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History (Research) Master's Thesis

An American Peculiarity

The Normalization of Non-Voting in America

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Introduction

In 1982, the *New York Times* ran an op-ed story with a simple question: "Why don't people vote anymore?"[1] The piece was submitted by a local from White Plains, New York who expressed concern that his fellow citizens seldom ever came to the ballot box. Antonia D'Apice, then-Commissioner of the Board of Elections in White Plains, was perplexed. "It amazes me that more people don't vote," she said, "and it's ironic, because one thing's for sure: it has never been easier to vote."[2] The topic would be subject to numerous opinion pieces and books by the 1990s, but had just as many questions as it had answers. E.J Dionne argued in his bestseller *Why Americans Hate Politics* (1991) that, despite partisan rivalries growing fiercer, the centrist public was culturally moving away from politics. In 2004, political scientist Walter Dean Burnham gave a more skeptical answer to *The Boston Globe.* It was the lower and working classes, he argued, who were abandoning electoral politics in record numbers. "I don't think a public policy that advocates such extraordinary class warfare would be successful with a more broad-based electorate," he told the newspaper.[3] The suggestion was that nonvoters were being kept structurally apathetic, skewing politics almost exclusively toward middle-to-upper class interests. These varied responses to the nonvoter problem indicate a deep need for historicization.

The large number of nonvoters in America is not just an oddity of the late 20th century. Unlike any other democratic nation, it has been a feature of the country's political life for the past hundred years. It is, to put it simply, an American peculiarity. Yet, there has been limited historical work done on non-voting in the United States, its causes and who benefits from this arrangement. The research that has been done mainly comes not from historians but from data-oriented political scientists. This is largely because nonvoters are a heterogenous group with no shared history. One characteristic that nonvoters do share,

[1] Tom Lashnits, "Why Don't Americans Vote Anymore?" (Published 1982)," *The New York Times*, October 31, 1982, sec. Archives, https://www.nytimes.com/1982/10/31/archives/why-dont-people-vote-anymore.html.

[2] Lashnits.

[3] Drake Bennett, "Who Votes? (And Who Cares?)," *The Boston Globe*, May 30, 2004, http://archive.boston.com/news/politics/president/articles/2004/05/30/who_votes_and_who_cares/.

however, is that they are generally poor.[4] They are also far more likely to be younger, less educated and nonwhite.[5] What this tells us is that historicizing nonvoters inevitably involves telling a story interwoven with the history of America's working class and its most vulnerable. But one may be wondering, why not simply put forth a working class history instead, if the group is so interwoven with nonvoters? One can easily see the temptation to substitute nonvoters with a social history of society's lowest strata. The reason for this thesis's approach is that nonvoters structure the terrain and possibilities of American democracy itself. Because nonvoters tend to support "increasing government services and spending, guaranteeing jobs, and reducing inequality," their absence fundamentally distorts what should be the priorities of politics. [6]

This thesis argues that non-voting in the United States has followed a path of normalization throughout the 20th century. As will be argued, non-voting was initially viewed as a social problem and an abnormality of American democracy during the 1920s, but would be normalized by the end of the Cold War. It would become a feature of the political landscape. My investigation is bracketed within a concept I have called an 'American peculiarity.' It is a phrase inspired by political scientist Walter Dean Burnham's work *The Appearance and Disappearance of the American Voter* (1984). "Saturation was reached a century ago," Burnham writes of American voting rates, "[and] since then, electoral demobilization has occurred in several waves, and is still going on."[7] He describes this development as an "extraordinary peculiarity" because it is unique to the United States.[8] This turn of phrase became the inspiration for my title. This thesis explores how perceptions of this American peculiarity evolved over time—with the result being the socio-cultural normalization of non-voting and apoliticism by the 1990s.

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[4] Tom Rosentiel, "The Party of Nonvoters," Pew Research Center, October 29, 2010, https://www.pewresearch.org/2010/10/29/the-party-of-nonvoters/.

[5] Rosentiel.

[6] Sean McElwee, "Why Increasing Voter Turnout Affects Policy," The Atlantic, September 15, 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/why-nonvoters-matter/405250/.

[7] Walter Dean Burnham, "The Appearance and Disappearance of the American Voter," *The Political Economy : Readings in the Politics and Economics of American Public Policy,* edited by Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers (Armonk, NY: 1984), 112.

[8] Walter Dean Burnham, "The Appearance and Disappearance of the American Voter," 112.

I. The Approach

When examining electoral participation in the United States, a strange trend becomes apparent. The country saw a relative decline of voter turnout in the 20th century unlike other developed democracy.[9] This peculiarity was enough to pique my interest, but upon further investigation I realized that the historical work done on this core trend of American society was lacking. Longer-term analyses of non-voting trends are primarily discussed in political science, not history. While depoliticization remains a popular topic within critical theory, it often doubles as a philosophical diagnosis of postmodernity and its relation to neoliberalism.[10] Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos* (2015), for example, traces the construction of the Foucauldian *homo economicus* subject in late capitalism. She links this new subject to the mode of governance, political rationality, and human capital which characterizes the neoliberal turn.[11] Other scholars have also stressed depoliticization as a core feature of the neoliberal era.[12] Still others have emphasized what they consider to be a post-political, managerial style of governance after the Cold War. The theorists who argue for this critique include Jacques Rancière, Slavoj Žižek and Chantal Mouffe. While I am partial to these views, I also find their scope limited: it is not strictly historiographical nor is it confined to the United States. The depoliticization of American society in particular was a longer, more drawn-out process with non-voting being its primary symptom. The post-political critique therefore must be broadened. What began as a *particular* tendency of depoliticization in the leading capitalist superpower later became a more *generalized*, global tendency near the end of the 20th century.[13] Non-voting in the

[9] Michael P. McDonald, "National General Election VEP Turnout Rates, 1789-Present," United States Elections Project, accessed December 10, 2020, http://www.electproject.org/national-1789-present.

[10] *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) by Frederic Jameson was influential in this regard.

[11] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (MIT Press, 2015).

[12] Yahya M. Madra and Fikret Adaman, "Neoliberal Reason and Its Forms: De-Politicisation Through Economisation," *Antipode* 46, no. 3 (2014): 691–716, https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12065.

[13] For documentation of the global decline in voter participation among virtually all democracies starting from the mid-1980s, see: Abdurashid Solijonov, "Voter Turnout Trends around the World," *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance* (Dec. 31, 2016), https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/voter-turnout-trends-around-world.

United States foreshadows what would later become a general trend globally. But to make such a case required first examining the process forthright in the United States. This ultimately brought me to my thesis's hypothesis: Non-voting has undergone a process of normalization in the United States during the short 20th century.

A Historiography of Non-Voting

Constructing a historiography on existing scholarship on non-voting is difficult because research has largely been confined to political science. Yet, even within political science, questions over how to properly calculate electoral turnout remain. The U.S Census Bureau uses a calculation based on the percentage of *total voting-age population* who voted. However, political scientist Michael P. McDonald has claimed that this skews the data. He instead relies on an alternative count relative to the total *voting-eligible population*. When 'ineligible adults' are excluded, turnout from eligible voters from 1960 to 2000 actually "declined by 9 points (from 64 to 55 percent), compared with the Census Bureau's population-based figure of 12 points (63 to 51 percent)."[14] Even with these adjusted numbers, political scientist Thomas E. Patterson writes that turnout is still "disturbingly low."[15] More importantly, McDonald's formulation does not fundamentally change the downward trajectory that characterizes the 20th century. Turnout as per voting-eligible population still declined in six conservative presidential elections from 1960 to 1980.[16] What is ultimately not in dispute is that American democracy was growing less representative of the total voting-age population throughout the course of the 20th century.

Discussions on low voter turnout began to break into the mainstream around the time of the 1988 presidential election. Media widely reported that it was the lowest turnout of voting-age population since 1924.[17] The problem gained historicity since the country

[14] Thomas E. Patterson, "'The Vanishing Voter,'" *New York Times*, October 20, 2002, https://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/20/books/chapters/the-vanishing-voter.html.

[15] Patterson.

[16] McDonald, "National General Election VEP Turnout Rates, 1789-Present."

[17] Richard L. Berke, "50.16% Voter Turnout Was Lowest Since 1924," *The New York Times*, December 18, 1988, https://www.nytimes.com/1988/12/18/us/50.16-voter-turnout-was-lowest-since-1924.html.

was in the same place some 74 years before. The wide-ranging commentary at the time underscores the fact that this was a development that was real and felt. The reasons given have varied in the literature. Scholars have laid blame on institutional impediments, the media landscape, partisan ideologues, changes to the party system and Americans' cultural aversion toward politics, among other reasons.

Why Americans Don't Vote (1988) by sociologists Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward frame nonvoters as the product of institutional limitations to voting. Because the United States relies on a registration-based system, these requirements "constitute direct barriers to voting" and have eroded working class participation in politics.[18] They are not the singular cause of low voter turnout for Piven and Cloward, but are nonetheless the leading one. The text documents the barriers to voting that arose after the Gilded Age, building off a branch of political history that has stressed legal-institutional restrictions as the main cause of low voter turnout. Some of the leading scholars of this approach are Philip E. Converse, Paul Kleppner, Richard G. Niemi and Herbert F. Weisberg.[19] However, the progression of Piven and Cloward's text is abrupt—entirely skipping over the 1920s panic over nonvoting, the postwar era, and the collapse of public trust during the 1970s. Piven and Cloward also gloss over the fact that the longest period of monotonic electoral decline occurred, not during the 1980s, but from 1960 to 1980.[20] The collapse of public trust during this period receives no attention because they are not pursuing a socio-cultural account of why Americans exited politics. Rather than a critique of the growing separation between the political class and the public, it is mostly a historicized policy appeal.[21] While I largely agree with such prescriptions, I do not believe it answers the title of the text itself.

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[18] Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Why Americans Don't Vote* (Pantheon Books, 1988), 18.

[19] William E. Dugan and William A. Taggart, "The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe Revisited," *The Journal of Politics* 57, no. 2 (1995): 469, https://doi.org/10.2307/2960317.

[20] McDonald, "National General Election VEP Turnout Rates, 1789-Present."

[21] The text ends with a call to action to make registration easier, a wish that would be fulfilled when Bill Clinton signed the National Voter Registration Act of 1993. Involved in the lobbying efforts for its passage, both Piven and Cloward were present at the signing ceremony.

Other scholars have opted for a more socio-cultural approach to the problem of non-voting. Nina Eliasoph's work *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life* (1998) helps to account for some of the gaps in Piven and Cloward's work. Using interview-based studies, she highlights how the work of avoiding politics is done through the demarcation of boundaries in everyday sociability. "Political avoidance was a culture," she writes.[22] In one interview at a country-westerner dance club, Eliasoph recounts how those she engaged with "experienced the world of politics... as an inert, distant, impersonal realm, a boring and scary jumble of facts that did not really touch life."[23] The 'political' was culturally understood as that which was 'away from home.' What Eliasoph is describing was the cultural shift that gave way to the neoliberal turn of the 1980s. The boundaries of politics shrank as many Americans tuned out. Elisabeth Anker (2016) calls this process 'prepolitical suppression,' building off work by political theorist Michael Rogin.[24] It is the manner by which ideas are delegitimized as 'non-political' before they have a chance to assert themselves as oppositional. Reaganism is said to employ this strategy by discrediting the need for social welfarism in the public discourse.

Criticism has also been levied against the media cycle and the "permanent campaign" style of politics for depressing turnout after the 1970s. Thomas E. Patterson in *The Vanishing Voter* (2002) argues that in the modern media age, "politics is a secondhand experience, lived through the stories of journalists."[25] The very medium by which the public interacts with politics has produced widespread alienation. Patterson points to Watergate and Vietnam as the "point of departure for an increasingly assertive press and an increasingly jaded public."[26] The result has been a "vicious circle" of animosity between

[22] Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 47.

[23] Eliasoph, 131.

[24] Elisabeth Anker, "The Cinematic 'Dream Life' of American Politics," *Political Theory* 44, no. 2 (2016): 208.

[25] Thomas E. Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter: Public Involvement in an Age of Uncertainty* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 65.

[26] Patterson, 80.

the politicians and journalists.[27] Patterson argues that the collapse of public trust from the 1970s onward is one of the leading catalysts for the contemporary phenomenon of non-voting in the United States. Likewise, E. J. Dionne Jr. in *Why Americans Hate Politics* (1991) also locates the origins of contemporary depoliticization in the same period, but for different reasons. He argues that in the wake of the 1960s and its ideological battles, politics became a permanent culture war. Taking a radical centrist position, Dionne Jr. states that both "liberalism and conservatism have become obstacles to a healthy political life."[28] The increased polarization of party politics, according to him, has been in sharp contrast to the depoliticization of American society generally. For Dionne Jr., ideological polarization is not representative of the electorate. Hence, many Americans exit politics entirely or grow hostile to it.

Still others have put forward a more radical critique: the American party system was not designed to represent voters anyway. Thomas Ferguson in *Golden Rule: The Investment Theory of Party Competition and the Logic of Money-Driven Political Systems* (1995) argues that it is not voters, but business elites, who determine the political directives of parties. "The electorate is not too stupid or too tired to control the political system... it is merely too poor," Ferguson writes.[29] Structurally, voters are not able to acquire the information required to properly integrate themselves in the political sphere. Such a privilege is reserved for elites and those with capital and influence. Ferguson's argument is in line with the ideas put forth by Walter Dean Burnham (1985), Bill Winders (1999) and others who link the shrinking electorate to efforts by the political class to insulate themselves from economic demands.[30] Burnham, in particular, argues that the vanishing

[27] Thomas E. Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter: Public Involvement in an Age of Uncertainty* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2002),, 73.

[28] E. J. Dionne, *Why Americans Hate Politics* (Simon and Schuster, 2013), 23.

[29] Thomas Ferguson, *Golden Rule: The Investment Theory of Party Competition and the Logic of Money-Driven Political Systems* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), 384.

[30] Bill Winders, "The Roller Coaster of Class Conflict: Class Segments, Mass Mobilization, and Voter Turnout in the U.S., 1840-1996," *Social Forces* 77, no. 3 (1999): 833–62, https://doi.org/10.2307/3005963; Walter Dean Burnham, "The Appearance and Disappearance of the American Voter," *The Political Economy: Readings in the Politics and Economics of American Public Policy*, edited by Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers (Armonk, NY: 1984), 112-37.

electorate finds its origins in President McKinley's 1896 presidential victory and the defeat of William Jennings Bryan's economic populism.[31] The United States is said to have followed a unique path of political demobilization precisely because of the entrenchment of exclusively bourgeois interests within the party system thereafter. Later transformations in the media landscape only furthered the gap between the public and the political sphere. By the end of the 1980s, political parties had separated entirely—pushing a rightward agenda despite there being no rightward shift in the public at large.[32] According to Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers (1985), there has been a "continued decline in the capacity of conventional politics to organize and integrate electoral demand."[33]

My Contribution to the Scholarship

While the aforementioned approaches inform my thesis, I expand on them by adding the concept of *normalization* to the existing scholarship. Normalization is the process by which activities and ideas come to be viewed as natural and normal in everyday life. For example, homosexuality in the Western world has undergone a process of relative normalization in the last century as have other social mores. In some cases, normalization can also serve a disciplinary function. Philosopher Michael Foucault understood normalization to be the construction of ideal forms of conduct which, if not followed, bring social punishment. This allows for the exertion of social control with minimal coercion.[34] Normalization is ultimately the way by which individuals intuitively understand whether activities are allowed or shunned.

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[31] Walter Dean Burnham, "The Appearance and Disappearance of the American Voter," *The Political Economy : Readings in the Politics and Economics of American Public Policy,* edited by Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers (Armonk, NY: 1984), 124-29.

[32] Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, "The Myth of America's Turn to the Right," The Atlantic, May 1986, https://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/95dec/conbook/fergrt.htm.

[33] Ferguson and Rogers.

[34] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Penguin Books, 1977), 215–20.

Naturally, normalization is also a process present in political culture: the determination of what is allowed in the public discourse and how one can act politically. One particularly ruthless story of this in practice is described by Michał Krzyżanowski (2020) as it occurred in Poland during Soviet rule. When the Solidarity trade union was suppressed in December 1981, the state employed martial law. After weeks of rioting, things began to calm as the state channels broadcasted the message: "despite disruptions, a significant degree of normalization is already settling in..."[35] In this case, normalization was understood to be complacency and passivity on part of the public—a return to normal, or at least the appearance of it. In most liberal democratic states, however, the normalization process is not as directly repressive. It often occurs within the realm of political discourse, such as the limiting of political possibilities to budgetary issues, regulations and culture wars (as was the strategy during Reagan's presidency). These discursive strategies belong to the realm of metapolitics, since they rework how politics speaks of itself and understands its own boundaries. Beyond discourse, normalization in political culture also determines which political activities are allowed or encouraged and which are not. Therefore, whether or not to be involved in politics is not as straight-forward as one might assume. One must arguably be socialized into being political. Political action (or inaction) could become a course of habit with each generation. For example, in the United Kingdom, evidence suggests that those who grew up during Thatcherism are less likely to engage in political activities compared to the previous generations.[36] The process of normalization is frankly made real by its staying power with each generation.

Having defined normalization as it relates to political culture, I apply this concept to my thesis's hypothesis: American political culture underwent a process of normalizing electoral non-participation during the 20th century. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the United States has possessed a disproportionately large number of nonvoters. During

[35] Michał Krzyżanowski, "Normalization and the Discursive Construction of 'New' Norms and 'New' Normality: Discourse in the Paradoxes of Populism and Neoliberalism," *Social Semiotics* 30, no. 4 (August 7, 2020): 435, https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2020.1766193.

[36] Maria Teresa Grasso et al., "Socialization and Generational Political Trajectories: An Age, Period and Cohort Analysis of Political Participation in Britain," *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 29, no. 2 (April 3, 2019): 199, https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2018.1476359.

the 1920s, it was viewed as a deeply abnormal social problem—but by the 1990s, it was not given comparable importance. To best understand the process behind this development, I have broken up my inquiry into four key areas each defined by its own theme. My thesis traces how attitudes toward widespread non-voting underwent a process of (1) initial recognition and concern, (2) disregard, (3) crisis, and then (4) normalization. I will now concretely introduce the four thematic periods of my thesis.

The Interwar Period (1920s)
Theme: *The Problem is Recognized*

An argument for the normalization of non-voting must first begin by demonstrating it was once an abnormal, social problem. Chapter 2 briefly begins with the origins of the American peculiarity at the turn of the 20th century. The nonvoter problem is recognized for the first time during the 1920s. I recount the social panic over non-voting then and the mass-led efforts to correct it.

The Postwar Period (1950s & early 1960s)
Theme: The Problem Is Disregarded

Chapter 3 examines the theorists who looked at the nonvoter problem with fresh eyes after World War II. They proceeded to reimagine the issue entirely, normalizing non-voting in their theories and misconstruing the public's political demobilization as necessary for social stability. A depoliticized society was thought to be a stage of democratic development akin to maturity. Their ideas would be foundational for the field of political science and statecraft, more generally. Many scholars of the postwar era fully expected the public's passivity and political disengagement to continue unabated—that the normalization of non-voting in theory would proceed as a general tendency in the culture at large—but such predictions were cut short by the activist era of the 1960s. My methodology stresses not only their thoughts, but also how the ascendent liberal age in which they lived influenced their conclusions.

The Restless Period (late 1960s & 1970s)
Theme: The Problem Splinters and Deepens

Chapter 4 documents how the social conditions of the 1960s ultimately repudiated the postwar idea that the public's apathy was now stable and normalized. My argument traces how left-oriented political theorists deconstructed the postwar perspective at the same time Americans grew skeptical of politics and the number of nonvoters grew. Political distrust as a consequence of scandals within power further alienated the public from politics during the 1970s. It proved to be fertile soil for the normalization of non-voting thereafter.

The Depoliticized Period (1980s & the End of the Cold War)
Theme: The Problem Is Normalized

Chapter 5 finally illustrates how the normalization of non-voting grew out of the public's exit from politics during the 1970s. An awakened individuality came to replace some of politics as Americans looked to find self-actualization elsewhere. The New Right then leveraged the public's inertia to assume a political mandate and enact their neoliberal program. Left alone and unresolved, the crisis of confidence during the 1970s was allowed to fester and nonvoters subsequently became a fixture of American political culture. Non-voting had effectively been normalized.

Methodology & Sources Used

When demarcating periods, cultural critic Stuart Hall wrote that, "what is important are the significant breaks—where old lines of thought are disrupted, older constellations displaced, and elements, old and new, are regrouped around a different set of premises and themes."[37] This is the thinking I employ in demarcating the four thematic areas outlined in the previous section. Each period represents a *break* or shift in attitudes toward non-voting. Although widespread non-voting has remained persistent in the United States throughout the 20th century, perceptions toward this American peculiarity have naturally morphed over time. To demonstrate this development, my theoretical framework combines two forms of history-writing.

[37] Daniel T. Rodgers and Henry Charles Lea, *Age of Fracture* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 3.

