Voter Turnout for Elections Is Declining

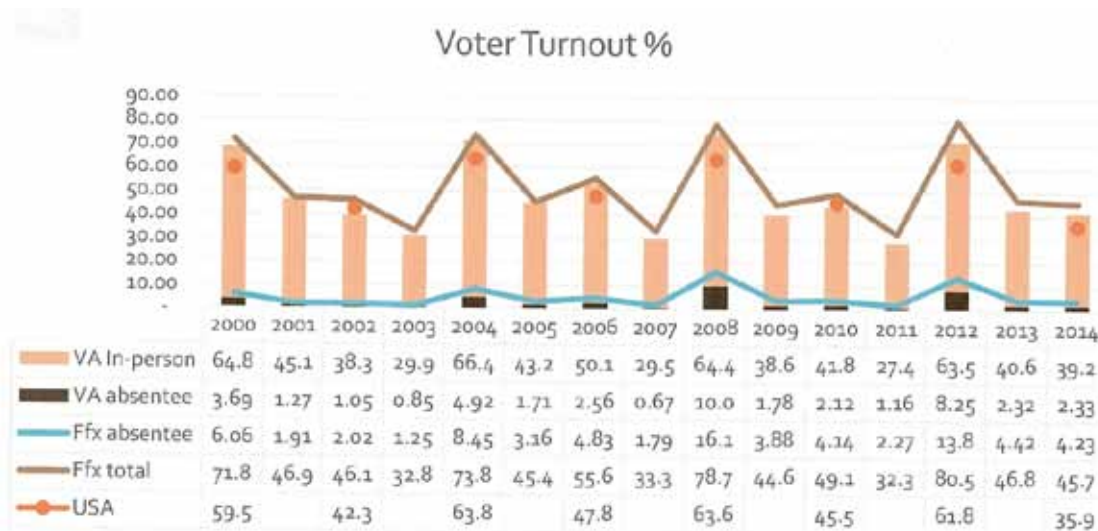By Sharone Lathrop, Pat Nelson-Douvelis, Susan Cowart, Mary Jane Cleary

In Virginia, elections are held every year in November: Year 1 is for Governor (last held in 2013); Year 2: the U.S. Congress (2014); Year 3: the Virginia Legislature and statewide and local offices (2015); and Year 4: President and U.S. Congress (2016).

This year, 2015, in a Year-3 election, Virginia voters will elect officials who will have direct influence on their lives: transportation, schools funding, property tax rates, etc. Turnout in Year-3 elections has been falling for 30 years. In Fairfax County there will be candidates for 52 offices, but less than 30 percent of eligible voters in Virginia, including Fairfax County, will likely go to the polls to cast a ballot and select leaders for the next four years. This is not a new phenomenon. Note in Figure 1 the percentage of registered voters who actually voted in presidential vs. other elections and the especially low turnout in Year-3 elections (2003, 2007, 2011).[1]

In the last Virginia Year-3 election (2011), few seats were seriously contested. "The combination of winner-take-all rules, incumbent advantages and gerrymandering led many representatives to run unopposed, leaving only one-third of are competing to control a majority of the 40 State Senate seats, 23 of which will have more than one candidate on the ballot. The percentage of contested seats is down slightly from the Year -3 election in 2011.[3] In Fairfax, 3 of the

Figure 1: Percent of Registered Voters

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
VA In-person	64.8	45.1	38.3	29.9	66.4	43.2	50.1	29.5	64.4	38.6	41.8	27.4	63.5	40.6	39.2
VA absentee	3.69	1.27	1.05	0.85	4.92	1.71	2.56	0.67	10.0	1.78	2.12	1.16	8.25	2.32	2.33
Ffx absentee	6.06	1.91	2.02	1.25	8.45	3.16	4.83	1.79	16.1	3.88	4.14	2.27	13.8	4.42	4.23
Ffx total	71.8	46.9	46.1	32.8	73.8	45.4	55.6	33.3	78.7	44.6	49.1	32.3	80.5	46.8	45.7
USA	59.5		42.3		63.8		47.8		63.6		45.5		61.8		35.9

races contested, most of which were in Northern Virginia." A mid-October 2011 poll done by Christopher Newport University found that 70 percent of registered voters were paying "little" to no attention to the November 2011 elections. With two- thirds of races uncontested that year, voters already knew who the winner would be before they voted, and had more incentive not to show up on Election Day.[2]

Throughout most of Virginia, the General Assembly elections this November will be a "mere formality." The lack of competition is noteworthy in the House of Delegates, where 62 of 100 seats are uncontested. It will be more competitive in the State Senate: Democrats and Republicans

9 Supervisor positions are uncontested as are 3 of the 9 District School Board positions and the Commonwealth's Attorney position.

