

You Can Bring a Horse to Water...
Youth Voting and the Personal Touch

An honors thesis for the Department of Political Science

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Acknowledgments

A rookie political scientist, I embarked on this project concerned about the level of cooperation I would receive from the educational institutions required for its execution. I was thrilled and honored to encounter a number of individuals who dedicated a substantial amount of time and energy towards the project's completion with little or nothing by way of compensation. The students and faculty at Roxbury Community College and Massachusetts Bay Community College have my most sincere thanks. I am especially indebted to Mark Garth, Barbara Mercomes, John Driscoll, William Raynor, and Donna Green, without whom this thesis could not have been written. Aside from the Political Science faculty at Tufts, I am additionally thankful to Elizabeth Addonizio, who provided several helpful suggestions with regard to this project's logistics.

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Chapter One - Vote or Die?

The t-shirt is plain white with a thin black collar. Those in the know regarding youth culture will tell you that it is most fashionably worn several sizes too big and frequently complemented with a flashy necklace or flat-brimmed baseball cap. Huge block letters printed in red and black eschew subtlety and understatement, as does the severity of their message. “Vote or Die!” they exclaim.

During the 2004 Presidential Election, P. Diddy, the rap music icon, took a new approach to the old problem of voter turnout. Appearing at both parties’ national conventions and offering numerous interviews on MTV, the unusually flamboyant effort was designed to “hip [verb] young people to the game.” P. Diddy and other celebrities bemoaned the low turnout of individuals in their teens and early twenties and implored the young and minorities to seize the political influence rightfully due to them by registering and going to the polls in record numbers on Election Day.

It is easy to identify the impetus for the vociferous campaign. Even in the face of overall turnout levels that lag far behind those in other countries, American youth stand apart as being especially apathetic with regard to voting. For instance, even in the face of large scale efforts like the one described above, the 2004 presidential election saw 46.7% of eligible individuals aged 18-24 turn out to vote, a rate 9% lower than those aged 25-34 and fully 25% lower than those over the age of 55.¹

Should this trend be a cause for concern? For a number of reasons, I assert that the answer is a resounding “Yes.” First, it should be intuitive that low turnout among the

¹ US Census Bureau, “Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2004,” available online at <<http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p20-556.pdf>> accessed 16 May, 2006.

young gives politicians little electoral incentive to court these groups or, once elected, to give weight to their opinions and grievances. Secondly, some have suggested a connection between electoral participation and other civic behavior. Voting may have positive spillover effects in the realm of volunteering and political interest. More fundamentally, voting can be viewed as a profoundly symbolic act – perhaps the most fundamental expression of the legitimacy of American democracy. Low turnout among the young may be a sociological warning sign foretelling increasing antipathy towards government through the process of generational replacement.

Why might the young lag behind other segments of the population with regard to turnout? A number of possible explanations have been offered. Some, for instance, point to the registration procedure as constituting a formidable obstacle to overcome. The young may be especially susceptible to the registration obstacle because they lack the resources and familiarity with governmental bureaucracy requisite to acquire and complete a registration application. Alternatively, they may be deterred from registering by a tendency towards frequently changing addresses and life situations (marriage, employment, and so forth). Others suggest that the emergent zeitgeist of youth culture – including negative attitudes towards government and feelings of inefficacy – is more responsible. Theoretical and empirical work in the area of voter turnout has yet to reach a consensus weighing the respective merits of these possibilities.

This project offers some new insights into the questions surrounding youth voting. I employ a heretofore underutilized methodology – field experimentation – to weigh procedural and attitudinal influences on youth turnout. In October of 2005, I conducted a registration drive in certain classes at Roxbury Community College. I provided 152

students with registration applications and instructions on how to fill them out. I then returned the completed forms to the Boston Registrar of Voters prior to the deadline for Boston's November municipal election. Using Boston's Voter File, a public record available to anyone willing to purchase it, it was subsequently possible to determine how many students in this group voted and compare their turnout to a control group comprised of other Roxbury students. Additionally, using a survey distributed to both the control and treatment groups, it was possible to relate students' attitudes to their registration and voting behavior.

I find little evidence that the registration procedure is responsible for depressing turnout among the young. Neither do I find significant evidence that attitudes influence registration behavior. Rather, if there is a relationship between voting and attitudinal measures, causality seems to run in the opposite direction.

Next, I turn to semi-structured focus group interviews to address some of the questions raised by my field experiment. In April of 2006 I conducted two one-hour interview sessions with students at Mass Bay Community College. While I find abundant evidence of negative attitudes held by the young towards government and political participation, I do not find these attitudes to be causal in low rates of participation. Rather, I find a significant influence of personal-level encouragement – such as the kind that can come from family members – to be highly influential in both registration and voting behavior. This last finding goes far in answering many of the questions raised by the field experiment.

In an effort to be shocking and memorable, P. Diddy's youth turnout campaign relied on a pithy slogan that, in retrospect, is overstated. It is surely something of a

hyperbole to place voting in such dramatic and fatalistic terms. While this project approaches the question of youth turnout with considerably less fatalism, I nonetheless assert that high turnout is a worthwhile goal with positive effects for society. I hope to illuminate the best path towards that ideal.

Chapter two provides a review of the literature on voter turnout, including the normative questions surrounding the issue, the theoretical framework used to analyze it, and previous empirical work in the area. Chapter three explains the methodology I employ for both the field experiment and focus group interviews. Chapters four and five present the findings of the field experiment and focus groups, respectively. In Chapter six, I depart briefly from formal analysis and reflect on this project as a learning experience. Chapter seven closes.

Chapter Two – Who Doesn't Vote and Why it Matters

Although voluminous research points to a general decline in voter turnout in the US since a high water mark at the end of the nineteenth century, there has yet to emerge a consensus regarding the causes and severity of the trend, its normative implications, and methods for solving the problem if one exists. I begin with a general review of voter turnout in the US as compared to other countries and our own historical trends. Next, I consider the implications of these trends with regard to civic engagement, community activism, and evaluations of political efficacy. Grounding my analysis in the theoretical work on rational choice and cognitive dissonance, I then move on to possible causes of the trends observed. I pay special attention to the problem of voter turnout as it relates to the young. Scholars have pointed to a number of reasons why the young may vote at a lower rate than other ages groups, including the increased important of bureaucratic barriers, rapidly changing life circumstances, and attitudinal differences. However, previous research display broad disagreement and significant methodological shortcomings. Finally, I describe the niche of the current project.

Voter Turnout and Political Participation in Context – A culture of apathy

Even without an extensive examination of statistics, it is easy to come under the impression that voter turnout in the US is low in comparison to levels seen in other countries and in our own history. The issue receives perennial attention – especially in federal election years – from the media, candidates, and non-profit organizations alike. In 2004, nonpartisan groups like Rock the Vote, Declare Yourself, and Fairvote.org

mobilized to encourage turnout among various segments of the population. Meanwhile, partisan organizations dedicated much energy to reach out to constituents in key states, believing that the edge would go to the candidate who more successfully mobilized his supporters. Such efforts suggest a shortfall in the realm of American political participation, an impression reinforced by considerable media attention bemoaning a lethargic and apathetic electorate. It is a notion supported by statistical evidence. Viewed in the context of historical decline, it is clear that turnout is not what it once was, and comparisons with participation in other countries suggest that it is not what it could be.

Slightly more than 121 million individuals turned out to vote in the 2004 presidential election, representing 54.9% of the voting-age-population.² Some heralded this figure as a promising upsurge in American political participation, as voting reached the highest level since 1968.³

Still, this figure seems less impressive in light of the election's special circumstances. The 2004 election followed a tumultuous and highly controversial presidential term that saw substantial economic upheaval, the most devastating terrorist attack in US history, and the entrance of the US military into prolonged engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan. Further, the importance of turnout in 2004 was likely made more salient by the uncertainty of the result and the recency of an extremely close race in 2000. In many ways, 2004 was the perfect storm for high participation.

² To determine the rate of voter turnout, one can use at least two different measures as a denominator: voting age population and eligible voters. I adopt the former, more common, measure for the purposes of this thesis. Although figures based on the number of eligible voters may appear more pertinent, the large number of undocumented immigrants and other ineligible voters have historically made accurate measures of eligible voters elusive. Best estimates show that 60.95% of eligible voters turned out to vote in 2004 (See the United States Elections Project at George Mason University, available online at <<http://elections.gmu.edu/>> accessed 29 April, 2006).

³ See, for instance, Brian Falter, "Election Turnout in 2004 Was Highest Since 1968," *Washington Post*, January 15th, 2005.

Viewed in a broader context, the statistics paint a picture of a startlingly disengaged electorate. Voter turnout decreased for every presidential election from 1960 to 1980, as seen in Figure 2.1. After a very slight surge in 1984, it continued to fall, even dropping below 50% in 1996.⁴ In 2000, an election which was a virtual tie right through Election Day, turnout only increased to 51.2%.

Figure 2.1: Percentage Turnout of VAP - Presidential Elections⁵

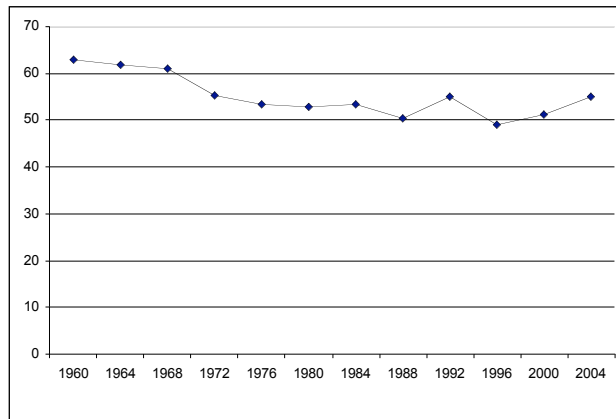
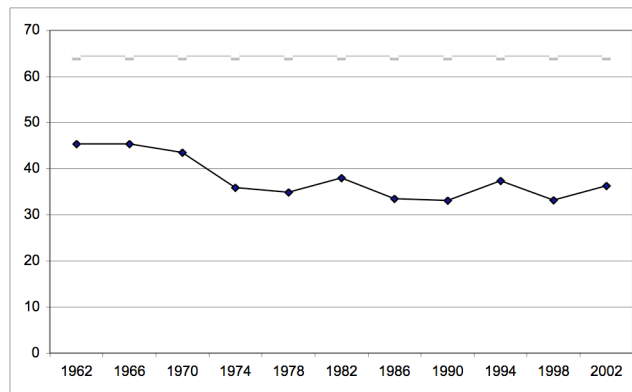


Figure 2.2: Percentage Turnout of VAP - Midterm Elections⁶



⁴ Thomas E. Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2002), p. 4.

⁵ Compiled from Martin P. Wattenberg, *Where Have All the Voters Gone?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 6 and Scott L. Althaus, "How Exception Was Turnout in 2004?" *Political Communication Report*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Winter, 2005.) Available online at http://www.ou.edu/policom/1501_2005_winter/commentary.htm accessed 10 February, 2006.

⁶ Compiled from Wattenberg, pp. 6-7 and the United States Elections Project at George Mason University, accessed 10 February, 2006.

Turnout in non-presidential elections provides no solace for those disturbed by low rates of participation, as Figure 2.2 demonstrates. Whereas turnout rates averaged about 45% in the 1960s, they have dropped to the mid 30s throughout the 80s and 90s, reaching a low of 33.2% in 1998.⁷

Perhaps most striking, however, is participation in local elections. While the high-stakes semi-annual national competitions typically receive the lion's share of media attention, one could argue that thousands of state and local competitions that occur every year are of greater tangible impact and offer citizens a higher chance of being significant in the election outcomes. Yet participation in municipal contests routinely falls below 25% of the voting age population.⁸

It should be noted that, in spite of these figures, some feel that the trend towards nonparticipation is exaggerated. Michael P. McDonald and Samuel L. Popkin, for instance, suggest that at least part of the trend is an illusory by-product of an increase in the number of undocumented immigrants and convicted felons, groups that are included in population figures but are ineligible to vote.⁹ In other words, the denominator used to calculate the rate of participation may have grown artificially inflated over the past several decades. However, as Thomas E. Patterson points out, McDonald and Popkin's results are likely biased by the history of discriminatory practices in southern states; for decades, southern blacks were technically eligible to vote but were barred from participation by poll taxes, intimidation, and the like. In other words, the denominator

⁷ Wattenberg, pp. 6-7; George Mason University United States Elections Project, "2004 Voting-Age and Voting-Eligible Population Estimates and Voter Turnout," accessed 31 January, 2006, <http://elections.gmu.edu/Voter_Turnout_2004.htm>.

⁸ Zoltan Hajnal and Paul G. Lewis, "Municipal Institutions and Voter Turnout in Local Elections," *Urban Affairs Review*, Vol. 38, No. 5 (May 2003), p. 646 and research cited there.

⁹ Michael P. McDonald and Samuel L. Popkin, "The Myth of the Vanishing Voter," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 95, No. 4 (Dec., 2001), pp. 963-974.

used to calculate participation was likely artificially inflated in the past, as well. An examination excluding southern states demonstrates a clear decline since 1960.¹⁰ And even if some accounts do overstate the downward trend, it nevertheless seems clear that participation in elections has not increased, even in spite of numerous liberalizing reforms that – as I will demonstrate – should have facilitated voting.

Further, a comparison with international rates of participation underlines that the US case is worthy of special attention. Several scholars have observed that democracies of many different types enjoy rates of participation that are consistently higher than those seen in the US.¹¹ Whereas it is common for presidential elections in the US to see participation fall below 60%, Norway, Germany, and others typically see participation exceed 80%. And a few states with mandatory voting laws – such as Australia and Belgium – often see participation rates supersede 90%, even though sanctions on nonparticipation are rarely enforced. Additionally, it seems that tendency towards high participation extends to local as well as national elections. Municipal elections in Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Finland, and Denmark all average higher rates of participation than those seen in the US.¹² Even if McDonald and Popkin’s claim is correct, it still seems clear that the US lags behind other democracies.

¹⁰ Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter*, p. 9.

¹¹ Ruy A. Teixeira, *The Disappearing American Voter* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1992), p. 8; Wattenberg, *Where Have All the Voters Gone?*, p. 14; G. Bingham Powell, Jr., “American Voter Turnout in Comparative Perspective,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 80, No. 1 (Mar., 1986), pp. 17-43.

¹² Robert L. Morlan, “Municipal vs. National Election Voter Turnout: Europe and the United States,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 99, No. 3 (Autumn, 1984), p. 462.

High participation: Too much of a good thing?

