

The Competitive Problem of Voter Turnout

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On November 7, millions of Americans will exercise their civic duty to vote. At stake will be control of the House and Senate, not to mention the success of individual candidates running for office. President Bush's "stay the course" agenda will either be enabled over the next two years by a Republican Congress or knocked off kilter by a Democratic one.

With so much at stake, it is not surprising that the Pew Research Center found that 51 percent of registered voters have given a lot of thought to this November's election. This is higher than any other recent midterm election, including 44 percent in 1994, the year Republicans took control of the House. If so, turnout should better the 1994 turnout rate among eligible voters of 41 percent.

There is good reason to suspect that despite the high interest, turnout will not exceed 1994. The problem is that a national poll is, well, a national poll, and does not measure attitudes of voters within states and districts.

People vote when there is a reason to do so. Republican and Democratic agendas are in stark contrast on important issues, but voters also need to believe that their vote will matter in deciding who will represent them. It is here that the American electoral system is broken for many voters.

Voters have little choice in most elections. In 1994, Congressional Quarterly called 98 House elections as competitive. Today, they list 51. To put it another way, we are already fairly confident of the winner in nearly 90 percent of House races. Although there is no similar tracking for state legislative offices, we know that the number of elections won by less than 60 percent of the vote has fallen since 1994.

The real damage to the national turnout rate is in the large states of California and New York, which together account for 17 percent of the country's eligible voters. Neither state has a competitive Senate or Governor's election, and few competitive House or state legislative races. Compare to 1994, when Californians participated in competitive Senate and governor races the state's turnout was 5 percentage points above the national rate. The same year New York's competitive governor's race helped boost turnout a point above the national rate.

Lacking stimulation from two of the largest states, turnout boosts will have to come from elsewhere. Texas has an interesting four-way governor's race that might draw from infrequent voters to the polls. Ohio's competitive Senate race and some House races

might also draw voters. However, in other large states like Florida, Illinois, Michigan and Pennsylvania, turnout will suffer from largely uncompetitive statewide races.

The national turnout rate will likely be less than 1994 and fall shy of 40 percent. This is not to say that turnout will be poor everywhere. Energized voters in Connecticut get to vote in an interesting Senate race and three of five Connecticut House seats are up for grabs. The problem is that turnout will be localized in these few areas of competition.

The fault is not on the voters; people's lives are busy, and a rational person will abstain when their vote does not matter to the election outcome. The political parties also are sensitive to competition and focus their limited resources where elections are competitive. Television advertising and other mobilizing efforts by campaigns will only be found in competitive races.

The old adage of "build it and they will come" is relevant. All but hardcore sports fans tune out a blowout. Building competitive elections -- and giving voters real choices -- will do much to increase voter turnout in American politics. There are a number of reforms on the table: redistricting to create competitive districts, campaign financing to give candidates equal resources, and even altering the electoral system to fundamentally change how a vote elects representatives. If voters want choice and a government more responsive to their needs, they should consider how these seemingly arcane election procedures have real consequences on motivating them to do the most fundamental democratic action: vote.

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