Low voter turnout is not new and not limited to Virginia. Nationwide the turnout for presidential elections is highest; while primaries, off-year and midterm elections have significantly lower turnout. However, higher turnout is possible. There are many industrialized democracies with standard turnout for major elections of over 80 percent, e.g., Norway, Denmark, Austria, Sweden, Italy, Turkey, and Belgium. Australia (96 percent turnout) has mandatory voting with fines for those who don't vote.

The Problem of Turnout
Voter turnout is measured in various ways. The percentage of the total population above the voting age, the percentage of citizens and the percentage of registered voters are typical voter turnout measures. Some statistics include valid only vs. all ballots cast. All measures show the same patterns of turnout.

Nationally, over 19 million registered voters did not vote in the 2012 U.S. presidential election! In the 2014 U.S. congressional primaries, the highest turnout was in Montana with 26.3 percent, and the lowest was Iowa with only 9.7 percent. Some of the reasons for not voting, given nationwide by non-voters in the 2012 presidential election, cited by the Census Bureau,[4] were:
A) Illness or disability-14%
B) Out of town-8.6%
C) Too busy-18.9%
D) Not interested-15.7%
E) Did not like candidates or campaign issues-12.7%
F) Registration problems-5.5%

In an editorial after the 2014 election, the *New York Times* rued the "abysmally low turnout – the lowest in more than seven decades." The Editorial Board cited several states that had expanded the opportunities for voting, including by mail, concluding that "when voting is made easier, more people vote." "Showing up at the polls is the best way to counter the oversized influence of wealthy special interests who dominate politics as never before. But to encourage participation, politicians need to stop suppressing the vote, make the process of voting as easy as possible, and run campaigns that **stand** for something."[5]

Who Votes <u>Does</u> Matter
A recent study, *Who Votes Now? Demographics, Issues, Inequality, and Turnout in the United States,"* by Jan E. Leighley and Jonathan Nagler, supports the *Times* view. The authors analyzed voting data for presidential elections between 1972 and 2008. In their most important conclusion, Leighley and Nagler found that individuals are more likely to vote when candidates take policy positions providing the voter with more distinct choices and when candidates offer policy choices that more closely match the individual's preference.

"When one candidate's policy positions are more appealing to an individual than the other candidate's policy position, the resulting perceived difference *increases* the probability of voting. When candidates' policy positions are distant from those of the individual, then the resulting perceived policy alienation of the individual d*ecreases* the probability of voting."

Leighley and Nagler found substantial divergence over time between how different groups of respondents identified the policy choices of candidates. "After 1980, respondents in the lower income quintile consistently saw the Democratic candidates as less liberal than the respondents in the upper-income quintiles. At the same time, respondents in the lower-income quintile consistently saw the Republican candidate as less conservative than did respondents in the upper-income quintiles."

Especially on economic and redistributive issues, voters have been shown <u>not</u> to be representative of non-voters. In each presidential election from 1972-2008:
➢ Voters were more conservative than non-voting citizens on how much government should do.
➢ Voters were also more conservative than non-voters on partisanship, candidate preference and ideology.
➢ On values-based issues –aid to the poor, defense spending, etc.– there was no systematic differences between voters and nonvoters (except for gun control).
➢ On <u>every</u> redistributive issue, non-voters were more liberal than voters.

Leighley and Nagler present other statistics of particular note:
➢ Nearly 80 percent of high-income citizens vote; barely 50 percent of low-income citizens do. (Although citizens with higher levels of education and income vote at higher rates than the poor, this *"income bias"* did not change over the period of their study, despite large increases in income inequality over the period. So, while there remains a significant difference in turnout rates between the wealthy and the poor, that ratio has been stable over time.)
➢ White and black citizens vote at higher rates than Hispanics. Indeed, in every election since 1984, blacks have been voting at substantially higher rates than whites.
➢ Married citizens vote proportionately more than singles.
➢ Older citizens vote more than younger citizens.
➢ Women vote in larger numbers than men. Since 1996, the magnitude of the difference in turnout between men and women has been significant: women are more likely to vote than men of comparable income, education and age, by 5 percentage points.
➢ Hispanic whites have lower turnout rates than "Anglos", and there has been no increase in turnout rates of Hispanics over the past 30 years. Leighley and Nagler posit that the turnout gap between Hispanics and Anglos would not disappear even if

