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# So why don't you vote?

Americans like to think of themselves collectively as a democratic beacon in the world. Indeed, the United States spends millions of dollars and unmeasurable amounts of diplomacy promoting democratic behavior around the globe.

But when it comes to that most basic of democratic privileges - voting - the American model of behavior has been more "do as I say, not as I do." In 1996, for example, voter turnout dipped below 50 percent for the first time in a modern US presidential election - that is, fewer than half of America's 196 million adults chose to cast a ballot. (About 4 million adults, or 2 percent, are barred from voting because of felony convictions.) With such low turnout, it was just 24 percent of American adults who put Bill Clinton in office.

See page 11 for commentary on one man's pride in voting and a shame-on-Americans analysis of voter turnout.

In a global context, the average US voter turnout in the post-World War II era ranks below 137 other nations in elections for heads of state.

Shirking the opportunity to vote because of disaffection, lack of interest, or just the inconvenience of the moment can have serious implications - even in this most stable of democracies in this most prosperous of times.

The complexion of all three branches of government will be affected by those chosen to lead in November's elections. The presidency, the whole House of Representatives, and 34 of 100 Senate seats are at stake. The conservative-centrist-liberal balance struck between the president and Congress can affect the drift of legislation and the high court appointees who interpret the law.

So ... are you going to vote?

## Maybe we just need a day off?

Proposed solutions to poor voter turnout range from the radical, such as a new electoral system or allowing voting in prison, to the less controversial, such as simplifying the registration and voting processes. Proposals offered by electoral reform groups to get a larger percentage of the population to the polls include:

### Election holidays or weekend voting:

Make voting more convenient so voters needn't "make time" for it in busy workweeks.

### Easier registration:

Make it more convenient to register - such as online, or through "motor voter" initiatives or permit election-day registration.

### Instant runoff voting:

Hold a single round of voting to elect the majority winner, thus eliminating the need for primaries. This would be similar to Australia's election system.

### Youth voting:

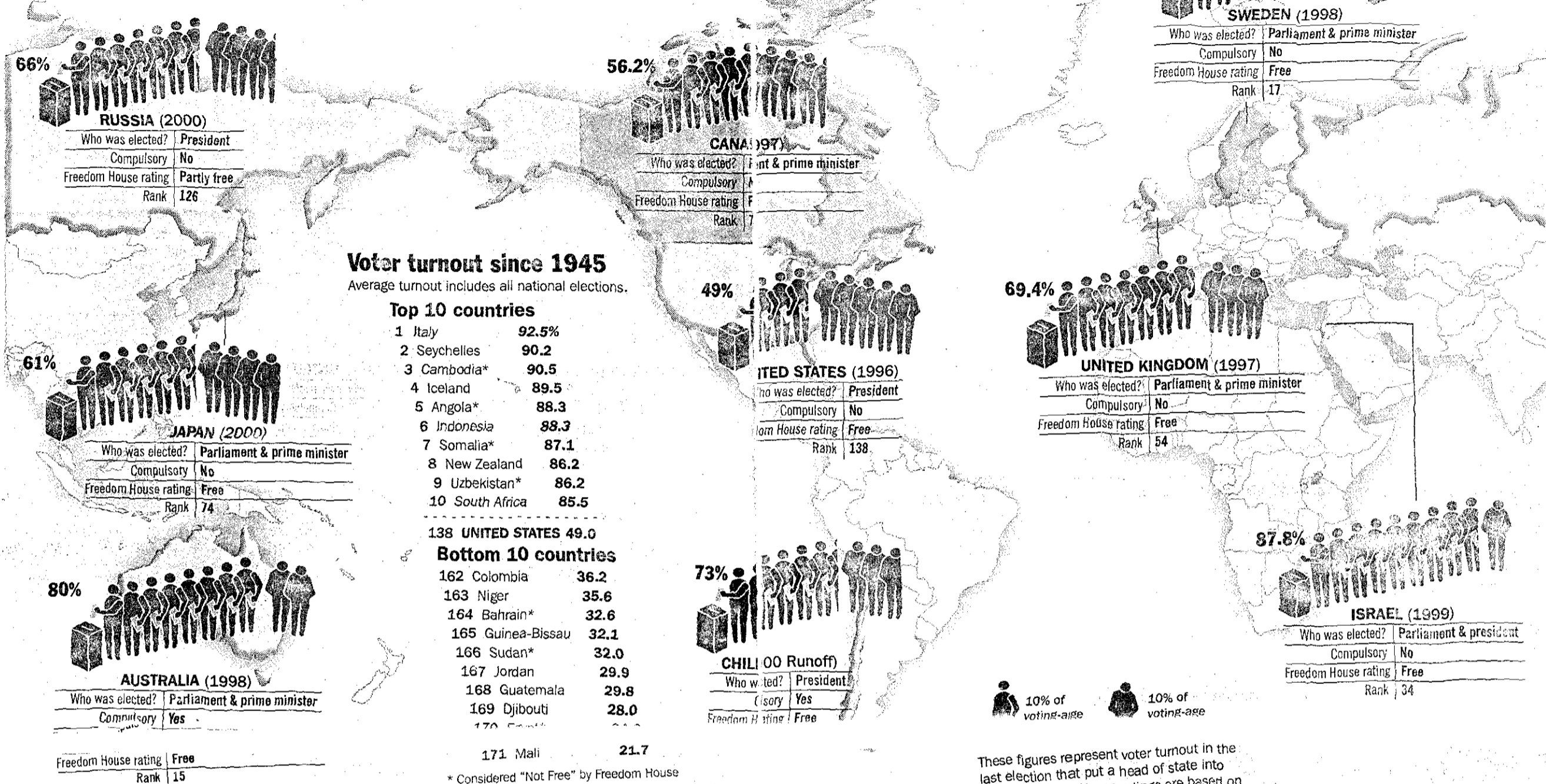
Lower the voting age to encourage civic participation in young people and increase turnout.

