

Unit 5 Lesson 28

The Economics of Voting

INTRODUCTION

Economics Why do so many voters stay away from the polls on election day? This is a puzzle to many people interested in the well-being of our democratic system. Economists are among those who try to explain this outcome. They suggest that non-voters may be acting rationally: the costs associated with voting (taking time to register, rearranging work schedules, getting to the polls, gathering information on the candidates, and so on) may seem to outweigh the benefits (influencing the outcome of an election or gaining the satisfaction of being a good citizen).

Reasoning In explaining human behavior, economists stress the incentives that influence behavior. In the case of voting, some incentives discourage voting. The cost in time and effort of obtaining detailed information about issues and candidates (e.g., by attending meetings, following debates, reading position papers) is so high, according to this view, that many voters settle for rational ignorance, relying on inexpensive forms of information about candidates obtained from media ads and conversations with friends. The cost of getting to the polls, similarly, encourages non-voting. If we favor encouraging higher rates of voter participation and improved voter knowledge about issues and candidates, we need to examine how to restructure the incentives at work in the voting process.

CONCEPTS

- Choice
- Incentives
- Rational ignorance

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

1. Analyze voting behavior by reference to the assumption that rules can influence people's choices and incentives.
2. Examine information about recent voter turnout in the United States.
3. Identify the costs and benefits associated with voting.
4. Suggest how incentives to vote might be reformulated to encourage broader voter participation.

CONTENT STANDARDS

- People respond predictably to positive and negative incentives. (NCEE Content Standard 4)
- Costs of government policies sometimes exceed benefits. This may occur because of incentives facing voters, government officials, and government employees, because of actions by special interest groups that can impose costs on the general public, or because social goals other than efficiency are being pursued. (NCEE Content Standard 17)

LESSON DESCRIPTION

Students examine a visual to identify patterns of voter turnout in U.S. presidential elections. They analyze the costs and benefits of voting and discuss how people's voting behavior is influenced by incentives.

Time Required: 45 minutes

MATERIALS

- A transparency of Visuals 1, 2, 3, and 4

PROCEDURE

1. Explain that the purpose of this lesson is to help students see how economic reasoning can be applied in the analysis of a wide range of human behavior. Specifically, this lesson allows students to extend their understanding of incentives by analyzing the economics of voting.
2. Explain that the level of voter turnout is often worrisome to people interested in preserving our democratic traditions. Display Visual 1. Ask: What seems to be the pattern of voter turnout in U.S. presidential elections?

(The pattern shows a low level of voter turnout ranging from a high of 63 percent in 1960 to a low of 49 percent in 1996. Point out that in non-presidential elections, the results are even lower, ranging from 47 percent to 36 percent.)

3. Display Visual 2. Ask: Which groups of people tend to vote less? Why might this be the case?

(People who seem not to have much "stake" in society, such as the young or the less educated, tend to vote less than others.)

4. Ask: What do you think might be the costs and benefits of voting? List plausible student responses on the board.

(Accept a variety of responses.)

5. Display Visual 3. Explain the costs and benefits of voter participation presented there.
6. Explain that many voters who do go to the polls are not very well informed about the issues or candidates. Ask: What are the costs associated with obtaining information on the candidates? (Stress that most of these costs involve the time spent in gathering information. List students' ideas on the board. The following are a few possibilities.)

(Reading candidates' position papers. Attending meetings at which candidates appear. Reading newspapers. Reading news magazines. Watching special TV news programs about elections and the issues.)

7. Tell the students that the concept of rational ignorance is used to explain voter reluctance to gather much political information. Display Visual 4 and discuss the definition of the concept with the class.
8. Invite the students to apply what they have learned about incentives for voting. Explain that an important goal of our political system is to encourage voter participation. Perhaps we can attain that goal by changing the rules to reduce the costs or increase the benefits. Ask: What might be some ways to reduce the costs of voting or increase the benefits?

(Ways of reducing the costs of voting might include:

- A. *Allowing voter registration at the polls on election day.*
- B. *Developing electronic voting systems allowing people to vote from their homes.*
- C. *Allowing voter registration by mail.*
- D. *Reducing residency requirements for voters.*
- E. *Holding elections on holidays or weekend days.*

(Ways of increasing benefits of voting might include:

- A. *Encouraging more attractive candidates to run for elected office, such as people known for their strength of character, bravery, or heroism.*
- B. *Nominating candidates with sharp differences on the issues.*
- C. *Encouraging more competition between candidates.)*

CLOSURE

Review the key points of the lesson. Ask:

- What is the pattern of voter turnout in the United States?
(The pattern shows a low voter turn out from 1960 until 2000.)
- What are some of the costs associated with voting?
(Some costs involve registration, taking time off from work, time and effort spent getting to polls. Another cost is time preparing to vote; gathering information about the candidates takes time.)
- What are some of the benefits associated with voting?
(The chance that your vote will make a difference and the satisfaction of doing your duty as a citizen.)
- What is rational ignorance?
(In the case of voting behavior, it involves a decision not to obtain information about political issues or candidates because the costs of doing so outweigh the benefits.)
- What are some ways to change the incentives associated with voting?
(Some suggestions include encouraging higher levels of formal education, allowing voter registration at the polls on election day, developing electronic voting systems, encouraging more civic groups to offer rides to the polls, and so forth.)

MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

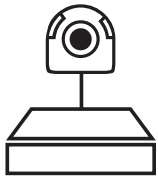
(CORRECT ANSWERS SHOWN IN BOLD)

1. Recent evidence suggests that American voter turnout is low — even in presidential elections. Using economic reasoning, how would you explain this?
 - A. American voters are lazy.
 - B. American voters have decided that the costs of voting may not be worth the benefits.**
 - C. Studies show that few Americans know how to cast a ballot.
 - D. Reform is long overdue in the financing of presidential campaigns.
2. The age group with the lowest voter turnout is:
 - A. 18-20 years.**
 - B. 21-24 years.
 - C. 25-44 years.
 - D. 45-64 years.

