

February 4, 1993

Study Names "Dismal Dozen" For Poor Voter Turnout, Poor Laws

As Congress begins debate on voter registration and campaign finance reforms, a new study finds that people are more likely to vote in states that make registration easy while tightly regulating political contributions.

By contrast, the states with the fewest such provisions are often the ones where more adults stay home on election day than bother to vote.

"More people in these states feel like their voices don't count," says the study's author Bob Hall. "They face more barriers to voting and get the message that politics is for the rich and powerful, not for them."

The study is based on an analysis 20 state laws that ease voter registration or regulate the flow of campaign contributions. Nine of the 12 states with the highest average turnout in presidential elections since 1980 have adopted 8 or more of the laws. By contrast, only 3 of the 25 states with the worst turnout have implemented more than 6 of the laws.

The 12 worst states - called the "Dismal Dozen" in the study have a low average turnout and 5 or fewer of such key laws as mail-in and motor-voter registration, or strict limits and full disclosure for campaign contributions. These 12 states are South Carolina, Georgia, Nevada, North Carolina, Texas, Tennessee, New York, Virginia, Alabama, New Mexico, Maryland, and Mississippi.

"There's a strong correlation between voter involvement and control of the influence of wealthy contributors," Hall concludes. "If political leaders want to win back voter confidence, they must make access to the ballot easier while reducing the access that lobbyists and wealthy contributors already have."

The national turnout rate hit 55 percent of voting-age adults in 1992, up from the post World War II low of 50 percent in 1988. But despite the hoopla about fired-up voters, Hall says nearly 85 million Americans still boycotted the November election.

"This is a national problem, not just something that should be left to the states," Hall said. "Congress should show strong leadership with 'motor-voter' legislation, plus new limits on fundraising and spending by federal candidates."

Hall, a recent MacArthur Fellowship winner, is research director of the Institute for Southern Studies in Durham, North Carolina, which publishes *Southern Exposure* magazine. His study is based on the Institute's new "Democracy Index," which evaluates election laws and voter participation in the 50 states.

The 15 states with the highest turnouts in November 1992 all have systems to allow for late registration, "motor-voter" or easy absentee balloting.

The key to boosting voter involvement, Hall asserts, lies in creating "a culture of citizenship that values public participation over private wealth."

The states with the highest turnout -- Minnesota, Maine, Montana, Wisconsin -- have "long histories of 'good government' and populist reforms," says Hall. "Here's a tradition that the voices of ordinary people are important and monied interests should not hold sway over government."

To reinforce this democratic tradition, each state has passed at least 12 of the 20 laws making it easier to vote and harder to corrupt campaigns with money. Among the measures:

- Minnesota, Maine, and Wisconsin are the only states that allow voters to register as late as election day. North Dakota, ranked 6th in turnout, is the only state that does not require voters to register.
- Minnesota and Wisconsin also have the nation's most far-reaching systems to replace private campaign money with public funds in gubernatorial and state legislative races
- Minnesota, Montana, and Wisconsin are three of the six states that require detailed descriptions of an individual contributor's economic interests, while also banning direct political donations from corporations.

By contrast, the 14 states with the lowest turnout in 1992 include 8 from the Old Confederacy and 5 others with large non-white populations -- states that have long histories of disenfranchising people of color and low-income whites. Most of these states also lack effective measures to monitor, much less curtail, the influence of wealthy campaign contributors.

Most of these low-turnout states lack strong provisions to limit the size of campaign contributions, require contributors to disclose their economic interests, provide public financing for state elections, or establish an aggressive motor-voter registration system. State legislators stay in office longer, and women have a much smaller chance of getting elected.

In the past year, a number of states - from Arizona to South Carolina to Rhode Island - have imposed stronger restrictions on contributions from special interest lobbies. Others, like New Hampshire, Kentucky, and Nebraska, have enacted new methods to control campaign spending. And some states with low turnout - including North Carolina, Texas, and Nevada - have recently passed laws to allow registration by mail or create active motor-voter programs.

"This is an area of great experimentation," Hall says. "Americans are cynical about political leaders and the corrupting influence of campaign money, and they show their distrust by boycotting the ballot box."

"Aggressive measures to pull voters in and push money out are needed at the federal level, too," Hall said. "They are fundamental tools to protect the principle of 'one person, one vote' which lies at the foundation of our democracy."

The Democracy Index ranks the states on more than 80 factors related to voter participation, campaign financing, the cost of elections, disclosure requirements, conflict-of-interest limits, ballot initiatives, and legislative ethics. For a copy, write the Institute at P.O. Box 531, Durham, NC 27702.

[If you call the state board of elections, you can obtain the number of registered voters and calculate the turnout as a percent of those who registered. For a fairer comparison among states, all figures in this piece are for turnout among the voting-age population. The vote total is for ballots cast for presidential candidates, not any candidate.]

A Report From the Institute for Southern Studies