Firstly, I trace how nonvoters were conceptualized across the short 20th century: how they were perceived and rationalized by the purveyors of ideas in American society. Primary source material, especially for chapters 2 and 3, mainly comes from academic journals such as the *American Political Science Review, American Journal of Sociology, Journal of Politics* and others along with books from the period. To establish an authoritative voice on the subject matter, each of my thesis's four thematic areas rely on their own set of secondary source materials. I then build on them with primary source material which I have compiled myself.

Secondly, my work connects this intellectual history to socio-cultural processes: how certain ideas preceded the public's mass exit from politics from the late 1970s onwards and were later reiterated. The increase of nonvoters after the 1960s is also contextualized with quantitative data, such as polling and surveys, to document the analogous trends in public opinion. Secondary source material from historians is used to contextualize these trends and understand who benefited from the rise of non-voting and why it was not properly addressed by the 1980s and '90s. Finally, I use newspapers, media, and other commentary to illustrate how the normalization of non-voting was lived and felt.

Altogether, my investigation links the intellectual apologists of political demobilization to the socio-cultural process of normalizing non-voting and apoliticism. Ultimately, the end result was that comparable rates of non-voting during both the 1920s and the 1980s/90s produced two difference responses: panic in the former and relative ambivalence in the latter. My methodology merges both intellectual and socio-cultural history to construct a four-part thematic argument of how the process of normalization took place.

Limitations and Relevance

This thesis relies on the progression of a fourfold thematic structure to make its historical argument. I did, however, encounter some limitations in the process of my work. Because of the ongoing COVID-19 epidemic, I was unable to obtain access (or had limited access) to non-digitized archival material in the United States. My research was therefore restricted to digitized archives published online. Because internal documents from political parties

are poorly archived and are largely in print-only, I was limited in how I could link my research to strategies taken by political parties toward non-voters. Therefore, there is room for further scholarship on this front in the future.

Moreover, although my thesis focuses on the short 20th century, its findings are still prescient. By historicizing nonvoters and how they came to be understood by intellectuals and the culture at large, we can better contextualize the present political culture. Given that nonvoters arguably determined the 2016 election, the timeliness of such an investigation could not be more appropriate.[38] In the vast majority of states, nonvoters formed a majority amid an election where both candidates had record disapproval. According to Gallup, this was the first time both candidates were viewed unfavorably by the majority of Americans since it started measuring the metric in 1956.[39] The recent 2020 election may have seen record turnout, but the normalization of non-voting and its impact will likely persist until a higher standard for electoral participation is firmly established. For now, we still live in the shadow of the long process of depoliticization that characterizes 20th century American political culture.

[38] Brittany Shoot, "Who Helped Trump Most in the Presidential Election? Nonvoters, Pew Study Says," *Fortune*, August 10, 2018, https://fortune.com/2018/08/09/nonvoters-trump-presidency-pew-study/.

[39] Lydia Saad, "Trump and Clinton Finish With Historically Poor Images," Gallup, November 8, 2016, https://news.gallup.com/poll/197231/trump-clinton-finish-historically-poor-images.aspx.

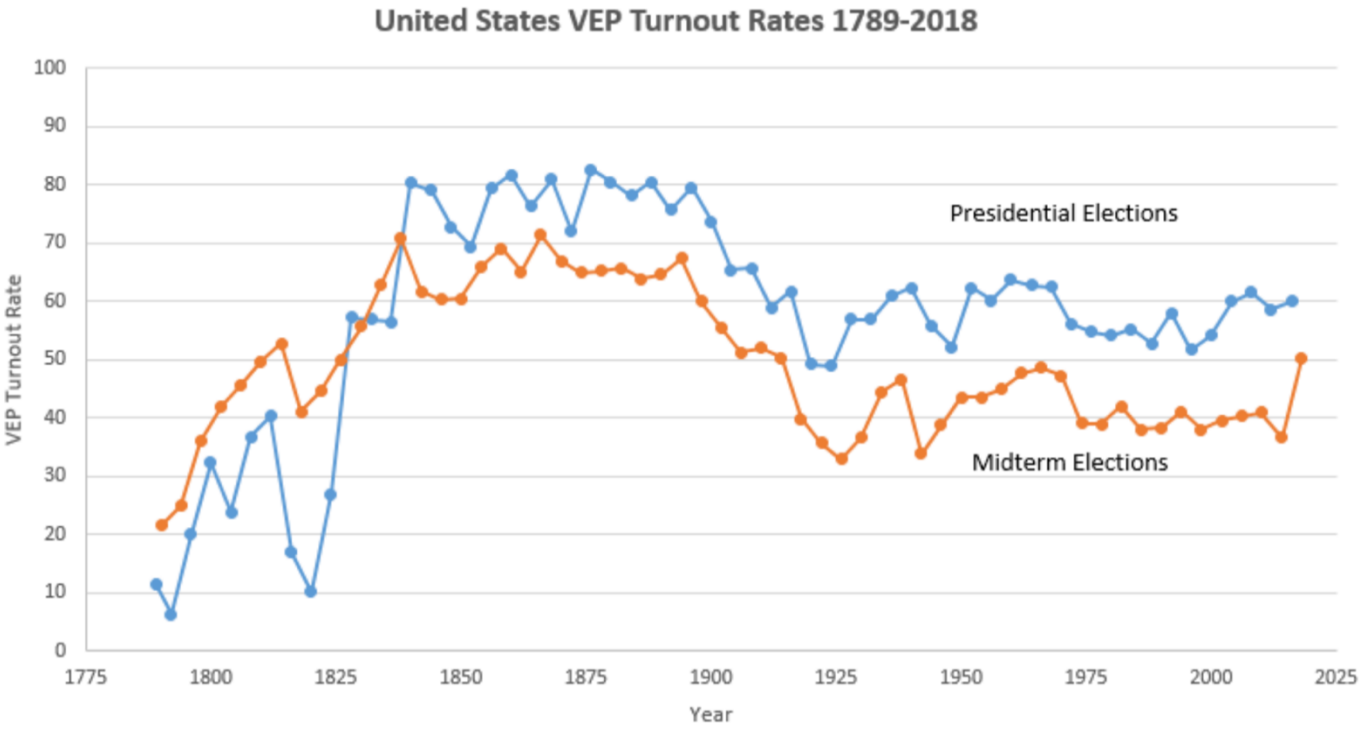

Figure 1. Shows the trend of voter-eligible turnout in U.S. history. Includes the American peculiarity periodization (1896—)

Source: Michael P. McDonald, "National General Election VEP Turnout Rates, 1789-Present," U*nited States Elections Project,* accessed December 10, 2020, http://www.electproject.org/national-1789-present.

II. An American Peculiarity

The foundation of this thesis's investigation is an acknowledgement of an American peculiarity. It is one that has perplexed scholars for close to a century. Since the turn of the 20th century, there has been a general decline of voter turnout and political participation in the United States.[40] The country has remained an outlier among most other democratic nations in this regard. Political scientist Walter Dean Burnham, often credited with inventing the 'Party System' periodization, claims that the years between 1896–1930 are the first time the U.S. sees a "disappearing electorate."[41] This was a period when the political class began to proactively insulate itself from the public.[42] By the 1920s, the decline of political engagement was obvious to all. For the first time since 1828, less than half of all Americans voted in both the 1920 and 1924 presidential elections.[43] This is in stark contrast to other nations—for example, turnout was close to 80% in German (1920), 73% in the United Kingdom (1922), 80% in Denmark (April, 1920) and 71% in Australia (1919).[44] The destruction of World War I may be partially culpable for the mass political participation then, but low electoral turnout in the United States has comparatively persisted well beyond these early years.

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[40] McDonald, "National General Election VEP Turnout Rates, 1789-Present."

[41] Walter Dean Burnham, "The Appearance and Disappearance of the American Voter," *The Political Economy : Readings in the Politics and Economics of American Public Policy,* edited by Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers (Armonk, NY: 1984), 124.

[42] Walter Dean Burnham, "Party Systems and the Political Process," *The American Party Systems: Stages of Political Development*, edited by William Nisbet Chambers (New York, 1967): 301 **quoted in** Allan J Lichtman, "Critical Elections in Historical Perspective" (Division of the Humanities and Social Sciences | California Institute of Technology, 1982), 7.

[43] Bill Winders, "The Roller Coaster of Class Conflict: Class Segments, Mass Mobilization, and Voter Turnout in the U.S., 1840-1996," *Social Forces* 77, no. 3 (1999): 846, https://doi.org/10.2307/3005963.

[44] Dieter Nohlen and Philip Stöver, *Elections in Europe: A Data Handbook* (Nomos, 2010), 776; Dieter Nohlen and Philip Stöver, *Elections in Europe: A Data Handbook*, 537; Edmund Tetteh,"Election Statistics: UK 1918-2007" *House of Commons Library* (February 2008): 18, Archive, accessed December 1 2020.https://web.archive.org/web/20140708134346/http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons/lib/research/rp2008/rp08-012.pdf; University of Western Australia, "Commonwealth Parliament, House of Representatives Election: Election of 13 December 1919," *Australia Politics and Elections Archive 1856-2018*, accessed December 1, 2020, https://elections.uwa.edu.au/elecdetail.lasso?keyvalue=693.

During the 1920s, the precipitous decline in U.S. electoral participation caused serious concern among intellectuals and civic groups. Although electoral turnout had been on the decline for at least two decades by then, it was the first time many recognized this American peculiarity as real. The operating assumption of traditional democratic theory then was that it had to be dynamic and centered around participation. With the majority not voting, there was panic. This peculiarity of American political life had to be quashed or the "cherished historic ideals of the nation" would be permanently scarred.[45] What ensued was an unprecedented national effort in media, academia and on-the-ground activism to bring individuals to the ballot box.

The persistence of non-voting in the United States thereafter has its roots in this historical moment. The political culture of the United States arguably never fully recovered. For the rest of the century, the highest turnout for voting-eligible Americans was in 1960 (63.8%).[46] For comparison, UK General election turnout in 1959 was recorded to be 78.7%.[47] The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that non-voting was seen as an abnormality and serious social problem during the 1920s. Mass-led actions were taken in the hopes of correcting it. By contrast, the late 1980s and the 1990s had no comparable mass effort despite electoral turnout being virtually the same. In other words, the same problem of low voter turnout produced two completely different responses during the 1920s and the late 1980s-1990s. This comparison is necessary because it provides us with a reference point for understanding the normalization process. I begin with the historical circumstances of turn-of-the-century America to contextualize the precipitous decline of voter turnout by the 1920s.

[45] Arthur Schlesinger and Erik McKinley Erikson, "The Vanishing Voter," *The New Republic* XL, no. 515 (1924): 167.

[46] McDonald, "National General Election VEP Turnout Rates, 1789-Present."

[47] "1959 UK General Election Results Summary," UK Political Info, accessed December 10, 2020, http://www.ukpolitical.info/1959.htm.

The Transformation of American Political Culture (1890 – 1920)

Courthouse cliques, political clubs, parades and vicious rivalries—these are just a few features that defined American political culture in the second half of the 19th century. Often called the Third Party System (1854 – 1894) in American historiography, the period was dominated by ethnocultural and religious issues which reduced politics to that which was immediate and personal. In a time of committed party membership, the political machines of the day ensured that this culturally incendiary mode of politics would capture the public imagination. More importantly, they succeeded in translating it into votes at the local, state and national level. Those who were eligible to vote came out in record numbers during the Third Party System despite the relative exclusion of some swathes of the American population. From the 1850s until the end of the century, voter turnout among those eligible averaged around 80%.[48] This figure, the highest among virtually all other democratic nations at the time, remained constant throughout the Gilded Age and its unprecedented economic expansion. The aggressive cultural politics of the day and its strong party apparatuses had successfully mobilized the public to new heights. Yet, in just a few decades, the socio-economic forces unleashed during the Gilded Age would disrupt the same politics that allowed for them. Economic grievances, previously excluded, began to augment the political sphere and its demands. By the tail-end of the Gilded Age, the succeeding Progressive Era (1890s – 1920s) sought to resolve the many social questions that grew out of the expansionist era. By the 1920s, its paradoxical end result was nothing short of a transformation: a "[narrowing of] the role politics played in daily life."[49] The mass mode of politics that had defined the previous age began to unravel under the mounting complexity of 20th century modernity. It is during this tumultuous time that the American peculiarity finds its historical origins.

The United States sets itself apart from the rest of the world in that it had a "fully operating set of mass-democratic institutions and values before the onset of industrial-

[48] Winders, "The Roller Coaster of Class Conflict," 836.

[49] Mark L. Kornbluh, *Why America Stopped Voting: The Decline of Participatory Democracy and the Emergence of Modern American Politics* (NYU Press, 2000), 115.

capitalist development."[50] In Europe and elsewhere, modernizing elites found themselves well-insulated; yet, in the United States, such pressures were recognized as a potential tinderbox. By the 1890s, capitalism found itself under tremendous stress as its contradictions worsened. Crises within emergent American finance-capital began to seriously disrupt the workings of the national economy. In a span of just two decades, the United States experienced economic panics in 1890, 1893, 1896, 1901 and 1907. For many Americans, this was comparable to a long depression and, as a result, economic grievances began to enter national politics for the first time. Major labor protests like the Homestead Strike (1892), Pullman Strike (1894), Bituminous Coal Miners' Strike (1894), the Lattimer Massacre Strike (1897), the Great Anthracite Coal Strike (1902) and others pushed forward a new class-based politics that had previously been largely latent. It was one of the most active periods of proletarian organizing the United States would ever see. However, the rise of this class-based politics also precedes the secular decline of electoral participation in the United States. The dominant segments of America successfully restructured society to insulate themselves from these ruptures. As Bill Winders (1999) argues, "once *class*—not religious or ethnic—conflict emerged, the U.S. political context changed, and voter turnout consequently fell."[51] Walter Dean Burnham highlights the 1896 election as an possible demarcation point for this development because it "pitted industrial-capitalism against mass pluralist democracy."[52] Ultimately, the former triumphed with the victory of William McKinley and America's 'Age of Imperialism' followed.

The restructuring of politics in response to growing economic demands was done through the courts, institutions, and within the parties themselves. One popular, new tool to break up economic demands became the court injunction. It was commonly used against strikers, which "by 1920 or earlier... had become settled American practice."[53] The legal precedent of *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad Co.* established the concept

[50] Burnham, "The Appearance and Disappearance of the American Voter," 124.

[51] Winders, "The Roller Coaster of Class Conflict," 844.

[52] Dugan and Taggart, "The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe Revisited," 469.

[53] P. F. Brissenden, "The Labor Injunction," *Political Science Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (1933): 414, https://doi.org/10.2307/2143155.

of 'corporate personhood,' further delineating politics and the economic sphere as separate domains. Within political parties, the period is marked by a decline in competition. The 52nd Congress of 1900 was, for the first time, composed of more than two-thirds returning congressmen.[54] With incumbents facing less competition, the public's interest in electoral contests faded. In his investigation, Paul Kleppner estimates that "the declining electoral competition accounted for between one-quarter and one-third of the early twentieth-century drop in turnout."[55] Some states went further by directly barring 'undesirable' democratic participation at the ballot box. The most brazen acts of voter suppression for blacks and poor whites occurred in the South through literacy tests, poll taxes, grandfather clauses and other means. The goal was to thwart a cross-racial class-based coalition. The voter suppression strategy would succeed in maintaining Democratic party hegemony in the South from the late 19th century until the 1960s.[56] Southern voter turnout has historically always been less than the rest of the country, but the decline in political participation was stark. By the 1924 election, turnout was just 19% in the Southern United States with the region effectively ruled in an anti-democratic, despotic manner through white terrorism.[57] A similar, more subdued development took place in the North where nativist Progressives enacted parallel policies to restrict the 'least desirable' elements of their electorate—working class immigrants.[58] Stricter residency requirements were extended in the North and non-citizens were barred from voting in most states by the early 1920s.[59] In just a few decades, turnout for U.S. presidential elections declined drastically:

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[54] Kornbluh, *Why America Stopped Voting*, 147.

[55] Paul Kleppner, *Who Voted?: The Dynamics of Electoral Turnout, 1870-1980* (Praeger Publishers, 1982), 184 **quoted in** Kornbluh, *Why America Stopped Voting*, 148.

[56] Bertrall L. Ross and Douglas M. Spencer, "Passive Voter Suppression: Campaign Mobilization and the Effective Disfranchisement of the Poor," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, November 20, 2019), 652, https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3501739.

[57] Winders, "The Roller Coaster of Class Conflict," 836.

[58] Winders, "The Roller Coaster of Class Conflict," 848.

[59] Liette Gidlow, *The Big Vote: Gender, Consumer Culture, and the Politics of Exclusion, 1890s-1920s* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 25.

from 80% in 1896 to a low of 49% in 1924.[60] All of these confounding, structural forces took part in this transformation of politics.

By the end of WWI, the electoral universe was unrecognizable to what it had been just decades ago. Any socialist and populist elements that would have been largely responsible for mobilizing America's lower-classes had largely evaporated. Socialist Eugene V. Debs's 1920 presidential run from his prison cell was the last, fading reminder of a bygone era. Industrial capitalism had completely reinvented the party system and the possibilities of politics itself. Spectacular politicking was replaced by a more sober 'educational style' of campaigning as parties became more entrenched. The mood was felt by some like David Jayne Hill who lamented the declining voter turnout amid, what he called, an "undisguised autocracy" within the party system.[61] A new order emerged after WWI which reworked the public's relationship with the political state. As Walter Dean Burnham concludes in his essay *The Appearance and Disappearance of the American Voter* (1984)*:*

> A political system which was congruent with the hegemony of laissez-faire corporate capitalism over the whole society had come into being [after WWI]. This system rested on two non-competitive party hegemonies *and upon a huge mass of nonvoters* [emphasis added].[62]

It is this observation that fundamentally structures this thesis's understanding of the nonvoter in America. The democratic system that emerged by the 1920s structurally depended on nonvoters for legitimacy. The socio-economic development of the country had "significantly outpaced the evolution of its political institutions, yielding an inherent lag in the meeting of political demands."[63] What resulted was a lumpen-mass, excluded from politics proper, and an insulated ruling class united by its bourgeois directives. This arrangement was made possible by nonvoters whose inertia narrowed the possibilities of

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[60] Winders, "The Roller Coaster of Class Conflict," 846.

[61] David Jayne Hill, "The Default of Democracy," *The North American Review* 212, no. 778 (1920): 296.

[62] Burnham, "The Appearance and Disappearance of the American Voter," 128.

[63] Lichtman, "Critical Elections in Historical Perspective," 2.

American politics. The American peculiarity would thereafter become a fact of political life for the remainder of the 20th century.

The 1920s Panic Over Non-Voting

The interwar years were an era of political quietism. Today, the 1920s are often associated with the nouveau riche and the rest of America who sought to be them. It is remembered for the automobile, jazz, radio, and early film. Seldom is it ever remembered for politics. It was, after all, a 'return to normalcy,' as President Warren G. Harding famously put it. The dispassionate politics of the era, however, runs counter to expectations. In 1913, the Amendment XVII to the U.S. constitution allowed popular elections of senators for the first time; then, in 1920, Amendment XIX nominally enfranchised some 26 million American women.[64] Yet, the expansion of the vote did not result in a rapid rise of political participation.[65] In comparison, the passing of the women's vote led to far greater participation in Europe than in the United States.[66] In Europe, the expansion of the electorate produced mass-led political ideologies that gripped the public imagination. Yet, in the United States, everything seemed to run backwards. The enfranchisement of women in the U.S. occurred during a time when the public's diminishing appetite for politics was already firmly established. This did not go unnoticed by activists at the time. Suffragist Suzanne La Folette remarked in 1926 that, "it is the misfortune for the woman's movement that it has succeeded in securing political rights for women at the very period when politics are worth less than they have been at any time since the eighteenth century."[67] The fact that

[64] "A Century of Women's Vote - the 19th Amendment at 100," VOA, accessed October 15, 2020, https://editorials.voa.gov/a/a-century-of-women-s-vote---the-19th-amendment-at-100/5557148.html.

[65] After immediate enfranchisement, raw electoral turnout can be expected to drop because the electorate expands and not all are integrated into the political sphere yet. It takes some time before an enfranchised group reaches the voting levels comparable to the other parts of the electorate.

[66] Burnham, citing *Political Behavior* (1963) by H.L.A. Tingsten, claims that turnout for the women's vote after enfranchisement was "61.8 percent in Sweden (1919), 68.1 percent in New Zealand (1896), and 82.1 percent in Austria (1919)." For comparison, the turnout among women in Chicago, Illinois in 1916—the first state to give women the right to vote in 1913—turnout was around 47.3 percent.

[67] Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (Yale University Press, 1987), 102.

roughly half of the population was absent from electoral politics was disconcerting for the early suffragettes.

