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OPINION

Test your civic imagination

On election day, will you vote or will you bail?

By Andrew Reynolds

SOUTH BEND, IND.

Americans bask in the glow of having created one of the most dynamic and participatory democracies in the world. But the dirty family secret is that over the past few decades, fewer and fewer voters take part in the decision over who leads.

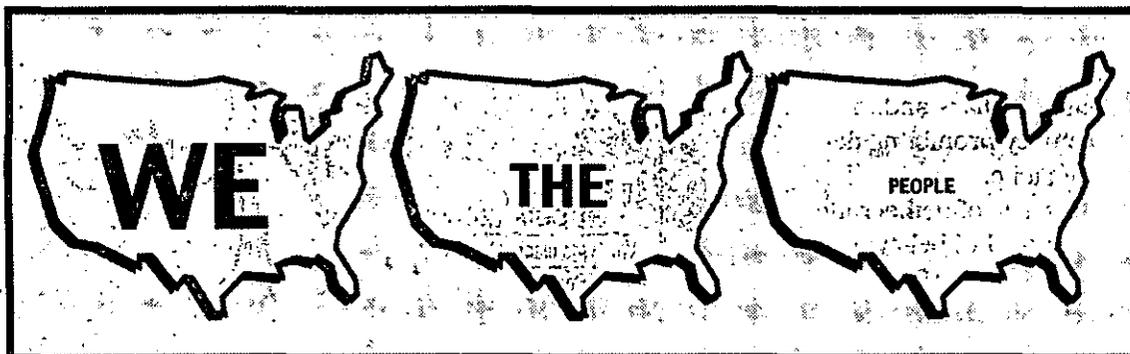
American presidents are now catapulted into office with the positive endorsement of less than 25 percent of the voting age population. Roughly the same amount - 25 percent - vote against the winning candidate.

Meanwhile, 25 percent of Americans over 18 are registered to vote but don't bother to do so. And the remaining quarter of eligible adults aren't even registered to vote.

A few years ago, I conducted a global study of voter participation in national elections since 1945 for the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. I found that, with an average turnout of only 48 percent of the voting-age population, America languished at No. 110 out of 134 nations.

The citizens of places as disparate as Albania, Italy, Iceland, Indonesia, and Uzbekistan turn out in almost twice the numbers Americans do.

This isn't necessarily because the issues in those places are more pressing or the races any more exciting. Voting is more than a spectator sport in the rest



stantial voter turnout, any leader's mandate is - or should be - highly dubious.

Whether it's Al Gore or George W. Bush taking up residence in the White House next January, the president - if current trends continue - will be put there by only a quarter of the people. Wouldn't it be much more convincing - indeed, even comforting - if he was carried into office by over half the voting-age citizens?

The view that nonvoting is a gauge of satisfaction also contradicts the fact that nonvoters are disproportionately the young, the poor, and the socially marginalized. For many, abstention is a subconscious expression of alienation - a whisper to the politicians that "you are not like us, you do not understand us, and we, for whatever reason, are unwilling to speak to you."

entirely on the alienated and marginalized. The comparative evidence shows a number of factors combine to affect turnout rates; understanding these structural effects is the first step to knowing how to increase voter participation.

The first hurdle on the way to the ballot box is registration. In most countries, registration is essentially automatic for citizens. So almost everyone is registered to vote come election day.

But US registration laws remain cumbersome and historically suspect, putting the onus too much on the individual to navigate the process. By not being registered, one-quarter of Americans are denied the vote before the campaign even begins.

The second hurdle is the type of electoral system used - it molds the incentives to vote. In countries that use systems of proportional representation - where parties receive seats in proportion to their share of the votes so that far fewer votes are "wasted" - turnout is, on average,

use single-member winner-take-all systems.

Lani Guinier, a Harvard Law School professor and leading proponent of electoral reform in the US, has argued that the exclusionary aspects of the US voting system curtail debate, limit effective representation, and alienate minorities from the electoral sphere. The implication is that the introduction of more inclusive voting systems would help bring the dispossessed back into the fold.

But in some ways, the global statistics give counter-intuitive answers. High voter turnout is not significantly correlated with the wealth of a nation, its literacy rate, or its level or length of democracy.

Brand-new democracies are as likely as old ones to see voters go to the polls, although it is true that the passion shown for democracy by voters in the very poor, fragile democracies of the developing world puts some Western nations to shame.