A comparison of recent rates of turnout with historical and international figures makes it clear that the US case is worthy of special attention. It seems that turnout has fallen off considerably over the past several decades and that, even if this trend is slightly obscured by the shortcomings of census figures, turnout certainly lags behind the rates seen in most other democracies. To highlight a trend, however, is not the same thing as to demonstrate its normative importance. Even if turnout is comparatively low, democracy continues to live on the efforts of those who show up. Turnout has been low for years, and so it seems unreasonable to treat it as the harbinger of more serious problems. Indeed one could plausibly assert that low turnout is a symptom of a healthy, functional democracy. I begin by reviewing the arguments that suggest that low turnout might be functional and even desirable. I then refute these arguments and move on to an explanation of why low turnout has negative implications for both democracy and civic society as a whole.

At least two possible reasons have been set forth to assuage concerns over low voter turnout. The first speaks to the implications low turnout has for the quality of the electorate. There are those who believe that low turnout is simply the symptom of withdrawal on the part of those who are too uninformed to engage political issues in a meaningful way. As George F. Will put it, “As more people are nagged to the polls, the caliber of the electorate declines. The reasonable assumption about electorates is: smaller is smarter.”¹³ The implication is that those who do not vote *should not* vote because their opinions are random or somehow less worthy than those more highly invested in the process. One could extend the same sentiment to the study of registration procedures,

¹³ “In Defense of Nonvoting,” *Newsweek*, 10 October, 1983, p. 96.

suggesting that those who lack the skills necessary to register should be discouraged from participation. Will's sentiment finds some empirical support from research into the characteristics of voters and nonvoters. For example, Seymour Lipset finds that nonvoting correlates with antidemocratic attitudes.¹⁴ Similarly, it is well documented that the highly educated are more likely to vote.¹⁵ And numerous studies have left little doubt that the majority American electorate lacks the requisite knowledge to make informed political decisions.¹⁶

A second possible reason to downplay the importance of nonparticipation derives from the belief that political activity only occurs when there is dissatisfaction with the status quo. In this view, low voter turnout could be taken as a sign that all is well. As one columnist explains, "Low voter turnout is... a symptom of political, economic, and social health... If you'd rather watch "All My Children" or "Family Feud" than nip over to the firehouse to vote, then you can't be feeling terribly hostile toward the system."¹⁷

Similarly, Robert Kaplan writes in the cover story of the December, 1997 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*, "[A]pathy, after all, often means that the political situation is healthy enough to be ignored. The last thing America needs is more voters – particularly badly educated and alienated ones – with a passion for politics."¹⁸

¹⁴ Seymour M. Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

¹⁵ Raymond E. Wolfinger and Steven J. Rosenstone, *Who Votes?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); Teixeira.

¹⁶ See, for example, Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why it Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

¹⁷ *Boston Globe* columnist quoted in Gary R. Orren, "Political Participation and Public Policy: The Case for Institutional Reform" in Alexander Heard and Michael Nelson, eds., *Presidential Selection* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1987), p. 52, n.2.

¹⁸ Quoted in Jack C. Doppelt and Ellen Shearer, *Nonvoters* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc., 1999), p. 10.

Such statements might strike a chord for those who hold a cynical view towards the effectiveness of democracy. It is easy to place the culpability for suboptimal political outcomes on the ignorance or nonchalance of a faceless group. Indeed, one could even turn to the sentiments expressed by America’s founders for support. Institutions like the Electoral College, a bicameral legislature, the indirect election of US senators, and property requirements for voting were all meant to insulate government from the “impulse of sudden and violent passions”¹⁹ The founders favored democracy, to be sure. But they also feared – as did Plato and Aristotle before them – having too much of a good thing.

Does this view constitute a prudent reflection on human nature or is it merely an excuse for elitism? Does it lead to a system in which the most qualified take on the responsibility of governing, or does it discourage participation along lines that are unfairly discriminatory? Unfortunately, there is considerable reason to believe that the latter answers are the correct ones. The demographic trends have been exhaustively explored and it is clear that – intentionally or not – apathy has become an engine for the entrenchment of political influence among the most privileged groups in society. Wolfinger and Rosenstone, for instance, find that voting strongly correlates with socioeconomic status as well as age.²⁰ Other research notes that minorities are substantially less likely to vote than non-minorities.²¹ The implications seem intuitive. If

¹⁹ The Federalist 62.

²⁰ Wolfinger and Rosenstone, chapters 2 and 3. For more recent information pertinent to age, see Peter Levine and Mark Hugo Lopez, “Youth Voter Turnout has Declined, by Any Measure,” *Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement Fact Sheet*, Sep., 2002. Available online at <http://www.civicyouth.org/research/products/fact_sheets_outside.htm> Also informative is the U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey, 2004 <<http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/voting.html>>.

²¹ Ibid. Also see Stephen Knack and James White, “Election-day Registration and Turnout Inequality,” *Political Behavior*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Nov., 2000), pp. 29-44.

we presume that politicians have enough savvy to focus their efforts on their supporters – that they know where their bread is buttered, in other words – they have less electoral incentive to court these groups or, once elected, to give weight to their opinions and complaints. Martin P. Wattenberg identifies several examples of recent elections in which the outcome could almost certainly have been changed by equal participation among various demographic groups.²²

The high degree to which these tendencies are acknowledged undermines the second view of non-participation expressed above – that non-participation is a symbol of political satisfaction. If this were the case, why would apathy be concentrated in certain demographic groups, especially those who are seemingly the least privileged in society? As I will demonstrate, the young turn out at a rate far lower than other age groups. Yet one could easily argue that the young, facing a lifetime of being subject to public policy, have the greatest reason to turn out. Involvement in foreign conflicts, the accumulation of national debt, the instability of the social security system, and rapidly rising education costs all affect the young more than other age groups. Why would this group be less inclined to turn out to vote? To attribute their apathy to political satisfaction does not seem reasonable.

With regard to the first claim about non-participation – that encouraging participation would decrease the quality of the electorate – objections can be raised on both empirical and value-based grounds. For instance, several researchers have found that poorly informed voters usually reach the same voting decisions as those with more education and expertise by relying on information heuristics – advertisements, partisan

²² Wattenberg, *Where Have All the Voters Gone*, chapter 5.

affiliations, interest group endorsements, and the like.²³ For instance, Arthur Lupia finds that most voters in California were able to reach sound, rational positions on the complex issue of insurance reform even when they had done little to familiarize themselves with the issue.²⁴ The assumption that a more inclusive electorate would necessarily be a less-effective one, then, may very well be fallacious.

Moreover, in spite of the apprehension displayed by the founders with regard to universal participation, one could argue that high participation should be a core value of American democracy. To quote American political rhetoric at length would be trite, but is not a government based on the “consent of the governed” undermined to some extent when nearly half of the governed decline to partake in the democracy’s most sacred ritual? In an age where campaign donations and support from special interests are clearly of paramount importance to candidates, the fact that voting in elections is the only form of political influence equally available to all becomes all the more salient.

Perhaps a more clear and tangible application of these values becomes evident from a consideration of the possible causes of non-participation. As will be elaborated later, one likely cause is the inability or disinclination on the part of some people to navigate the bureaucratic obstacles to voting, such as registration. It seems likely that at least some individuals do not vote because they do not know how to register and lack the requisite experience with government to track down a voter registration application and return it to the appropriate official. These logistical steps that often befuddle or thwart

²³ James H. Kuklinski, Daniel S. Metlay, and W.D. Kay, “Citizen Knowledge and Choices on the Complex Issue of Nuclear Energy,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (November, 1982), pp. 615-642. For an agenda control model demonstrating the effects of information, see Arthur Lupia, “Busy Voters, Agenda Control, and the Power of Information,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 86, No. 2 (June, 1992), pp. 390-403.

²⁴ Arthur Lupia, “Shortcuts Versus Encyclopedias: Information and Voting Behavior in California Insurance Reform Elections,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 1 (March, 1994), pp. 63-76.

voting are catalogued by Martin P. Wattenberg in a chapter entitled, “How Voting Is Like Taking An SAT Test.”²⁵

One could argue, as Robert Kaplan seems to do above, that non-participation by these individuals is desirable because their unfamiliarity with governmental procedures is representative of an inability to participate effectively. But history, in particular the restrictive registration laws that once existed in the South, has taught us to be wary of unnecessarily cumbersome procedures. As Piven and Cloward note, “True, poll taxes and literacy tests are gone. But administration barriers remain much the same... In practice, remote registration, together with complicated forms, are *de facto* income and literacy tests.”²⁶ The question must be asked, Does our voting system unintentionally discriminate against certain groups?

Finally, low rates of political participation might be viewed as problematic if it can be shown that political participation correlates with other attitudes related to civic engagement or good citizenship. Robert Putnam and Ruy Teixeira both find that voting correlates with interest in politics, giving to charity, volunteerism, attending community school board meetings, and other activities desirable from a good citizen.²⁷ And so perhaps voting is something of a sociological thermometer – or as Putnam calls it, a “canary in the mining pit”²⁸ – through which one can gauge a society’s health and cohesion. Teixeira explains the underlying logic of such a hypothesis:

The idea here is that the various ways individuals tend to be connected to politics in the United States – through their identification with or

²⁵ Wattenberg, *Where Have All the Voters Gone*, chapter 6.

²⁶ Quoted in Benjamin Highton, “Easy Registration and Voter Turnout,” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (May, 1997), p. 566.

²⁷ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), p. 35; Teixeira, pp. 36-39.

²⁸ Putnam, p. 35.

knowledge about parties, through their psychological and media-based involvement in public affairs, and through their sense of a responsive link between individuals and government – determine to a significant extent how meaningful these individuals find elections and therefore how likely they are to vote.²⁹

Or, as John Stuart Mill put it more than a century ago,

[S]alutary is the moral part of the instruction afforded by the participation of the private citizen, if even rarely, in public functions. He is called upon, while so engaged, to weigh interests not his own; to be guided, in case of conflicting claims, by another rule than his private partialities; to apply, at every turn, principles and maxims which have for their reason of existence the common good: and he usually finds associated with him in the same work minds more familiarised than his own with these ideas and operations, whose study it will be to supply reasons to his understanding, and stimulation to his feeling for the general interest. He is made to feel himself one of the public, and whatever is for their benefit to be for his benefit.³⁰

If voting is tied to good citizenship and civic engagement, the intuitive causal direction is that being civically engaged leads to a high chance of voting, as assumed above.

However, it has also been suggested that the reverse may be true. Perhaps the act of voting – by affirming the legitimacy of and one’s allegiance to a political system – leads to a view of citizenship conducive to engagement, volunteerism, and other participatory behavior.

²⁹ Teixeira, pp. 39-40.

³⁰ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism, Liberty, and Representative Government*, ed. Ernest Rhys (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1910).

Such a hypothesis has a strong grounding in the social psychological research on cognitive dissonance. In a classic study, Festinger and Carlsmith demonstrated that individuals often contrive post-hoc rationalizations for costly actions.³¹ The theory has been shown to apply well to initiations into groups,³² and so it is no surprise that, for instance, fraternity members who undergo hazing subsequently feel a high sense of belonging and report that the experience was worthwhile and justified. In our current discussion, it seems plausible to view the act of voting as a kind of initiating activity through which one is “baptized” into the family of active citizenry. As such, registering and voting may have positive “spill-over” effects in other realms. In fact, although the link is worthy of more attention, there is already some empirical evidence to support this notion. Using panel data, James McCann finds that voting boosts community involvement.³³ Similarly, M. Margaret Conway finds that voters are more likely than nonvoters to contact elected officials and engage in community work.³⁴

This section has demonstrated the normative significance of low voter turnout. In light of evidence that low turnout undermines the legitimacy of a democratic government and the fact that voting may be related to other forms of good citizenship such as volunteerism and civic engagement, there is reason to believe that an increase in turnout would not be too much of a good thing, but rather a healthy boon to a

³¹ L. Festinger and J.M Carlsmith, “Cognitive Consequences of Forced Compliance,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 58, (1959), pp. 203-210.

³² E. Aronson and J. Mills, “The effect of severity of initiation on liking for a group,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 59 (1959), pp. 177-181.

³³ James A. McCann, “Electoral Participation and Local Community Activism: Spillover Effects, 1992-1996” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, September 1998).

³⁴ M. Margaret Conway, *Political Participation in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1991) p. 135.

functioning democratic society. I now move on to a review of the possible causes of low voter turnout.

How do people think about voting?

This section asks the question, “Why do people vote?” and reviews some of the scholarship explaining why voter turnout in the United States may be low. As we will see the answers to these straightforward questions are far from clear-cut.

Perhaps the most straightforward way to analyze decisions regarding political participation is to start from the assumption that all individuals are rational and seek in their daily decisions to maximize utility, which Anthony Downs classically defines as “a measure of benefits in a citizen’s mind which he uses to decide among alternative courses of action.”³⁵ Downs continues: “Given several mutually exclusive alternatives, a rational man always takes the one which yields him the highest utility, *ceteris paribus*; i.e., he acts to his own greatest benefit.”³⁶

This logic is clearly applicable to voting decisions. As Downs writes, “[E]very rational man decides whether to vote just as he makes all other decisions: if the returns outweigh the costs, he votes; if not, he abstains.”³⁷ So, what costs and benefits factor into the voting calculus? Although rational choice theorists initially defined the benefits as the satisfaction of one’s vote leading to the election of a desired individual or party, other researchers have suggested that participation intrinsically provides a feeling of satisfaction for having fulfilled a civic obligation, and so it is likely necessary to

³⁵ This definition taken from Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (Boston: Addison Wesley, 1957), p. 36.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

account for more subtle benefits as well.³⁸ On the other hand, the costs include the expense and effort associated with voting, such as registering to vote, becoming informed about one's choices, and the time and fuel spent traveling to the polling place.³⁹ For a young, first-time voter the costs might additionally include traveling to a post office to acquire a registration application and overcoming the social anxiety associated with completing an unfamiliar task.

Rational choice's framework is so straightforward and eloquent in its conceptualization that the theory is hard to ignore. It says little more than that individuals vote when it is in their best interest to do so, each according to his or her own analysis of the costs and benefits involved. As we will see, this conceptualization provides satisfactory explanations for many trends associated with voter turnout and why various policy changes have succeeded and failed.

Rational choice theory does, however, exhibit at least one major shortcoming in an application to voter turnout. This becomes palpable when its logic is expressed mathematically as

$$pB + D > C$$

where p is the probability that a person's vote will influence the outcome of the election, B is the benefits associated with a victory by one's party of choice, D is the excludable "selective incentives" associated with voting, and C is the costs associated

³⁸ See, for instance, Lester W. Milbrath, *Political Participation: How and Why Do People Get Involved in Politics?* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965); William H. Riker and Peter C. Ordeshook, "A Theory on the Calculus of Voting," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (March, 1968), pp. 25-42.