The public's political inertia also came at a time when modern consumerist society was coming into being. The many 'publics'—as Walter Lippmann famously wrote of in *Public Opinion* (1922)— began to feel the pull of the many cleavages of the burgeoning consumer culture. During the 1920s, politics became overshadowed by new lifestylist tendencies, a consumerism that resembles much of our own today. The public's diminished appetite for politics was reflected in the urban papers of the 1920s with the addition of "sports sections, women's pages, lifestyle articles, comics, and more features."[68] The many novel cleavages of social life demanded tools to understand how this new mass society ticked. Applied science, especially psychology, provided such a methodology. Using these methods, the field of public relations worked hand-in-hand with advertisers to construct a science of society that could install consumer desires into the many publics of America.[69] Yet, if science could be applied convincingly to consumers, could it not just as effectively be applied to voters—the so-called 'consumers of politics'? Parallel to these revolutions within consumer society, political science was constructing its own quasi-predictive methodologies to understand political participation in a way that had never been done before.

With depressed turnout being a common concern during the 1920s, some of the first field experiments in political science were aimed at understanding the nonvoter in America. Noted political scientist and card-carrying progressive Charles Edward Merriam is often credited with introducing quantitative, scientific methodology to the discipline with his field experiments. In 1924, Merriam and his associate, Harold F. Gosnell, published the findings of their field study on non-voting in Chicago. In *Non-Voting: Causes and Methods of Control* (1924), they sought to understand why half of Chicago's electorate did not come out for the mayoral election of 1923. It was the first use of "random sampling and statistics

[68] Kornbluh, *Why America Stopped Voting*, 115.

[69] See: *Propaganda* (1928) by Edward Bernays and *Century of the Self* (2002) directed by Adam Curtis.

of attributes" within political science.[70] The field study also required a massive research base consisting of statisticians, psychologists, and hundreds of other political experts. The investigation was presented as an outgrowth of behavioristic psychology in a 1924 roundtable discussion; the goal was to determine the *set* under which non-voting occurs.[71] The authors wrote that the trends seen in Chicago at the time were representative of the nation at large, and they "decided to make it the basis of a general analysis of the causes of non-voting."[72] In surveying some 6,000 nonvoters in Chicago, the book outlined the reasons for non-voting which include: (1) physical difficulties, (2) legal and administrative obstacles, (3) disbelief in voting, and (4) inertia.[73] The 'heterogenous environment' of Chicago at the time, with its many different immigrant groups, was given attention. Children of foreign-born parents and new residents were least likely to vote because they were still new to the urban community, they argued. In treating the public like a biological organism, Merriam largely blamed politics itself for being unable to rouse the public's interest. "It is possible to show how the life-interest of the voter is linked up, under present conditions, with the character of the government," Merriam wrote.[74] He goes further in stating that "the politician's tactics of 'not stirring them up' was the method best adapted to promote indifference and neglect."[75] Still, despite the institutional pressures that made political apathy possible, Merriam still viewed the nonvoter with relative revulsion as "the greatest grafter in America."[76] This was largely in line with popular culture at the time,

[70] Barry Dean Karl, *Charles E. Merriam and the Study of Politics*, First Edition (Chicago: Univ of Chicago Pr, 1975), 148.

[71] Charles E. Merriam, "Round Table I. Psychology and Political Science," *The American Political Science Review* 18, no. 1 (1924): 124, https://doi.org/10.2307/1943702.

[72] Charles Edward Merriam, *Non-Voting : Causes and Methods of Control* (Chicago, Ill. : The University of Chicago Press, 1924), http://archive.org/details/nonvotingcausesm0000merr.

[73] Merriam, 11.

[74] Charles E. Merriam, "Round Table I. Psychology and Political Science," *The American Political Science Review* 18, no. 1 (1924): 244, https://doi.org/10.2307/1943702.

[75] Merriam, 247.

[76] Gidlow, *The Big Vote*, 19.

which characterized those who failed to vote as 'civic slackers' who were responsible for America's social ills.

The text was widely well-received in the academic press. One reviewer glowingly called it "one of the few pieces of genuine political research ever undertaken in this country."[77] Eschewing the standards of their day, Merriam and Gosnell have "adopted the technique of laboratory science."[78] Another reviewer hoped that this "first scientific study of one of the most important problems of American democracy" will lead to a technique for "inducing the American voter to do his duty."[79] Citing the work, Walter Lippmann wrote in *The Phantom Public* (1924) that, "the students used to write books about voting. They are now beginning to write books about non-voting."[80] The text would cement Merriam's position as the chair of the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago. The public success of the study saw the department's funding grow as a new generation of political scientists were trained under its wing.[81] *Non-Voting: Causes and Methods of Control* (1924), and other such studies produced under Merriam's direction, would transform the field—introducing "survey experiments, content analysis, field experiments, and correlation, regression, and factor analysis" to construct a new science of politics.[82]

Investigations into the motives of voting (and non-voting) would frequent journals and newspapers in the years ahead. Ben A. Arneson (1925) would conduct a similar field

[77] Chester C. Maxey, review of *Review of Non-Voting: Causes and Methods of Control*, by Charles E. Merriam and Harold F. Gosnell, *The Journal of Social Forces* 3, no. 2 (1925): 369, https://doi.org/10.2307/3005316.

[78] Maxey, 369.

[79] Caleb Perry Patterson, review of *Review of Non-Voting*, by Charles E. Merriam and Harold F. Gosnell, *The Southwestern Political and Social Science Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (1924): 285–86.

[80] Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (Transaction Publishers, 1993), 7.

[81] Frederic A. Ogg, "Personal and Miscellaneous," *The American Political Science Review* 18, no. 3 (1924): 606, https://doi.org/10.2307/1944185.

[82] Michael T. Heaney and John Mark Hansen, "Building the Chicago School," *The American Political Science Review* 100, no. 4 (2006): 589.

study of nonvoters in Delaware, Ohio.[83] Inspired by the work of Merriam and Gosnell, Daniel C. Cline (1926) reviewed voting habits of public service employees.[84] Sociologists Robert Stoughton Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd were careful to note the decline of political participation in their case study *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (1929), seeing it as representative of a general American trend. Others like Charles H. Titus (1928) looked backward, piecing together how voting habits changed in the past two decades.[85] In the years after *Non-Voting,* Republican activist Simon Michelet published "more than twenty studies on turnout and distributed them widely to public officials, party leaders, civic leaders, and newspaper editors."[86] Gosnell expanded on the work he did with Merriam by conducting a stimulation of voting "to test the causes of non-voting in an objective fashion," the fruits of which were published in 1927.[87] Altogether, nonvoters took on special importance during this early period of political science. It was believed that understanding the nonvoter would shed light on what moves the public and democracy's mass impulses. For progressives, it was also the key to encouraging Americans' involvement in politics during a time when apathy was at historic highs.

As interesting as these scholarly investigations were, they ultimately tapped into a zeitgeist that echoed far beyond academia. Among progressives, the press and civic organizations, concerns were being raised about the public's political apathy. Arthur M. Schlesinger and Erik Eriksson (1924) in *The New Republic* likened it to "a creeping paralysis," that "an apathetic attitude has spread over the body politic, steadily enlarging the area of its devastation and waxing in vigor with the years."[88] This social problem was

[83] Ben A. Arneson, "Non-Voting in a Typical Ohio Community," *The American Political Science Review* 19, no. 4 (1925): 816–25.

[84] Denzel C. Cline, "Public Service Employees in Politics," *Social Forces* 5, no. 1 (1926): 127–32, https://doi.org/10.2307/3004822.

[85] Charles H. Titus, "Voting in California Cities, 1900-1925," *The Southwestern Political and Social Science Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (1928): 383–99.

[86] Gidlow, *The Big Vote*, 32.

[87] Harold F. Gosnell, "An Experiment in the Stimulation of Voting," *The American Political Science Review* 20, no. 4 (1926): 869–74, https://doi.org/10.2307/1945435; Harold F. Gosnell, *Getting Out the Vote; an Experiment in the Stimulation of Voting* (The University of Chicago Press, 1927).

[88] Schlesinger and Erikson, "The Vanishing Voter," 164.

festering despite the great strides in educational attainment made during this time, they noted.[89] In presenting their case, the authors called on all agencies of information—"the press, radio, the pulpit, the universities, the labor unions," and so on—to lead a mass effort to restore politics to its former importance.[90]

The apathy of the American public clearly confounded commentators and scholars. For the first time in over a century, most of the American voting public did not cast a ballot for a presidential election in both 1920 and 1924. To save American democracy, Get Out the Vote (GOTV) campaigns began to operate on a grand scale like never before. Organizations like the League of Women Voters, the American Legion, the National Civic Federation (NCF), and many others led a national campaign to mobilize the public back to the ballot box again. Chief Scout Executive of the Boy Scouts, James West, likened it to the "'biggest national undertaking' since the wartime sale of Liberty Bonds."[91] Political scientists and their organizations were heavily involved and often inspired these efforts. Their experts were often asked to speak at local events organized by the League of Women Voters; and, in January 1926, the American Political Science Association sent delegates when the NCF assembled its Department of Political Education. [92] Altogether, the common assessment in popular culture was that these so-called civic slackers were the anthesis of America—comparable to those who failed to take up arms during WWI—and should be blamed for the social ills of the day. Activists like Simon Michelet, founder of the GOTV Club, stressed that higher turnout was needed to improve the "efficiency rating of the government."[93]

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[89] The authors note that "enrollment in the grade schools increase 164 percent from 1890 to 1917, in the high schools 473 percent, and in the colleges and universities 677 percent. Since the rate of population growth was only 170 percent, the electorate was constantly growing more widely educated throughout these years" **quoted in** Schlesinger and Erikson, 164.

[90] Schlesinger and Erikson, 167.

[91] Gidlow, *The Big Vote*, 5.

[92] Gidlow, 102; Gidlow, 150.

[93] Simon Michelet, "The Millions of Americans Who Fail to Vote," *Current History* 21, no. 2 (November 1924): 249.

An Unresolved Abnormality

Despite the mass-led efforts, the GOTV campaigns were, in many ways, a disappointment**.** Although voter turnout increased in 1928, the campaign was built on a false premise. They intentionally mischaracterized the nonvoter in popular culture as middle-class and white even though this group was the *most likely* to vote. Workers, African Americans, immigrants, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized groups were largely excluded from GOTV efforts. What was ultimately reinforced was a discourse that broke civic participation into two groups. As Liette Gidlow (2002) argues, middle-class whites and elite men constituted the 'problem nonvoters' whose non-participation raised alarm; workers, immigrants, racial minorities, and sometimes women constituted the 'problem voters' whose political participation was rarely ever encouraged.[94] This distinction affirmed the idea that poorer nonvoters could be ignored because their inertia maintained the American order. Such a position would be formally synthesized in theory after World War II as political scientists and other thinkers reimagined American democracy by decentering political participation.

As this chapter has established, the interwar period was the first time that the nonvoter in America came under intense analysis and scrutiny. Political science came of age during a time when the abnormal 'non-voting problem' was thought to need solutions. Parallel to this development came the tremendous popular energy that was poured into the period's GOTV campaigns. These two spheres intersected and bolstered one another. The tone of the period was profoundly alarmist. Widespread non-voting had to be corrected or else American democratic traditions would succumb to irrelevance. In the succeeding two decades, Americans reentered politics in growing numbers because ultimately crisis had struck. New Deal liberalism mobilized large segments of the public to combat the Great Depression and Americans were horrified to see Europe plunge deep into mass anomie and war. These experiences naturally also had an impact on democratic theory and the

[94] Liette Gidlow, "Delegitimizing Democracy: 'Civic Slackers,' the Cultural Turn, and the Possibilities of Politics," *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 3 (2002): 933, https://doi.org/10.2307/3092346.

possibilities of politics thereafter. In the decades after the field studies of the 1920s and energetic GOTV drives, political theorists after WWII developed a more guarded understanding of democracy. Nonvoters were decentered in political thought in favor of a new goal: stability and equilibrium. As Chapter 3 will recount, the public's apathy and non-participation would be reimagined as structurally necessary in maintaining the consensus of the American order.

III. The Nonvoter As Necessary for Democratic Stability

It was ultimately the Great Depression that roused the public from the political inertia of the 1920s, as crises tend to do. The United States emerged from economic calamity and World War II as the leading global superpower with a highly unified administrative state. A period of capitalist growth unparalleled in modern history followed. Because this thesis traces the changing perceptions toward American nonvoters, the postwar period establishes the next transformation in this development after the 1920s panic. As this chapter argues, the discursive position of nonvoters in the literature categorically shifted. In their reimagining of democracy, intellectuals after the Second World War repositioned nonvoters and apathy as necessary for stability. They would effectively normalize nonvoting and political disengagement in theory, seeing it as a natural process of democratic maturation—with the expectation that their ideas would proceed the normalization of nonvoting in the public at large.

The elation after the World War II vindicated New Deal liberalism. A relative consensus consequently formed both on domestic and foreign policy issues which became the *modus operandi* of governance in the postwar era. At its core, postwar liberalism centered on technocratic governance. The Cold War created an ever-growing need to expand America's technological dominance. Federal spending into the sciences consequently increased manifold, especially as part of the federally-funded National Science Foundation established in 1950.[95] The social sciences naturally benefited from this development. Its many subfields attained newfound authority, boosting both their profile and funding among the growing universities and thinktanks of America.[96] Enjoying newfound prestige, its scholars were tasked with constructing a 'science of society' for the

[95] Margaret W. Rossiter, "Science and Public Policy since World War II," *Osiris* 1 (1985): 276–79.

[96] As Charles E. Lindblom (1997) notes, the American university system expanded as part of the search-and-development rivalries of the Cold War. Social science departments in America gained an unprecedented boost in funding and recognition. With the computer and new empirical methodologies, it was believed the social sciences could begin to resemble organic science in its rigor; Charles E. Lindblom, "Political Science in the 1940s and 1950s." *Daedalus* 126, no. 1 (1997): 227.

stable, postwar era. Political theorists were naturally at the heart of this effort. The stability achieved in these postwar years crafted a strong sense among some intellectuals that the American state was arching toward perfectibility. The goal now was to sensibly manage the spoils of postwar prosperity. It was from this perspective that political theorists put forth a revisionist democratic model that decentered political participation in favor of stability. The position of nonvoters in their democratic models likewise changed drastically.

This chapter traces how political theorists normalized non-voting in theory during the postwar era. Some of the major figures involved in reimagining democratic theory included the likes of Joseph Schumpeter, David Truman, Robert A. Dahl, Lester W. Milbrath, Seymour Martin Lipset and others. Although falling under heavy criticism during the 1960s activist era, their arguments would be recycled by strategists and scholars after political movements lost their intensity by the mid-1970s. The postwar period therefore established an intellectual precedent for the normalization of non-voting. Because America emerged as the strongest world power, postwar political theory became deeply tied up in defending the era in which it lived. Altogether, this bias prevented many postwar political scholars from acknowledging the deep, latent ruptures that would later fully materialize—seldom mentioning, for example, black Americans disenfranchised in the South or how politics inadequately reflected the needs of the country's poorest. The supposed 'stability' these postwar scholars praised proved to be vacuous by the mid-1960s.

A New Democratic Model

As this thesis explained in Chapter 2, non-voting during the 1920s was viewed as a symptom of a 'social disease'—one to be investigated in the hopes of finding a cure. Traditionally, classical democratic theory "emphasized individual participation in the development of public policy."[97] Political participation was believed to instill in the citizen a sense of collective, social responsibility. Moreover, classical democratic theory viewed itself as a "never-ending process of achieving, as a dynamic striving for the goals of liberty,

[97] Jack L. Walker, "A Critique of the Elitist Theory of Democracy," *The American Political Science Review* 60, no. 2 (1966): 288, https://doi.org/10.2307/1953356.

equality, and fraternity."[98] Under this model, widespread non-voting was rightfully construed as a serious social problem. Participation was at the center of its applied theory. Yet, during the postwar era, the focus shifted. Postwar thinkers would turn this traditional model on its head by decentering political participation entirely. Non-voting moved from an object of analysis to an assumed constant in their democratic theories. Within this understanding, non-participation in American democracy had no real historical origin nor was it necessarily an issue. The new, more cynical liberalism that emerged in the postwar era saw itself as nearing the end of its historical development. American democracy, it was said, now simply had to be defended and managed.

The revisionist, and often elitist, models of democracy put forward by postwar political theorists provide us with a clear illustration of how ideas are molded by material and social forces. One can draw a straight line connecting New Deal liberalism, its technocratic governance, and the new postwar focus on democratic stability. As this chapter describes in the succeeding sections, many political theorists viewed the apathetic non-voting mass as being foundational for equilibrium. It was precisely the lower-strata's disengagement from politics that gave democracy its stability. Their activation, it was believed, could easily disrupt the unity of the administrative state. This impression was informed by two attitudes: a deference to consensus ideology and a view that the masses were predisposed to authoritarianism and irrationality. For postwar democracy to survive, it had to be guarded against the demos itself.

Consensus Ideology and Technocratic Governance

Looking backward, the period of political consensus in post-WWII America up until the early 1960s seems strange to us today. It is so contrary to our contemporary political climate. Although there were divisions that would materialize in the succeeding decades, there was some unity on domestic and foreign policy between the political parties. The postwar years up until the early 1960s can be best described as a time of liberal ascendency,

[98] Charles Allan McCoy, *Apolitical Politics: A Critique of Behavioralism* (Crowell, 1967), 228.

an unspoken deal within the political class itself.[99] On the domestic front, both parties were in relative agreement on a modest welfare state. Tacit concessions from right-wing ideologue Frank Meyer, associated with the *National Review,* acknowledged that "conservatives could no longer openly seek to repeal the New Deal."[100] On the foreign policy front, the fight against communism was virtually unanimously supported by both parties after being set in motion as doctrine during the Truman administration. According to Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., the postwar era was a time guided by a "reasonable responsibility about politics and a moderate pessimism about man."[101] The widely-read book *America In Our Time (1976)* by British journalist Godfrey Hodgson is often cited for its assessment of consensus ideology and how it operated. He writes that consensus ideology had two prevailing aspects: "[confidence] to the verge of complacency about the perfectibility of American society, and [anxiety] to the point of paranoia about the threat of communism."[102] Its simple maxim was "the American system worked at home, and America must be strong abroad."[103] It often also excluded any recognition of conflict within American society itself. Even postwar American historiography itself began to smooth over the conflicts emphasized by the earlier progressive historians—as historian John Higham famously critiqued in *The Cult of the American Consensus* (1959).

The consensus was, of course, imagined on the everyday level. The historiographical concept has been accused of slighting the race issue and ignoring the South "which could never be made to fit comfortably within liberal consensus

[99] Godfrey Hodgson, "Revisiting the Liberal Consensus", *The Liberal Consensus Reconsidered: American Politics and Society in the Postwar Era,* edited by Robert Mason and Iwan Morgan (University Press of Florida, 2019), 12.

[100] Godfrey Hodgson, "Revisiting the Liberal Consensus," 13.

[101] Darren Barany, *The New Welfare Consensus: Ideological, Political, and Social Origins* (SUNY Press, 2018), 229.

[102] Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time* (Vintage Books, 1978), 75.

[103] Murray Kempton, "America in Our Time," *The New York Times*, January 16, 1977, https://www.nytimes.com/1977/01/16/archives/america-in-our-time-america.html.

paradigm."[104] The historiographical consensus perspective fundamentally breaks down when brought to the state level over civil rights and cultural concerns of the day, especially in the South.[105] Still, as historian Gary Gerstle writes, the assumption then was that the "South was an atavism that would soon have it rough edges removed [...] by the powerful currents of liberal modernity."[106] Hodgson himself admitted that the consensus idea was an oversimplification, but one that nonetheless illustrates the power of the east-coast establishment at the time—comprised of the "foreign-policy establishment and [...] the interconnected elite of international bankers, international lawyers, relatively liberal business executives and centrist academics."[107] Arguably, consensus ideology most concretely speaks to the convergence of thought on matters of political economy in the postwar period. According to historian Wendy L. Wall, it also captures a certain mood among those who were tasked with constructing the "American Way" after the New Deal. Building off of Hodgson's ideas, she documents a wide-ranging social effort to "buttress national unity and shape a consensus on America's unifying values" in the late New Deal era which fully materialized in the postwar period.[108] The effort involved federal officials, business organizations, universities and other institutions. Wall's work documents a greater effort to systematize cultural values along consensus lines. Today, the characterization of postwar thought as consensus-oriented still enjoys staying power in contemporary pedagogy, historiography and academia.

A core component of consensus thought *in practice* was its reliance on technocratic rationality. The professional class within the state expanded as appointed experts were put to work to solve "social problems... like industrial problems."[109] This development ran

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[104] Gary Gerstle, "The Reach and Limits of the Liberal Consensus", *The Liberal Consensus Reconsidered: American Politics and Society in the Postwar Era,* edited by Robert Mason and Iwan Morgan (University Press of Florida, 2019), 53.

[105] Gary Gerstle, 53.

[106] Gary Gerstle, 53.

[107] Godfrey Hodgson, "Revisiting the Liberal Consensus", 17.

[108] Wendy L. Wall, *Inventing the "American Way": The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 172.