Encouraging more Americans to vote entails not merely making

lective responsibility, but also making voting easier and more accessible for busy people.

Some countries enforce civic virtue. More than 20 nations - Austria, Italy, Greece, Bolivia, and Switzerland, for example - have compulsory voting, or at least compulsory attendance at the polls. But the level and enforcement of penalties for not voting vary widely.

Whether or not voting is legally required, turnout is enhanced when voting is on a Sunday or public holiday, when there are many polling stations, and when people may vote during their regular daily activities - at work, the store, the bank, or school.

The new wave of technology ultimately will make voting as easy as the touch of a computer button at home. Oregon is at the forefront of mail-in ballots, while a number of other places in North America - like Toronto and Arizona - are experimenting with e-mail and Internet voting.

Until these reforms are brought to fruition, though, the dangers of not voting still far outweigh the costs of voting.

Politicians' legitimacy is rooted in their democratic mandate: born from the votes they receive. As fewer Americans vote, political life is weakened. The crisis of a democratic deficit may not have hit fully yet, but if current trends continue, it may not be far off.

Andrew Reynolds is assistant professor of government and international studies at the University of Notre Dame. His most recent book is *Electoral Systems and Democratization in Southern Africa* (Oxford Univer-

See page 12 for more on how US voter turnout compares with other countries, plus favorite excuses for not voting.

Namibia they turned out in huge numbers with dignity and pride. When anciens régimes fell in Indonesia, Mongolia, Cambodia, and the Seychelles, the people demonstrated their desire to choose by entering the voting booth in record numbers.

Even in the rest of the wealthy West, 7 or 8 out of every 10 adults vote - but the US doesn't even make the top-10 turnout list for North America and the Caribbean.

Some political scientists say low turnout is a sign that all is well - Americans are satisfied with their lot. The cost of taking half an hour to walk down to a local hall to cast a ballot for president once every four years outweighs the marginal benefit of being a tiny part of a big decision.

Such a view demonstrates a sad lack of civic imagination. Voting isn't just about picking the winner - it is a collective and personal responsibility born of the benefits of an organized society. To vote is to be equal, to be virtuous, to speak. Without a sub-

The joy of voting

By Patricia R. Olsen

TINTON FALLS, N.J.

IT'S no secret that Americans aren't big on voting. The results of a long-ago poll on voter apathy have stayed with me over the years. People said things like:

"Nothing I do makes a difference."

"The candidates are all liars, anyway. They don't care about issues."

"It's all about getting elected."

At election time, I do sometimes find myself bemoaning how I haven't had time to learn about the issues, and I'm not really sure about the candidates. I, too, can find excuses not to vote. Or at least I could, until a friend's husband became an American citizen four years ago and made me rethink my laziness.

When I met my friend Gina for coffee the morning of the 1996 presidential election, she was smiling from ear to ear. Her husband, Rao, who's from India, had become a US citizen days earlier.

"You should see him," she marveled. "He

was walking around singing 'You're a Grand Old Flag' this morning. He bought a red, white, and blue-striped tie to wear to work today, and he bought me socks with a flag on them."

She laughed on, telling me Rao was hoping to buy something patriotic for the baby, too, but he couldn't find anything.

"He's prouder than a kid who got all As on his report card. He bought red, white, and blue cupcakes, and he got out the red, white, and blue paper plates and cups from the Fourth of July. He even hung out a flag. He is just so into being able to vote," she said. I knew Rao was a pretty sentimental guy, but somehow I hadn't pictured him in this light.

"Today," she bubbled on, "he asked me if I knew who my congressman was. When I said no, he lectured me on our system of government. He knew more than I did!"

She explained that even during local elections, before Rao could vote, he wanted to study the sample ballot.

In his excitement on election day 1996, Rao quizzed Gina about what it's like in the voting booth, and if he could bring the baby in. He wanted to know if anyone ever tries to cheat and vote twice.

"Over the weekend I heard him asking our neighbors who they were voting for," Gina said, cringing. "When I got him aside, I told him it might be OK to discuss the issues, but people might not want to broadcast who they're voting for."

Rao decided he wanted to make election night a tradition - go out to dinner afterward and celebrate every time they vote.

As Nov. 7 approaches, I think about Rao's eagerness to vote. I could see how he'd want to be a part of our democratic process.

There are a million excuses not to vote. But when "old citizens" start taking voting for granted, there are plenty of new citizens like Rao to remind us what it's all about.

Patricia R. Olsen is a freelance writer.