

# POLITICS IN THE UNITED STATES\*

OpenStax College

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## Abstract

- Explain the significance of “one person, one vote” in determining American policy
- Discuss how voter participation affects politics in the United States
- Explore the influence of race, gender, and class issues on the voting process



**Figure 1:** Americans' right to vote in free elections is a fundamental element of the nation's democratic structure and a privilege envied by citizens of more oppressive societies. (Photo courtesy of David Goehring/flickr)

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In describing a nation's politics, it's important to define the term. Some associate “politics” with power, others with freedom. Some with corruption, others with rhetoric. How do sociologists understand politics? To sociologists, **politics** is a means of studying a nation or group's underlying social norms and values. A group's political structure and practices provide insight into its distribution of power and wealth, as well as its larger philosophical and cultural beliefs. A cursory sociological analysis of U.S. politics might, for

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instance, suggest that Americans' desire to promote equality and democracy on a theoretical level is at odds with the nation's real-life capitalist orientation.

The famous phrase “by the people, for the people” is at the heart of American politics and sums up the most essential part of this nation's political system: the notion that citizens willingly and freely elect representatives they believe will look out for their interests. Although many Americans take for granted the right of citizens to hold free elections, it is a vital foundation of any democracy. However, at the time the U.S. government was formed, African Americans and women were denied voting privileges. History details the struggles that each of these minority groups undertook to secure rights that had been granted to their white male counterparts. Nevertheless, their history (and the earlier history of the struggle for American independence from British rule) has failed to inspire some Americans to show up at the polls or even to register to vote.

Naturally, citizens must participate in the democratic process in order for their voices to be heard. Sociologists understand voting to be at the heart of the U.S. political process because it is a fundamental political behavior in a democracy. Problems with the democratic process, which include more than limited voter turnout, require us to more closely examine complex social issues.

## 1 Voter Participation

Voter participation is essential to the success of the American political system. Although many Americans are quick to complain about laws and political leadership, roughly half of the population does not vote in any given election year (United States Elections Project 2010). Some years have seen even lower turnouts; in 2010, for instance, only 37.8 percent of the population participated in the electoral process (United States Elections Project 2011). Poor turnout can skew election results, particularly if one age or socioeconomic group is more diligent in its efforts to make it to the polls.

Certain voting advocacy groups work to improve turnout. Rock the Vote, for example, targets and reaches out to America's youngest potential voters to educate and equip them to share their voice at the polls. Public service promos from celebrity musicians support their cause. Native Vote is an organization that strives to inform American Indians about upcoming elections and encourages their participation. America's Hispanic population is reached out to by the National Council of La Raza, which strives to improve voter turnout among the Latino population. According to the Pew Research Center, the portion of minority race voters has been increasing steadily over the past few decades (Lopez and Taylor 2009).

### 1.1 Race, Gender, and Class Issues

Although recent records have shown more minorities voting now than ever before, this trend is still fairly new. Historically, African Americans and other minorities have been underrepresented at the polls. Black men were not allowed to vote at all until after the Civil War, and black women gained the right to vote along with other women only with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. For years, African Americans who were brave enough to vote were discouraged by discriminatory legislation, passed in many southern states, which required poll taxes and literacy tests of prospective voters. Literacy tests were not outlawed until 1965, when President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act.

The 1960s saw other important reforms in U.S. voting. Shortly before the Voting Rights Act was passed, the 1964 U.S. Supreme Court case *Reynolds v. Sims* changed the nature of elections. This landmark decision reaffirmed the notion of “**one person, one vote**,” a concept holding that each person's vote should be counted equally. Before this decision, unequal distributions of population enabled small groups of people in sparsely populated rural areas to have as much voting power as densely populated urban areas. After *Reynolds v. Sims*, districts were redrawn so that they would include equal numbers of voters.

Evidence suggests that legal protection of voting rights does not directly translate into equal voting power. Relative to their presence in the U.S. population, women and racial/ethnic minorities are underrepresented in the U.S. Congress. White males still dominate both houses. For example, there is only a single Native

American legislator currently in Congress. And until the inauguration of Barack Obama in 2009, all U.S. presidents were white men.

Like race and ethnicity, social class also has impacted voting practices. Voting rates among lower-educated, lower-paid workers are less than for people with higher socioeconomic status, fostering a system in which people with more power and access to resources have the means to perpetuate their power. Several explanations have been offered to account for this difference (Raymond 2010). Workers in low-paying service jobs might find it harder to get to the polls because they lack flexibility in their work hours and quality daycare to look after children while they vote. Because a larger share of racial and ethnic minorities is employed in such positions, social class may be linked to race and ethnicity in influencing voting rates. Attitudes play a role as well. Some people of low socioeconomic status or minority race/ethnicity doubt their vote will count or voice will be heard because they have seen no evidence of their political power in their communities. Many believe that what they already have is all they can achieve.