³⁹ Martin Wattenberg enumerates several costs of voting and provides some empirical evidence in *Where Have All the Voters Gone*, pp. 60-62.

with voting.⁴⁰ In assigning values to these variables we must be led to believe that, while B and C are certainly positive, the large number of voters in almost all elections will cause the value of p to approach zero. At the same time, empirical observations of fluctuations in turnout have cast doubt on the possibility that selective incentives alone are sufficient motivators for turnout.⁴¹ The logical conclusion is that voting is a ubiquitously irrational act.

Blatantly problematic to this account is the conspicuous fact that individuals *do* in fact vote. Indeed millions turn out for national elections in spite of the fact that their influence is negligible to the outcome. This inconsistency has led to the characterization of voter turnout as the “paradox that ate rational choice theory.”⁴² Criticisms of the theory as applied to turnout are numerous.⁴³ Still, its proponents hold it to be the only theory general enough to apply broadly to political behavior and point to some empirical evidence in support of its predictions. As we will see, the rational choice framework has been used to explain how various legal-institutional reforms may be responsible for differences in turnout. A consensus has yet to be reached, however, with regard to adequacy of these explanations.

⁴⁰ Numerous forms of this same basic mathematical formulation exist in the literature. The sample used here is taken from Donald P. Green and Ian Shapiro, *Pathologies of Rational Choice* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1994), p. 49.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁴² Morris P. Fiorina and Kenneth A. Shepsle, “Is Negative Voting an Artifact?” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 33, pp. 423-39.

⁴³ See for example, Russell Hardin, *Collective Action* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1982); Geoffrey Brennan and James M. Buchanan, “Voter Choice: Evaluation Political Alternatives,” *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 28, pp. 185-201. Donald Green and Ian Shapiro offer an excellent summation of the challenges voting poses to rational choice theory in *Pathologies*, chapter 4.

Alternatives to rational choice theory typically focus on social-psychological factors that weigh in voting decisions.⁴⁴ The assumption in these cases is that sociological influences play a role in the attitudes individuals develop towards voting. Stephen Shaffer, for instance, points to a decreased sense of political efficacy among nonvoters⁴⁵ while other researchers have found that the sense of civic obligation⁴⁶ and level of partisan attachment⁴⁷ are correlated with voting behavior. Of course neither is this model without its critics. G. Bingham Powell finds that explanations focusing on these variables tend to break down when applied cross-nationally⁴⁸ and other research suggests that social-psychological studies are prone to confusing causation.⁴⁹

Why low turnout?

At this point, I hope to have demonstrated that low voter turnout in the United States is a real phenomenon and one worthy of concern. It should further be clear that the problem can be addressed through a number of theoretical frameworks. I now briefly review some of the specific empirical findings of various studies over the past several years.

⁴⁴ Social-psychological factors could be fused into the rational choice framework if one defines the costs and benefits of voting broadly enough. This strategy, however, requires weakening the rational choice framework to the point of near-tautology. See Green, Chapters 4 and 8.

⁴⁵ Stephen D. Shaffer, "A Multivariate Explanation of Decreasing Turnout in Presidential Elections 1960-1976," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Feb., 1981) pp. 68-95.

⁴⁶ Sidney Verba and Norman H. Nie, *Participation in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 125-137.

⁴⁷ Bruce A. Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes, *The American Voter* (New York: John Wiley, 1960); Gregory A. Caldeira, Samuel C. Paterson, and Gregory A. Markko, "The Mobilization of Voters in Congressional Elections," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (June, 1985), pp. 490-509.

⁴⁸ Cited in Francis Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Why American Still Don't Vote and Why Politicians Want It That Way* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), p. 42.

⁴⁹ Samuel P. Hayes, "Politics and Society: Beyond the Political Party" in Paul Kleppner, eds., *The Evolution of the American Electoral System* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981).

Although voter turnout has been the subject of voluminous empirical research for nearly three decades, a consensus has yet to emerge regarding the factors that cause it to fluctuate. Political scientists and sociologists alike have examined a slew of social-psychological variables that may play a role, such as political efficacy, civic engagement, partisan affiliation, and trust in government. At the same time, other scholars have reviewed numerous structural-legal reforms and resource shifts that may alter individual cost/benefit analyses. Different findings exist not only among these approaches, but within them as well.

Perhaps nowhere are these inconsistencies more noticeable than in the vast work examining the logistical and bureaucratic obstacles to voting. It is easy to see why these hurdles have received the lion's share of attention in the rational choice tradition. They clearly speak to the costs associated with voting. Voter registration in particular is an obvious starting place because the registration system in the United States stands in sharp contrast to European democracies – where registration is the responsibility of the government – and because the implementation of the US's registration system correlated with a falling-off of the high rates of participation seen in the 19th Century. Still, empirical findings regarding the depressive effects of registration differ substantially. Powell finds that administrative costs like registration are responsible for depressing turnout about 14%⁵⁰ while Teixeira puts the same figure at 8%⁵¹ and Wolfinger and Rosenstone estimate it to be about 9%.⁵² At the same time, however, Fitzgerald finds that turnout is not boosted by measures that lower logistical costs by

⁵⁰ G. Bingham Powell, "American Voter Turnout in Comparative Perspective," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 80, No. 1 (March, 1986), pp. 17-43.

⁵¹ Teixeira, chapter 4.

⁵² Wattenberg, *Where Have All the Voters Gone?*

liberalizing registration procedures – same-day voter registration, for example.⁵³

Echoing Fitzgerald, Highton finds that the effects of liberalized registration procedures are limited to those with low education⁵⁴ while recent work by Knack, Karp, and Banducci finds that same-day registration procedures, no-fault absentee ballots, and early voting periods all have minimal effects.⁵⁵

However, the most striking observation for the attribution of low turnout to bureaucratic and administrative procedures derives from a simple “big picture” view of broad changes over the past several decades. As Teixeira points out, in general, all these obstacles have undergone liberalization over the past several decades through reforms such as bilingual registration applications, the increased prevalence of registration by mail, and the softening of registration closing dates. Yet voter turnout has declined over the same time period.⁵⁶ If the lowering of bureaucratic hurdles really facilitates turnout, another stronger influence must have outweighed this effect for some time.

So what other factors might be responsible for a disengaged electorate? Scholarship on the subject provides an assortment of attitudinally derived possibilities from which to choose, but none solidly emerge as more likely than the others. Piven and Cloward, for instance, suggest that political parties have intentionally suppressed mobilization of working class.⁵⁷ Burnham points to an ideological spectrum in the US

⁵³ Mary Fitzgerald, “Greater Convenience But Not Greater Turnout: The Impact of Alternative Voting Methods on Electoral Participation in the United States,” *American Politics Research*, Vol. 33, No. 6 (Nov., 2005), pp. 842-867.

⁵⁴ Highton, “Easy Registration and Voter Turnout.”

⁵⁵ Stephen Knack, “Election-Day Registration: The Second Wave,” *American Politics Research* Vol. 29 (2001) pp. 65–78; Jeffrey A. Karp and Susan A. Banducci, “GOING POSTAL: How All-Mail Elections Influence Turnout,” *Political Behavior* Vol. 22, No. 3 (Sep., 2000), pp. 223-239.

⁵⁶ Teixeira, p. 29.

⁵⁷ Piven and Cloward.

that is substantially narrower than in other democracies.⁵⁸ Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar use meticulously designed laboratory experiments and find that negative political advertisements – the use of which has increased markedly in recent years – turn citizens off to politics and decrease the likelihood of voting⁵⁹ while Patterson suggests that lengthy campaigns may bore the electorate to the point of disengagement.⁶⁰

Finally, it should be noted that research into voting has been subject to significant methodological difficulties. The Census Current Population Survey (CPS) is likely the most convenient source of data for scholars because it provides a readily accessible source for large-scale individual-level data associating voting behavior with a number of demographic characteristics. Unfortunately, in measuring voter turnout, the CPS relies on self-reports of voting, a technique which is subject to considerable inflation.⁶¹

Youth Turnout: Is voting like eating your vegetables?

Although turnout rates have declined across a wide spectrum of demographic groups, the trend is especially crystallized among the young.⁶² Census figures suggest that voting in presidential elections among people aged 18-24 has dropped 15 percent since 1972 while registration among this age group has declined by 13 percent. Other studies have shown that people aged 24 and under are far less likely to follow what is

⁵⁸ Walter Dean Burnham, *The Current Crisis in American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

⁵⁹ Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, *Going Negative: How Attack Ads Shrink and Polarize the Electorate*, (New York: Free Press, 1995).

⁶⁰ Patterson, chapter 4.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 202. Also see Brian D. Silver, “Who Overreports Voting?” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 80, No. 2 (June, 1986), pp. 613-624 and Peter Levine and Mark Hugo Lopez, “Youth Voter Turnout has Declined, by Any Measure,” *Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement Fact Sheet*, Sep., 2002. Available online at <http://www.civicyouth.org/research/products/fact_sheets_outside.htm>

⁶² Benjamin Highton and Raymond E. Wolfinger, “The First Seven Years of the Political Life Cycle,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (January, 2001), pp. 202-209.

happening in government, contact a public official, and work in a political campaign.⁶³

The implications seem clear. Politicians have little electoral incentive to frame issues and campaigns so as to appeal to the needs and concerns of the young.⁶⁴ In a time of rapidly accumulating national debt, one cannot help but wonder if US fiscal policy, for instance, would be affected by greater political participation among the young.

Still, no consensus exists regarding the causes or remedies for low turnout among the young. Is poor turnout the result of disconnected, apathetic attitudes, or are legal-institutional barriers to blame? Could youth turnout be increased through procedural reforms, or is it more a product of the emergent zeitgeist among American youth? The apparent ineffectiveness of large-scale efforts to mobilize this sleeping giant by facilitating voting, such as MTV's "Rock the Vote," would seem to point to the latter conclusion. Youth voting remained in decline from the group's founding in 1990 until the highly contested 2004 presidential race – an example that may prove to be more of a spike than a change in trend.

At the same time, the effects of liberalized voting and registration procedures on youth turnout are mixed. Mary Fitzgerald finds that election-day registration significantly increases youth turnout, while early voting has a much smaller impact. However, Fitzgerald simultaneously finds that unrestricted absentee voting and mail registration (a provision of the National Voter Registration Act) in fact have a negative effect on youth turnout in presidential elections.⁶⁵ Other research demonstrates that the young have

⁶³ Stephen E. Frantzich, *Citizen Democracy: Political Activists in a Cynical Age* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), p. 3.

⁶⁴ Stephen Earl Bennett, "Left Behind: Exploring declining turnout among noncollege young whites, 1964-1988," *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 72, No. 2 (1991), pp. 314-333.

⁶⁵ Mary Fitzgerald, "Easier Voting Methods Boost Youth Turnout," *Circle Working Papers* (February, 2003), p. 1. Available online at <<http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP01Fitzgerald.pdf>> accessed 5 April, 2006.

significantly less trust in government and further finds that low trust may relate to a lower intention of voting.⁶⁶

Following a different line of reasoning, some scholars have asked whether low turnout among the young is mostly a by-product of the life-circumstances prominent among young people. For instance, John M. Strate, et. al. suggest that low participation among the young is “likely due to the primacy of such nonpolitical concerns as obtaining an education, finding a mate, and establishing a career.”⁶⁷ If such were the case, one would expect to see an increase in voting among individuals who had fulfilled some of these goals, thereby transitioning into adulthood in a way that may be more meaningful than the measure of years since birth. However, Benjamin Highton and Raymond Wolfinger test the degree to which adult characteristics such as residential stability, marriage, home ownership, leaving school, obtaining a full-time job, and moving out from parents’ roof have an effect of voting independent from age. They find little evidence of a positive effect by adult roles on voting. In fact, several of the independent variables they test appear to have a *negative* effect.⁶⁸

The result of the empirical contradictions and methodological shortcomings enumerated is an incomplete picture of voting in general and youth voting in specific. My goal thus far has been to outline a convincing case for why society should place value on an engaged public in general and on high voter turnout in particular. The trend towards apathy becomes all the more alarming when one realizes that it is especially concentrated

⁶⁶ Judith Torney-Purta, Wendy Klandl Richardson, and Carolyn Henry Barber, “Adolescents’ Trust and Civic Participation in the United States: Analysis of Data from the IEA Civic Education Study,” *Circle Fact Sheets* (August 2004.) Available online at <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_Trust_CivicPart.pdf>.

⁶⁷ John M. Strate, Charles J. Parrish, Charles, D. Elder, and Coit Ford III, “Life Span Civic Development and Voting Participation,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 83, No. 2 (June, 1989), p. 443.

⁶⁸ Highton and Wolfinger.

in the youngest cohorts of society. If apathetic behavior remains fairly stable over time, it would seem logical to expect apathy to continue increasing as younger generations replace older ones. It is clear that we have compelling reasons to address the issue of low turnout, especially among the young.

I now turn to a discussion of the methodologies I employ to study the phenomenon of nonvoting.

Chapter Three – A Novel Approach

The overarching goal of this project is to determine what methods might best be employed in an effort to raise voter turnout among the young. Within this goal are three aims. First, I seek to test the degree to which procedural obstacles – the registration process in particular - constitute a barrier to youth voting. Second, I endeavor to determine whether nonvoting might also be attributable to negative attitudes held by the youth towards government and political participation. Finally, I address the possible feelings of empowerment that may be associated with being “baptized” into the political system through registration.

This section describes the methodologies employed to address these questions. I begin by describing how this project constitutes a unique contribution to existing scholarship. I then move on to an account of the experimental and interview techniques that are presented in Chapter 4.

The scope of the current project

On the whole, it is surprising how little is known about voting, a phenomenon large in scale and one that has been the subject of public attention for decades. Perhaps at least some of the uncertainty derives from the methodological approaches that have been applied. Most of the scholarship reviewed in Chapter 2 relies on either self-reports taken from the National Election Study, the Census Current Population Survey (CPS), or the researchers’ own instruments. Unfortunately, self-reports of voting have repeatedly been

shown to be inflated.⁶⁹ In some cases, researchers have used regional changes – reforms to state registration laws, for instance – to devise “natural” experiments. However, because there is no random assignment of cases to control and experimental groups, the question of causality will always be an issue. Many of these shortcomings are readily admitted by the authors.⁷⁰

Fairly recent developments in political science research methodology are well suited to continuing exploration of the problem of voter turnout. Chief among these is the resurgence of field experimentation as a tool for studying political problems like turnout. Although in some ways still a nascent approach, field experimentation is powerful research tool because the investigator randomly assigns subjects to control and treatment groups and has the ability to manipulate the independent variable. For these reasons, properly conducted field experiments make it possible to conclusively state that differences between the control and treatment group are attributable to the experimental manipulation and to no other variable. Further, because they take place in the context of real, everyday routine, they likely have greater external validity than more narrowly focused strategies, such as laboratory experiments. Applied to voter turnout, researchers such as Donald Green have recently received robust and compelling results from creative endeavors that measure the effects of different campaign tactics and polling-place atmospheres.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Highton and Wolfinger p. 202. Also see Brian D. Silver, “Who Overreports Voting?” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 80, No. 2 (June, 1986), pp. 613-624 and Peter Levine and Mark Hugo Lopez, “Youth Voter Turnout has Declined, by Any Measure,” *Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement Fact Sheet*, Sep., 2002. Available online at <http://www.civicyouth.org/research/products/fact_sheets_outside.htm> accessed 15 February, 2006.

