not with the character of society, but actually with the character of elections, going as far as to say that party attachment; trust in government, or union membership 'contribute nothing to the explanation of turnout' (pp. 171). He instead credits turnout to the engagement of young people and how low the voting age is, as well as the fractionalising of party systems. All this to say that the complexity of analysing the how and why of low voter turnout can make it difficult to draw concrete conclusions as to whether we should worry just yet.

I've mentioned before how many people feel a sense of duty to vote, and that people will often determine whether the benefit of voting will outweigh the cost- this is known as rational choice. André Blais focuses much on this idea of rational choice theory, looking not only at the potential benefit but the *expected* benefit, saying 'If a preferred candidate is sure to win, the expected benefit of losing is nil' (Blais. A, 2000, pp. 1-10.). So here he is saying that people choose not to vote based on their expectations, the problem being that it is the political institutions and electoral systems we

should be worried about rather than low turnout, as turnout is merely a reaction to these systems.

Moreover, I would like to make the point that although we've been looking at low turnout as a bad thing which needs to be fixed, it is equally important to give merit to the idea that not voting at all can be viewed as just as democratic and therefore is not something we should be worried about.

While some countries such as Australia have a compulsory voting system, most major democracies also allow citizens to maintain a right not to vote, and I want to explain why that can be viewed in a positive light. Many writers such as Blais acknowledge that the right to vote is just that, a right, and while many citizens may interpret it as a duty, it is not a legal requirement in most countries, and there is an argument to be made that if we forced citizens to vote that they would not vote with their conscience, but vote randomly or erratically because they have no other choice, therefore leaving the government as no more representative than if citizens reserved their right to not vote; in its own right compulsory voting can be viewed as undemocratic because it takes away a choice.

In fact, Meredith Rolfe expands her idea of 'conditional choice' (pp. 21-41) that many people vote merely because they see and know of other people doing it, so the argument could even be made that not voting is more democratic because it might be more representative of how people actually feel. At least if a large number of citizens decide not to vote as a sign of protest or disdain it can send a message of disenfranchisement and perhaps a more powerful message from society more widely, hence my point being

that no low turnout would not be something to worry about, as the message it sends can in itself be democratic and meaningful.

Conclusively, I have laid out a definition of what we class as ' low turnout' using the idea of Franklin et al of voting being a ' habit' and low turnout depending on a country's historic average turnout; we have looked at how low turnout can effect the legitimacy of a government and how Martinez points out low turnout means low representation, as well as how some academics have offered their views on how turnout could be improved through party mobilization and offering citizens clearly advantageous policies due to how most voters use a ' rational choice' model, as laid out by André Blais, to determine the costs and benefits of voting. However we have also determined how not voting is also a right of citizens and, despite the sense of duty and patriotism some may feel in voting, I would conclude that citizens should be allowed to maintain their right to withhold their vote, and consequently even though low turnout can be concerning for the aforementioned reasons, not voting can be seen as equally democratic and therefore should not be worried about to much as of present.

Bibliography

- lais, A. (2000). *To vote or not to vote? : the merits and limits of rational choice theory* . Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, pp. 1-10.
- Fowler, J. and Smirnov, O. (2009). *Mandates, Parties, and Voters- How Elections Shape The Future* . Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

- Franklin, M. and Eijk, C. (2004). *Voter turnout and the dynamics of electoral competition in established democracies since 1945* . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Karp, J., Banducci, S. and Bowler, S. (2008). *Getting Out the Vote: Party Mobilization in a Comparative Perspective* . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 91-111.
- Martinez, M. (2010). *Why is American Turnout so Low, and Why Should We Care?* . Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 9-12.
- Rolfe, M. (2012). *Voter turnout : a social theory of political participation* . New York: Cambridge University Press. pp. 1-55