[109] Hodgson, *America in Our Time*, 76.

parallel to the expansion of the military-industrial complex in the postwar era. Taking lesson from the behavioral sciences, social scientists of the postwar era advanced "forms of American history that focused on organizations and systems" and projected these ideas onto present-day solutions: organizing urban-industrial society along impersonal rules and mechanisms aimed to resolve conflict.[110] The end goal was stabilization. Historian Michael Heale has argued that sociological studies at the time corroborate the idea that postwar bureaucracies and national, non-governmental organizations largely shared a set of value, institutionally-defined roles, and a particular mode of orientation.[111] The consensus project of smoothing over structural conflict was made easier by the assumed "labor-capital accord" between management and unions during the postwar period.[112] Hodgson likens the consensus thinking within governance as a kind of "sociological hygiene" which was to be pursued technologically.[113]

Consensus ideas clearly had a strong sway over postwar intellectual thought. By the mid-1950s, the fashionable adage of the day was that the "age of ideology was over."[114] As Daniel Bell argued provocatively in *The End of Ideology* (1960), the future lied with these pragmatists and technocrats rather than those who wanted to completely reinvent society through far-reaching political programs. The consensus, he wrote, included the "acceptance of a welfare state, the desirability of decentralized power, a system of mixed economy and of political pluralism."[115] Political demobilization suited these technocratic ends and was evidence that ideological conflict was wearing thin. Such ideas naturally had a profound impact on democratic theory and the possibilities of politics itself. To forthright acknowledge racial terror in the South, entrenched party systems, money in politics, lack

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[110] Michael Heale, "Historians and the Postwar Liberal Consensus", *The Liberal Consensus Reconsidered: American Politics and Society in the Postwar Era,* edited by Robert Mason and Iwan Morgan (University Press of Florida, 2019), 30.

[111] Michael Heale, 31.

[112] Michael Heale, 31.

[113] Godfrey Hodgson, "Revisiting the Liberal Consensus", 14.

[114] Godfrey Hodgson, 14.

[115] Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties : With "The Resumption of History in the New Century"* (Harvard University Press, 1988), 402-403.

of representation for lower-class Americans and so on would be an acknowledgement of *conflict.* That would, as Wall would argue, go against the "American Way." Moreover, it ran counter to the consensus-oriented disposition of postwar thought. Consensus ideology among social scientists and the professional class at large was the 'intellectual substance' with which they reimagined democracy—repositioning nonvoters and the politically-disaffected as the bedrock of social stability. Daniel Bell's 'end of ideology' proclamation came at an inopportune time, just years before ideological rifts would unravel the country, but they nonetheless illustrated a disposition present among America's liberal professional class.[116] This disposition allowed for nonvoters to be categorically redefined in postwar democratic theory: from a problem of democracy to its stabilizing pillar.

The Fear of Mass Political Participation

Underneath the consensus ideology that influenced postwar American thought was a deep anxiety: a fear of the irrational, apolitical masses being 'activated.' This perception was not a given but developed as a lesson from WWII.[117] Preceding the war, Europe became the social laboratory of mass politics and ideological struggle which met violent ends. Deeply impacted by the war, political theorists became disillusioned. They now had to contend with the "full knowledge of the nonrational and irrational capacities people possess to do great harm."[118] Many scholars began to link mass participation to the development of totalitarianism. Its most famous advocate was perhaps social theorist Hannah Arendt. Dutch political thinker Peter Baehr (2007) argues that mass participation lies at the heart of Arendt's conception of totalitarianism. It is the masses that provide totalitarian regimes with legitimacy, "human bulk... to devour, [to] furnish its militants and sympathizers."[119]

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[116] Perhaps Bell's argument would have been more appropriate alongside Francis Fukuyama's thesis on end of history, proposed right on the eve of the Cold War's end

[117] Writing in 1898, the founder of *The Nation,* Edwin Lawrence Godkin, believed that "the growth of democracy has dissipated a good many fears about the 'mob'" (**quoted in** Schlesinger and Erikson, "The Vanishing Voter," 162). Many others shared this view and it informed the social effort to mobilize nonvoters during the 1920s.

[118] Ira Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment: Political Knowledge After Total War, Totalitarianism, and the Holocaust* (Columbia University Press, 2020), 445.

[119] Peter Baehr, "The 'Masses' in Hannah Arendt's Theory of Totalitarianism," *The Good Society* 16, no. 2 (2007): 14.

Throughout Arendt's writing, her depiction of the masses is "entirely negative."[120] Arendt's thoughts on mass politics were a crystallization of many of the ideas floating around the social sciences in the postwar era. Totalitarianism was believed to emerge from mass participation and, once established, was sustained by it.

It was out of the fear of the irrational masses that postwar political scholars decentered political participation in democratic theory. This dose of sobering realism over mass politics was by no means unwarranted, but the analysis often lacked historical specificity. The behaviors of the masses in Europe were generalized as representative of how all masses acted when politicized. Moreover, it was widely believed that lower-class nonvoters were responsible for the rise of Nazism. As Walter B. Simon (1959) concluded in his investigation on the matter, "it appears safe to assume that the voters the Nazis attracted had previously not voted at all or for minor parties."[121] German-American sociologist Reinhard Bendix also pinned the rise of Nazism to the sudden participation of nonvoters in his work *Social Stratification and Political Power* (1952).[122] The masses were believed to be irrational, destructive and politically-disengaged but who entered the political arena during times of crisis. This caricature was likewise applied to Americans in the postwar era and studies were conducted to further explore this impression.

In 1956, psychologist Philip K. Hastings published *The Voter and the Nonvoter,* a study dedicated to determining the core character traits that differentiated nonvoters from voters. The work was a follow-up to his two previous studies on nonvoters in the city of Pittsfield, Massachusetts.[123] Hastings found that nonvoters tend to be more concerned with "immediate" rather than long-term issues and, in general, display "a personal sense of

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[120] Baehr, 12.

[121] Walter B. Simon, "Motivation of a Totalitarian Mass Vote," *The British Journal of Sociology* 10, no. 4 (1959): 340, https://doi.org/10.2307/587799.

[122] Reinhard Bendix, "Social Stratification and Political Power," *The American Political Science Review* 46, no. 2 (1952): 369, https://doi.org/10.2307/1950834.

[123] Philip K. Hastings, "The Nonvoter in 1952: A Study of Pittsfield, Massachusetts," *The Journal of Psychology* 38, no. 2 (October 1, 1954): 301–12, https://doi.org/10.1080/00223980.1954.9712939; Philip K. Hastings, "The Independent Voter in 1952: A Study of Pittsfield, Massachusetts," *The American Political Science Review* 47, no. 3 (September 1953): 805–10.

inadequacy and insecurity."[124] Nonvoters and the working class were said to be predisposed to authoritarianism. Another study published by William J. MacKinnon and Richard Centers (1956) put forward similar findings: "authoritarians in the working class exceed that in the middle class and authoritarianism increases with the intensity of class identification."[125] These conclusions would have a strong influence on Seymor Martin Lipset's popular work *Democracy and Working-Class Authoritarianism* (1959). The operating assumption was that the activation of large swathes of the non-voting public could easily unravel the democratic order in America like it did in Germany.

What naturally emerged from these investigations was a far more paternalistic understanding of liberalism: a deeply elitist and guarded theory of democracy which prioritized stability and equilibrium at the expense of political inclusion. Celebrated political scientist and historian Ira Katznelson argues that the leading postwar interpreters of American politics can be characterized by their commitment to an "antitotalitarian program."[126] The leading scholars of this program included David Truman, Robert Dahl, V. O. Key, Seymour Martin Lipset, and others. These American political theorists prioritized social stability because they believed it to be a bulwark against mass-led totalitarianism. Yet, those who committed themselves to this cavalier program often did so while overlooking the real, structural repression of political participation that did exist in the United States. As Katznelson writes, their anxiety produced distorting effects on their analysis, especially when these scholars "engaged with social movements, with the national security state in the age of the Cold War, and with the deep-seated structural inequalities, especially those based on race."[127] Due to the concerns over mass political participation, such pressing issues were therefore avoided. The nonvoter, whose inactivity caused alarm

[124] Philip K. Hastings, "The Voter and the Nonvoter," *American Journal of Sociology* 62, no. 3 (1956)., **quoted in** Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960), 218.

[125] William J. MacKinnon and Richard Centers, "Authoritarianism and Urban Stratification," *American Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 6 (1956): 610.

[126] Ido Oren, *Our Enemies and US: America's Rivalries and the Making of Political Science* (Cornell University Press, 2003), 96.

[127] Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment*, 482.

during the 1920s, was to be viewed as a group best kept relatively dormant to preserve the democratic order and its rational, technocratic stability.

Political Apathy Is Good

As postwar political theorists were putting forward a new model of democracy, they had to contend with a fact of American social life: many Americans did not participate in politics at all. Political scientist Lester W. Milbrath (1965) estimated that some one-third of all U.S adults were "unaware of the political part of the world around them."[128] Such a reality, however, proved easy to dismiss within a democratic model chiefly concerned with "the determinants of consensus and political stability."[129] Within this model, democracy was understood purely in procedural terms as "a method of making decisions which insures efficiency in administration and policymaking."[130] Participation was only useful insofar as it gradually made elites aware of inefficiencies within governance. Given these aims, the public's political inertia was preferable.

To quote one scholar of the postwar period, the 'most basic function' of a political system is the "maintaining of internal social stability."[131] Naturally, this 'most basic function' is dependent on the merits of the order itself—whether it provides for all its citizens and includes them. During the postwar period, the reality for many marginalized peoples in America was exclusion from politics altogether. Nonvoting was then, and continues to be, generally concentrated among the poor and underprivileged. For some, the right to vote was barred completely as was the case in the Jim Crow South for black Americans. Southern turnout in national elections between 1948 – 1960 averaged only 35%

[128] Lester W. Milbrath, *Political Participation: How and Why Do People Get Involved in Politics?* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965), **quoted in** Steven Panageotou, "The Three Dimensions of Political Action in United States Democracy: Corporations as Political Actors and 'Franchise Governments,'" *Doctoral Dissertations*, (University of Tennessee, 2017), 94.

[129] John S. Dryzek, "The Progress of Political Science," *The Journal of Politics* 48, no. 2 (1986): 310, https://doi.org/10.2307/2131095.

[130] Jack L. Walker, "A Critique of the Elitist Theory of Democracy," Peter Bachrach, *Political Elites in a Democracy* (Routledge, 2017).: 71.

[131] Francis E. Rourke, "The Quest for Political Stability," *Ethics* 67, no. 4 (1957): 286.

in four presidential contests.[132] Yet, throughout the postwar literature, non-voting was understood with a broad brush: it was said to be the product of decontextualized 'apathy.' There was little to no mention of those who did not vote out of fear, conscious choice or outright repression. Political scientist Robert Lane in *Political Life* (1959), for example, "identifies no less than eleven factors that purport to account for lower-class nonparticipation in politics... [but] fear is not one of them."[133] Fear is neither mentioned in Seymour Martin Lipset's *Political Man* (1960) nor Lester W. Milbrath's later text *Political Participation* (1965).[134] The relative stability of the postwar era caused many scholars to equivocate non-voting with apathy. Based on this equivocation, non-voting was construed as representative of the public's passive consent.

In a provocative piece titled *In Defense of Apathy* (1954), English scholar W. H. Morris Jones argued precisely what the title suggests. It is a defense against those who wish to further politicize society supposedly to its own undoing. As Jones wrote, "the general theme of a Duty to Vote belong properly to the totalitarian camp and is out of place in the vocabulary of liberal democracy."[135] To raise political participation to the realm of virtue was, for him, misguided. Apathy was the natural counterweight "to the fanatics who constitute the real danger to liberal democracy."[136] Jones's arguments were widely echoed on the other side of the pond by American scholars. In *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Election* (1954), social scientists Bernard Berelson, Paul Lazarsfeld and William McPhee reached a similar conclusion. In a wide-ranging investigation into the many social cleavages of American life, the authors documented the innumerable variables that influence the public's political efficacy. They credited the

[132] Average calculated from data compiled in Winders, "The Roller Coaster of Class Conflict," 836.

[133] Lester M. Salamon and Stephen Van Evera, "Fear, Apathy, and Discrimination: A Test of Three Explanations of Political Participation," *The American Political Science Review* 67, no. 4 (1973): 1288, https://doi.org/10.2307/1956549.

[134] Salamon and Van Evera, 1288.

[135] W. H. Morris Jones, "In Defence of Apathy: Some Doubts on the Duty to Vote," *Political Studies* 2, no. 1 (1954): 25.

[136] Jones, 37.

apathetic segment of America for helping to "hold the system together and [cushion] the shock of disagreement, adjustment, and change."[137] Compromise in politics is only made possible because it is "induced by indifference."[138] The structural constancy of non-voting in America was understood as responsible for maintaining the democratic system's stability and order. *Voting* depicted the majority of Americans as politically-disengaged and largely incompetent when it comes to politics. Yet, the system functioned, which Berelson et al. likens to a paradox: "where the rational citizen seems to abdicate, nevertheless angels seem to tread."[139]

The line of reasoning used by Jones and Berelson et al. is a common theme throughout much of postwar political literature: political apathy ensured the stability of democracy. It was believed that mass engagement placed too much of a burden on the public and was an ideal that could never be realized. A more apathetic citizenry was preferable otherwise instability and irrational outcomes could ensue. Democratic maturity came from leaving a large segment of the population politically dormant. Few political scholars put this argument as forcefully as political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset. The self-styled theorist of 'elitist democracy,' he wrote in *Political Man* (1960):

> Although the kinds and causes of apathy and nonvoting vary for different historical periods and for different sections of the population, it is possible that nonvoting is now, at least in the Western democracies, a reflection of the stability of the system, a response to the decline of major social conflicts, and an increase in cross-pressures, particularly those affecting the working class.[140]

Lipset's understanding of mature democracy was ultimately in line with consensus ideology. The public's non-participation was viewed as evidence of their "basic satisfaction with the way things are going."[141] Yet, Lipset did admit that the poorest and

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[137] Bernard R. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee, *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign* (University of Chicago Press, 1954), 322.

[138] Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee, 315.

[139] Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee, 311.

[140] Lipset, *Political Man*, 181.

[141] Lipset, *Political Man*, 21.

least educated tend to not vote and suggested that the lower-strata be integrated gradually.[142] But his acknowledgement is tempered by a lengthy argument for political apathy—quoting the works of apologists for it at length, such as Francis G. Wilson (1936), W. H. Morris Jones (1954), David Riesman (1950), W. B. Munro (1928), Philip K. Hastings (1954), and others.[143] His later work would reference the need for a passive, apolitical public. Writing in 1963, he stated that "the most valuable element of democracy in complex societies is the formation of a political elite in the competitive struggle for votes of a mainly passive electorate."[144] Again, non-voting and apathetic passivity are repeatedly recognized as necessary.

Lipset's argument for apathy in *Political Man* (1960) is a rich illustration of how pervasive such claims were during the postwar period. Because the fear of fascism produced a deep skepticism toward mass participation, the celebration of apathy was put forward as honest realism. For example, Canadian political scientist H. B. Mayo (1959) echoed W. H. Morris Jones in arguing that voting should not be considered a civic duty. Published in University of Chicago's *Journal of Politics,* he wrote, "by emphasizing the duty of everyone to vote, we risk creating inner conflict in many good non-political people."[145] Alfred de Grazia is quoted by Mayo, asserting that "politics, in what may be the most free political system in the world, is the work of a few people."[146] Katznelson claims that Mayo's contemporary, David Truman, makes a similar case when read between-the-lines—that it would be "far better for the excluded to remain apolitical than challenge the dirty secrets of the country's liberal regime."[147] Other postwar scholars believed widespread apathy to be evidence of democracy maturity. In their landmark

[142] Lipset, *Political Man*, 219.

[143] Lipset, *Political Man*, 216-218.

[144] Seymour Martin Lipset, *The First New Nation: The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (Basic Books, 1963), 238.

[145] H. B. Mayo, "A Note on the Alleged Duty to Vote," *The Journal of Politics* 21, no. 2 (1959): 323.

[146] Mayo, 321.

[147] Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment*, 474.

investigation *The Civic Culture* from 1963, Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba argued that the relative stability of Anglo-American democracy was because it was moderated by passivity, healthy levels of apathy, and high trust.[148] Lester W. Milbrath made a similar claim in his work *Political Participation* (1965), viewing mass political participation as antithetical to limited government and constitutional democracy.[149] Ironically, both *The Civic Culture* (1963) and *Political Participation* (1965) were written shortly before the mature, democratic stability they celebrated fell apart.

Apologetics for apathy were a fixture of postwar literature on political theory. As an abstract problem, one could even claim that concerns over the 'total politicization' of society had some merit. When related to the existing social realities of postwar America, however, the arguments reveal their callousness. Theses texts simply ignore the glaring fact that not all Americans were even integrated into the political sphere then—some, as was the case for many black Americans, were not even integrated into civil society proper, let alone the political realm. Because scholars took the stability of the state as their perspective, what ultimately followed were conclusions divorced from the social needs of their time. The public's apathy was misconstrued as a positive indicator of how well the political class was doing in managing society, instead of an indictment of politics misaligning itself with the social good. When read in this way, the apologist literature for apathy provided justification for the state's directives in postwar America. It legitimized the consensus-based unity of elite American power by misconstruing non-participation as contentment and passive consent.

[148] Gabriel Abraham Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

[149] Steven Panageotou, "The Three Dimensions of Political Action in United States Democracy: Corporations as Political Actors and 'Franchise Governments,'" *Doctoral Dissertations*, December 1, 2017, 95, https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_graddiss/4776.

The End of Ideology Announced Too Soon

The ascendency of liberalism during the postwar era appeared to its critics as insurmountable at its zenith. Conflict was eschewed and depoliticization was valued as necessary for order. Apathy was construed as good and a sign of democratic maturity. Yet, if this was the supposed 'end of ideology,' as Daniel Bell claimed in 1960, it had certainly left out large swathes of the American public, unabashedly so. Although the technocratic rationality of postwar liberalism relied on harmonious stability, those on the other side of its machine logic lived its glaring, violent contradictions.

In 1956, W.E.B. Du Bois published a provocative piece in *The Nation* titled "Why I Won't Vote." He recounted how he had long followed the standard voting protocol even when the choices given were unsatisfactory. He had voted third-party, seen his vote disenfranchised while living in the South, and voted for the 'lesser of two evils' when he resided in the North. Yet, for the presidential election of 1956, he declined to vote entirely. He wrote:

> In 1956, I shall not go to the polls. I have not registered. I believe that democracy has so far disappeared in the United States that no "two evils" exist. There is but one evil party with two names, and it will be elected despite all I can do or say.[150]

The piece goes on to give a damning, hopeless portrayal of America in the 1950s: one that is obsessed with militarism, corporate profiteering, and expanding its global reach at whatever the cost. Built on the backs of black and poor America, the administration—including both its corporate benefactors and its state apparatuses—had perfected the machinery of its far-reaching activities. Although Du Bois did not use the term specifically, what he was critiquing was precisely the technocratic consensus that dominated the 1950s: the relative unity of private industry, the military-administrative state, and the two-party system.

The contrast between Du Bois and the postwar political theorists thus far discussed is stark. It was as if they lived in different worlds. This is because the former looked at American politics from the perspective of the public and those who were excluded; the

[150] W. E. B. Du Bois, "I Won't Vote," *The Nation*, October 20, 1956, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/i-wont-vote/.

latter largely took the perspective of the state and privileged its stability. Out of disillusionment and as a conscious choice, Du Bois joined the ranks of American nonvoters. Postwar democratic theory would have branded his non-voting as representative of his apathy; it would have been understood as Du Bois giving passive consent to the existing state of things. Yet, such a characterization could not have been farther from the truth. Du Bois was clearly not apathetic nor content nor approving of the American order. Here, in his own words, we have a living refutation of the postwar characterization of nonvoters. Other non-voting Americans may not have put the argument as forcefully, but their alienation from politics was real and felt regardless of whether it was consciously expressed or not.

Du Bois's characterization of the 1956 election also stands up to historical scrutiny. The election was of a peculiar, apolitical character. This is evident by how Eisenhower's opponent, Adlai Stevenson, approached the electoral contest. His campaign had determined that the incumbent president was held in such high regard by the public that "the people of the nation were relieved of the necessity of following day-to-day political developments."[151] Voter turnout in 1956 reached 60% not because of a deeply politicized contest, but because of the sheer popularity of Eisenhower's character as a respected general. "The popularity of Eisenhower is [...] one side of the coin; the flight from politics is the other," read the notes of one campaign meeting for Stevenson.[152] Sociologist David Reisman confirmed this impression in his commentary on the elections of 1952 and 1956. "It would appear that the get-out-the-vote campaigns swelled the Eisenhower majorities... with voters who, basically apathetic, responded only to personalities and not to issues," he wrote.[153] Other commentators noticed this peculiar character of the 1950s presidential race

[151] Gary Donaldson, *The First Modern Campaign: Kennedy, Nixon, and the Election of 1960* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 26.

[152] Donaldson, 26.