⁷⁰ See, for instance, Teixeira, pp. 116-120.

⁷¹ Donald P. Green and Alan S. Gerber, “The Effects of Canvassing, Telephone Calls, and Direct Mail on Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 94, No. 3 (Sep., 2000), pp. 653-663; Donald P. Green, James M. Glaser, Elizabeth Addonizio, and Timothy J. Ryan, “Putting the Party

It is the aim of this project to provide a unique contribution to the scholarship on voter turnout by readdressing the legal-institutional and attitudinal influences that may depress participation in elections through an experimental approach. In an effort to devise a study that is both practical and comprehensive, I focus my research specifically on the voter registration processes and the young.

Roxbury Community College Field Experiment

The inspiration for this research design is drawn from a number of studies, most notably the work of Donald Green, Alan Gerber, Elizabeth Addonizio, Stephen Ansolabehere, and Shanto Iyengar. Ansolabehere and Iyengar have demonstrated the powerful ability of experimental research to study how various factors, such as negative campaigning, affect voter turnout.⁷² Green, Gerber, Addonizio, and Michelson have continued in this vein by conducting realistic field experiments.⁷³

Back into Politics: Results of an Experiment Designed to Increase Voter Turnout through Music, Food, and Entertainment.” Paper presented at Challenges of Participatory Democracy Workshop, 24 January, 2006. Available online at <http://lawweb.usc.edu/csfp/conferences/democracy_workshops/> accessed 7 May, 2006.

⁷² See, for instance, Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, *Going Negative: How Attack Ads Shrink and Polarize the Electorate* (New York: The Free Press, 1995); Stephen Ansolabehere, Shanto Iyengar, and Adam Simon, “Replicating Experiments Using Aggregate and Survey Data: The Case of Negative Advertising and Turnout,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 93, No. 4 (December, 1999), pp. 901-909. For a general discussion on the applicability of experimental methods to political science research, see Donald R. Kinder and Thomas R. Palfrey, eds., *Experimental Foundations of Political Science* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993,) especially chapter 1.

⁷³ Donald P. Green and Alan S. Gerber, “The Effects of Canvassing, Telephone Calls, and Direct Mail on Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 94, No. 3 (Sep., 2000), pp. 653-663; Donald P. Green and Alan S. Gerber, *Get Out the Vote! How to Increase Voter Turnout* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004); Elizabeth Addonizio, “Practice Makes Perfect: How Hands-on Familiarity with the Voting Process Increases Turnout among 18 Year-Olds” (Prepared for delivery at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, September 2-5, 2004); Donald Green, Alan S. Gerber, and David W. Nickerson, “Getting Out the Youth Vote in Local Elections: Results from Six Door-to-Door Canvassing Experiments,” May, 2002. Available at <<http://www.youthvote.org/info/YouthVote2001YaleReport.pdf>> accessed 15 February, 2006; Melissa R. Michelson, “Getting Out the Latino Vote: How Door-to-Door Canvassing Influences Voter Turnout in Rural California,” *Political Behavior*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (September, 2003), pp. 247-263.

The basic framework of my experiment involves providing some individuals with an easy means of registering to vote and then using public records to compare their voting activity to individuals who were required to register on their own initiative and through their own efforts, as most voters do. The underlying notion is that, for the young, registration constitutes a barrier to voting and that its removal will facilitate youth turnout.

Participants in the field experiment were students at Roxbury Community College (RCC), a two-year public institution of higher learning located in Roxbury, a neighborhood of Boston, MA. RCC grants Associate Degrees and well as various certificates and enrolls approximately 2,500 students.⁷⁴ RCC was selected for a number of reasons. First, it provided a snapshot of the demographic group most afflicted by low voter turnout – young minorities from poor socioeconomic backgrounds. Only 7% of RCC’s students are both White and non-Hispanic.⁷⁵ Second, because the experiment required obtaining public voting records, logistics were greatly facilitated by sampling from a population that is geographically concentrated. Whereas performing the experiment at a private university might have required requisitioning voting records from dozens of different municipalities, 76% of RCC students fall within the jurisdiction of Boston’s Registrar of Voters.⁷⁶

Participants in the experiment were recruited in one of two ways. Instructors of RCC’s College Survival seminars invited their students to participate. The College Survival seminars are required of all first-semester students. They typically include 20 students and meet once every week for about one hour. In total, 125 students from the

⁷⁴ Roxbury fact sheet http://www.rcc.mass.edu/Download/FactSheet_2004.pdf

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 2.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 2

College Survival seminars participated. Additionally, a letter was distributed to all RCC faculty members inviting them to have one or more of their classes participate in the experiment. The study was touted as a way to facilitate discussion about voting, government, and community involvement. Eight teachers opted to conduct the experiment in their classes, yielding an additional 133 participants. The total number of participants was 258.

Each of the classes involved in the study was randomly assigned to be in the treatment or control groups. This task was performed by the staff of RCC; as instructors came to pick up the study materials, they were assigned to one group or the other on an alternating basis. This method was chosen instead of pre-assignment because, although many instructors expressed interest in having their classes participate, it was impossible to know how many would actually commit to the study until they actually came to gather the necessary materials. Alternating assignment allowed a roughly equivalent number of classes to be assigned to each group in a way that was both logistically practical and would not bias the results.

The procedure for the treatment group was as follows: Beginning on October 7th, 2005, instructors in each participating class distributed packets containing 1) a consent form describing the study and what is required of participants, 2) a questionnaire containing 30 questions measuring political connectivity and civic engagement, and 3) a national voter registration application along with instructions on how to complete it. The instructor explained to students that if they had the inclination, they could complete the registration application, return it to the instructor, and it would be filed before the

registration deadline for Boston's Municipal Election on November 8th. Instructors collected all the completed materials and turned them over to the principal investigator.

The procedure for the control group was identical to that of the treatment group with the exception that these students were not provided with voter registration materials. In order to vote in Boston's municipal election, it would be necessary for them to register on their own.

Some instructors in both the treatment and control group chose to offer their students a small amount of extra credit as an incentive for participation. The instructions on the questionnaire and consent form, however, made it clear that all participation was entirely voluntary and would have no bearing on a student's relationship with Tufts University or RCC. The instructions further stated that participants could skip any part of the study they did not wish to complete and that they could withdraw their participation at any time.

Boston's November, 2005 Municipal Election was one of relatively low-salience. Mayor Thomas Menino ran for a fourth term and, although he was opposed by city councilor Maura Hennigen, the outcome of the election was never in question. Menino won in a landslide, taking 67% of the vote. Eight candidates ran for four councilor-at-large seats. Three of the nine city councilor districts were uncontested.

In January of 2006, I purchased the Boston Voter File and Resident List from the Boston Registrar of Voters. These records provide a list of registered voters in the city of Boston and describe in which elections each registrant voted. For each experimental participant residing in the city of Boston, the records were electronically searched to determine whether that individual had registered and whether that individual had turned

out to vote in the November 8th municipal election. It was thus possible to determine the effect of the experimental treatment on tendencies towards registration and voting.

Although it might have been possible to measure voting and registration behavior using a post-survey, there are substantial advantages to verifying this information with public records. As described above, self-reports of voter turnout may, for a variety of reasons, inaccurately characterize turnout rates.⁷⁷ Individuals may not properly recall whether they voted or they may intentionally misreport their behavior for fear of being characterized as lackadaisical. In fact, it is believed that self-reports typically inflate actual turnout figures by 9-10%.⁷⁸

Experimental Ethics / Protection of Privacy

In order to avoid biasing the voting activities of experimental participants, it was necessary to employ some deception in the form of omission. If students knew that their registration and voting decisions would be monitored using public records, it seems likely that they would feel especially compelled to register and vote for fear of being observed as apathetic. As such, the faculty members distributing the experimental materials were not informed the students' behavior would be monitored and the consent form avoided stating the specifics of the experimental procedure. Students were informed only that the study aimed to explore "the attitudes young people hold towards government."

Further, most social-scientific experiments can easily protect the privacy of participants by assigning them participant codes that serve as the primary means of identification. Oftentimes, names and other personally identifiable information are hidden

⁷⁷ John P. Katosh and Michael W. Traugott, "The Consequences of Validated and Self-Reported Voting Measures," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (Winter, 1981), pp. 519-535.

⁷⁸ Levine and Lopez.

from investigators for the duration of a study. The specific requirements of this inquiry precluded such a possibility. In order to investigate participants' voting behavior using public records, it was necessary to record their names and dates of birth and then search for the pertinent entries in public records. Verifying voting behavior in this way is and has been common practice in political science research.⁷⁹

Extensive measures were taken to safeguard participants' privacy in light of these concerns. All completed experimental materials were kept in a secure location and were never duplicated. Further, the experiment's data management plan called for meticulous steps that allowed all required information to be recorded without directly associating participants' names with their survey responses. Each participant was assigned a four-digit participant code upon agreeing to participate. These codes were printed at the bottom of each consent form and questionnaire. In the initial compilation of data, two databases were created: one with participants' names, dates of birth, and the participant code; the other with the participant code and survey responses. In January of 2006, the first database was used to investigate participants' voting behavior. After this step, participants' names were deleted from the first database and the two databases were merged to create the final database, used for analysis. It was at no time possible to simultaneously view participants' names and survey responses, and all personally identifiable information – in both paper and electronic form – was discarded as soon as it was no longer needed.

Finally, following Boston's November Municipal Election, a debriefing form was distributed to all classes participating in the study. The debriefing form explained the true

⁷⁹ See, for instance, Green and Gerber, "The Effects of Canvassing, Telephone Calls, and Direct Mail on Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment" as well as Addonizio, "Practice Makes Perfect."

intentions of the experiment, described how personally identifiable information was used and protected, and provided contact information for the principal investigator, the faculty supervisor, and the Tufts Institutional Review Board should participants have any questions or concerns. No follow-up calls from participants were received.

Mass Bay Focus Groups

In order to place the quantitative results of the Roxbury field experiment in context and more fully examine possible reasons for low turnout among the young, I conducted semi-structured focus group interviews with students at Massachusetts Bay Community College. While the Roxbury experiment takes extensive steps to isolate causality, the depth with which it can explore the emotional and attitudinal influences on voting is limited. The purpose of the focus groups, then, is to complement the Roxbury results with qualitative data that provide a more complete picture of how procedural barriers and attitudes may influence youth turnout.

The advantages of focus groups as a research instrument are numerous. Aside from being low-cost and providing speedy results, focus groups are a socially oriented research procedure. As Richard Krueger says, “People are social creatures who interact with others. They are influenced by the comments of others and make decisions after listening to the advice and counsel of people around them.”⁸⁰ In other words, group interviews may be successful in drawing out latent feelings that would otherwise go unnoticed. Additionally, focus groups allow a researcher to improvise and explore unexpected avenues to an extent not possible with other tools.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Richard A. Krueger, *Focus Groups* (Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA, 1994), p. 34.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

I conducted two one-hour focus groups in early April, 2006. The focus groups were arranged through Mass Bay's Office of Academic and Institutional Support. At my request, this office contacted members of the college's athletic teams to ask if they might be willing to participate in a one-hour group interview in exchange for \$30. I targeted athletic teams in an effort to recruit students who would be familiar with each other and therefore more comfortable exchanging ideas in an unfamiliar context. In order to prevent either interview session from being dominated by males or females, I asked Mass Bay to recruit about half the interviewees for each group from male teams and half from female teams. Each of the two focus groups included seven participants, of which four were female and three male.

The interviews were conducted in a small conference room provided by Mass Bay. Students sat around a small conference table with two tape recorders in the middle. In an effort to make the students more comfortable, I served light refreshments. I dressed in a business-casual fashion so as to assert my role as the discussion leader without coming across as severe or overly formal.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format. I came prepared with several questions about attitudes towards voting and political participation. These questions were followed up by impromptu questions meant to encourage discussion and more detailed responses.

In summation, this project creates a unique niche for itself through its focus on a specific subdivision of the turnout question – that of youth voting – and through its application of a field experiment complemented by group interviews. The next chapter presents the results of this endeavor.

Chapter Four – Bringing a Horse to Water: The Roxbury Experiment

The Roxbury experiment allows the testing of two causal relationships. First, I can determine the degree to which removing the registration barrier increases voting among the young. Second, using the responses from surveys that were completed concurrently with the receipt of a registration application, I can determine the effect that a registration drive has on politically related attitudes such as evaluations of political efficacy, sense of civic obligation, interest in politics, and evaluations of government. Additionally, I examine the correlation between attitudinal measures and registration behavior.

The results do not confirm the hypothesis that facilitation of the registration process leads to an increase in youth voting. Although I registered several students to vote, my registration drive was unsuccessful in bringing new voters to the polls for Boston's November, 2005 Election.

Further, although I find evidence of a relationship between registration behavior and political attitudes, it is unclear that a registration drive can be responsible for attitudinal changes. It does not seem that my experimental treatment had a pronounced effect on attitudinal measures.

Hypothesis #1: Facilitation of the registration process will lead to an increase in voting.

I begin with the most important relationship tested by this project: that between the registration barrier (IV) and voting activity among the young (DV). A large body of theoretical and empirical work suggests that the facilitation of registration procedures

increases voting. As detailed in Chapter 2, numerous scholars such as Ruy Teixeira, Benjamin Highton, and Mary Fitzgerald point to the relatively cumbersome registration process in the US as a possible reason why turnout lags behind that in Western Europe. The underlying logic is quite intuitive; individuals may be dissuaded from voting by the difficulties and inconveniences of registering or a lack of inclination to take the time to do so. With regard to the rational choice perspective, the registration procedure raises the cost of voting and as such makes voting an irrational act to some individuals who derive little enjoyment from playing a role in the outcome of an election.

With regard to the young, however, the Roxbury experiment finds little evidence that registration is responsible for depressing turnout.

A total of 258 students participated in the Roxbury experiment. Of these, 106 were assigned to the control group and 152 to the treatment group. As described in Chapter 3, the control group would be invited to complete a survey related to their political attitudes (Appendix A). In addition to being invited to complete the same survey, the treatment group would receive a voter registration application along with written instructions explaining how to complete it. The purpose of this division is to isolate the effect of a registration opportunity in a subsequent review of turnout among these individuals.