Hispanic and Anglo demographic characteristics (education, income, age) became more similar.[6]

Youth Voting

Much has been made recently about millennials – the young demographic group that now outnumbers the baby boomers in the U.S. Millennials (and Hispanics) have the lowest relative turnout among voters. Most young adults who register to vote actually vote in presidential years but in mid-terms, many do not vote. There are some differences between college and non-college youth voters.[7]

Young people who register before reaching voting age are more likely to actually turn out to vote once they turn 18, according to a 2014 Duke University study. Pre-registration is increasingly the more popular of the proposed voting policies aimed at engaging youth. The Virginia legislature defeated two bills in 2015 --HB 2000 and HB 694 -- that would have expanded registration opportunities for young people age 16.[8]

A number of non-profit, non-partisan organizations are devoted to increasing the turnout of millennials and have succeeded in registering many millions of them to vote, for example: Particip8, ActiVote America, Rock the Vote, Declare Yourself, Just Vote, *Voto Latino*, and the Voter Participation Center (Rising American Electorate).

Table 1 - Turnout of 18-24 Year-Olds (Percent)

Year	Registered College Students	All College Students	All Registered Youth	All Eligible Youth
2008	87	60	83	48.5
2010	50	26.5	47	21
2012	82	53	77	41

Impact of Not Voting

One of the biggest consequences of low voter turnout is the misrepresentation that then occurs in government. When a segment of the population sits out an election, the results are not representative of the population as a whole. When only a very low percentage of the population votes in an election, the legitimacy of the results can be called into question.[9]

Most democratic organizations require at least 50 percent of eligible voters for a quorum. Yet in the 2014 midterm election, only 45 percent of the voting-age population (VAP) cast a vote. Those who did vote tended to be older, whiter, and more educated. They were not necessarily representative of the population as a whole. Often those who do vote are more partisan; therefore more polarization results in those who are elected.

A similar situation occurred in the 2010 midterm election for the House and Senate--less than 40 percent of the VAP voted. Even though representatives won with an average of 64 percent of the vote, they received only 23.4 percent from those who were actually eligible to vote . When fewer than a quarter of the constituents actually support a candidate, the legitimacy of the outcome might well be suspect and may not truly reflect the desires of those being represented.

What about local elections? It is widely acknowledged that local government has more impact on our daily lives than other levels of government. School boards, police and fire departments, sheriff, soil and water conservation and libraries all fall under local government. For homeowners, it is local government that controls property taxes. Yet votes cast for local officials are generally far below those for state and national candidates. The effects last long after the election; consider the effects of redistricting, appointment of judges and planning for bonds for infrastructure.

Low voter turnout and under-representation appear to be something the people of Ferguson, Missouri, understand now. In their "normal" city election, about 15 percent of the eligible voters cast a vote, and the six seats on the City Council were occupied by one black and five whites. The population of the city is 60 percent black. After the Justice Department determined that the Ferguson courts and police department engaged in racial discrimination, the voter turnout increased significantly and the seats on the City Council are now evenly allocated racially.

As we know, the president's party almost always loses seats in the mid-term election. This negativity or presidential penalty is seen as a way of expressing levels of dissatisfaction with the president's performance or ensuring that his party doesn't control all levels of government. Independent voters tend to vote more in presidential election years where they may feel more represented because the selection of candidates is more visible.

Legislative Efforts to Encourage Turnout

Federal and state legislatures have taken actions over the years to increase turnout. The 1992 National Voter Registration Act (aka "motor voter") was a significant attempt to make registering voters easier. It mandated states to make available the opportunity to register to vote wherever drivers' licenses were issued and wherever states provided public benefits. Most states have instituted additional legal measures to increase turnout, such as

absentee voting, early voting, election-day registration (EDR), registering and voting by mail, - most of which were adopted with the intention of increasing voter turnout of traditionally under-represented groups (e.g., the poor or racial and ethnic minorities). Virginia has absentee voting (but not no-fault absentee voting, which is a form of early voting) as well as online registration.

Contrary to previous academic research on voter turnout, which held that these legal reforms had little impact on turnout, Leighley and Nagler found that some of these reforms have raised turnout or affected disparities in voting rates between different groups of voters. They found that[10]:

> "Motor voter" significantly increased registration but not turnout as much.