[153] David Reisman, "Private People and Public Policy," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 15, no. 5. (May 1959), 205.

as well.[154] It was as if the election of 1956 (and 1952, for that matter) was an election absent of politics. It gave a false impression of the state of American civic life. However, as postwar theorists repeatedly emphasized, it was stable. The system had reached a stasis which relied on the damage done to those unfortunate enough to be on the other side of its machine logic. The electoral outcome of 1956 was, in many ways, a living vindication of their elitist approach to democracy at work. Despite depoliticization and an exceptionally meagre public discourse, consensus scholars could point to the 60% turnout as evidence that *just enough* people were participating to give the system legitimacy.[155]

While Du Bois and millions like him expressed great cynicism over American democracy, postwar liberalism was at its height. In its vast size, it was unmoving. Apologists for political apathy expected the public's political inertia to go on indefinitely. Non-voting was normalized in democratic theory because it was seen as an accurate description of social reality. Even as late as 1963, just years before the counterculture activist era, Gabriel Almond and Sidney characterized Anglo-American political culture as possessing 'healthy levels' of political apathy.[156] United States was said to be following a path of democratic maturation. The activist era, however, permanently maligned these postwar biases. By the late 1960s, the social ruptures would alter political theory permanently as new notions on participatory democracy emerged. Yet, American society's trajectory toward political demobilization would go unabated in the long-run. The postwar diagnosis of political apathy proved to be premature. Despite the emancipatory potential of the following period, the structural reasons for the American peculiarity would remain in place.

[154] Louis Harris in *Is There a Republican Majority?* (1954) also notes how the presidential victory was purely a product of Eisenhower's personality and did not produce Republican gains elsewhere (Harris, 1954, p. 52-57).

[155] McDonald, "National General Election VEP Turnout Rates, 1789-Present."

[156] Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture*, 21.

IV. Malaise and Contradiction: The American Peculiarity Deepens

The Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam War era was a period rife with contradiction. It began with heroic efforts to include the disenfranchised and exploited into the political sphere. The activist era broke apart the civic glue that previously held America together because it had been predicated on a lie.[157] Yet, putting the social sphere back together once undone proved to be a far more difficult task. The spirit of social revolt that gripped the country paradoxically ended up solidifying the American peculiarity, transforming the country into "a nation of nonvoters and non-joiners" by the late 1970s.[158] Such a characterization is not an indictment of the era's social movements and their forward-thinking attitudes; it is instead an indictment of American politics and its pernicious ability to stifle imagination and new possibilities. The years between 1960 and 1980 marks the "longest period of monotonic decline in American history" for electoral participation in presidential elections.[159] The broken dreams of the 1960s and the malaise of the 1970s determined that the American peculiarity would persist.

Thus far, this thesis has examined two eras distinguished by their attitudes toward the 'nonvoter question.' In the past two chapters, we see a categorical shift in attitudes toward non-voting: a movement from panic to normalization within theory. Postwar scholars rethought non-voting as evidence of contentment, apathy and passive consent on the part of the public. Had it not been for the activist era, non-voting and depoliticization would have likely been normalized further socio-culturally. This, at least, was the implied expectation among many postwar scholars of politics at the start of the 1960s.

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[157] The lie was the mythology often employed by consensus-oriented scholars who saw the United States as embodying a civic culture that was growing inclusive and arching toward perfection.

[158] Melissa J. Marschall, "Robert D. Putnam, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community," in *The Oxford Handbook of Classics in Public Policy and Administration*, ed. Steven J. Balla, Martin Lodge, and Edward C. Page (Oxford University Press: 2015), 590.

[159] Howard L. Reiter, "Why Is Turnout Down?" *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (1979): 297.; **Note***: I cite Reiter (1979) who wrote his piece before the election of 1980. Electoral turnout also dropped that election year, so I extend Reiter's statement by another election cycle. Turnout declined for six consecutive presidential contests from 1960 to 1980.

Unexpectedly, however, a spirit of revolt gripped the nation in the years ahead. In less than a decade after Daniel Bell proclaimed the supposed 'end of ideology,' American society began to intensely repoliticize itself along ideological lines. There would be great efforts to bring America's underclass into electoral politics—the group whose inactivity was originally assumed by postwar theorists to stabilize democracy.

This chapter traces the third shift in attitudes toward non-voting: the years between 1968 and the so-called Reagan Revolution of 1980. The period would be fundamental for the American public's depoliticization and the normalization of non-voting thereafter. Surveys show a steep decline in public trust in the government and its institutions during this time which never recovered.[160] A generation of political theorists also became busy dismantling the elitist postwar concept of democracy by expanding the definition of political participation. However, they did so right as 'dropping out' of politics was endemic during the 1970s. Electoral turnout declined across virtually all segments of the public. These trends solidified as non-voting became a fixture of political culture during the 1980s and '90s. In this chapter, I document the contradictions that were foundational for the normalization for non-voting after the struggle for mass enfranchisement.

The Struggle for the Ballot Box and Its Limits

From the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, much of the Civil Rights Movement revolved around equal access to the ballot box. Because most black Americans were outright barred from voting in the South, this naturally became the primary impetus for change. Historically, the South has had far less democratic institutions compared to the rest of the United States. Although not to the same degree, this hurt both poor whites and blacks with turnout recorded at a meager 19% in 1924.[161] Up until 1950, the "active southern electorate

[160] Public trust in government continued to decline in the decades ahead and reached new lows by the 2010s. See: Research Center, "Section 1: Trust in Government 1958-2010" in *The People and Their Government: Distrust, Discontent, Anger and Partisan Rancor* (Washington, D.C: Pew Research Center, April 2010): 13.

[161] Winders, "The Roller Coaster of Class Conflict," 836.

[only] encompassed between one-fourth and one-third of the adult population."[162] The repression of black voters in the South persisted during the postwar era. A 1959 report by the United States Commission on Civil Rights found that "in sixteen counties [in the South] where African-Americans represented a majority, not one was registered to vote; in an additional 49 counties less than five percent of the voting age African Americans were registered to vote."[163] Yet, by the end of the Civil Rights era, the transformation of the Southern electorate was nothing short of remarkable. In 1968, the Commission on Civil Rights found that since the passing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, African-American registration increased to over 50 percent of the voting age population [in every Southern state].[164] During the presidential election that year, Southern turnout was recorded at around 52%, the first time it had surpassed a majority of voting-eligible peoples since 1876.[165]

It was by aligning himself with the Civil Rights Movement, coupled with his Great Society program, that President Lyndon B. Johnson won a landslide presidential victory in 1964. Voter enthusiasm was markedly high: he secured the largest share of the voting-age population of any president in the 20th century.[166] The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 became the core part of Johnson's pitch for the election. As Martha J. Bailey and Nicolas J. Duquette (2014) recount, President Johnson embarked on a public relations tour to promote it by visiting, among other areas, the poor in the historically-disadvantaged region of Appalachia.[167] The promises of the Great Society program mobilized large segments of America's underclass who were hopeful their social standing would improve. According

[162] James W. Ely Jr and Bradley G. Bond, *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 10: Law and Politics* (UNC Press Books, 2014), 148.

[163] Gabriel Jackson Chin and Lori Wagner, "U.S. Commission on Civil Rights: Reports on Voting," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, September 11, 2006), 12.

[164] Chin and Wagner, 19.

[165] Winders, "The Roller Coaster of Class Conflict," 836.

[166] Calculated from: McDonald, "National General Election VEP Turnout Rates, 1789-Present."

[167] Martha J. Bailey and Nicolas J. Duquette, "How Johnson Fought the War on Poverty: The Economics and Politics of Funding at the Office of Economic Opportunity," *The Journal of Economic History* 74, no. 2 (2014): 355.

to political scientist Bernard L. Fraga, the election had the highest voter turnout percentage among Northern black Americans ever in history, even eclipsing white Americans.[168] The reason was ultimately a simple one: many black Americans believed the ballot box was their only hope of affecting change. In a survey conducted by David O. Sears (1969), three-fourths of African-Americans polled agreed that voting was "the only way people like me can have any say about how the government runs things."[169] This is in spite of the majority of black Americans also believing that the government "doesn't care what people like me think."[170]

Despite the legislative victories on the federal level, black activists also recognized that the ballot box was not the end of the road. According to Ronald W. Walters and Robert C. Smith (1999), after 1965 Martin Luther King Jr. began to focus on "[redefining] the character of American society."[171] Black voters needed thoughtful leaders to elect. Yet, the fight for the ballot box struggled to translate to real, political power because black Americans constituted a minority. Noted civil rights activist Bayard Rustin argued in 1965 that "the country's twenty million black people cannot win political power alone."[172] This sad realism proved true in the years ahead. According to Salamon and Evera (1973) while Southern black voter registrants increased by 1 million between 1964 and 1970, white registrants increased their count by roughly 2 million in the same time.[173] This diluted the political impact of black enfranchisement. Some outlets began to blame black apathy for failing to mobilize around their political candidate. One such article in the *New York Times* claimed that "voting apathy among blacks" was to blame for the defeat of their candidates

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[168] Bernard L. Fraga, "The Voting Rights Act Turns 50 Today," Washington Post, August 6, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/08/06/the-voting-rights-act-turns-50-today-here-are-three-trends-in-minority-voting-you-should-know-about/.

[169] David O. Sears, "Black Attitudes toward the Political System in the Aftermath of the Watts Insurrection," *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 13, no. 4 (1969): 533, https://doi.org/10.2307/2110070.

[170] Sears, 533.

[171] Ronald W. Walters and Robert C. Smith, *African American Leadership* (SUNY Press, 1999), 117.

[172] Daniel Levine, *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement* (Rutgers University Press, 2000), 175.

[173] Salamon and Van Evera, "Fear, Apathy, and Discrimination," 1290.

in Mississippi's 1969 municipal elections. [174] Fear, however, proved to be a more compelling explanation.[175]

While the struggle for the ballot box was showing its limitations in electoral politics, the Civil Rights Movement was also expanding and merging with the anti-war movement. The fight for justice had to be expanded while also recognizing that judiciously exercising the vote was still required.[176] In the last years before he was assassinated, King prominently aligned himself with a national anti-poverty and anti-war campaign. In a 1967 speech, he linked "racism, extreme materialism and militarism" as the three evils of American society and accused Johnson of trying to "occupy Vietnam as an American colony."[177] While King and his allies were moving toward electoral and economic demands, the grassroots led by factions like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Black Panther Party sought a path centered more on black self-determination and militant tactics.[178] By the late 1960s, the tension between the national and local character of the black movement was palpable. The struggle of black mass enfranchisement splintered into factions "fueled in part by a growing disaffection with the Democratic Party support for the Vietnam War and the rising authority of black self-determination."[179] According to sociologist Jean Van Delinder, this splintering was embodied in the 1968 election. As Delinder writes, four black presidential and vice-presidential candidates ran that year—which included Eldridge Cleaver, Julian Bond,

[174] Salamon and Van Evera, 1290.

[175] According to Salamon and Van Evera's 'expanded fear model' accounts for 69 percent of the variation in black political participation rates" in their investigation of 29 black-majority counties in Mississippi, Apathy, in contrast, was found to explain only 23 percent of the variation (Salamon and Van Evera, 1973, pp. 1305).

[176] As famously argued by Malcom X in his 1964 speech, *The Ballot or the Bullet.*

[177] Ronald Radosh, *Divided They Fell* (Simon and Schuster, 1996), 34.

[178] Jean Van Delinder, "Civil Rights Activists and the Reach for Political Power," *African Americans and the Presidency: The Road to the White House* edited by Bruce A. Glasrud and Cary D. Wintz (Routledge, 2009), 104.

[179] Jean Van Delinder, "Civil Rights Activists and the Reach for Political Power," 104.

Coretta Scott King, and Richard C. "Dick" Gregory—each of which "represent four distinctly economic, political and social directions."[180]

The splintering of the black movement occurred around the same time the uprisings began in Northern urban centers. The uprisings, centered around economic demands and racial justice in the slums of America, finally made the ugliness of American poverty visible. In total, race-related grievances are estimated to have fueled some 750 riots between the years 1964 – 1971.[181] The liberal program put forward by Johnson was overloaded with demands from America's underclass and growing anti-Vietnam War sentiments. Gareth Davies (1992) argues that the Great Society's stress on 'equal opportunity' as opposed to income redistribution impaired its ability to properly respond. Citing scholars like James T. Patterson, Henry J. Aaron, Sar A. Levitan and others, Davies states that Johnson's liberal policymakers "acted in part upon a naïve faith in individual rehabilitation" and a political calculation that "[focused] on opportunity rather than income support."[182] A program of guaranteed income was not only viewed as going against the American creed, but was seen as an admission of defeat.[183] The many political demands that converged by 1968, coupled with the urban uprisings, would ultimately paralyze the liberal administration which was also bogged down in an imperialist war abroad. A consequence of these failings was Nixon's victory in 1968, despite the public still believing in the need for social welfare programs, according to historian Doris Kearns Goodwin. She writes, "…what changed between 1964 and 1968 was not people's attitudes towards the policies which Johnson espoused…but their level of trust in Johnson's capacity to cope with domestic and international problems."[184] In short, political power was losing its authority among the public.

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[180] Jean Van Delinder, "Civil Rights Activists and the Reach for Political Power," 104-105.

[181] Gregg Lee Carter, "In the Narrows of the 1960s U.S. Black Rioting," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 30, no. 1 (1986): 115.

[182] Gareth Davies, "War on Dependency: Liberal Individualism and the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964," *Journal of American Studies* 26, no. 2 (1992): 207.

[183] Davies, 231.

[184] Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (Harper & Row, 1976), 352.

A Political Theory Rebuked by Society

The urban uprisings proved to be the decisive sign that the postwar model of democracy was broken and exclusionary. Former apologists for apathy now appeared as callous defenders of a broken, bygone era. Moved by the social conditions of their time, critics worked to recenter participation in democratic thought. In 1967, the Caucus for a New Political Science (CNPS) was formed as a challenge to the prevailing orthodoxy in the field. It came to fruition during the year of the 'long, hot summer' of 1967 when race riots gripped the country. Eschewing the imagined value-neutral models of old, it professed a left-wing orientation in an unabashed effort to return 'politics' to political science. At its inception, *Apolitical Politics: A Critique of Behavioralism* (1967) became one of the leading texts of this new movement within political science. A compilation of essays, the authors indicted postwar liberal pluralists for misconstruing political non-participation and apathy. As James Petras wrote in his critique, "the notions of 'equilibrium' and 'balance,' perhaps more than any other, [had] distorted the perception of political scientists."[185] The authors pointed to the plight of black America to discredit apathy's apologists. Political scientist Jack L. Walker expanded on this idea:

> But it is hard to believe, in these days of protest demonstrations... that the mood of cynical apathy toward politics which affects so many American Negroes is an indication of their satisfaction with the political system, and with the weak, essentially meaningless alternatives it usually presents to them.[186]

Clearly, the riots had a strong impact on the authors. Walker goes on further, stating that:

> To assume that apathy is a sign of satisfaction in this case is to overlook the tragic history of the Negroes in America and the system of violent repression long used to deny them any entrance into the regular channels of democratic decision-making.[187]

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[185] James Petras, "Ideology and United States Political Scientists" in *Apolitical Politics*, ed. Charles A. McCoy and John Ployford (Crowell, 1967), 95.

[186] Jack L. Walker, "A Critique of the Elitist Theory of Democracy" in *Apolitical Politics,* ed. Charles A. McCoy and John Ployford (Crowell, 1967), 207.

[187] Jack L. Walker, "A Critique of the Elitist Theory of Democracy." 208.

Unlike postwar scholars, the authors of *Apolitical Politics* linked political alienation with non-participation. Non-voting was understood to be a symptom of inequality. Shinya Ono put forward a similar argument in his contribution to the anthology. Inspired by *The Power Elite* (1956), Ono argues that the state had grown so concentrated and centralized that the "citizens cannot transcend their narrow personal milieux even cognitively."[188] The public's recognition of the state's gargantuan status "further reinforces their political alienation in terms of both their political consciousness and participation."[189] He characterized widespread apathy as "[constituting] the reservoir of institutionalized power for the elites."[190]

Out of the late 1960s emerged a more diffused understanding of political participation which went beyond mere voting. The CNPS accused the old guard of using techniques to deliberately see only what they wanted to see—of avoiding "vital political issues, such as racial and gender inequality, labor strife, poverty, and the sources of imperial warfare."[191] If postwar theorists were not able to adequately account for social needs, then perhaps it was the definition of political engagement itself that needed readjusting. One such effort was attempted in *Participation in America* (1972) by Sidney Verba and Norman Nie. The highly influential text expanded political participation to four domains: voting, campaigning, community-based activities, and communication with public officials.[192] Other comprehensive studies like *Political Action: An Eight Nation Study (1973–1976)* further reworked Verba and Nie's definitions to include protest

[188] Shinya Ono, "The Limits of Bourgeois Pluralism" in *Apolitical Politics,* edited by Charles A. McCoy and John Ployford (Crowell, 1967), 114.

[189] Ono, 114.

[190] Ono, 114.

[191] Clyde W. Barrow, "The Political and Intellectual Origins of New Political Science," *New Political Science* 39, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 445, https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2017.1378297.

[192] Sidney Verba and Norman H. Nie, *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality* (University of Chicago Press, 1987), 54.

movements.[193] Efforts like these became standard fare within the field by the 1970s and would continue in the decades ahead. However, these largely data-driven models seemed to not grasp the historical-cultural shift that was manifesting in America. In many ways, they flew right past each other. Around the same time political scholars started to expand their definition of participation, the possibilities of politics were beginning to exceptionally narrow. For all the inventive ways academics reframed political participation, the social fact of America remained: the public was growing more alienated from politics itself. Theorists disassembled the normalization of non-voting in theory precisely when non-voting was being normalized in actual, everyday life.

The Emergent Non-Voting Near-Majority

The national mood after the news of Watergate broke was profoundly cynical. Journalist Bob Woodward, one of the lead reporters on the corruption probe, admitted he sat out the election of 1972.[194] Nixon won the presidency handily that year because the full extent of his administration's crimes were not yet known. He was also able to tap into the vast, largely white working-class who was "overtaxed, distrustful of politics and politicians [and] worried constantly about layoffs."[195] But as the following two years unraveled, opinions on Nixon soured. By 1975, most Americans believed that the government had been consistently lying to them for the past ten years.[196] Historian Thomas Borstelmann pinpoints this moment as a historic shift in the public's orientation toward the state. As a counterweight to centralized private power after the industrialization of the late 1800s, Americans had long accepted a strong national state to provide a safety net.[197] This half

[193] Samuel H. Barnes and Max Kaase, "Political Action: An Eight Nation Study, 1973-1976: Version 1" (ICPSR - Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research, 1984), https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR07777.V1.

[194] Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, *All the President's Men* (Simon and Schuster, 2007), 200.

[195] Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (The New Press, 2010), 121.

[196] Yanek Mieczkowski, *Gerald Ford and the Challenges of the 1970s* (University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 21.

[197] Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 40.

century-old disposition toward national governance, according to Borstelmann, "reached its apex in the [...] reforms of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society" but then proceeded to chip away.[198] Until Watergate, the public generally "tended to assume their presidents were moral and competent men."[199] Although corruption and distrust in government ranked as top concerns, Borstelmann claims that neither of these worries were fundamentally resolved. Both Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter "failed to consolidate their authority"—with Ford being bogged down by his Nixonian past and Carter's later administration becoming synonymous with critical failure both domestically and abroad.[200] Ford's pardon of Nixon in 1974, in particular, permanently maligned his future political aspirations. The editorial board of the *New Yorker* wrote, "The pardon may be the final blow to [Americans'] faith in America... there is sudden gloom everywhere—a compound of shattered hopes, cynicism, despair about the future, and helplessness."[201] The growing public distrust, however, was not just levied at the presidency. It had effectively damaged perceptions toward all leading state institutions. At the same time Americans were fully retreating from the failed Vietnam War in 1975, the Church Committee revealed "assassination attempts against foreign politicians and incidents of spying on individuals living in the United States."[202] The revelation that state agencies like the CIA had been acting with impunity for decades was widely televised with the media relaying precise details of how power had gone awry.[203] Ultimately, the divide between those 'inside the Beltway' and the public had widened as public trust in institutions shattered.

Many Americans consequently began to retreat into their private lives amid a growing number of scandals at the highest level of power. Student campuses, hotbeds of anti-establishment radicalism just years prior, noticeably calmed. As Philip G. Altbach

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[198] Borstelmann, 40.

[199] Borstelmann, 41.

[200] Borstelmann, 41–43.

[201] Kevin Michael Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974* (W.W. Norton, 2019), 7.

[202] Kruse and Zelizer, 12.

[203] Kruse and Zelizer, 12.