Although 258 students participated in the study, it was necessary to refine this sample by eliminating observations from the 64 individuals who did not complete the study's consent form, bringing the usable sample size to 194. Additionally, with regard to the analysis of voting behavior, logistical concerns required that I focus exclusively on individuals residing in the city of Boston; in order to determine whether the individuals in

my study had in fact voted, it was necessary to purchase election records from the municipalities in which they resided. Because the 49 individuals residing outside of Boston were distributed across 14 different municipalities, the cost of investigating their voting activity was prohibitive.

Finally, some teachers were unable to distribute the study materials to their classes prior to the registration deadline for Boston's November election. The students in these classes could not have used my registration drive to register before the election, and so the experimental treatment was essentially neutralized with regard to the first hypothesis. In order to vote, these individuals would have had to register through some other means. In testing the first hypothesis, I therefore reclassify the 30 students in these classes as belonging to a pseudo-control group. However, these classes *did* receive the experimental materials in the period between the registration deadline and the election. As we will see, it is therefore logical to return them to the treatment group when considering behavior unrelated to the November election.

To determine the effect of the experimental treatment, I compare turnout among the control and treatment groups. The results of a chi-squared significance test are displayed in Table 4.1. They show that the treatment group did in fact exhibit a higher level of turnout than the control group, about 13% compared to 8%. Overall turnout for the election in question was 35.61%.

However, there are several reasons why it would be unreasonable to point to this difference as evidence of an experimental effect. First, the discrepancy falls considerably short of the 95% confidence level; the sample size is small enough that there is a

considerable possibility that different turnout rates exhibited by the two groups are due to chance.

Table 4.1 – Only slight differences between treatment and control groups

Voted?	Group		Total
	(Pseudo) Control	Treatment	
No	95 (92%)	49 (87%)	144 (91%)
Yes	8 (8%)	7 (13%)	15 (9%)
Total	103	56	159

$\text{Chi}^2 = .9511, \quad df = 1 \qquad \text{Right-tail } p = .329$

A more important observation, however, is derived from an individual-level consideration of the experimental subjects. Focusing exclusively on the students residing in Boston, of the 56 individuals who were offered voter registration applications before Boston’s registration deadline, 10 completed the applications and returned them to me and eight successfully became registered to vote. (A number of individuals who returned registration applications to me did not become registered because the applications had irreconcilable errors. For example, some individuals forgot to sign the applications. Others answered the question, “Are you a US citizen?” in the negative. In these cases, I turned the applications in to the Registrar of Voters anyway. The Registrar explained that these individuals would be mailed a letter explaining that their registration application had errors along with a new application to complete.)

The Boston Registrar of Voters mailed letters to these individuals shortly prior to the election confirming their registration status. Nevertheless, *none* of the eight individuals cast a ballot on Election Day. The seven students in the treatment group who did turn out to vote *all registered in some way external to my registration drive*. It is

clear, then, that the different rates seen between the two groups cannot be attributed to the removal of the registration barrier. Rather, those who were inclined to vote had already navigated the requisite bureaucratic obstacles on their own.

This finding seemingly damages the legal-institutional explanation of non-voting, at least as it relates to the young. While some students seized the easy registration opportunity when presented with it, none of these students actually went to the polls on Election Day.

Perhaps, then, we must turn to an attitudinal explanation of nonvoting. Such a focus is bolstered by a further consideration of how students responded to my registration drive. In this second step of analysis, I examine how students responded to an easy opportunity to register. Were most students excited about the chance to join the electorate? I find reason to believe that the answer is No.

Because this step examines how students responded to a registration opportunity and does not address behavior in the November election, the pseudo-control group can once again be reclassified as belonging to the treatment group, bringing the number of students in the control and treatment groups to 86 and 73, respectively.

Using the resident list for the City of Boston, I identified 54 students in the treatment group who were not registered at the time of the experiment. Of these students, only 13 – about 25% – completed applications and returned them to me.⁸² In other words, 75% of the unregistered voters *passed up the opportunity to register when it was presented to them*.

⁸² This figure differs from the figure reported earlier (10) because of the inclusion of students in the pseudo-control group. Three students returned registration forms after the registration deadline. They were not eligible to vote in the November election, but should still count as having seized the opportunity to register when presented with it.

What are the implications of this indifference? Why would so many students forgo such a simple opportunity to become a registered voter? Although most would see the completion of a registration application as a requiring little in terms of time or energy, it conceivably could present more of a challenge than is immediately apparent. Some students fear there might be negative repercussions to placing themselves on government controlled lists, such as a greater chance of receiving jury duty. Or perhaps the impersonal characteristics of my registration drive – occurring during class, using written instructions, and with being distributed along with a survey – were in some way inimical to achieving high participation. I return to this last possibility in Chapter five.

It should be clearly noted that participation rate might be skewed by the fact that Roxbury Community College enrolls a large number of students who are not US citizens. The questionnaire provided as part of the experiment did not inquire as to whether the subject was a US citizen and it was not possible to obtain this information on an individual level through the college. Given the young age group targeted by my study, the inclusion of a US citizen question on the questionnaire may have presented additional difficulties during the Institutional Review Board protocol review process because of the stigma associated with not being a US citizen. Additionally, one cannot be certain how many subjects would have answered the question and, even if they did, how many would have answered truthfully. Nevertheless, it is recommended that the possibility of a citizenship question be explored if future projects mimic the methodology described herein.

In an effort to partially surmount this shortcoming, I obtained aggregate-level data regarding the number of US citizens at Roxbury. Overall, 43% of Roxbury students are

non-citizens. There is no reason to believe that the classes included in the study substantially depart from this figure in their makeup. In contrast, fully 75% of unregistered students passed up the opportunity to vote. While it is likely that the sample of unregistered students may be somewhat biased towards containing *noncitizens* (because *all* students who *are* registered *are* US citizens,) it is still unlikely that the registration shortfall can be attributed entirely to this factor.

The results of the Roxbury experiment do not support the notion that the registration barrier is responsible for depressing turnout among the young. My registration drive was unsuccessful in bringing even one new voter to the polls on Election Day. Further, many students presented with an easy registration opportunity did not take advantage of it. There is reason to believe, then, that facilitation of the registration process through straightforward, impersonal drives such as mine will have a minimal impact on turnout.

Hypothesis #2: The disinclination among the young to register and vote is associated with negative attitudes held towards government, politics, and political efficacy.

Why would a significant number of students pass up an easy opportunity to register to vote? I use the responses from a questionnaire distributed along with the registration material to determine whether indifference towards voting might be attributable to the attitudes students hold towards government and their own political efficacy. Although the lack of a controlled experimental treatment in this part of analysis prevents a firm determination of causality, I can examine how the attitudes held by

different members of the treatment group correlate with their responses to the registration drive.

As was previously stated, 86 students from Boston were offered registration applications through my registration drive. Of these, 32 had already registered through their own means. The analysis in the section concerns the remaining 54 students. I compare the attitudes held by the students in the group who completed registration applications (Group A) with those who did not to do so (Group B). If it can be demonstrated that the students in Group A have a greater sense of political efficacy or hold more favorable views towards government and politics than those in Group B, it would provide evidence in support of the notion that negative attitudes held by the young may be causal in the rejection of the opportunity to register among this group. For reference, I also compute the measures as they relate to the 57 students in both the control and treatment group who were already registered before the experiment took place (Group C).

I compare the attitudes held by the first two groups described above across four dimensions: political efficacy, civic obligation, interest in politics, and evaluation of government. The results do not bear out the hypothesis that negative attitudes are associated with registration behavior.

I begin by constructing an index of political efficacy based on the answers to seven survey questions that asked respondents to rate their ability to influence government in different ways. I scaled these responses from one to five, with five indicating high efficacy. As one can see from Table 4.2, students who completed registration applications (A) rated their political efficacy at nearly the same level (2.76)

as students who passed on the opportunity (B – 2.83). Similarly, previously registered voters display a nearly identical rating of political efficacy (C – 2.97). A difference of means test of significance finds relatively high p values between .338 and .810, suggesting a high likelihood that the small differences observed are due to random variation. If efficacious individuals are more likely to register, the relationship is rather weak. Likewise, it is unlikely that being registered to vote greatly enhances feelings of political efficacy.

Difference of Means Relationship Between Registration and Attitudinal Measures

Table 4.2: Efficacy

	Mean (n)	<i>p</i>
Group A (Registered through experiment)	2.76 (12)	.810
Group B (Skipped registration)	2.83 (39)	
Group C (Preregistered)	2.97 (55)	.338

Table 4.3: Civic Obligation

	Mean (n)	<i>p</i>
Group A	2.66 (12)	.294
Group B	2.8 (39)	
Group C	2.63 (55)	.106

Table 4.4: Interest in Politics

	Mean (n)	<i>p</i>
Group A	2.33 (12)	.96
Group B	2.35 (40)	
Group C	2.83 (56)	.008

Table 4.5: Opinion of Government

	Mean (n)	<i>p</i>
Group A	1.55 (11)	.810
Group B	1.5 (35)	
Group C	1.22 (57)	.006

Next, I examine registration activity as it related to individuals' sense of civic obligation. In this case, "civic obligation" scores from one to five are assigned according to the responses to questions asking respondents to rate the importance of voting, serving on a jury, and keeping informed about public issues. As one can see from Table 4.3, the attitudes most in favor of civic obligation (2.8) are found in Group B, the students who passed on my registration drive. While the small n in Group A (2.66) makes it difficult to reject the possibility that this difference is due to chance, the degree to which students in Group B offer higher responses than Group C (2.63) approaches statistical significance. Perhaps the act of declining a registration opportunity activates a desire to fulfill societal expectations in other ways. Of course, the disparity is not so extreme as to discount the possibility that it is a random aberration.

Third, I examine the correlation between registration behavior and interest in politics – as measured by the responses – scaled from one to five – to the question, "How interested are you in politics and national affairs?" As Table 4.4 demonstrates, students who registered before my experiment were significantly more interested in politics (2.83) than those who were not (A – 2.33; B – 2.35). While these measures cannot speak to the question of whether interest in politics increases registration or vice versa, it is an encouraging finding, if one that is unsurprising. The implication is either that registration can be increased through increased focus on civic affairs or that joining the electorate encourages individuals to keep abreast of politics.

With regard to the interest in politics measure, the difference in responses from Groups A and B is once again far too small to suggest a connection between attitudes and behavior in this dimension.

Finally, I examine the respondents' evaluations of government as they relate to registration behavior. The "evaluation of government" measure is a one-to-three point index of questions asking respondents to rate their trust in government and satisfaction with democracy. As with the previous measure, students who registered before my experiment display attitudes significantly different (1.22) from Groups A (1.55) and B (1.5). Surprisingly, students in Group C report lower ratings of government than the other two groups. Perhaps the higher degree of participation in this group makes them more cognizant of and likely to focus on flaws in government. Once again, the responses from Groups A and B do not diverge in any significant way.

Viewed as a whole, attitudes do not appear to be related to the decision to complete a registration application. Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest that some attitudes are related to being a registered voter. The individuals who registered prior to my experiment do display significant attitudinal differences from those who did not. This relationship appears to exist in a counterintuitive direction in two of the four dimensions examined: opinion of government and civic obligation. However, the consistency with which Group C differs from Groups A and B goes far in setting it apart. It seems that, if the act of registering to vote has a positive influence on any of the attitudes examined, the change comes with time and not instantly. It may be that attitudinal shifts occur only after regular participation in several elections. I address these possibilities more thoroughly in the next section.

It seems that, through the analysis above, I am placed in the unenviable position of having ruled out both of the general explanations of nonvoting that were previously identified. The legal-institutional explanation is strongly undermined by the fact that the treatment group was only slightly more likely to vote than the control group as well as the fact that a significant number of students did not register when presented with the opportunity. At the same time, students' registration behavior within the context of the experiment does not appear related to their attitudes. Thus far, we are left without an adequate answer to the question of why the young are disposed towards nonparticipation.

I return to this fundamental question in the next chapter. In the next section, however, I turn to a causal examination of the effect that registration may have on attitudes.

Hypothesis #3: Being presented with the opportunity to register has a positive influence on attitudes related to government and political efficacy.

The degree to which individuals who registered previous to my experiment differ in attitudinal measures raises a compelling question: Can the simple act of registration lead to an attitudinal shift? While the underlying logic of such a relationship may not be intuitively clear, there are several reasons why such a relationship might be plausible. As previously mentioned, voting can be viewed as a profoundly symbolic act. Many would consider elections to be the most fundamental institution of a functioning democracy, and so registration could be viewed as a process through which an individual is "baptized" as a full-fledged member of his or her society.

The Roxbury experiment's methodology allows me to explore how the act of registering may influence political attitudes. I compare responses provided by individuals in the treatment group to those from the control group, with the notion that being exposed to an easy way to register may affect one's evaluations in a variety of politically related areas.

I perform linear regressions to measure the influence of the experimental treatment (IV, coded as a dummy variable with 1 being the treatment group and 0 being the control group) on questionnaire responses as defined along the same dimensions outlined above (DV). I limit my analysis to students who were not registered at the time of the experiment, since any effect is likely to be neutralized in cases where a student was already registered. The results are displayed in Table 4.6.

As one can see, no definitive trends emerge from this analysis. All the relationships observed are relatively weak and stray far from statistical significance. For two of the categories measured, the treatment may have had a positive effect on attitudinal responses, but in the other two categories the effect seems to have been negative, an illogical and counterintuitive finding. It is much more likely that the effect is negligible and that the differences observed are due to simple random variation.⁸³

⁸³ Again, the results in this section may be skewed by the fact that the sample likely contains a significant number of non-US citizens. One might very well expect the experimental treatment to have the opposite attitudinal effect for these individuals as the receipt of a registration form may serve as a reminder that one is barred from participating in the governmental activities of the society in which they live. It is regrettable that the sample could not be refined so as to remove such individuals from the analysis.

Table 4.6 Little evidence that experimental treatment (IV) influences attitudinal responses (DV) among unregistered. (N=98)

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Political Efficacy	.02	.17
Constant	2.86	.25
Civic Obligation	.03	.11
Constant	2.8	.17
Interest in Politics	-.16	.2
Constant	2.23	.31
Evaluation of Gov.	.06	.11
Constant	1.56	.18

* $p < .1$

Table 4.7 No strong evidence of relationship between completion of registration application (IV) and attitudinal measures (DV). (n=106)

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Political Efficacy	.2	.16
Constant	2.97	.08
Civic Obligation	-.15	.11
Constant	2.69	.06
Interest in Politics	-.03	.22
Constant	2.62	.1
Evaluation of Gov.	.18	.12
Constant	1.38	.06

* $p < .1$

Perhaps an attitudinal effect would be more observable if the analysis were limited to students who did take advantage of my registration drive. If any attitudinal shift were present, it seems reasonable to expect it to be most prominent among these newly registered voters. I therefore perform a regression to compare the attitudes held by these individuals to those of individuals who did not take advantage of the registration opportunity. In this case, registration behavior (IV) is analyzed as a dummy variable with completion of a registration form coded as 1 and a pass on the registration opportunity coded as 0. The results are displayed in Table 4.7. Again, one would be hard pressed to extract a definitive trend. Any relationship that exists appears to be small and far from statistical significance.

