

## **First-Time Voters Propelled to Polls by Personal Contact: Non-Voters Discouraged by Election Procedures**

Voter turnout rose sharply in the 2004 election, reaching its highest level since 1968. According to the Shorenstein Center's post-election Vanishing Voter national survey, first-time voters accounted for a large share of the increase.

### First-time Voters

Issues fueled the turnout increase in 2004. Pre-election polls indicated that most Americans felt that the election of 2004 was the most important in years. Indeed, a large majority of both first-time voters (92 percent) and repeat voters (86 percent) cited election issues as a driving force in their decision to vote. Both groups, and first-time voters particularly, were also motivated by their dislike of a particular candidate. Half of the repeat voters and nearly two-thirds of the first-time voters said they voted in part "because I really disliked one of the candidates."

The greatest difference in the turnout decisions of first-time voters and repeat voters was the impact of personal contact. Compared with repeat voters, first-time voters were substantially less likely (78 percent vs. 96 percent) to claim that "it is a citizen's duty to vote in every election." Personal contact helped overcome their weaker sense of civic duty. Three times as many first-time voters—61 percent vs. 21 percent—said that a reason they voted was because "my family or friends encouraged me to vote."

The numerous get-out-the-vote efforts by groups and luminaries during the 2004 campaign also made a difference on Election Day. Compared with repeat voters, first-time voters were more likely to say (14 percent vs. 4 percent) that a reason they voted was that "a group or organization helped me register to vote." They were also more likely to say (7 percent vs. 2 percent) they became interested "because so many celebrities were encouraging people to vote." Americans who had been eligible to vote in previous presidential elections but voted for the first time this year mentioned the latter reason most frequently. Roughly one in seven—14 percent—of these first-time voters said that celebrity involvement affected their decision to cast a ballot.

### Non-Voters

Although turnout was up sharply in 2004, tens of millions of vote-eligible Americans did not vote on Election Day. A fourth of these non-voters said that they have virtually no interest in voting.

Some of those who expressed interest in voting but did not vote this time gave reasons that indicate they would be hard to lure to the polls in almost any case. Eighteen percent of the interested non-voters said they are disgusted with politics. Fourteen percent said they find politics befuddling. Mobility also affected turnout. One in five of the interested non-voters said they didn't have any way to get to the polls.

Other reasons cited by non-voters who expressed interest in voting suggest that changes in election law would encourage higher turnout. For example, 32 percent of the interested non-voters said they had moved recently and hadn't yet reregistered. In many democracies, registration is renewed automatically when a registered voter moves to a

new residence. America's registration system, which places the burden of registration on the individual rather than, as in Europe, on officials, depresses turnout in other ways, too. One in eight of non-voters with an interest in voting said they simply do not know how to go about registering.

Some of the ballot-related issues raised by the news media also depressed turnout. Six percent of the interested non-voters said they had thought they were registered but found out otherwise when they went to the polls. Three percent said they were discouraged from voting because they worried that their right to vote would be challenged if they went to the polls. Six percent said they planned to vote but then discovered that the lines at their polling place were excessively long.

Although it is difficult to estimate precisely the combined effect of these various factors, there is little question that several million more Americans would have cast a ballot on Election Day if the country's registration and voting system were more welcoming.