(1979) wrote, "scholars, university administrators and students seem just as surprised by the present period of political quiet on campus."[204] Concepts like 'burnout' appeared in psychological journals for the first time, a timely description of a period losing its political fervor.[205] The distrustful, white working class voters that had carried Nixon to victory in 1972 also began to withdraw from politics. The cynicism that defined this segment of America had grown to become the majority's sentiment. While some withdrew, others were just plain angry. "Impeach someone!" read a popular bumper sticker at the time.[206] Skepticism toward politics likewise seeped into every nook and cranny of American life. Eddie Williams, president of the thinktank Joint Center tasked with assisting black elected officials, expressed outrage in 1976. "Political apathy and cynicism [...] is gripping the black electorate across the nation," he writes, and it is this "enemy from within which threatens hard won gains of the past and potential gains of the future."[207] Politics had become so suspect that Gerald Ford's advisors even told him to avoid mentioning his congressional experience during the 1976 presidential debates.[208] They sincerely believed it would hurt his chances. After the 1970s, virtually all future presidents would play on their 'outsider' status to win elections.[209] Political experience had, in many ways, become a liability.

Come election day in 1976, voter turnout plummeted to just over 53% of the voting-eligible population.[210] Western Europe, in contrast, enjoyed a voter participation rate of

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[204] Philip G. Altbach, "From Revolution to Apathy: American Student Activism in the 1970s," *Higher Education* 8, no. 6 (1979): 609.

[205] Wilmar B. Schaufeli, "Burnout: A Short Socio-Cultural History," in *Burnout, Fatigue, Exhaustion*, ed. Sighard Neckel, Anna Katharina Schaffner, and Greta Wagner (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 105.

[206] Mieczkowski, *Gerald Ford and the Challenges of the 1970s*, 20.

[207] Smith Baxter, "Blacks & The Elections: What's Behind Black Voter Apathy?," *The Militant*, October 29, 1976, vol. 40, no. 41, 21.

[208] Mieczkowski, *Gerald Ford and the Challenges of the 1970s*, 20.

[209] Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 46.

[210] "Table 397. Participation in Elections for President and U.S. Representatives: 1932 to 2010." *U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2012* (U.S. Census Bureau).

some 80 percent during the 1970s.[211] It was a worrying development for a country that prided itself on being the world's leading democracy. The fact that Jimmy Carter barely etched out a win over Ford, the former vice president of the first president to resign, was testament to the public's disinterest. Many in the media anticipated beforehand that the 1976 election would be a dismal affair. Just over two weeks before the election, the *New York Times* ran a story titled "Does It Really Matter?"[212] In the piece, author James Reston put forward an argument that voting did, in fact, still matter. But the fact that such a position had to even be defended spoke to the national mood. Reston's article was widely re-published in the opinion sections of local newspapers like *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, The Billings Gazette, Orlando Sentinel, the Freeport Journal-Standard* and others, each with their own unique headline.[213] It was an effort to push back against the national sentiment best summed up as, "Don't blame me—I'm against both of them."[214] One submission to the local paper *Lowell Sun* before the election ran with the title: "Voting is dishonest and fraudulent."[215] The author said bluntly, "if voting could change anything it would be made illegal!"—a famous quote which has been misattributed ever since.[216] Debates over the merits of voting were overall a common sight in the local papers running up to the 1976 election.

Alienation and Cynicism: A Look at the Data

The record level of nonvoters during the 1976 presidential election was caused by a confluence of factors. Luckily, this was also a time when surveys and polling became

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[211] Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 46.

[212] James Reston, "Does It Really Matter?," *The New York Times*, October 20, 1976. Archives, https://www.nytimes.com/1976/10/20/archives/does-it-really-matter.html.

[213] James Reston, "Voting: Does It Really Matter?" *Freeport Journal-Standard* (Freeport, IL) Oct. 21, 1976; James Reston, "Yes, It Does Make a Difference," *The Atlanta Constitution* (Atlanta, GA) Oct 21, 1976; James Reston, "Yes, It Really Matters" *The Orlando Sentinel* (Orlando, FL) Oct. 20, 1976; James Reston, "You Want Four More Stodgy Years?" *The Billings Gazette* (Billings, MT) Oct. 21, 1976.

[214] Reston, "Does It Really Matter?"

[215] Robert S. Borden, "Voting Is Dishonest and Fraudulent," *Lowell Sun* (Lowell, MA) Sept. 24, 1976.

[216] Borden. (note: The quote has been commonly recycled online and misattributed to individuals like author Mark Twin, peace activist Phillip Berrigan, anarchist writer Emma Goldman, and others).

standard political practice, so we can trace these developments very precisely.[217] While many political scientists were charting new ways to conceptualize political participation, the public was growing wary of the possibilities of politics. The famous documentary *1964* took its title as the 'last innocent year,' and polling surprisingly points to this being the case. According to Pew Research Center, public trust in government reached an all-time-high in 1964 with 77% believing that the federal government does "what is right just about always or most of the time."[218] The drop-off that occurred in the years ahead is nothing short of extraordinary. By 1979, Pew Research records that just a quarter of Americans trusted their own government.[219]

The collapse of trust is widely documented in other polling of the period. The *American Election Studies Data Sourcebook* finds that at least 70% of Americans agreed with the following statements in 1980: (1) "the government wastes a lot of money," (2) "government is run for the benefit of a few big interests," and (3) "you cannot trust the government to do right most of the time."[220] Although Gallup only has data on public confidence since 1973, the polling outlet finds that trust in many aspects of American life—organized religion, Congress, media, and so on—began its decline during the 1970s.[221] Such a development is arguably just one degree separated from individualized alienation. America was becoming more atomized. This connection was demonstrated in a comprehensive study conducted by Twenge, Campbell and Carter (2014) who found that "trust in others declined markedly among American adults... between the 1970s and

[217] D. S. Hillygus, "The Evolution of Election Polling in the United States," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 75, no. 5 (December 1, 2011): 963, https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfr054.

[218]Pew Research Center, "Section 1: Trust in Government 1958-2010" in *The People and Their Government: Distrust, Discontent, Anger and Partisan Rancor* (Washington, D.C: Pew Research Center, April 2010): 13.

[219] Pew Research Center, "Section 1: Trust in Government 1958-2010," 13.

[220] Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider, "The Decline of Confidence in American Institutions," *Political Science Quarterly* 98, no. 3 (1983): 386.

[221] Gallup Inc, "Confidence in Institutions," Gallup.com, June 22, 2007, https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/Confidence-Institutions.aspx.

2012."[222] It was not merely that trust in the state and its political institutions collapsed—virtually every aspect of civil society suffered. Sites of belonging in America, responsible for Americans' feeling of community, felt the pull of alienation. The complete debasement of public confidence ended up reinforcing the American peculiarity. Writing in 1977, pollster Daniel Yankelovich noted that "two-third majority [of Americans] felt that what they think 'doesn't really count.'" It is on these grounds that many Americans began to detach from politics completely to join the growing legion of nonvoters. The development has prompted some historians, like Julian Zelizer, to argue that "we still live in the era of Watergate."[223] In truth, public trust began to slowly fall in the years before Watergate. The scandal confirmed the trend was here to stay and it deepened further during Reagan's presidency.

One may wonder how American democracy was able to sustain itself with such a crisis of confidence. The answer is hidden in the data itself. Findings by the National Election Studies (NES) demonstrate that distrust of politics was largely toward politicians and officials, *not* against the regime itself.[224] The imagined idea of America remained relatively intact. This helps to clarify why the order did not collapse unto itself despite deep cynicism creeping into every facet of life. It also explains how Ronald Reagan successfully ran on American greatness despite such low levels of public trust. Expecting less of institutions, the public retreated further into America as an idea. This proved to be fertile ground for neoliberal governance with its hands-off approach to social welfare. As long as the idea of America persisted, the decline of electoral and civic participation would not threaten political power. Non-voting was therefore relatively a non-issue for elites and could even be opportunistically leveraged to win elections.

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[222] Jean M. Twenge, W. Keith Campbell, and Nathan T. Carter, "Declines in Trust in Others and Confidence in Institutions Among American Adults and Late Adolescents, 1972–2012," *Psychological Science* 25, no. 10 (2014): 1917.

[223] Julian Zelizer, "Distrustful Americans Still Live in the Age of Watergate," CNN, July 7, 2014, http://edition.cnn.com/2014/07/07/opinion/zelizer-watergate-politics/index.html.

[224] Kevin Chen, *Political Alienation and Voting Turnout in the United States, 1960-1988* (Mellon Research University Press, 1992), 215.

Altogether, the data certainly points towards a real and documented trend. However, it should not be taken as completely explanatory. In one of the most comprehensive investigations on political alienation and voting at the time, Kevin Chen (1992) puts forward an alternative thesis: the decline in voting is largely due to a "cohort effect."[225] In other words, the public's depoliticization was sustained by each generation voting less and less. It had effectively become cultural. Non-voting was normalized. The hardening of the American peculiarity may have had concrete reasons during the 1970s, but by the 1980s it had become a force of habit. Chen admitted such phenomenon cannot be measured through empirical analysis, an admission that studying the nonvoter problem in America requires historicization.

Public Distrust Left Unresolved

In the months before the 1976 election, noted pollster Peter Hart predicted a record total of 70 million qualified voting-age Americans to stay home.[226] He turned out to be right. Nonvoters almost made up almost the majority that year. Their reason was not out of apathy, but largely out of conscious choice. More than two-thirds of nonvoters polled by Hart gave their reason as "candidates say one thing and then do another."[227] The overwhelming sentiment was that politics had become a corrupt enterprise. Hart recognized that American political culture was moving into a new mode. "I have a feeling," he said, "that if they don't come back in 1976, they won't be coming back at all."[228] Harold Mendelsohn, a political scientist from the University of Denver and co-sponsor of the study, also took the findings as evidence of a cultural shift. As he told *The New York Times, "*It may be that this generation has accepted nonvoters as a norm the way other generations took voting for granted."[229] What both of them were describing was the normalization of

[225] Chen, *Political Alienation and Voting Turnout in the United States, 1960-1988*, 216–17.

[226] Christopher Lydon, "Nonvoters Found Near a Majority," *The New York Times*, September 5, 1976. Archives, https://www.nytimes.com/1976/09/05/archives/nonvoters-found-near-a-majority-10-million-rise-since-72-hinted.html.

[227] Lydon.

[228] Lydon.

[229] Lydon.

non-voting. Because of the growing separation between politics and the public, coupled with widespread distrust, apoliticism was effectively becoming cultural.

When Jimmy Carter took office in 1976, he opted for an individualist approach to the 'crisis of confidence' at hand: the public was told to expect less and that the road ahead would be difficult. The austere outlook seemed at odds with a public who expected more from political solutions, not less. It was an admission that political imagination had reached the end of the road. The precipitous decline in public trust that defined the 1970s would ultimately be left unresolved. According to historians Michael Kevin Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, Reaganism would not have been possible had there not been this environment tinged with widespread disillusionment.[230] In 1980, Ronald Reagan famously ran on a platform of 'getting the government off of the backs of the people.' The actual catalyst that caused the public distrust—the crimes of the political class and its corrupt entrenchment—was never properly corrected. Reagan instead appealed to a further separation between the state and the public. Whereas the 1970s produced depoliticization and fertile ground for the normalization of non-voting, the neoliberal turn of the 1980s solidified the American peculiarity as a cultural feature of American life—as will be discussed in the next chapter.

[230] Kruse and Zelizer, *Fault Lines*, 104.

V. The New Non-Voting Normal

The precipitous decline in public confidence after Watergate was nothing short of historic. Yet, it did not topple the American order. Political institutions retained their stature despite being suspect. What did change, however, was the public's orientation toward politics itself. This chapter examines how the trend of depoliticization during the 1970s solidified by the 1980s and ties together the central argument: the United States followed a trajectory that normalized non-voting during the short 20th century. The normalization of non-voting is the fourth and final thematic break in this thesis, after (1) panic over non-voting during the 1920s, (2) disregard and apologism in the postwar era, and (3) the activist period and the malaise of the 1970s—as traced in the previous three chapters.

In sociology, normalization is commonly understood to be a socio-cultural process. If a prescriptive norm which once had high levels of compliance falls over time, one would say it had lost its authority as 'normal.' The same can be said for voting. The fallout from the 1970s proved to be fertile ground for a cultural shift away from politics as the 'Me Generation' came of age. Out of the collapse of public trust emerged a reawakened individuality as formerly political problems became personal problems. The idea that politics was inherently compromised became something of a cultural truism after the 1970s. By the 1980s, dwindling participation in electoral politics was no longer an anomaly but an established trend. The generational cohorts that came of age during this time were also less interested in politics generally. Between 1972 and 2000, the "voting rate for adults under the age of thirty years plummeted from 50 to 30 percent between 1972 to 2000."[231] But the electoral disengagement was felt more broadly with "the period from 1960 to 2000 [being the] lowest ebb in voter turnout in the nation's history."[232] It was indicative of a

[231] Walter Williams, *Reaganism and the Death of Representative Democracy* (Georgetown University Press, 2003), 68.

[232] Thomas E. Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter: Public Involvement in an Age of Uncertainty* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2009), 3–4 **quoted in** Walter Williams, *Reaganism and the Death of Representative Democracy* (Georgetown University Press, 2003), 68.

more general trend in the population: the "rift [was widening] between the 'party of nonvoters' and the 'party of voters."[233]

The implications of the public's political disengagement are broad, but they are closely linked to the rise of Reaganism and the New Right. The public's exit from politics allowed these ideologues to misconstrue their victory as a mandate which pushed the political discourse in both parties rightward. This chapter traces the cultural shift toward apoliticism and how it made the New Right programme possible. The success of Reaganism ultimately relied on depoliticization. Whereas non-voting produced panic during the 1920s, it produced ambivalence by the 1980s and '90s: unlike before, it was now an opportunity for certain ideologues to reconstruct the boundaries of politics. The normalization of non-voting had become both a cultural truism and politically useful for those who sought power.

The Cultural Drift Toward Apoliticism

In 1980, PBS NewsHour ran a story on nonvoters before that year's election. Enthusiasm was markedly low. "It's the same old promises, and we keep paying," said one respondent.[234] Another individual told PBS NewsHour, "I'm like a lot of other truckers, and most of the American public, I guess. I`m disappointed in politics. I`m disappointed in the crooks."[235] All the comments were tinged with a deep desire for real choices. "I think we`re going to have to get some kind of presidential hero... someone to look up to," remarked one student.[236] The televised segment showed the sentiments common to American nonvoters: a belief that politics was an inherently corrupt enterprise, a lose-lose game for the majority and utterly devoid of inspiration.

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[233] Tom DeLuca, *The Two Faces of Political Apathy* (Temple University Press, 1995), 56.

[234] MacNeil/Lehrer Report, "Nonvoters," *American Archive of Public Broadcasting* video, 00:31:47, Oct. 10, 1980, https://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip_507-j678s4kd00.

[235] MacNeil/Lehrer Report, "Nonvoters."

[236] MacNeil/Lehrer Report, "Nonvoters."

Turning away from the increasingly limited possibilities of politics, many Americans looked inward. Tom Wolfe described the 'Me Generation' of the late 1970s as possessing a new, awakened form of individuality. As part of constant self-improvement, it was a time to 'find yourself' amid a social shift toward inward-focused sensibility. Taking cues from the sexual revolution and hippiedom, America became more of a confessional society. A cursory look at the *New York Times* best-seller list points to the changing mood: "In the 1960s, the "best-seller list rarely had more than one self-help book on it; by May 1978, there were seven," as historian Thomas Borstelmann notes.[237] Cultural theorist Christopher Lasch called this shift as one toward 'therapeutic sensibility'—a longing for "the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health, and psychic security." [238] Moreover, this individualized outlook was threatening to "displace politics, the last refuge of ideology."[239] Working off of Richard Sennet's *The Fall of Public Man* (1976), Lasch argued that, under the present age, "politics degenerates into a struggle not for social change but for self-realization."[240] While this new motivation may drive some, the majority did not look to politics as a suitable place for self-actualizing their dreams. Instead, they looked elsewhere—and what were once problems for politics transformed into personal problems as the cultural ethos of the "Me Generation" became widespread. It was this transformation that gave Reaganism its staying power during the 1980s.

The cultural drift toward reawakened individuality and apoliticism has been recognized by commentators as a core feature of post-1970s America. In fact, the shift was so noticeable that it was properly psychologized as a cultural phenomenon taking shape. Historian Robert M. Collins (2007) writes how researchers of the 1980s distinguished the

[237] Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 65.

[238] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, Revised edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 7.

[239] Lasch, 13.

[240] Lasch, 28.

this "expressive individualism" as entirely new.[241] For example, the widely-discussed *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985) found that white, middle-class Americans demonstrated a "strikingly individualistic value system that revolved around 'the ideal of a radically unencumbered and improvisational self.'"[242] They described this development as a novel shift in how many individuals were coming to understand themselves. Noted political scientist Ronald Inglehart likened this transformation to a transition toward post-materialist values centered on "self-expression, self-esteem, self-realization, and the quality of life."[243] This generation, associated with the post-industrial age, tended to privilege "cultural conflicts over self-actualized and individual freedom" in their approach to politics.[244] In contrast, the previous generation had more 'material values' with concerns over "distribution of sources and income." Their activity tended to gravitate toward mass organizations like unions and parties.[245]

Ultimately, the character traits Inglehart defined as 'post-materialist' were the ideal coordinates for a neoliberal subject: a hyper-individualized actor who eschewed bread-and-butter politics in favor of 'living in the now' and 'being yourself.' The new cultural ethos also proved to be a powerful catalyst for economic demand. The *Los Angeles Times* characterized the 1980s as the "shopped-till-we-dropped decade" as consumer spending boomed to new highs.[246] While the new individualist was a powerful driver of economic demand, it also reshaped the possibilities of electoral politics—and few politicians were able to tap into this cultural transformation like Ronald Reagan did.

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[241] Robert M. Collins, *Transforming America: Politics and Culture in the Reagan Years* (Columbia University Press, 2007), 152.

[242] Collins, *Transforming America: Politics and Culture in the Reagan Years,* 152.

[243] Collins, 153.

[244] Clem Brooks and Jeff Manza, "Do Changing Values Explain the New Politics? A Critical Assessment of the Postmaterialist Thesis," *The Sociological Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (1994): 544.

[245] Brooks and Manza, 455.

[246] Nancy Rivera Brooks. "1980s Shoppers Charged Into a Brave New World of Goods : Consumer Products: Electronic Gadgets, Fitness Fads and Yuppie Indulgences Attracted Attention and Sales during the Past Decade.," *Los Angeles Times*, December 31, 1989, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-12-31-fi-270-story.html.

The Political Ambiguity of Reaganism

Ronald Reagan was perfectly fit for an American society that was undergoing an individualist reawakening. Reagan was, after all, a man of the movies—a medium where dreams are projected and realized in narration. It proved to be a well-suited vehicle to tap into the new individualism taking root in America. Starring in films since 1937, Reagan was part of popular American culture long before he ran for office. Although he never reached the pinnacle of celebrity stardom in the movie business, it best prepared him for the theater of politics. His slick rhetoric, from years in both radio and as a talk show host, allowed him to mingle between contradictions unlike any other politician. Historian Robert Dallek has argued that the trajectory of Reagan's political life mirrors the changing form of two different types of celebrity idols in America. The original 'idol of production' was one whose appeal comes from his achievements. By contrast, the contemporary 'idol of consumption' is one who sells his image.[247] Like a cultural salesman, Reagan is the idol of consumption: he sells ideas and dreams, like movies do. As Micheal Rogin writes in *Ronald Reagan The Movie* (1988), "ordinary Americans can identify with the idol of consumption because he does not exercise authority over them."[248] This makes him especially salient in an age of political demobilization.

If we view Reaganism like a movie, we can see how the phenomenon was effective in a time of depoliticization. Elisabeth Anker in *The Cinematic "Dream Life" of American Politics* (2016) builds on Rogin's work in this regard. In Rogin's cinematic-historical account of American politics, he relies on a concept called 'prepolitical suppression.' It is essentially the process by which ideas are preemptively relegated as nonpolitical before they can assert themselves as oppositional. According to Anker, "[oppositional] claims are culturally deciphered as personal desires, family concerns, criminal behavior, or medical challenges" and then discredited.[249] This ultimately narrows the scope of politics itself. Within the Reaganism phenomenon, prepolitical suppression was done by replacing

[247] Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, The Movie: And Other Episodes in Political Demonology*, 8.

[248] Rogin, 8.

[249] Anker, "The Cinematic 'Dream Life' of American Politics," 208.

politics with film. The personal dreams associated with cinema merged with politics, resulting in ambiguity: "Reagan's easy slippage between movies and reality is synecdochic for a political culture increasingly impervious to distinctions between fiction and history."[250] This was recognized by some commentators at the time. Writing in 1985, columnist Leslie H. Gelb characterized Reagan as possessing a "contradictory cast of mind" as a man who seemed to consistently mismatch his heart with his mind, the consequences of his actions from his words.[251] When Reagan was exposed for lying about the Iran Contra scandal, he put it simply: "I did not trade arms for hostages... my heart and best intentions tell me that's true, but the facts and evidence tell me it is not."[252]

When the sequel to the Reagan Movie was up for reelection in 1984, 'prepolitical suppression' had effectively narrowed the scope of politics completely into Reagan's camp. Democrats found themselves adopting many of his own policies despite running against him, such as a balanced budget and supply-side economics.[253] "On economic issues the Democrats offered voters almost nothing in 1984," political scientists Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers observed in *The Atlantic*.[254] Aside from pushing the political discourse squarely in his camp, Reagan's cinematic persona also allowed him to be the "Teflon president"—a term coined by Rep. Pat Schroeder in 1983 to denounce Reagan as someone for whom no blame sticks.[255] One famous example of this in practice occurred during the 1984 election. Lesley Stahl of *CBS Evening News* aired a critical story on the

[250] Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, The Movie: And Other Episodes in Political Demonology,* 9 **quoted in** Anker, "The Cinematic 'Dream Life' of American Politics," 213.