Of course, all of the results presented in this chapter must be viewed in context. My experiment revolved around a relatively low-salience election with few races seriously in contention. If the young are more likely than other groups to get caught up in the excitement of high-profile elections, it is possible that turnout would be higher if the experiment had been conducted around a state or federal election.

In summation, the behavior of the students in my study provides little evidence of registration as a significant barrier to voter turnout among the young, at least with regard to the functional, impersonal registration methods I employed. The relationship between attitudes and behavior is somewhat more difficult to pin down. I find no evidence of a relationship between students' responses to attitudinal questions on my survey and their reaction to the registration drive. Students who were registered *before* my registration drive do, however, display significantly different attitudinal responses. Taken together,

these findings speak to the possibility of a *gradual* effect of political participation on attitudes. If students who are registered and participate gradually undergo attitudinal changes as they participate in elections, it would explain why my survey's responses identify attitudinal differences between, on one hand, students who registered *before* my registration drive and, on the other, students who registered *through* my registration drive.

Chapter Five – Convincing It to Drink: Massachusetts Bay Focus Groups

In many ways, the Roxbury field experiment leaves us with more questions than answers. Why did so few students seize the opportunity to register? Why did none of the students who did register turn out on Election Day? To what extent is voting behavior related to attitudes towards government? The purpose of the focus group interviews is to shed some light on the questions raised in the previous chapter. I interviewed 14 college students from Mass Bay Community College in order to explore the phenomenon of nonvoting in a more detailed, descriptive way than is possible with a field experiment.

The responses and stories I recorded provide valuable evidence serving to clear up some the mixed results. I discover abundant dissatisfaction with the US political climate in general and voting in specific. It seems that one need not probe the average American student too extensively to elicit sentiments of anger frustration, and powerlessness. What is less clear is that these feelings are responsible for low turnout. While all the students I interviewed were generous in their criticism of government, the remedy they suggested when probed was not to withdraw from political participation, but rather to increase it. Indeed, the students seemed to enjoy discussing politics and the issues confronting their generation a great deal. I am led to conclude that a link between dissatisfaction and nonvoting is tautological. Why would the young stay home on Election Day? It is not satisfactory to say that the reason is that they feel that their participation does not matter if the remedy they offer is greater participation.

Turning to an examination of procedural effects, the focus groups are once again illuminative. Several of the students I interviewed placed themselves in a category I call

“lapsed registrants.” These individuals registered to vote at some point, but are inconsistent in their participation in elections. In almost every case, it took an “easy registration” opportunity to get them on the rolls, but their responses suggest that it took more than this to get them into voting booths with regularity. The story told by my interviews is that, for the young, registration is an important barrier that often requires a special opportunity or strong pressure to surmount. But it is not the only barrier. It seems that, in many cases, the young also need sustained encouragement right up to Election Day in order to get them to the polls. You can bring a horse to water, but your work may not be done. You may also have to convince him to drink.

As stated above and in Chapter 3, both focus groups included seven participants. In recounting their responses, I change all participants’ names to pseudonyms of the same gender in order to protect anonymity. The first group consisted of Jennifer, a student who appeared to be Hispanic; James, Jonathan, Betty, and Alex, all of whom were Black; and Julie and Catherine, both of whom were White. Alex appeared to be confined to a wheelchair. It became clear in the course of the interview that Jennifer was not a US citizen. She nonetheless seemed fully integrated into US culture and offered thoughtful commentary on the issues addressed. The second group consisted of Deborah, Laura, Beatrice, and Abigail, all of whom were Black, as well as Keith, Derrick, and Nathan, all of whom were White. All participants appeared to be between the ages of 18 and 24.

I begin with an analysis of the attitudes held by the young towards government. I find abundant evidence of dissatisfaction and anger towards the current political order, but I continue by explaining why this dissatisfaction is an inadequate explanation of nonvoting. There is reason to believe that the connections students draw between their

dissatisfaction and nonvoting are more rationalization than explanation. I then demonstrate how, for many of my subjects, the tendency towards nonvoting was overcome by special encouragement near Election Day, a tendency I believe to be generalizable.

“All I see is a suit.” : Negative Attitudes Prevail

In designing a protocol for the focus groups, I originally expected that I would have to coax my subjects into describing their feelings about politicians and the political climate. I would never get the chance. In both sessions, my questions on this topic would be preempted when the interviewees seized the opportunity to voice dissatisfaction, disillusionment, and in some cases outright contempt with the state of American politics. These feelings would manifest themselves in a number of ways, including complaints that participation is ineffective, sharp criticisms of campaigns, and the influence of money, a perception that the most important issues are being ignored, and general skepticism in politicians’ intentions and honesty.

I begin with the students’ views towards their own political efficacy. In the first session, my very first substantive question asked how the people are able to influence government. Jennifer was the first to respond and immediately described feelings of powerlessness, saying, “Well I think [writing] to their representatives, *not that it works very well.*” (Emphasis added.) Her sentiments would be echoed just a moment later by James, who continued,

It’s really all about voting but it’s so diluted now that I’m not sure that any one person’s vote can make a difference depending what region and who represents that.

Similar statements expressing skepticism about the effectiveness of voting would be expressed by Betty and Jonathan at different points in the interview. Betty, for instance, sat passively throughout nearly the entire session and spoke only when directly called upon. At one point she briefly stated her indifference to politics. Without any encouragement on my part, several of the other participants probed her as to why she took such an apathetic attitude. Betty replied, “They’re not gonna change anything, so why should I care? ... I mean... everything gonna stay the same.”

In the second focus group, expressions of powerlessness would focus more narrowly on frustration with institutions of American politics, especially the Electoral College. As Laura responded to a question asking whether voting is an option or an obligation,

It also depends on what state you’re in. Because one state or- like California or Texas have more electoral votes than like Massachusetts or you know other places like that. I mean it all depends if the person in the state- I mean if the people in the state vote for one person and they win, you know the whole thing, then they get the electoral votes in that state... So like back when Kennedy was like around like he got Texas, which held the most elector votes so, since he got that state- like he got less states than I think it was Richard Nixon... so like it really doesn’t matter how many people are voting. It depends on which state gets the electoral votes... I mean if the people in a state vote for one particular person then obviously they’re gonna get their electoral votes, but other than that it’s just, I mean we’re not voting for the president. We’re voting for their electoral votes.

Laura’s point would be made more poignant by Derrick a moment later,

[Massachusetts’ electoral votes] aren’t going to go to a Republican because Massachusetts is always gonna vote Democratically for president so if you’re a Republican living in Massachusetts you’re like, why bother going out and voting, cuz it’s not gonna have an effect? My one vote for a Republican candidate isn’t gonna matter. Same thing with Texas with Democrats. I mean Texas is always gonna vote Republican. I mean I think everyone should vote because we could have different outcomes if everyone decided to vote, but it all depends on where you live and what your state votes for.

Or, as Nathan continued, “I’d rather vote if you knew that your vote wasn’t based on electoral votes. If you knew you were going by peoples’ votes, then it would make more sense to vote.” The students seem well aware that the impact of one vote is easily lost in a crowd.

Students’ feelings of powerlessness were not derived solely from perceived subversion by the institutions of American elections, however. Several students, James and Jonathan in particular, expressed concern that politicians are excessively influenced by money. James introduced the influence of money into a conversation about the connection between citizens and government,

One other point I would like to add is money. Money influences. I mean people have a decent amount of money or income wage that holds leverage as far as the decisions that they’re allowed to make... It can win you an election. Just like the 2000 election. I mean there’s the proof right there. I mean who has the more corporate side in their hand? I mean if you want to take it back to 2000 you can look at this past election and we can see that, I mean who has more control? I mean or you could say who controls who more? I mean the president or the corporations? I mean who’s really controlling this country? Is it the people or is it money?

For Jonathan, the issue rang with overtones of a class struggle:

Just look at it. Like, uh, Boston. You livin in the city. You livin in Dorchester. I mean two different cities. It’s like two different worlds... [Voting] doesn’t affect us. It’s not gonna affect everywhere. Like you’re not gonna see the changes. Especially where I live. You’ll see it in like Newton and Wellesley. That’s why it looks like two different worlds... It’s like, if you live in Newton, you should vote. If you live in Boston, it’s like a bottomless pit. I’m not gonna vote until I move out.

Both of these statements would be met with firm nods of agreement.

Taken on their own, the statements above would constitute a plausible starting point for an explanation of nonparticipation among the young. A broader exploration of attitudes, however, makes it more difficult to place the blame in such a specific locus.

Students' frustration is no way appears limited to feelings of inefficacy. The participants in my focus groups also expressed concern about a culture of dishonesty in politics. When I asked what political candidates could do to make politics more interesting, Jonathan replied,

Candidates should just be more real. They gotta say what they mean, not something that some dude just wrote for them. Speak from the heart. Tell me the truth. Tell me what you really can do and what's really not gonna happen... They're living through their campaign, but they're blinded by it. They actually believe that nonsense that they wrote on that card. It's nonsense. It's meaningless nonsense.

Catherine agreed:

Yeah no I think that if they were a little more honest instead of trying to make all these power chords and stuff, and just really, like Jonathan was saying, just say what they really can do and can't do, what's really going on.

As did Jennifer:

I think that everyone in general sort of buys into that style of campaigning and politics where they all sort of talk the same way, act the same way, dress the same way, so that everyone who has this kind of attitude about politics and politicians in general aren't gonna be- you know it's not going to strike their interest. They just so, "Oh, another politician." Because they talk the same. They don't try to really stand up and say, "Hey, I really am out there for you people." Because I'm sure, I mean there has to be some of them out there. But they just don't know how to present themselves in a way that you know, people who have felt unrepresented can actually see that "Oh there is someone out there that I can vote for." They need to find a way.

Jonathan: All I see is a suit.

Jennifer: Exactly.

Similarly, James implied that running for office requires the sacrificing one one's principles:

James: Honestly, I think somebody would kill me. Just cuz, you know what I mean, just cuz of the things that I'm prone to just blurt out sometimes. I don't think it's my opinions. I know about politics that the one that they do is not tell the truth and that's one thing that I pride myself in doing is to

make sure that I'm honest, you know what I mean. Even if it's just a regular conversation with anybody. I mean honesty I feel is the best policy regardless if it hurts or not. I mean it may hurt a few people, but in the end they may be better cuz of it instead of just sugar-coating things or telling them untruths.

Jonathan: Lying.

James: Yeah.

Tim: So it sounds like you feel that you need to sell out kind of-

James: Yeah you definitely have to sell out to be a politician. You do.

Jonathan: Exactly

Tim: I see a lot of people nodding their heads.

Concern over a culture of dishonesty was also apparent in the second interview. In this case the conversation revolved more specifically around criticisms of specific politicians. President Bush in particular was characterized as being deceptive in personality and style.

As my final question in both interviews, I asked students to tell me what they considered to be the most important issue we discussed. The answers to this question were often scattered and lacking in substance. In two (nonsequential) cases, however, students took this opportunity to focus on dishonesty:

Alex: I think the most important joint was [muffled] you know and like actually bringing it to the table. Saying it. The dishonesty is out there, you know? And the next step is just to- what do we do about it?

Keith: I'd say the most important thing was the dishonesty with how they go about doing things. And a lot of them all for just they wanna get somewhere, so they say things they don't really mean.

The students' overall sentiment was perhaps best expressed by James as he described completing a voter registration application:

Yeah it only took two seconds to fill the application out, but then you see the candidates and it's like pick your poison. [Laughter.] It's true! It's true!

Finally, the students I interviewed seemed to feel that, as young citizens, they are especially excluded from the political process. When I asked if the young face special challenges in political participation the conversation grew excited. Students had no trouble thinking of issues pertinent to the young that are often ignored in politics:

Nathan: [Political participation] definitely is [different for young people.] Cuz like if you watch the news or if you watch CNN or any of those political shows, it seems like they're all debating like whether to have pro-choice or you know like taxes. Most of us don't pay that- like we pay on what we make, but most of us don't have houses. Most of us don't have kids to pay taxes for or medical expenses or Medicare or stuff like that.

Beatrice: It doesn't have an effect on us.

Nathan: On the younger gener- like on the younger, like 20s, 25 year range and lower. Like it pretty much all geared towards older people like adults, you know, say towards 30 plus.

Tim: Does that strike a chord with other people? I guess that you're kind of saying that the issues addressed are not really in line with what young people are concerned about.

Several people: Yeah.

Nathan: I mean you look at like what it takes now for college, like college education. Like you go to Mass Bay, not that expensive. You go to

Keith: Babson.

Nathan: Yeah like Babson is how expensive?

Keith: Like 40 grand.

Nathan: Like 40 grand. That's an absolute joke. And then you get you know, you have to do all this work, especially if like are in a really difficult major- you know medical or psychological or something like that. You spend all

this time so that means you can't work and it means you can't have a life or anything like that. So how are you expected to pay these bills? And then, so what they do is they give you loans. So ok, but then you have to pay interest on those loans which is more money and more money and just- it snowballs again.

Tim: Ok. So politicians don't address the issues that young people need addressed. Are there any specific- you just mentioned college tuition. Is that about right or are there any other issues that-

Beatrice: Credit cards. You know like charging the interest rate. You know in a lot of countries there's a law that credit cards, they can't have an interest rate over like 20% or something like that. Or probably they have to have it less than that and like so young people, they get credit cards in order to pay off like what they need to pay off, and next thing you know they owe so much money and like that's why many people in America are in debt. And in like the politics they don't talk about that.

The conversation above implies that students view the problems they face as being politically related, but extraneous to the current focus of political debate.

The focus groups provided no lack of evidence for the prominence of negative attitudes regarding government among young citizens. The students I interviewed were generous in their criticisms of the politics and the political system in general. This is not enough, however, to attribute nonvoting to attitudes. It is possible that the two observations merely correlate with each other. This would be the case, for instance, if the students used negative responses to rationalize their nonparticipation. In the next section, I provide evidence that this is in fact the case.

The Incomplete Picture

It is easy to attribute nonvoting to negative attitudes held by the young. This age group is widely perceived as having a substantially different world view than older segments of the population and is often associated with traits such as rebelliousness,

nonconformity, and lethargy. It is tempting to attribute behavioral differences to this distinction because it is perhaps the most salient trait of this age group. This is especially the case when the young readily display dissatisfaction so palpably illustrated above.