In the American democracy, there are means to power and voice aside from holding political office. As suggested earlier in the discussion on oligarchy, money can carry a lot of influence. Free speech, a right available to all, can also be an influence. People can participate in a democracy through volunteering time toward political advocacy, writing to their elected officials, or sharing views in public forums like blogs or letters to the editor, forming or joining cause-related political organizations like PACs (political action committees) and interest groups, participating in public demonstrations, and even running for local office.

## 2 Summary

The success and validity of American democracy hinges on free, fair elections that are characterized by the support and participation of diverse citizens. In spite of their importance, elections have low participation. In the past, the voice of minority groups was nearly imperceptible in elections, but recent trends have shown increased voter turnout across many minority races and ethnicities. In the past, the creation and sustenance of a fair voting process has necessitated government intervention, particularly on the legislative level. The *Reynolds v. Sims* case, with its landmark “one person, one vote” ruling is an excellent example of such action.

## 3 Section Quiz

### Exercise 1

(Solution on p. 6.)

In the past, Southern states discouraged African Americans from voting by requiring them to take a \_\_\_\_\_ test.

- a. blood
- b. literacy
- c. lie detector
- d. citizenship

### Exercise 2

(Solution on p. 6.)

Which president signed the Voting Rights Act?

- a. Lyndon Johnson
- b. John F. Kennedy Jr.
- c. Barack Obama
- d. Franklin D. Roosevelt

### Exercise 3

(Solution on p. 6.)

Which factor does not influence voting practices?

- a. Race

- b. Social class
- c. Ethnicity
- d. Voting booths

**Exercise 4***(Solution on p. 6.)*

The U.S. Supreme Court case \_\_\_\_\_ led to the revision of voting districts to account for differences in population density.

- a. *Roe v. Wade*
- b. *Reynolds v. Sims*
- c. *Brown v. Board of Education*
- d. *Marbury v. Madison*

**Exercise 5***(Solution on p. 6.)*

Which statement best explains the meaning of “one person, one vote”?

- a. One person should not be allowed to vote twice.
- b. A voter deserves one chance to vote.
- c. A voter should vote only once a year.
- d. Each voter’s vote should count equally.

**4 Short Answer****Exercise 6**

If the percentage of Asian Americans in Congress is far below the percentage of Asian Americans in the United States, does that mean Asian Americans lack political power? Why or why not?

**Exercise 7**

Explain how a voter’s social class can affect his or her voting practices.

**Exercise 8**

Besides voting, how can U.S. citizens influence political processes and outcomes? Which of these strategies have you personally used?

**5 Further Research**

The 1965 Voting Rights Act was preceded by Lyndon Johnson’s signing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Both articles were instrumental in establishing equal rights for African Americans. Check out Cornell University’s website on this topic to learn more about this civil rights legislation: [http://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/Civil\\_rights](http://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/Civil_rights)<sup>1</sup>

**6 References**

Lopez, Mark Hugo and Paul Taylor. 2009. “Dissecting the 2008 Electorate: the Most Diverse in U.S. History.” Pew Research Center. April 30. Retrieved April 24, 2012 (<http://pewresearch.org/assets/pdf/dissecting-2008-electorate.pdf><sup>2</sup> ).

Raymond, Jose. 2010. “Why Poor People Don’t Vote.” Change.org, June 6. Retrieved February 17, 2012 (<http://news.change.org/stories/why-poor-people-dont-vote><sup>3</sup> ).

<sup>1</sup>[http://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/Civil\\_rights](http://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/Civil_rights)

<sup>2</sup><http://pewresearch.org/assets/pdf/dissecting-2008-electorate.pdf>

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<sup>4</sup>[http://elections.gmu.edu/Turnout\\_2008G.html](http://elections.gmu.edu/Turnout_2008G.html)

<sup>5</sup>[http://elections.gmu.edu/Turnout\\_2010G.html](http://elections.gmu.edu/Turnout_2010G.html)

## Solutions to Exercises in this Module

to Exercise (p. 3): Answer

B

to Exercise (p. 3): Answer

A

to Exercise (p. 3): Answer

D

to Exercise (p. 4): Answer

B

to Exercise (p. 4): Answer

D

## Glossary

**Definition 1: one person, one vote**

a concept holding that each person's vote should be counted equally

**Definition 2: politics**

a means of studying a nation's or group's underlying social norms as values as evidenced through its political structure and practices