[251] Leslie H. Gelb, "The Mind of the President," *The New York Times*, October 6, 1985, https://www.nytimes.com/1985/10/06/magazine/the-mind-of-the-president.html.

[252] Lou Cannon, "Reagan Acknowledges Arms-for-Hostages Swap," *Washington Post*, March 5, 1987, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1987/03/05/reagan-acknowledges-arms-for-hostages-swap/7a5cd7cc-a112-4283-94bd-7f730ad81901/.

[253] Steven V. Roberts, "Democrats to Focus on Budget Issues," *The New York Times*, January 31, 1984, https://www.nytimes.com/1984/01/31/us/democrats-to-focus-on-budget-issues.html.

[254] Ferguson and Rogers, "The Myth of America's Turn to the Right."

[255] David J. Lanoue, "The 'Teflon Factor': Ronald Reagan & Comparative Presidential Popularity," *Polity* 21, no. 3 (1989): 481, https://doi.org/10.2307/3234744.

President that year, but was phoned immediately by White House aide Richard Darman after it went live:

> "You guys in Televisionland haven't figured it out, have you?" Darman said. "When the pictures are powerful and emotional, they override if not completely drown out the sound. Lesley, I mean it, nobody heard you."[256]

His aides knew how difficult it was to separate the cinematic idea of Reagan from the cruel realities of his neoliberal policies. For those that adored him as an idol, they were 'politicized'—for the majority that did not, the exit from politics was much easier than ever before. When politics becomes a movie, those who find themselves unimpressed by the showing can easily tune out. Their struggles, now lacking a political outlet, become personal.

The cynical attitudes of the 1970s provided an opportune cultural moment for the Reagan movie to begin its showing. The cinematic vision was defined by its blind optimism, nationalism and 'anything is possible' attitude. But it also effectively ignored the reasons democratic trust was in decline. Reaganism prevented America from atoning for its mistakes. According to historian Rick Perlstein, this is often an overlooked consequence of the Reagan Revolution. Reagan failed America, Perlstein argues, by not giving it the closure it so desperately needed. He "[robbed] us of that maturity [...] in acknowledging that the American way is to acknowledge America's mistakes and correct them."[257] Instead, skepticism against politics was allowed to fester and be normalized. Reaganism effectively deepened the public's exit from politics. This 'exit' allowed for two consecutive Reagan landslides in 1980 and 1984 despite winning over only a fourth of the voting-eligible population.[258]

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[256] Jay Rosen, "'Nobody Heard What You Said.' Lesley Stahl's Fable About Reagan and the Press.," PressThink, June 9, 2004, http://archive.pressthink.org/2004/06/09/reagan_words_p.html.

[257] Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute at Hunter College, *Rick Perlstein – The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan*, August 19, 2014. YouTube. 24:44. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWsvyLYFGdM.

[258] Calculated from McDonald, "National General Election VEP Turnout Rates, 1789-Present."

Normalization as Part of Everyday Life

"Morning Again in America' was the slogan for Ronald Reagan's famous 1984 election commercial. It was American renewalism condensed in an ad, featuring scenes of patriots hoisting the flag, happy marriages and honest work. It was a world seemingly absent of politics other than love of country and family. But this world was also one of capitalism made into culture. In the ad, conservative moralism and the market intersect to form one whole—a wholeness consummated with a mention of low inflation right as a newly-wed couple share a kiss. The ad ends with a simple rhetorical question: "Why would we ever want to return to where we were, less than four short years ago?" Presumably, the 'before' was when this idealistic and white suburban experience was rife with disorder. "Morning in America" speaks to how Reaganism played into the public's depoliticization. It was an idyllic world, seemingly free of politics, and one where the only governing structure was economic growth.

Reagan's ad would ultimately become one of the most notable and successful television ads in American history. It demonstrates how depoliticization is reproduced by the boundaries people set for themselves in conduct and conversation. For example, a common Americanism that many are familiar with is to avoid three specific topics at the dinner table: politics, religion and money. The American predilection toward avoiding politics naturally has a long history. However, it became especially pronounced during the 1980s as Americans turned toward a more 'expressive individualism.' Nina Eliasoph conducted dozens of interviews with everyday Americans to try to better understand how they avoided politics. She found that whenever "broad political concerns surfaced... [they] mysteriously vanished behind very personal-sounding concerns: 'my house,' 'my children,' 'close to home.'"[259] The language used to describe what "affects me personally" was used interchangeably with "do-able" and "not political."[260] What Eliasoph ultimately discovered was that the public's reawakened individualism caused many to equate that

[259] Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics*, 6.

[260] Nina Eliasoph, "'Close to Home': The Work of Avoiding Politics," *Theory and Society* 26, no. 5 (1997): 608.

which was doable as *personal* and *non-political;* and that which was not doable was considered 'away from home' or *political.* Underlying this thinking was the belief that radical introspection, not the social sphere, was the key to truth and morality.

In most other democratic nations, democracy is understood to be a public negotiation and exchange. It depends on a collective, public sphere. Americans, however, often see the opposite: "it is the option to remain separate from the body politic that is priced as the main democratic privilege."[261] This separation forms the cultural bedrock of the American peculiarity. Because many choose to remain separate, the culture stresses voluntarism and charity as a result. Under Reaganism, the implication was that voluntarism, not political participation, made for the ideal citizen. For example, the President's Task Force on Private Sector Initiatives was formed in 1981 to "boost non-government solutions to social challenges."[262] Accolades like the President's Volunteer Action Award were rolled out as part of the Private Sector Initiatives effort.[263] A focus on voluntarism, and not politics, as the remedy to social problems would become a standard tenet of the conservative platform. To promote this end, for example, George H. W. Bush founded the Points of Light in 1990. According to Olga Thierbach-McLean (2019), the stress on voluntarism fits the goals of depoliticization. Under this understanding of social responsibility, "each citizen takes care of their own manageable 'territory' instead of draining their energies into the 'hubristic' undertaking of trying to change the entire world."[264] Politics, in other words, becomes secondary to that which is 'close to home.'

The normalization of non-voting is made possible by the construction of these boundaries. These sentiments are directly related to new, individualized cultural ethos that

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[261] Olga Thierbach-McLean, "Close to Home, One at a Time, Not in My Backyard: Individualism and the Mantras of Depoliticization in US Reform Discourses," *European Journal of American Studies* 14, no. 14–2 (July 6, 2019), 2.

[262] Thierbach-McLean, "Close to Home, One at a Time, Not in My Backyard: Individualism and the Mantras of Depoliticization in US Reform Discourses," 5.

[263] "Executive Order 12594—President's Volunteer Action Award" *The American Presidency Project,* accessed December 1, 2020, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-12594-presidents-volunteer-action-award.

[264] Thierbach-McLean, 5

took hold of American society during the 1980s. Yet, the fading importance of collective solutions to social problems left a gap in the public sphere. Neither the vacuity of consumerism nor therapeutic sensibility provided an adequate replacement for collective, political solutions. The consequences of this gap are most clearly seen in the generational cohort that came of age in Reagan's America. Generation X (born 1965-1980) fully embodied the unfilled, broken atmosphere that remained: they were defined by their political apathy and unprecedented electoral absenteeism. The generation was characterized in popular media as "the slackers, cynics, whiners, drifters, malcontents," but they were, above all, products of the Reagan era's political culture.[265] Paul Allen Beck, a political scientist at Ohio State University, told the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1989 that "young people see politics as a dirty business."[266] He noticed that politics had become largely synonymous with negativity among his students. Repeatedly, they saw it as "something done by 'them,' not by 'us,'" he said.[267] It was a consequence of the depoliticized age. One of the most powerful indications of normalization is its staying power with each generational cohort. Gen X demonstrated not only that non-voting was being normalized, but that it was deepening. It had become cultural.

The erasure of politics from the social sphere was ultimately a process rooted in everyday life. While some did, in fact, chart political aspirations in the realm of human rights, environmentalism and so on, the vast majority of the public was moving in the direction of depoliticization. As post-materialist values took hold, the public's reorientation toward politics followed. What resulted was an emphasis on the personal over the political. In Reagan's 1984 ad "Morning in America," we see a political vision largely pushed by dreams of an idyllic suburban life. But it is a dream largely absent of politics. Whether it be toward individualist self-actualization, free market innovation or American patriotism—none of these dreams, so emphasized in Reagan's America, necessarily required politics.

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[265] Ted Halstead, "A Politics for Generation X," *The Atlantic*, August 1, 1999, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1999/08/a-politics-for-generation-x/306666/.

[266] John Dillin, "Student Political Apathy Is Growing, Educators Report," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 1989, https://www.csmonitor.com/1989/0811/acoll.html.

[267] Dillin.

In fact, it was more suitable for Reaganism if politics was not spoken. In everyday American life, such boundaries were being established and they made the normalization of non-voting possible.

The Political Project of Normalizing Non-voting

Thus far, the cultural shift that allowed for Reaganism has been emphasized, but we must also speak of those who viewed the deepening levels of political disengagement as acceptable. The public's retreat from politics became the ideal pretense for a broad, reconstructive project that lives on to this day. That project would be Reaganism and the neoliberal turn that defined the 1980s.[268] Thinktanks like the Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute and the American Enterprise Institute formed the intellectual backbone of this emergent ideological movement often called the New Right. 'Government is the problem, not the solution' was its often-touted mantra. Such a position was electoral suicide when Barry Goldwater first ran on it in 1964, but it had more promise in a time of low voter turnout, diminished political possibilities and widespread distrust. Tapping into the anti-establishment feelings of the 1970s, the New Right was able to successfully harness these sentiments to drive the public away from a politics of social welfarism.

Despite holding no actual majority among eligible voters, the New Right took the public's indifference as evidence of a political mandate. The public's rightward shift, with which they justified their programme, was imagined. It was actually the poor who were instead joining the growing ranks of nonvoters. Any would-be opposition to Reaganism was stunted by this development as Walter Dean Burnham noted in *The Eclipse of the Democratic Party* (1982):

> "...instead of a Left, we find one side of a welter of conflict groups held together by increasingly tenuous historic loyalties (and antagonism to Republicans); and on

[268] Characteristics of neoliberalism include laissez faire markets, deregulation, supply-side economics, low taxes, monetarist policies, reductions in fiscal spending, weakened labor rights, low inflation, price stability, reduced barriers to trade, and economic globalization.

> the other, a vast and growing "party of nonvoters," sociologically concentrated precisely where, in other countries, leftist parties can be found."[269]

In sharp contrast, the New Right was insurgent and decisive in its aims. What resulted were the perfect ingredients for Reaganism: a depoliticized public looking for the exit and an emergent minority of ideologues who sought to leverage the vacuum to reconstruct the boundaries of politics. The mix proved to be potent force for the normalization of non-voting. Reagan would end up winning a 'landslide' presidential victory in 1980 with only a little more than a fourth of all eligible voters (27.4%).[270]

Jimmy Carter's Effort to Expand the Vote Is Thwarted

Reagan's allies fundamentally understood nonvoters as the key to Reagan's strategy. "Our leverage in the elections quite candidly goes up as the voting populace goes down," Paul Weyrich, the co-founder of the Heritage Foundation, told a religious roundtable in 1980, "I don't want everybody to vote."[271] Seizing on an opportunity amid a disillusioned public, the emergent New Right would come to employ Wyrich's thinking as proper strategy. The plan first crystallized years in 1977 when the Republicans successfully opposed Jimmy Carter's push to make voting easier. Reagan was himself involved in these efforts. Its success would cement the New Right as the now-dominant faction in the Republican Party.

In 1977, Jimmy Carter sent a recommendation to Congress based on a worrying situation affecting American democracy. The dismal state of U.S. electoral participation was further dwindling, falling into the bottom rung of developed democracies. "I am deeply concerned that our country ranks behind at least twenty other democracies in its level of voter participation," Carter told the nation.[272] The proposal he put forward was drastic:

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[269] Walter Dean Burnham, "Eclipse of the Democratic Party," *Democracy II*, 1982, 10.

[270] Calculated from McDonald, "National General Election VEP Turnout Rates, 1789-Present."

[271] Clare Malone, "The Republican Choice," *FiveThirtyEight* (blog), June 24, 2020, https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-republican-choice/.

[272] United States President, "Election Reform: Message to the Congress (March 22, 1977)" in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* (Federal Register Division, National Archives and Records Service, General Services Administration, 1977).

abolish the electoral college for a direct majority vote, ease voter registration laws and provide federal funding for campaigns.[273] For the first time, a U.S. president openly acknowledged low voter turnout as a serious social issue and offered concrete solutions. The concern was reminiscent of the panic over low voter turnout during the 1920s. Like then, the very fabric of democracy and the 'soul of America' was said to be at stake.

Initially, Carter's Proposal was met with wide acclaim. Some "dozen Senators and Representatives" met at the Executive Office Building to support the proposal.[274] The League of Women Voters cheered the effort, as did many other reform groups. At first, the idea was even warmly received by some Republicans across the aisle. Chair of the RNC, Bill Brock, initially likened it to a "Republican concept" and the House Minority Leader, John Rhodes, even went as far as arguing that Election Day be a national holiday.[275] The proposal, however, would be thwarted by the insurgent New Right. Future political careers within the Republican party would be decided by those who came to their aid.

Kevin Phillips, the author of the popular book *The Emerging Republican Majority* (1969), likened the reform bill to "political dynamite" in his editorial.[276] Published in the conservative newspaper *Human Events* in April of 1977, he argued that "most of the new participants [would be] drawn from lower-middle and low-income groups."[277] This would favor Democrats by a margin of two-to-one. The Heritage Foundation echoed similar sentiments, arguing that low turnout was caused by factors "beyond our control... and

[273] Warren Weaver Jr., "Carter Proposes End of Electoral College in Presidential Votes," *The New York Times*, March 23, 1977, Archives, https://www.nytimes.com/1977/03/23/archives/carter-proposes-end-of-electoral-college-in-presidential-votes.html.

[274] Warren Weaver J, "Carter Proposes End of Electoral College in Presidential Votes"

[275] Rick Perlstein, *Reaganland: America's Right Turn 1976-1980* (Simon and Schuster, 2020), 94.

[276] United States Congress Senate Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, *The Electoral College and Direct Election: Supplement : Hearings Before the Subcommittee on the Constitution of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, Ninety-Fifth Congress, First Session, on ... S.J. Res. 1, 8, and 18* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), 516.

[277] United States Congress Senate Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, 517.

which most Americans would prefer not to change even if they could."[278] Pat Buchanan, who would later become Reagan's White House Communications Director, spoke in far more apocalyptic terms. The reform would "aid the welfare class," Buchanan wrote in the *Chicago Tribune,* and he went further:

> The wholesale busing of economic parasites and political illiterates to the polls election spells death for any party that stands for something other than the regular refilling of the government trough. Embracing this scheme, the GOP, the sick man of American politics, is reaching from its own hospital bed to pull the plug on the life-support system that keeps it alive. Perhaps we ought not interfere.[279]

Buchanan's piece captures the New Right's ideology on voting at its core: voting should not be easy because, if it were, it would only work to aid the so-called 'parasites' of society. Low voter turnout was understood to be the political strategy keeping the GOP alive after Nixon—it was their 'life-support system.' The rest of the party would fall in line to this thinking. After a meeting with rising star and future President Ronald Reagan, RNC chair Bill Brock suddenly changed his tune. It was the "Universal Voter Fraud Bill," Reagan told his supporters, and Brock agreed.[280] Under these pressures, the House Republican Policy Committee adopted a formal statement of opposition to the proposal. The measure was subsequently filibustered to irrelevance.

Buchanan's argument was a repackaging of ideas that had been floating in some corners of the conservative movement since Goldwater's failed presidential bid in 1964. That year, one of its most eloquent advocates was a young Ronald Reagan. Speaking to a crowd in Manchester, New Hampshire, Ronald Reagan put forward his understanding of political participation and its relation to governance. Quoting a relatively obscure Scottish academic named Alexander Fraser Tytler, he told the audience in 1964:

> A democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government. It can only exist until the voters discover they can vote themselves favors out of the public treasury.

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[278] Milton R, "Carter's Election Reform Proposal," *The Heritage Foundation*, April 20, 1977, archive. https://www.heritage.org/election-integrity/report/carters-election-reform-proposal.

[279] Patrick J. Buchanan, "'Reform' Aids Welfare Class," *Chicago Tribune*, March 1977.

[280] Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 95.

> From that moment on the majority, he said, always vote for the candidate promising the most benefits from the public treasury, with the result that democracy always collapses over a loose fiscal policy, always to be followed by a dictatorship.[281]

This statement was a precursor to the ideas that would embody the New Right's thinking moving forward. Running on a platform of austerity and 'limited government,' they recognized that such flagrant class warfare could only be successful if there was a broad base of nonvoters. The New Right's success in defeating Carter's electoral reforms ultimately cemented them as an insurgent bloc within the Republican Party. Just as importantly, it made clear that there would be a different electoral strategy moving forward. The growing disillusionment and non-voting rates during the 1970s provided the perfect opportunity to turn free market fundamentalism into a political mandate.

Leveraging Nonvoters as a Political Strategy

Ronald Reagan used his presidential victories in 1980 and 1984 as evidence of a mandate for his ideological program. But evidence shows voters were not moving rightward and overwhelmingly disapproved of cuts to social spending. In 1980, the National Opinion Research Center found that "only 21 percent of Americans... thought that 'too much' was being spent on environmental health, education, welfare, and urban-aid programs."[282] Reagan's victory that year was ultimately "more a negative referendum on Carter than an endorsement of [his] policies."[283] In an exhaustive round-up of public opinion, Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers (1986) found that the public was growing *more approving* of domestic spending on education, health and anti-poverty measures by 1984, not less. Reagan's own voters were frankly at odds with his own right-wing agenda. Clearly, what moved them toward him then was profoundly cultural. This is to say, it went beyond politics—a crucial distinction, and a core feature of the normalization of non-voting.

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[281] O'Neil, D Frank. "Roar Approval for Barry." *Manchester Union Leader* (Manchester, NH), March 6, 1964.

[282] Ferguson and Rogers, "The Myth of America's Turn to the Right."

[283] Ferguson and Rogers.

The opposition to Carter's proposal is perhaps the most explicit example of the New Right's efforts to thwart voting. However, it was usually not quite as out in the open. Instead, it often relied simply on leaning into the public's depoliticization and transforming it into a winning electoral strategy. In other words, Reaganism would not have been successful had the public not been so depoliticized. Historian Leah Wright Rigueur documents how this idea was employed in the 1980 presidential election to "neutralize the black vote."[284] Black GOP strategist Bob Wright wrote in a September 1980 memo that the goal for the election was to prevent "black emotions from teaching a point where there is heavy turnout to defeat Reagan as opposed to low turnout to elect Carter."[285] This was done by attacking Carter as an individual rather than the Democratic party as a whole. Blunt, racially-incendiary language was strategically rejected. The plan was ultimately successful and black apathy came to Reagan's aid: "in all of the southern states which Reagan won, if an estimated ten-fifteen percent more blacks voted, Reagan would have lost [them]."[286] The approach would be reiterated by Lee Atwater, the deputy director for Reagan's reelection campaign in 1984. Again, the focus was to "stave off Democratic attempts to forge a strong coalition of populists and blacks."[287] The strategy revolved around what Atwater called the "Electoral Fortress"—leveraging low voter turnout among the lower-strata of American society to achieve an electoral college landslide despite razor-thin margins of victories in each state.[288] The low turnout would be offset by broadening their base of evangelical support, a bloc being mobilized as part of Jeffry Falwell Sr.'s Moral Majority. The plan proved to be effective for Reagan both in 1980 and 1984 and for George H. W. Bush in 1988.

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[284] Leah Wright Rigueur, *The Loneliness of the Black Republican: Pragmatic Politics and the Pursuit of Power* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 285.

[285] Rigueur, 286.

[286] Edward Mercia Jackson, *Black Education in Contemporary America: A Crisis in Ambiguity* (Wyndham Hall Press, 1986), 9.

[287] Doug Rossinow, *The Reagan Era: A History of the 1980s* (Columbia University Press, 2015), 170.

[288] Rossinow, 171.