However, in constructing such a view of negative attitudes as a cause of the young voting at a lower rate than older age groups, there are a number of things we logically would expect to see. For instance, we would likely expect to see the young reject political participation as a preferred means of effecting social change. If nonparticipation is an emotion-based behavior derived from flagging feelings of efficacy and interest, it would be logical to expect views on the worthiness of participation to be low, as I demonstrate they are in the previous section. More than this, however, we would expect views on the worthiness of participation to be *consistently* low. The attitudinal explanation would be damaged if the young in fact advocated participation in the political system in some contexts. As stated above, it is inconsistent to state that the young do not vote because they feel their participation does not matter if the remedy they offer is greater participation. Rather, we would expect them either to reject the very idea of working for social change or to advocate alternative methods of change, such as volunteer activity or social movements.

I demonstrate in this section that the views held by the participants in the focus groups are in fact inconsistent in this way. While the negative views described above prevailed, there were also numerous instances where the participants heartily endorsed political participation. I take this endorsement as evidence that many of the negative responses I received are in fact rationalization for what many perceive as the undesirable trait of apathy.

A striking example is provided by James, who repeatedly characterized voting as an exercise in futility, as demonstrated above. James shifted positions later in the interview when I asked about how to improve upon the problems described. His answer essentially centers on increasing participation in traditional institutions, a response that is somewhat at odds with his previous insinuation that the institutions are flawed.

James: I feel as far as getting the youth to come together and actually give them a voice and give them access to it. I mean I would say like put polling stations at school or universities. Why not have them there? I mean if they won't come to us in a sense, why not go to them? I mean and just make an outreach to get the youth who's paying for this war...

Beatrice and Nathan similarly vacillate with regard to the worthiness of participation. Like the other students, they are critical of the Electoral College, caustic in their criticism of politicians, and skeptical of their own influence. Yet when asked whether voting is an option or an obligation, they reply,

Berthany: I think it's an option... [However,] I honestly think that one vote does make a difference. Even though like yeah, the people we do vote for usually don't win, but the more, like, if you get more people involved in it, then maybe one day will actually get somebody that we want to be president. You know what I mean? I dunno like I believe that a vote does matter. The more people that you have voting is gonna make an effect.

Nathan: I think that you're given the option because of the country that you live in but I think you're obligated to vote if you want to be involved in what goes on in your own life and if you want to have that right to complain you should vote and have your opinion heard. Otherwise the senators, the mayors, they don't know what to fix.

Jennifer supports traditional avenues of participation, encouraging writing letters to representatives. She continues,

Tim: Do you think that's a more effective means of communication than just voting?

Jennifer: Well I would say still vote. I think voting is important cuz look at what happened in Iran. There are people who didn't vote for this crazy president they have now and they sit around and say, "Oh we don't like him so we're not gonna vote for him." So there's people who voted for him. So he won. Cuz they just didn't vote. You know, I mean you don't like someone, then vote against that person. I mean a lot of time it's, you know, like you said. Pick your poison. But pick a better poison, I guess.

Taken as a whole the willingness of the students to rebuff voting in general lacks the consistency one would expect if attitudinal influences were the overriding cause of nonvoting.

Finally, the students' approach to the interviews is inconsistent with a disillusionment with political participation. If the young were really turned off by politics, one could plausibly expect them to approach a one-hour interview on political issues with hesitation. This was not the case. Instead, many of the students appeared eager to participate and were lively in their discussion. Several students – Jennifer, Nathan, Alex, and Laura in particular – revealed substantial background knowledge that suggested more than a passing interest in political issues. Further, many of the students seemed to enjoy registering their opinion through the interview. During the second interview, when I asked the students what was the most important topic discussed during the interview, the following conversation ensued:

Laura: I think the most important thing is not the questions you ask, but allowing to speak freely. You know, to express our feeling. I mean it doesn't mean anything to the rest of the world. But us right here, you know, you're gonna remember this like, "Oh yeah, remember when I sat in that room and we talked about politics and the president and how bad Bush was and you know, I was really telling them how I felt." You know you have a sense of being when you talk about a thing that people don't usually talk about.

Nathan: Given the opportunity, I mean the three of our- not to exclude you girls, but the three of us play on the same team. We had a two-hour bus ride yesterday and political issues wouldn't be our number one topic, you know what I mean.

Derrick: We lost 36 to 4.

Deborah: 36 to 4?

[cross talk about overwhelming sports losses.]

Nathan: But I mean like I was saying, the whole- we wouldn't necessarily say, "Hey, what about Bush? Hey, what about Mayor Menino?" Being able to, you know, come together. I mean we're all very different, but you know the same school. We wouldn't necessarily walk down the hall and, you know, say hi to each other, but you know, the fact that we can all come together and we can all have a discussion about something very important is a big thing.

[cross-talk.]

Laura: It makes us feel like, "Yeah." Yeah we know shit. We *do* pay attention.

Deborah: I thought I was kinda dumb, like I don't know anything about politics. I was all nervous when I first came in here.

Abigail: But we all got into the subject and we all kinda gave our own opinion.

Laura: Expressed our feelings.

Abigail: Yeah.

Laura: Cuz I know not everybody hates Bush and not everybody loves Bush. Everybody is entitled to their own opinion, but you know we're not heard enough to make a difference.

A similar chord was struck by Alex when the same question was asked during the first interview. His previous quote is worth reproducing:

I think the most important joint was [muffled] you know and like actually bringing it to the table. Saying it. The dishonesty is out there, you know? And the next step is just to- what do we do about it?

In addition to these inconsistencies, the uniformity of negative attitudes towards government across several different dimensions also points to the possibility that the Mass Bay students were rationalizing their nonparticipation. Their negative responses were not focused on a specific concern such as the lack of influence or disgust with the current leadership. Rather, the participants provided negative responses in every attitudinal dimension with which they were presented. Given that the interviews were billed as a study on civic engagement, a topic with normative implications, it seems plausible that the overwhelming negativity exhibited was a defense mechanism meant to rationalize a low level of participation. It is a possibility with empirical support. Using extensive focus group interviews, John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse find that, contrary to conventional wisdom, many Americans support greater participation in name but in fact are wary of devolving extra responsibility to the public.⁸⁴

Finishing the Puzzle: The Personal Touch

A summary of the findings presented thus far is full of disconfirmations. Chapter 4 suggests that the registration barrier is an inadequate explanation of nonvoting among the youth. None of the individuals whom I registered in fact voted on Election Day. An attitudinal explanation of nonvoting is similarly deflated by, the lack of a relationship between attitudes and students' responses to the registration drive as well as the inconsistencies presented above.

⁸⁴ John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), especially chapters four and five.

This section finally offers some answers. A review of the focus group interviews reveals another factor important to encouraging political participation: a personal, individual-appeal. My interviews suggest that such appeals are helpful both when registering to vote and in encouraging actual voting on Election Day. In this section, I focus on the characteristics that differentiate the active voters in my interviews from the lapsed registrants. I find considerable reason to believe that personal appeals oftentimes make the difference between an active and lapsed citizen.

Of the seven individuals in the first focus group, six claimed to be registered. The exception was Jennifer, who explained that she was registered to vote, but in another country.⁸⁵ I asked each of the registered voters how he or she came to be registered. None of them reported registering solely on his or her own initiative. Rather, all of the individuals who could remember how they registered seemed to have been presented with some sort of easy registration opportunity. Catherine registered to vote at the Registry of Motor Vehicles while processing her driver's license. Julie was given a registration application by one of her high school teachers:

It was in high school. It was just kinda- she's like, "If you would like to register to vote I have the thing to fill out." And she just handed them out and I was like "Yeah why not?" And she sent them back in and it was mailed to me so... just easy, I suppose.

James was approached by a campaign worker while attending a local parade:

James: I was at the Puerto Rican festival and this person walks up to me and they were like "Hey, would you like to register to vote? I give you this and this and that and you can." I mean just to be registered, I figured why not?

Tim: So it took two seconds and you figured-

James: Yeah it only took two seconds to fill the application out...

⁸⁵ I did not press for more details for fear of making Jennifer uncomfortable.

Alex, Betty, and Jonathan provided more ambiguous answers that implied they could not remember the circumstances.

A similar pattern emerged in the second focus group, in which four of the seven students were registered. Keith was offered a registration application by his English teacher. Beatrice registered while attending a student event in her community while Laura's mother obtained an application for her and asked her to register. Nathan provides a poignant contrast. Nathan – perhaps the most talkative and well-informed individual in the second interview – would like to be registered, but missed out on an easy registration opportunity:

I also haven't voted, but my high school runs like a program where they give you- like they give you like they come in and you can sign up to vote and I went to go and I went the wrong day and I ended up not being able to sign up so I wanna do it, I just don't really have any time to get around unless someone gives me the stuff I need.

Meanwhile, Dennis took the initiative to register on his own, but missed participating in at least one election as a result:

I'm old enough [to vote.] At the time there was nothing to vote for, though. So I actually got the form late and handed it in late so I wasn't able to vote in the last election, which was last week. But I'm in the process of getting registered to vote.

Abigail and Deborah had not yet registered to vote, but their responses suggest that they would do so if approached in the right way:

Abigail: I'm not registered.

T: Not registered. Any specific reason you're not registered or-

Abigail: I just never-

T: Never got around to it?

Abigail: Yeah.

...

Deborah: I never voted cuz I'm not, well, it's confusing. Like in high school I was never into politics so I'm like in that process like everybody's like talking about as you get older everyone's talking about it so I kind of get into it. So I'm into it right now. But, you know there weren't any elections for this year, so.

T: So are you registered?

Deborah: No, I'm not registered.

Many of the individuals included in the interviews displayed an above-average level of political knowledge and were passionate in their feelings about politically related topics. It is significant that only one of them registered on his own initiative while the rest required special appeals.

The importance of such appeals extends to Election Day. The distinguishing characteristic differentiating regular voters from non-voters seemed to be the existence of such appeals, especially from family members. The regular voters reported being encouraged to vote by other members of their households. An exchange between Alex and Catherine, regular voters; and James, a lapsed registrant, is illustrative:

Alex: The presidential election, like I watched some people with the campaigns. They seemed like every time they were talking it seemed like [muffled] they just didn't come together. You know, none of it really made sense and, you know. I voted still, just cuz of family pressure and stuff like that, but like in the end I still felt lost.

Tim: Do other people feel family pressure?

Catherine: I was just gonna say, having [muffled] family, it could have to do with like, how interested his family is in politics and like what the kid knows at home, cuz he was like eighteen and you know, being registered to vote. He might not want to because his family has nothing to do.

James: It's a great point.

Catherine: Cuz I know I'm more interested in politics cuz my father watches it all the time. So I'll sit down and watch it.

James: I definitely agree with that. I mean if you're brought up in your family.

Jennifer: It's going to take extra effort for someone who didn't grow up in that kind of environment to make that person interesting [sic.]

James: Yeah

The most poignant – and humorous – example, however, is provided by Laura:

Well I am registered to vote. My mom did the whole registering process for me so all I had to do was just go in and vote but I don't feel like- I don't like to vote because like I feel that even though like we vote for whoever the president may be or anything it makes no sense because like if one president has more votes from the people and the other has less, I mean it doesn't matter. It really doesn't matter if we vote or not, basically, because it's all up to them to pick whose the next president. So my mom actually made me vote. I didn't want to.

This topic clearly struck a chord with James, who would later identify it as the most important topic covered during the interview:

What I didn't look at before was how much peoples' families actually influence them. I mean their political preference. I mean if you came off and let's say that your parents were Republican, I mean I'm pretty sure you're more likely to vote Republican. I mean same if they were Democrats or what have you. I never looked at it like that till today, till you brought it up. I mean that was a good point.

The finding of personal appeals as an important element in an effort to encourage turnout bolsters the findings of other empirical research. Employing large-scale field experiments, Green and Gerber find a significant positive effect of personal canvassing on increasing voter turnout. In contrast, less personal methods

of contact such as postcards or telephone calls have a weak effect or no effect at all.⁸⁶

The personal touch explanation may also go far in explaining the results of the Roxbury field experiment. None of the students who registered through my registration drive turned out to vote. With regard to registration, they likely adopted the “might as well” approach displayed by James and Julie. But they may very well come from families that place less emphasis on political participation and did not provide the extra impetus on Election Day.

If a personal touch is an important element in efforts to encourage political participation, it could also go far in explaining why many students at Roxbury did not seize the opportunity to register. The registration drive was rather impersonal, with registration applications being distributed along with a survey, consent form, and printed instructions for completing the study. It seems quite possible that a higher rate of registration would have been achieved with a more impassioned, energetic appeal.

The result of this chapter is at least a partial satisfaction of the questions raised in Chapter 4. Although derived from a relatively small sample of individuals, the results suggest that appeals for participation must be not just *functional*, but also *personal*.

Before summarizing and concluding, I use the following chapter to reflect on this thesis as a learning experience.

⁸⁶ Donald P. Green and Alan S. Gerber, “The Effects of Canvassing, Telephone Calls, and Direct Mail on Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 94, No. 3 (Sep., 2000), pp. 653-663.

Chapter Six – Lessons Learned

While primary purpose of a research thesis is surely take make a tangible contribution to scholarly knowledge, it should not be forgotten that a thesis – especially one undertaken at the undergraduate level – is also an educational enterprise through which one must, for the first time, conceptualize, design, execute, and finally defend a large-scale research project. Towards that end, I now briefly depart from the scholarly analysis – as well as some of its requisite formality – to reflect upon some of the challenges I encountered during the course of this project and a few lessons I learned along the way.

It should go without saying that this project required the accumulation of considerable technical knowledge from survey design to statistical methods. I leave these as understood for the time being and instead focus on some of the less tangible lessons as well as a few specific errors that would be addressed in future research.

The Human Factor: Working with other people

The fact that politics is an inherently social activity is, for this author, one of the most significant selling points of a career in political science. While many fine scholars are content to perform research in archives or laboratories, I for one take great pleasure in interacting with others and could not imagine submitting myself to a career content with isolation. This being said, the reliance on others presents some unique challenges for politically related research.

In the course of this project, I found it necessary to enlist the assistance of a number of faculty, administrators, and staff at Tufts University, Mass Bay Community

College, and Roxbury Community College. I am indebted to all these individuals for dedicating a significant amount of time to aid my project – usually for no compensation whatsoever. As I step back and reflect on this thesis, however, I am forced to conclude that some of its weakest aspects derived from the coordination with third parties assisting the research. These weaknesses in no way reflect on the capabilities, helpfulness, or dedication of the individuals in question. Rather, they are the product of my own relative inexperience in organizing and conducting an endeavor of the sort presented herein.