### Enfranchise convicted felons:

Restore voting rights to felons after they've served their time - or even allow prisoners to vote.

### Unicameral legislatures:

Supporters say this would increase accountability and decrease costs and redundancy.



### Voter turnout since 1945

Average turnout includes all national elections.

#### Top 10 countries

- 1 Italy 92.5%
- 2 Seychelles 90.2
- 3 Cambodia\* 90.5
- 4 Iceland 89.5
- 5 Angola\* 88.3
- 6 Indonesia 88.3
- 7 Somalia\* 87.1
- 8 New Zealand 86.2
- 9 Uzbekistan\* 86.2
- 10 South Africa 85.5

#### 138 UNITED STATES 49.0

- #### Bottom 10 countries
- 162 Colombia 36.2
  - 163 Niger 35.6
  - 164 Bahrain\* 32.6
  - 165 Guinea-Bissau 32.1
  - 166 Sudan\* 32.0
  - 167 Jordan 29.9
  - 168 Guatemala 29.8
  - 169 Djibouti 28.0
  - 170 ...
  - 171 Mali 21.7

\* Considered "Not Free" by Freedom House

These figures represent voter turnout in the last election that put a head of state into office. Freedom House ratings are based on social and political conditions.

You may think you're going to vote, but ...

A twinge of civic responsibility is apparently at work in the hearts of most Americans. When asked about their voting intentions in a New York Times/CBS poll in September: **85 percent of Americans said they would definitely vote in the November presidential election.**

But the path to the American ballot box is paved with good intentions - and not much conviction.

When asked in a September 1996 poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press whether they'd vote in presidential elections that November: **89 percent of Americans said they were "absolutely certain" they would vote.**

Yet on election day in November 1996: **Only 49 percent of America's 198.5 million voting-age population actually made it to the polls.**

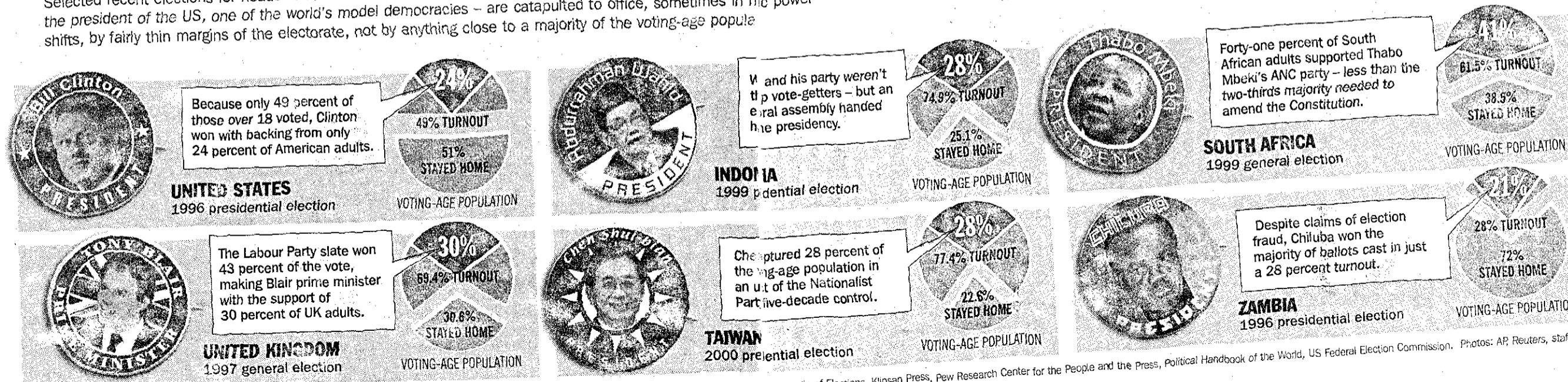
## ... excuses abound

Among Americans who admit they don't always vote, 44 percent polled in June by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press said they don't think it makes much difference whether George W. Bush or Al Gore is elected

- 72% Don't like the candidates
- 64% Unfamiliar with the candidates
- 47% Could make a greater impact getting involved in the community than by voting
- 36% Don't want to get involved in politics
- 26% Too difficult to get to polls
- 13% Too complicated to register to vote

## And the winners - no thanks to a majority of the people - are ...

Selected recent elections for heads of state illustrate the ironies of "democratic" voting. Most world leaders including the president of the US, one of the world's model democracies - are catapulted to office, sometimes in big power shifts, by fairly thin margins of the electorate, not by anything close to a majority of the voting-age population.



Source: Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Freedom House, Center for Voting and Democracy, International Foundation for Election Systems, International Encyclopedia of Elections, Kluwer Press, Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, Political Handbook of the World, US Federal Election Commission. Photos: AP, Reuters, Staff

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