The Republican strategy was furthered by expanding a policy whose origins lie in Nixon's administration: the War on Drugs. The War on Drugs intensified during the Reagan years despite drug use actually declining in the early 1980s.[289] Between the years 1976 to 2000, some 3.5 million Americans were disenfranchised due to felony convictions as a result of these measures and others.[290] In 1986, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act made for mandatory sentencing and emphasized punishment over treatment, disproportionately criminalizing crack cocaine.[291] Historian Carol Anderson has argued that the War on Drugs ultimately allowed for a rollback of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 for black Americans through punitive means.[292] In the lead-up to the mid-term election that year, the Democratic-majority House and the Republican-majority Senate effectively competed over who could put forward the most punitive anti-crime law to gain an advantage in the election. Both parties believed that "the most likely place to attract votes [was] from conservative Democrats and moderate Republicans."[293] The low voter turnout during the 1980s effectively distorted the electorate, moving all political discourse squarely into the Republican camp.[294] Political scientist Naomi Murakawa argues that Reagan's policies were also largely supported by Democrats "because they feared electoral reprimand for being soft on crime."[295] In effect, prepolitical suppression had narrowed political discourse as both parties fought each other over who was more 'tough on crime.' While these policies disenfranchised many of America's poor, they arguably would not have been possible without the decline of electoral engagement from the 1970s onward. The precipitous decline of voters had distorted the electorate toward upper middle-class interests as both

[289] Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 124.

[290] Jean Chung, "Felony Disenfranchisement: A Primer," The Sentencing Project, June 27, 2019, https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/felony-disenfranchisement-a-primer/.

[291] Anderson, *White Rage*, 132.

[292] Anderson, *White Rage*, 137.

[293] Naomi Murakawa, *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 126.

[294] Ferguson and Rogers, "The Myth of America's Turn to the Right."

[295] Murakawa, *The First Civil Right*, 117.

parties put forward draconian laws centered on austerity and anti-crime measures. The felony disenfranchisements as a result of these policies would be an assumed Republican strategy going forward, despite being pushed by both parties during the 1980s and 1990s.

As the new non-voting strategy was being constructed by New Right ideologues—relying on both the public's established indifference and punitive legal efforts—arguments were being put forward in favor of low voter turnout. The ideas bear some resemblance to the postwar apologist literature on voter apathy traced in Chapter 3. In a time of widespread apoliticism, these positions now became more applicable and politically useful. In 1982, influential conservative columnist George Will published a provocative piece in *Newsmax* titled, "In Defense of Nonvoting." The argument, put concisely, was "smaller is smarter."[296] "Nonvoting is a form of passive consent," he wrote, because the public recognizes that "things will be tolerable no matter who wins."[297] The argument is strikingly similar to W. H. Morris's *In Defense of Apathy* (1954). The hallmark of American democracy, Will believed, is that the day-to-day life of the average citizen remains unaffected despite political change. Such an assertion fails to hold water when we consider the deep, social impact of the privatization project under Reagan. Because the bulk of America's nonvoters come from its lower-strata, low turnout skews the class bias of electoral demands against social spending.[298] Moreover, Reagan's victory did not correspond to an actual rightward shift in public opinion and misconstruing non-voting as passive consent is purposefully misleading.[299] Yet, Will would continue to put forward this argument for the rest of his career, making the same case in *The Washington Post* in 2012.[300] Future Republican leader of the Senate, Mitch McConnell, has echoed these same

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[296] George F. Will, "In Defense of Nonvoting" in *The Morning After: American Successes and Excesses, 1981-1986* (Collier Books, 1986), 229.

[297] George F. Will, 231.

[298] Kim Quaile Hill and Jan E. Leighley, "The Policy Consequences of Class Bias in State Electorates," *American Journal of Political Science* 36, no. 2 (1992): 351, https://doi.org/10.2307/2111481.

[299] Ferguson and Rogers, "The Myth of America's Turn to the Right."

[300] George F. Will, "George Will: Federal Voting Drive Makes a Mountain out of a Molehill," *Washington Post*, December 19, 2012, sec. Opinions, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/george-will-federal-voting-drive-makes-a-mountain-out-of-a-molehill/2012/12/19/461e17c4-494c-11e2-ad54-580638ede391_story.html.

views. When the Motor Voter bill was being openly disputed on the Senate floor, McConnell remarked, "a sign of the health of our democracy that people feel secure enough about the health of the country and about its leaders where they don't have to obsess about politics all the time."[301] Clearly, the ideas put forward by Will had staying power within the party.

The New Right's strategy of exploiting voter apathy for political gain did not go entirely unnoticed by the opposition at the time. In October 1983, presidential candidate Rev. Jesse Jackson addressed the topic while giving a speech at Bronx Community College. The gloom was visceral amid a largely black audience, pessimistic of their position in Reagan's America. Jackson acknowledged that many of today's youths viewed voting as a useless act. But he reminded them that Reagan won the presidency by a slim margin whose "victory was the result of nonvoter participation."[302] If the normalization of political antipathy and non-voting persisted, the political project of Reaganism would continue unabated. The non-voting masses are like "rocks just sitting around," Jackson told the crowd—to which the university's newspaper urged, "STOP BEING A ROCK JUST LAYING AROUND!"[303] Jackson would end up losing the 1984 Democratic nomination to Jimmy Carter's Vice President, Walter Mondale, but his message was prescient. It was an acknowledgement of how political demobilization was being normalized and successfully weaponized by the insurgent New Right. To not just be a 'rock laying around' meant more than just participating in politics. It was an appeal to expand the scope of political possibilities, precisely at a time when the Democratic Party was following Reagan to the right. Moreover, Jackson intuitively understood that focusing on bread-and-butter economic issues was the only way to bring new, nonvoters into the electoral process.[304] The elites of his own party, however, did not heed his call. Mimicking Reaganism and only

[301] Alec MacGillis, *The Cynic: The Political Education of Mitch McConnell* (Simon and Schuster, 2014), 32.

[302] S. Jones Harold, "Run Jesse, Run," *Communicator*, October 1983, No. 1 edition, 1.

[303] Harold, 1.

[304] Frank Watkins and Frank Clemente, *Keep Hope Alive: Jesse Jackson's 1988 Presidential Campaign* (South End Press, 1989), 8.

courting already-likely voters would cost them two major landslide losses in 1984 and 1988.

Degrees of Separation

The conservative victories of the 1980s may have been built around low turnout, but it was not purely a conscious project. It was reinforced by the growing degrees of separation between the public and politics. A whole industry had grown around both U.S. political parties consisting of pollsters, consultants, media and their many ancillary branches. The expansion of this insulated sector is an end of itself for those employed by it—and politics consequently becomes the art of the maintaining it. The result is a 'permanent campaign,' as coined by Sidney Blumenthal in 1980.

The 'professionalization' of politics and those employed by it began to grow when non-voting was becoming more normal. According to an investigation by Costas Panagopoulos (2006), deferrals to consultants for political input grew exponentially during the 1980s. In his investigation of four leading media outlets, deferral to political consultant from 1979 to 1985 increased thirteen-fold.[305] Because Reagan relied heavily on image and style, he required a broad base of private advisors and consultants. In 1982, *Newsweek* reported that each top Reagan advisor even had his own pollster.[306] As per the RNC, expenditures for pollsters alone topped $16 million (adjusted to 1997 dollars) during the Reagan years, double what Carter spent annually.[307] Later President Clinton would continue this as the new, bipartisan standard of politicking.[308] Parallel to this development was the added expansion of campaign financing during the 1980s and its exponential rise by the late 1990s. Alan Abramowitz (1989) finds that "between 1974 and 1988, total

[305] Costas Panagopoulos, "Political Consultants, Campaign Professionalization, and Media Attention," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 39, no. 4 (2006): 867.

[306] Helman Eric, "A Third Pollster for the White House," *Newsweek*, July 1982.

[307] Norman J. Ornstein and Thomas E. Mann, *The Permanent Campaign and Its Future* (American Enterprise Institute, 2000), 116.

[308] Bill Clinton created the position of Senior Advisor to the President of the United States in 1993 and rotated five people in the position during the course of his presidency, in addition to an unprecedented number of other consultants including Mark Penn, Dick Morris and James Carville.

spending by Senate candidates more than doubled after adjustments for inflation.[309] Republicans led the spending spree with their growing core of financial backers, advisory private firms, pollsters and so on. PACs began to assert themselves, especially in support of incumbents. They effectively ensured that, once a candidate had secured his or her political position, they could be bankrolled to maintain it indefinitely.[310] The 'incumbency advantage' took on new meaning from then on.

With the political class's functionaries ballooning both in number and funding during the 1980s, politics naturally became more alien to the average American. The gap between those inside the beltway and those outside of it grew wider. The result was heightened apoliticism, non-voting and a view that politics was inauthentic. The goal of the expanding political class was neither to boost turnout nor to be ethical; it was, instead, to win. Oftentimes, consultants were tasked with suppressing turnout, defaming opponents and engaging in questionable behavior to put their candidate on top.[311] Those that constructed the New Right's 'Electoral Fortress' strategy were from this ilk. A comprehensive 1998 poll conducted by Pew Research Center demonstrated that not only were these practices widespread, but that many openly approved of them. According to the survey, only 46% said outright voter suppression was unethical; 66% fault the public for poor judgement; only 14% said scare tactics were unjustifiable; and 63% blamed, not themselves, but the media for inducing voter cynicism.[312] There was no major difference between Democrats and Republicans, although Democratic consultants did markedly approve of going negative more. The separation between the political class and the public was therefore a bi-partisan benefit by the late 1990s.

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[309] Alan I. Abramowitz, "Campaign Spending in U. S. Senate Elections," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1989): 487, https://doi.org/10.2307/439955.

[310] Abramowitz, 496.

[311] Kim Fridkin Kahn and Patrick J. Kenney in *Do Negative Campaigns Mobilize or Suppress Turnout?* (1999) find evidence to suggest that negative campaigning and mudslinging suppresses turnout.

[312] "Don't Blame Us," *Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy* (blog), June 17, 1998, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/1998/06/17/dont-blame-us/.

The American Peculiarity as a Fact of Life After Reagan

The normalization of non-voting America produced victories for Ronald Reagan in 1980 and 1984. However, the 1988 election between George H.W. Bush and Michael Dukakis was, even by those standards, a depressed affair—depressed in the sense that turnout was abysmal. The *New York Times* reported in December of that year that the turnout of total voting-age population (50.16%) was the lowest since 1924.[313] Adjusted turnout among voting-eligible Americans did not fare much better, recorded at 52.8%.[314] Black Americans, in particular, did not come out to the polls or were suppressed. The percentage of black Americans voting in 1988 was less than the Goldwater-Johnson election of 1964.[315] Experts fully expected the 1988 numbers to be here to stay.[316] The succeeding presidential election of 1992 may have seen an uptick in electoral participation due to Ross Perot's surprise third-party campaign, but the marginal improvement would not hold. The reelection of Bill Clinton in 1996 proved to be worse than 1988 with only 51.7% of voting-eligible people voting, despite the National Voter Registration Act coming into effect in 1995.[317] Clearly, as Walter Dean Burnham repeatedly argued, the depressed turnout was not purely a product of registration issues. It was a deeper, socio-cultural problem.[318]

With the end of the Cold War, however, there was little reason to worry about democratic deficits. America had been vindicated on the world stage, a far more important matter, and ideological politics was said to be over. Conservative commentator Charles Krauthammer praised the decline of politics in his piece, *In Praise of Low Voter Turnout*

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[313] Berke, "50.16% Voter Turnout Was Lowest Since 1924."

[314] McDonald, "National General Election VEP Turnout Rates, 1789-Present."

[315] Jennifer L. Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 210.

[316] Richard L. Berke, "Experts Say Low 1988 Turnout May Be Repeated," *New York Times*, November 13, 1988, https://www.nytimes.com/1988/11/13/us/experts-say-low-1988-turnout-may-be-repeated.html.

[317] McDonald, "National General Election VEP Turnout Rates, 1789-Present."

[318] Walter Dean Burnham, "Don't Blame Registration in Low Voter Turnout," *New York Times*, November 24, 1988, https://www.nytimes.com/1988/11/24/opinion/l-don-t-blame-registration-in-low-voter-turnout-460488.html.

(1990). “I couldn't be happier that the political century is over, and that all that's left is to shuffle cards on the cruise ship,” he wrote, “the great disease of the 20th century was the politicization of life.”[319] Like Daniel Bell proclaimed the ‘End of Ideology’ in 1960, Krauthammer made a similar assumption after the fall of the Berlin Wall: “the great dichotomies of war and peace, left and right, good and evil are gone.”[320] The political sphere had been slowly ceding its authority to the market since the 1980s and now, with the Cold War over, it could subsume it entirely.

Krauthammer erroneously connected the rise of nonvoters to the end of the Cold War. As this thesis has demonstrated, its most immediate socio-cultural roots run much deeper to the failed dreams of the 1960s, Watergate, and the collapse of public trust. By the mid-1990s, trust in government had depressingly worsened, posting lower lows than even the Carter years; Only 20% of those polled by Pew Research trusted the government to do right “always or most of the time” at the start of 1995.[321] Nearly half of the electorate during the 1990s was not participating in presidential politics, let alone local and state elections. The metrics commonly used to judge democracy were demonstrably poor. Such realities, however, proved easy to ignore with the collapse of communism. With America now the triumphant sole superpower, there was little room to critique the faultiness of its democratic representation. Bill Clinton’s Third Way position—a merging of right-wing economic thought and center-left social policies—was representative of the assumed post-ideological age. Clinton openly borrowed from the GOP’s 1984 playbook. "I guess it's true that imitation is the highest form of flattery," Joanne Drake, chief of staff at Reagan's Los Angeles office, told the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1996.[322] The dominant electoral

[319] Charles Krauthammer, “Essay: In Praise of Low Voter Turnout,” *Time*, May 21, 1990, http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,970156,00.html.

[320] Krauthammer.

[321] Pew Research Center, "Section 1: Trust in Government 1958-2010," 13

[322] Linda Feldmann, “Clinton Culls From GOP’s ’84 Playbook,” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 29, 1996, https://www.csmonitor.com/1996/0529/052996.us.us.1.html.

strategy was, to quote syndicated columnist Richard Reeves, “don’t wake up the voters” because “low voter turnout is the professionals’ friend.”[323]

Over 70 years ago, Arthur M. Schlesinger and Erik McKinley Eriksson wrote that "no stone should be left unturned" to bring nonvoters back to the ballot box. By the 1990s, however, non-voting prompted a far more subdued response from the political class. While registration efforts were expanded on the federal level, their intended effect was muted by the realities of American political culture. The separation between politics and civil society was felt at the ballot box as political quietism and non-voting became features of the American political landscape. However, in the post-Cold War era, such a development could easily be interpreted as passive consent just like it had been after World War II. At the end of a long, ideologically-tinged century, political elites could now rest easy atop the most depoliticized public the country had ever seen—a fitting reward, they undoubtably thought, for managing a country that was finally the world’s sole superpower.

[323] Richard Reeves, “‘Stealth’ Politics Dominates the Campaign -- The Art of Keeping Down the Opposition Vote,” The Buffalo News, October 28, 1996, https://buffalonews.com/news/stealth-politics-dominates-the-campaign----the-art-of-keeping-down-opposition-vote/article_745e0372-b99c-5c47-a141-c65a412b0451.html.

Conclusion

The transformation of democracy in the United States by the 1920s produced a peculiarity that casts a shadow over the entire history and argument presented in this thesis. That peculiarity is the persistence of non-voting unlike any other democracy. Its persistence made it appear normal over time, but it did not begin that way. The nonvoter problem had to either be resolved or be subsumed under a process of normalization. The trajectory of 20th century American history followed the latter. This thesis has traced the normalization of non-voting over four thematic eras. Each period differed in how it approached and oriented itself to the nonvoter problem, leading up to its normalization by the 1980s and 1990s.

The origins of the American peculiarity lie at the tail-end of the Gilded Age when voter turnout first began its precipitous decline.[324] Deep disputes over the spoils of economic expansion during the Gilded Age threatened the stability of the order. As a response, the political sphere became more insulated. By the 1920s, the consequences of this development would manifest in anemic voting rates during the presidential elections of 1920 and 1924. Intellectuals and activists expressed alarm over the public's political disengagement and viewed it as a threat to the country's civic life. Moved by these anxieties, science was properly applied to politics for the first time to resolve them. Political scientist Charles E. Merriam and his students at the University of Chicago employed empirical tools for the first time to understand society's political non-participants. An unprecedented Get Out the Vote (GOTV) campaign ensued to arouse interest in electoral politics again. During this period, non-voting was viewed as a social illness that needed to be cured or else it was believed it would seriously damage American civic life. This period establishes that non-voting was first viewed as an abnormal social development, thereby establishing it had to be normalized. The thematic mode of this period is that *the problem is recognized.*

[324] McDonald, "National General Election VEP Turnout Rates, 1789-Present."

In the period after World War II, perspectives on non-voting shifted dramatically from what they were just decades ago. Tasked with constructing a science of society and enjoying exceptional authority, political theorists engaged in a project to decenter the voter within political theory. They engaged in apologetics of voter apathy and the public's passivity. Stability was believed to be contingent on the non-voting masses whose inertia kept the system secure. The large number of nonvoters were misconstrued as contentment personified, as if living evidence of a stable, functional order. As a result, low levels of political participation were rationalized as necessary. These ideas came to be widely influential and dominated the postwar era. The decentering of nonvoters in democratic theory was a precursor to their socio-cultural normalization and the process would have continued unabated had it not been for the 1960s activist era. This postwar period is defined by the thematic mode of *the problem is disregarded.*

By the late 1960s, the postwar consensus under which political theorists decentered nonvoters fell apart. Those excluded from politics began to assert that their voices be heard like never before. It was a heroic moment that finally completed the project of mass enfranchisement within law. Yet, it was also a time of contradictions. Disillusionment grew as political dreams did not materialize. In less than a decade, a crisis of confidence ensued as did political demobilization. The limited achievements of the Johnson presidency, coupled with the Nixon victory of 1968, would have a devastating impact on the possibilities of politics. A deep decline of trust toward politics and institutions took root. By the 1970s, politics grew more distant from everyday Americans as corruption and scandals pervaded the national conversation. As a response, Americans looked inward as the "Me Generation" exited from politics to find self-actualization elsewhere. The numbers of nonvoters increased and public began to 'tune out' of politics. This development allowed for the normalization of non-voting in American society and provided an opportunity for the New Right to assume power amid the vacuum. The thematic mode of this period is that *the problem splinters and deepens.*

Rather than fully make amends for the widespread feelings of betrayal, the political class left the public's distrust unresolved and allowed it to fester. Reagan's victory in 1980 ultimately confirmed this issue would be left brushed aside as a reawakened individuality

took precedence over politics. His style of politicking was attuned to the cultural moment. Relying on his movielike qualities, he won voters by tapping into their dreams. The New Right then leveraged the large number of nonvoters who were tuned out of Reagan's cinematic showing to push their ideological agenda. The depoliticized subject proved to be ideal in a time when the state that was shedding its social obligations and the free market was in constant need of fresh consumer demand. During this period, the political class, including consultants and pollsters, also grew tremendously thus further adding to the degrees of separation between politics and the public. The generation that came of age at this time proceeded to be among the most depoliticized in American history, a testament to the normalization process at work. By the election of 1988, electoral turnout fell to levels comparable to the 1920s.[325] However, unlike then, there was now a more muted concern and meager mass-led efforts to galvanize the public. Non-voting was effectively the new normal. Although the New Right recognized it first, both parties would come to benefit from the normalization of non-voting by the 1990s. This thesis concludes with the final thematic mode of *the problem is normalized.*

Existing scholarship on non-voting has largely not attributed the process of depoliticization in the United States to a longer historical development. By tracing non-voting in the United States, however, we can anchor this process to concrete data and thematic breaks. This thesis has put forward a narrative that aligns socio-cultural history with the nonvoter problem in America as it ebbed and flowed throughout the 20th century. Through the concept of normalization, we can see the longer, historical scope of the depoliticization process at work. The methodology also renders nonvoters visible and demonstrates that their absence augments both theory and democratic praxis—they were the foundational pillar of both postwar democratic thought and the New Right's electoral strategy. Both proved to be impactful in their time of dominance and both leaned into the normalization of nonvoters to construct their ideas.

The work I have presented in this thesis leaves room for future scholarly contributions. Political ideas and strategies are inevitably molded by the expectation that

[325] McDonald, "National General Election VEP Turnout Rates, 1789-Present".

nonvoters will stay constant. The longer they do, the more this group's inactivity can be relied upon; in other words, their normalization deepens their impact on the possibilities of politics itself. The New Right likely would not have been able to construct its electoral strategy had they not had decades of data demonstrating exactly which segments of the electorate will stay dormant. Today, there is still ample work to be done in documenting the strategies of political parties around nonvoters. How political parties stood to benefit from political demobilization is an area likely rich with primary source material tucked away in archival boxes. Piecing together this story may uncover some unpleasant truths about the drivers of political power.

Altogether, by taking the historical perspective of nonvoters, scholars can unpack American political history from an entirely different angle. Since nonvoters tend to be from society's lower-strata, it is also a perspective closely aligned with working class historiography. One is better able to historicize the progression of American political discourse and its directives by counting those absent from its activities. The end result is a narrative that helps to better explain Americans' cultural aversion to politics while also shedding light on who benefits from this construction. Most importantly, such a perspective illustrates the persistent failure of American electoral politics to represent an abnormally large segment of its electorate throughout the 20th century.

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