The logistics surrounding the Roxbury field experiment are the prime example. In carrying out the experiment, I wrote a letter to faculty members at the college asking if they might be willing to conduct the experiment in their classes as a civically related activity. After several faculty responded favorably, I decided to provide all the study materials to the Roxbury coordinator and allow him to distribute them to the interested teachers.

In retrospect, it would have been better for me to travel to each class myself to oversee the distribution of the study materials. There was some inconsistency in the study's execution. Some teachers asked students to take the questionnaires home and return them later in the week. Others allotted about fifteen minutes of class time for the activity. Some teachers offered extra credit for completing the study while others did not. Further, it appears that some students took a half-hearted approach to the survey's completion. Some skipped questions or did not complete the study's consent form, making their participation irrelevant. Finally, many teachers did not complete the experiment in the two weeks between the distribution of materials and the registration deadline. As a result, many students were not registered in time for Boston's municipal

election, detracting from the study's sample size and the students' own ability to participate.

I am not certain I would have had enough time to coordinate such visits around a full class schedule. Each trip to Roxbury required at least one hour in commuting time and personally running the experiments would have taken dozens of trips spread over several weeks. Still, it seems likely that the shortcomings enumerated above may well have been curtailed if a personally interested party were to administer the experiment. Another possibility may have been to meet with all the participating teachers as one group to provide detailed training and answer any questions they might have had.

The human factor also manifested itself as a difficulty in the bureaucratic dealings of this project. I encountered significant delays in receiving approval for both the Roxbury field experiment and the Mass Bay focus groups from the Tufts Human Subjects Review Board. From my standpoint as the principal investigator, the methods to be employed in both cases seemed of such an innocuous nature that I expected an expeditious review process. In both cases, I was forced to modify my research protocol several times in order to meet Review Board standards without sacrificing the project's integrity. Doing so delayed the administration of the Roxbury experiment by nearly a month and the Mass Bay focus groups by more than three months, placing unanticipated strain on my writing schedule. These observations should not be construed as a criticism of Review Board procedures. I understand the unqualified need for third party review of all research procedures involving human subjects. Rather, I mention them because of the new appreciation I gained for the logistical legwork required to execute large-scale original research.

Asking for favors

Field work in the social sciences nearly always requires a researcher to enlist the help of individuals external to the project, usually with little or no compensation. This thesis was no exception. It has been my experience that most people are quite happy to donate some time and effort to a research project if the project piques their interest. This being said, making the first contact oftentimes presents a formidable hurdle. Researchers can find themselves asking for help from people in all walks of life. Oftentimes these people are extremely busy and a call from political scientist can be so external to routine as to create considerable doubt in some individuals. A researcher asking someone for a favor must very quickly establish his or her own legitimacy as well as that of his or her project. I believe this challenge is magnified for a young individual with neither an advanced degree nor the prestige associated with a faculty position. At the outset of this project, I found myself very intimidated by the proposition of convincing several college administrators, dozens of college teachers, and hundreds of students to play a role in the study. It should go without saying that politeness and sociability are invaluable in approaching others for help. Additionally, I quickly discovered a few “best practices” to increase the chances of success in this area.

- 1) *Write a letter first.* I found it greatly helpful to write a letter to each individual from whom I would be requesting a favor before making an actual request. I used such letters to introduce myself and provide some background information about my project. Rather than stating my request outright, I would state my intention to follow up the letter with a phone call within a week to

“discuss the possibility of cooperation.” As a result, most individuals knew to expect my call and had their thoughts sorted out beforehand, rather than being blindsided by an unusual request.

- 2) *Be prepared.* In each conversation with an individual providing assistance to the project, I was meticulous in planning my presentation and anticipating the kinds of questions that might be asked of me. I believe this went far in signaling my legitimacy and the worthiness of the project.
- 3) *Check in often.* The old saying goes that the squeaky wheel gets the oil. I was cautious in making repeated calls to check the status of logistics related to the project for fear of antagonizing individuals who had agreed to help me for nothing in return. This being said, there were some cases where I found it necessary to make repeated (polite) requests in order to advance my agenda. (To be sure, this is testimony to the fact that the individuals in question are legitimately busy rather than any shortcoming on their part.)

If only I had asked them...

One political scientist with whom I have spoken jokingly told me that no survey has been administered where the researcher did not, after its completion, think of a question that would have benefited the results but was not included. This trend was not lost on me. If a similar version of this study were to be administered in the future, I would omit numerous questions that turned out to be extraneous to the project’s scope and would have explored attitudinal measures such as efficacy and opinion of government in greater detail. Doing so would have decreased the amount of time required to complete

the survey and may have provided more robust results. In my review of the transcripts from the focus group interviews, I am also struck by follow-up questions that I wish I had thought to ask. I regret, for instance, not probing the students in the second group about possible influences that have motivated them to vote on Election Day. Doing so might have provided more evidence of the kind of secondary push required from family or another influence. There is little that can be done to improve on these observations after the fact. Instead, it is incumbent upon a dutiful scientist to learn from experience and improve in future research.

One omission from my research instruments deserves special mention. As described in Chapter 4, the survey administered to Roxbury students did not include a question asking whether the respondent was a US citizen. It was not until after the experiment's administration that I realized that a large number of Roxbury students are not US citizens and therefore not eligible to register and vote. Clearly, in analyzing the results of the experiment it would have been very helpful to sort out the students who did not register through my drive simply because they were ineligible to vote.

If a similar version of this project were to be administered in the future, it would be strongly advised that a citizenship question be included in the survey. This being said, I suspect that a solution to the citizenship issue is not so easy. A citizenship question may very well have created additional hurdle during the Human Subjects Review Board process. RCC almost certainly enrolls a number of undocumented immigrants for whom the discovery of an honest answer to a citizenship question could be a source of stigma or, worse, retribution. For this reason, I suspect that, at best, many students would skip or lie on a citizenship question or, at worst, refuse to participate in the study altogether.

While the citizenship issue weakens the results of this thesis, I am at least satisfied with the way in which I present this shortcoming. It is the opinion of this author that self-reflection and an honest presentation of flaws are desirable traits for any scholar. I have made mistakes, but I have not hid them, a characteristic in which I take pride.

Managing data

My ears still ring with the words of my introductory statistics professor imploring our class to keep careful track of how we manipulate and code data. It would be some time before I would take this lesson to heart. There were many instances when I returned to my analysis after a break to find myself trying to decipher the impromptu name previously given to this or that dummy variable or wondering whether or not I had already rescaled a certain measure. The result of these occasional oversights was no less than days of additional time spent trying to recreate previous results. While the statistical methods employed in this thesis are fairly straightforward, they still presented a formidable challenge to an investigator with only a weak background in math. I expect this hurdle to be lowered in future projects as I become more rigorous in the organization and maintenance of my datasets.

Chapter Seven – Where to Go?

This result of this thesis is a complete story, if one that would benefit from further substantiation. I begin with a question: To what extent do procedural and attitudinal variables contribute to low turnout among the young? Both of these explanations encounter considerable shortcomings through the results of the Roxbury field experiment. Attitudes do not appear related to registration behavior. Neither does a straightforward “nuts and bolts” registration effort appear to succeed in turning new voters out to the polls. In many ways, the Roxbury experiment raises more questions than it answers.

The Mass Bay focus groups go far in sorting out this quandary. While the students I interviewed were energetic in their criticisms of government and bemoan the youth’s lack of political influence, the inconsistency of views regarding political participation suggests that these grumblings are more consistent with rationalization than explanation. However, the important trend of personal connection emerges from the students’ descriptions of their voting and registration activity. Most of the students I interviewed registered through an easy-registration opportunity, whether it be at a parade, through a class, or during a student activity. More than this, the students who actually turned out on Election Day oftentimes received additional encouragement right before or during the election. Typically, this encouragement came in the form of pressure from a politically informed family. Students like James, who had registered but did not report this extra encouragement tended to not vote.

Returning to the Roxbury experiment, a possible explanation of the inconsistencies seen makes itself apparent. Perhaps the registration drive did not enjoy high participation because of its extremely impersonal manner of execution. Students

were provided with only a registration application and written instructions for its completion. Perhaps more students would have completed the application if the teacher or another individual had made a more energetic appeal in favor of filling the application out.

Of course, this finding is deserving of further substantiation. The conclusion to the story is based on the personal anecdotes of fourteen individuals, and while their experiences and views seem generic enough so as to be generalizable, more extensive empirical work would certainly bolster the notion that personal family pressure is a crucial ingredient in political participation. It would be appropriate to conduct more extensive interviews and surveys to test this relationship. Further, the protocol for another field experiment is nearly self-evident. One could conduct another college-based registration with using two different styles of appeal as an independent variable. Students in a control group would receive impersonal registration drive used in this study, while students in the treatment group would receive a presentation from an energetic researcher.

If the findings presented herein are in fact verified, it would underline the importance of parents playing an active role in their children's civic education. It seems that family members can greatly influence the voting behavior of their children. As such, voter turnout campaigns might do well to take borrow from the style of anti-drug campaigns, which encourage parents to talk to their children about the merits of a drug-free lifestyle. Because it seems likely that families with apathetic children will often have apathetic parents, registration drives might also do well to target venues that bring families together, such as churches and community centers. Perhaps registration is a step

that will be more memorable if taken by a family together. Alternatively, perhaps Americans would do well to seat the act of voting more deeply in tradition. Jane Eisner, for instance, suggests that casting one's first vote should be a rite of passage heralded with fanfare, celebration, and perhaps a bottle of champagne.⁸⁷

Returning once again to P. Diddy's combative "Vote or Die!" slogan, this notion surely places voting in excessively dire terms. An individual's decision to vote is not a matter of life or death. But an active, informed electorate is good for both society as a whole and the individuals who comprise it. It is my hope that this thesis will help illuminate the best path towards that ideal. Aside from its substantive contribution, it is an endeavor that I have found personally very rewarding.

⁸⁷ Jane Eisner, "First Vote" in E.J. Dionne, Kayla Meltzer Drogosz, and Robert E. Litan, eds., *United We Serve: National Service and the Future of Citizenship* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), pp. 169-171.

Appendix

Citizenship Survey

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this brief survey about your future plans and citizenship activity. All responses will be kept completely confidential. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

Classification information:

What are your initials?

(Collecting your initials will allow us to compare responses on this survey to future ones.)

**When were you born? (Please give year and date.
You must be 18 years old to take this survey.)**

What town/city do you currently live in?

Please circle the best response.

Are you currently registered to vote?

Yes

No

Don't know

Have you ever voted in either a local or national election?

Yes

No

Don't know

How interested are you in politics and national affairs? Are you very interested, somewhat interested, only slightly interested, or not at all interested?

Very interested

Somewhat interested

Slightly interested

Not at all interested

Don't know

During the past 12 months, have you worked with other people to deal with some issue facing your community?

Yes

No

Don't know

During the past 12 months, have you telephoned, written a letter to, or visited a government official to express your views on a public issue?

Yes

No

Don't know

During the past 12 months, have you telephoned, written a letter to, or visited another kind of official (such as in your college) to express your views on an issue important to you?

Yes

No

Don't know

Many people say they have less time these days to do volunteer work. By volunteer activity we mean not just belonging to a service organization, but actually working in some way to help others for no monetary pay. What about you, were you able to devote any time to volunteer work in the last 12 months?

Yes

No

Don't know

Listed below are examples of the many different areas in which people do volunteer activity. In which, if any, of these have you done some volunteer work in the past twelve months? Approximately how many hours per month do you dedicate to each?

<u>Area</u>	<u>Hours</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> Education	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Religious organizations	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Human services	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Arts, Culture, Humanities	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Environment	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Political Organizations	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Youth Organizations	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Private or community foundations	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please describe)	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> None	

During the past 12 months, did you attend a meeting about an issue facing your community or schools?

Yes No Don't know

Aside from a strike against your employer, in the past twelve months, have you taken part in a protest, march, or demonstration on some national or local issue?

Yes No Don't know

We all know that American citizens have certain rights. For example, they have the right to free public education and to police protection, the right to attend religious services of their choice, and the right to elect public officials. We'd like to ask now about certain obligations that some people feel American citizens owe their country. We would like your own opinion on these--whether you feel it is a very important obligation, a somewhat important obligation, or not an obligation that a citizen owes to the country.

- 1. Very important**
- 2. Somewhat important**
- 3. Not an obligation that a citizen owes to the country**

To vote in elections				
1	2	3		Don't know
Volunteering some time to community services				
1	2	3		Don't know
Serving on a jury if called				
1	2	3		Don't know
Reporting a crime that he or she may have witnessed				
1	2	3		Don't know
Keeping fully informed about news and public issues				
1	2	3		Don't know

How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right – just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?

Just about always Most of the time
 Only some of the time Don't know

Which of these is closer to the truth?

(1) The main reason government has become bigger over the years is because it has gotten involved in things that people should do for themselves OR

(2) Government has become bigger because the problems we face have become bigger.

Don't know

How much do you feel that having elections makes the government pay attention to what the people think -- a good deal, some, or not much?

A good deal

Some

Not much

Don't know

On the whole, are you satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in the United States?

Satisfied

Fairly satisfied

Not very satisfied

Don't know

Some people think that the government in Washington should do everything possible to improve the standard of living of all poor Americans. Other people think it is not the government's responsibility, and that each person should take care of himself. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you made up your mind on this?

(1) Government's responsibility

(2)

(3) Agree with both

(4)

(5) People should help themselves

Don't know

On the whole, how satisfied are you with your neighborhood? Would you say you are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied?

Very satisfied

Somewhat satisfied

Somewhat dissatisfied

Very dissatisfied

Don't know

With regard to people in your neighborhood, would you say that they are just looking out for themselves all of the time, most of the time, some of the time, hardly ever, or never?

All of the time	Most of the time
Some of the time	Hardly ever
Never	Don't know

Would you say that people in your neighborhood treat others with respect all of the time, most of the time, some of the time, hardly ever, or never?

All of the time	Most of the time
Some of the time	Hardly ever
Never	Don't know

For each of the following statements, do you agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, or strongly disagree?

- 1. Agree strongly**
- 2. Agree somewhat**
- 3. Neither agree nor disagree**
- 4. Disagree somewhat**
- 5. Disagree strongly**

I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics.

1	2	3	4	5	Don't know
---	---	---	---	---	------------

I feel that I could do as good a job in public office as most other people.

1	2	3	4	5	Don't know
---	---	---	---	---	------------

I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people.

1	2	3	4	5	Don't know
---	---	---	---	---	------------

So many other people vote in the national election that it doesn't matter much to me whether I vote or not.

1	2	3	4	5	Don't know
---	---	---	---	---	------------

Public officials don't care much what people like me think.

1	2	3	4	5	Don't know
---	---	---	---	---	------------

People like me don't have any say about what the government does.

1 2 3 4 5 Don't know

Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on.

1 2 3 4 5 Don't know

Thank you for your participation!