CHAPTER 4
Citizen Participation and Elections

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Democracy assumes citizen participation, but evidence of low voter turnouts suggests that many citizens are not much interested in elections. The traditional nonvoters—low income and less educated—forego any chance that vote-seeking candidates might pay attention to their needs. In a participatory democracy, voting is the most common form of exercising civic responsibility, but there are other methods of participating. William E. Lyons and David Lowery have categorized the potential responses (see Figure 4.1 in the text). Voting is an example of passive, constructive, and “loyal” behavior; contacting officials is an example of an active, constructive use of “voice” in participating; leaving the community is a type of active, destructive participation termed “exit”; and simply ignoring chances to participate is a passive, destructive behavior categorized as “neglect.”

Nonparticipation in elections can be explained by socioeconomic status. Individuals with lower levels of income and education participate less than wealthier, educated individuals do. Other explanations include age, gender, and race. Nonparticipation in elections also can partly be explained by age. In 1972, the turnout of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old voters was 52 percent; by 2000, it had dropped to 38 percent. These youthful voters once comprised 15 percent of the active electorate, but by 2004, they accounted for only 8 percent. Younger people participate less than middle-aged individuals; women have participated less than men; and, blacks have participated less than whites. However, only age seems to continue to affect participation. Women and minorities now participate significantly more than in the past. Institutional features, such as the complexity of registering to vote, also explain nonvoting. The right to vote in this country originally went only to white, propertied males. Those requirements were eventually dropped, but women, blacks, and Native Americans had a longer struggle. Women were enfranchised in all states in 1920 as a result of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 gave the vote to blacks, but they were denied those rights in many states until passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Twenty-Fourth Amendment (1964), and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Today nine southern states and parts of seven others must still submit changes in election laws or procedures to the U.S. Department of Justice for review. Currently federal government action follows if the “effects” of these state changes discourage minority voting. This is an important change from the original language of the Voting Rights Act, which required proof of “intent” to discourage minority voting.

Voting registration and voter turnout increased in the 1990s, stimulated in large part by the media. Generally, voting turnout is higher in presidential election years, stimulated by attractive candidates running a close race and encouraged by distinctive ideological stances in competitive elections. There are noteworthy differences among states in registration procedures and voter turnout. States with moralistic political cultures have higher voter turnout than traditionalistic ones. States with competitive political parties have higher turnouts, as do those with easier voter registration procedures. In the 2004 elections, voter turnout was the highest in Minnesota and lowest in Hawaii. Typically, voter turnout is lowest in southern states and in states and in states that have many poor citizens. California has the highest number of welfare recipients in the nation.
and despite its reputation for initiatives and citizen participation; California tends to consistently rank low in voter turnout.

To encourage voting many states have adopted a system whereby citizens can register by mail. The National Voter Registration Act was passed in 1993. It allows citizens to register to vote when they register an automobile or get drivers licenses. Some states are moving the deadline for registration closer to the date of the election, and four states allow citizens to register on Election Day. Only North Dakota requires no voter registration. Absentee balloting is easier than it used to be, and seven states allow early balloting. Ironically, recent research has shown that voters and nonvoters do not hold significantly different policy preferences. Thus, high voter turnout might not affect outcomes.

When government doesn’t respond to messages from the electorate, citizens are increasingly using ballot propositions to make their own laws. Initiatives are proposed laws or constitutional amendments that are placed on the ballot by citizen petition. The mechanism for legislation by popular vote was a reform introduced in the Progressive Era (circa 1890 to 1920). The popular referendum and recall were also products of this era. The popular referendum begins with a petition to put the question on the ballot to overturn a legislative action, whereas the general referendum puts a proposition on the ballot for citizen approval before it takes effect. Today twenty-four states allow the initiative, with Mississippi the most recent addition. A few states use the indirect initiative, where the legislature may act first on the question and only after the legislature rejects it does the citizenry get a chance to vote.

The first step in the initiative process involves a petition, and the petition signature requirement varies from state to state. California has transformed signature gathering to a science, most recently using direct mail. The 1950s and 1960s saw little use of the initiative, but the 1970s saw the process reactivated by environmentalists, consumers, and tax limitation organizations. The return of the initiative is seen by some as a return to populism or Progressivism. The 1990s find even greater reliance on it for getting tougher on crime, setting term limits, and tightening campaign finance laws. But taxation and gambling questions fared less well in the initiative process in a number of states. Although most state initiatives draw little national attention, some do. These include initiatives in Arizona and California to legalize the use of marijuana for medical use and California’s Proposition 209, where voters upended affirmative action. Despite the popularity of initiatives, typically, most initiatives are defeated.

Troubling questions arise over the wisdom of direct democracy. Can simple yes-or-no ballot questions really reflect options or develop compromise? Legislatures are deliberative bodies, not instant problem solvers. Ballot questions are low-information elections. Well-financed business and religious groups take advantage of this. Some initiative reformers think that the public should be informed about the financial sponsors of the propositions offered to voters.

At its extreme the initiative process can become electronic democracy. Several states have experimented with it, while the National Conference of State Legislatures is seeking ways to prevent usurpation of lawmakers’ prerogatives. Legislators are proceeding cautiously given the recent popularity of initiatives. And even as the question of reining in use of the device is examined, in 1994 four states considered and then rejected putting the question of the use of initiatives to its citizens.

Recalls were once a little-used mechanism in state and local governments, and only fifteen states provide for recall of state officials. In six of those, judicial officers are exempt. Even in states without recall, many city and county charters provide for its use. Recall efforts usually
involve a public perception of official misconduct. The number of recalls grew during the 1980s and, perhaps, the most notable was the 1988 effort to recall Arizona Governor Evan Mecham, he was impeached instead. The recall of California Governor Gray Davis in 2003 brought national attention to the process of recall. Davis became only the second governor in the history of the nation to be recalled from office. Only one other governor has been successfully recalled – North Dakota’s Lynn J. Frazier in 1921. The rationale for the recall is simple—public officials should be subject to continuous voter control. One survey found two-thirds of those questioned wanted that power with respect to Congress. The public, rather than participating less, may be seeking mechanisms that make it easier for them to participate.

Increasing the capacity of state and local governments depends on citizen participation. It may not be easy to foster or efficient to use, but in a democracy it is the ultimate test of legitimacy of that government. The irony of the American political system is that state and local governments’ encouragement of citizen participation may not make them run more efficiently. It will cause some to question the wisdom of too much direct democracy. But there seems little question that nonnational governments must provide an array of options for citizen involvement, because in the long run it will enhance their capabilities, vigor, and innovativeness. The Presidential Election of 2000 illustrated the importance of the role of the states in national elections. The Florida recount will be remembered for years; an election that will be recalled for illustrating the inadequacies of punch card voting machines, chads, and the involvement of the state and federal courts. The election also shows the importance of political participation as one of the closest presidential elections in the nation’s history was decided by only a few votes.