ESSAY QUESTION

Penny threw up her hands in frustration when she saw the sample ballot published in the local newspaper the day before election day. She had been looking forward to voting for the first time. But she was shocked when she saw that the ballot had 15 races on it. She knew about the race for Congress and the Senate, but she had not heard of any of the candidates running for other offices. "Who are these people?" she wondered. The ballot also contained one referendum proposing a change in the state constitution and a second referendum proposing selling government bonds to build a new library. Penny knew nothing about these other issues. She decided not to vote. How would economists describe Penny's behavior?

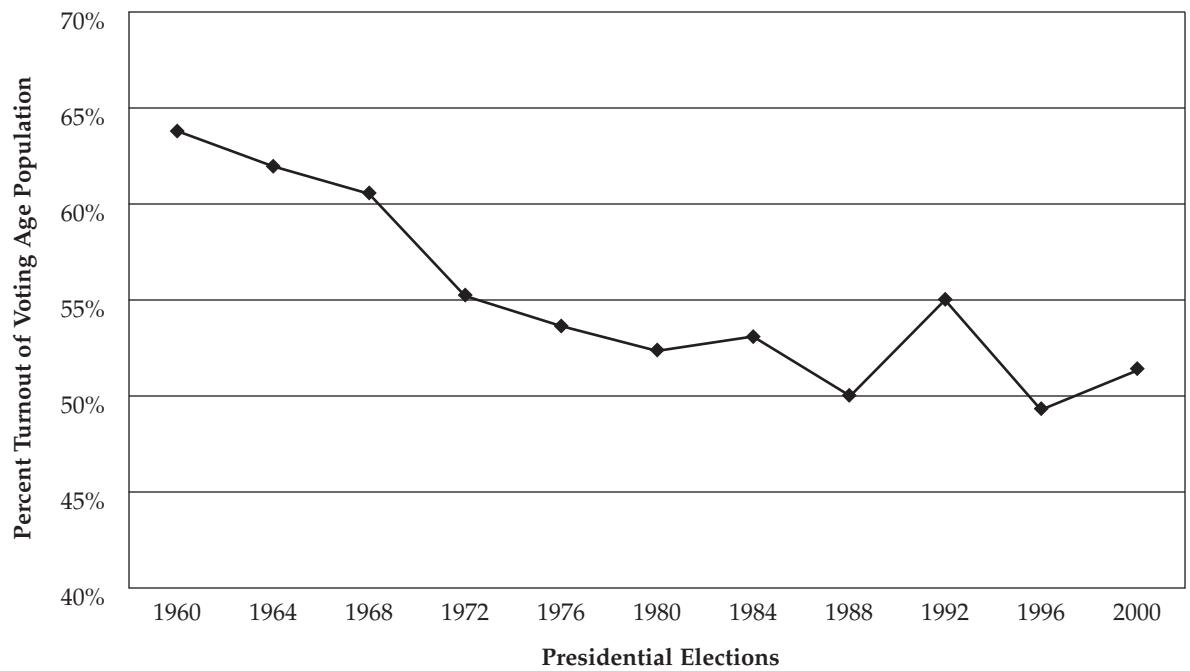
(Voters like Penny apparently decide that the costs of casting an informed vote are not worth the benefits. Voters are expected to cast ballots in many elections during the year. Often, each ballot addresses many races including local, state, and national campaigns. Voters are often asked to decide on referendums. The cost of becoming informed on each decision can be high; it would involve spending a great deal of time following local, state, and national events. Rational ignorance is the term used to describe situations like Penny's — when the costs of gathering information to cast an informed vote are thought to be too high.)

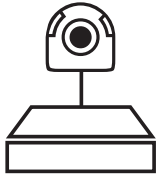


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Visual 1

NATIONAL VOTER TURNOUT IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: 1960-2000



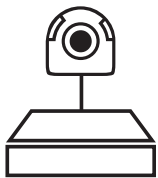


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Visual 2

WHO VOTES LESS?

1. People aged 18-20 had a voter turnout of 13.5 percent in 1998. Historically, young voters have the lowest voter turnout of all age groups.
2. Nonwhite citizens vote less than whites.
3. People with a college education are twice as likely to vote as are high school dropouts.
4. Unemployed people vote less than employed people.
5. Females are more likely to vote than males.
6. People living in the Midwest are more likely to vote than people living in the Northeast, West, or South.



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Visual 3

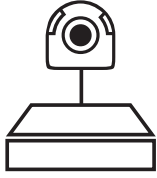
COSTS AND BENEFITS OF VOTING

COSTS

1. Voter registration: Many states require voters to register 30 days in advance of elections.
2. Time off from work: Elections are held on weekdays, so many people need to rearrange work schedules in order to vote.
3. Time preparing to vote: Voters may vote in primaries, local elections, special elections, and so forth. Ballots may include candidates for many local, state, and national elections. Gathering information about the candidates in all these races takes time.
4. Getting to the polls: Polls may be located in places that are not convenient for some people to get to.
5. Time in line: There is often a line of people waiting to vote at the poll.

BENEFITS

1. There is a chance that your vote will make a difference in the outcome of the elections.
2. You will gain satisfaction from performing your duty as a citizen.



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Visual 4

RATIONAL IGNORANCE

A decision not to obtain information about political issues or candidates because the costs of doing so outweigh the benefits.