> "Election-day registration increased turnout by 3-5 percent, but the law has had limited effect on the representativeness of various demographic groups (though it may be more important for younger rather than older voters.).

> Absentee voters are more educated and older than election-day voters; no-fault absentee voting increased turnout by 3.2 percent, which they consider one of the most significant institutional changes made since the Civil Rights Act.

> For early voting, a voting period of as long as 27 days is required to see any positive effect on turnout.

> Election-day registration (EDR) leads to an increase in turnout of 2.8 percent in states with a previous 15-day registration-closing period. A 10-day decrease in the length of the registration-closing period would *in itself* lead to a 1% increase in turnout for states without EDR. Research over several decades also shows that the greater the number of days prior to the election that voter registration closes, the *lower* an individual's probability of voting in presidential elections.

Virginia has not made progress on reversing regressive voting laws, except to allow for the use of valid student photo IDs that are issued by any private school located in the Commonwealth as a Voter ID. Bills that would have allowed no-excuse absentee voting failed in the legislature this year (HB 1394, SB677, SB 954). All bills on voting rights restoration have failed in the Virginia legislature to date.[11]

A note of caution: according to Leighley and Nagler, making voting easier will not dramatically change who votes and how many vote. Some electoral reforms modestly increase turnout but by no means produce changes in turnout anywhere near large enough to close the gap in turnout rates between the United States and many of the other industrialized democracies. However, at 2-3 percent increase in turnout could change the results in a close election.[12]

What Else Can Be Tried to Increase Turnout?
There have also been non-legislative efforts to increase turnout. A Stanford Business School Symposium explored how lessons from behavioral science can help increase turnout. Researchers applying psychology to the realm of politics are finding that giving voters a few strategic "nudges" can push far more people in the direction of polls on Election Day. More voters are motivated to go to the polls when they are told turnout will be high and when they are provoked to discuss plans for getting there. They are also more likely to vote when they are threatened with personal accountability and when they are encouraged to see voting as an intrinsic part of their identity, rather than just "something they do." Campaign telephone calls must get people to form a voting plan, e.g., when and where will they vote. Two get-out-the-vote field experiments found that messages emphasizing low expected turnout were less effective at motivating voters who were low-participation voters than those voters who are more civically minded.[13]

Some practitioners believe that what really mobilizes groups that tend to vote at lower rates is repeated personal contact. Analysis, based on 268 get-out-the-vote field experiments conducted repeatedly across six electoral cycles from 2006 to 2008, showed that citizens who haven't voted much in the past can be inspired by either door-to-door visits or live phone calls. Such contacts, especially if repeated, can produce habitual voters. It is the social interaction that seems to matter. Messages designed to appeal to ethnic or racial solidarities are *not* more effective than general appeals to civic duty or other broad concerns.[14]

Voting on a Weekend -- Tuesday was set by Congress in 1865 to give voters a travel day after the Sabbath to get to the polls in town. There is bipartisan support for changing to weekend voting, perhaps Saturday from 10 a.m. to Sunday at 6 p.m. Bills to make this change have been introduced in Congress but public support has not pushed them forward yet. Many countries, such as France, have much higher turnout and have weekend voting.

Universal Voter Registration--One way of increasing the number of voters is to have more registered voters. Many countries have opt-out registration. Some such as Norway allow non-citizens to vote for municipal offices.

Voting by mail--This is an effective means of ballot delivery, but only Oregon, Washington and Colorado have fully adopted this method. Generally, millennials like this format but boomers do not. Security is at most a minor problem since mischief is limited to one ballot at a time. Turnout is improved but not wonderful in those states. Virginia provides for voting by mail for absentee ballots and overseas voters. The robust Virginia online tracking system for absentee ballots could be the start of either a completely mail-in or an online voting system.

Web ballots--Voting online has been successfully used by many corporations and associations. It has not been extensively used in the United States in a political context; reasons cited include lack of a paper trail and security concerns. However, online voter activities are simplifying various aspects of voting, e.g., registering, checking registration status, and requesting absentee ballots.

Gerrymandering--Partisan drawing of legislative boundaries suppresses turnout by making seats safe and therefore uncontested. Re-districting based on less partisan criteria should increase competition and turnout. See League positions below.

Limit Campaign Season--Britain has a Parliamentary system that allows for elections to be called when needed to support the position of the party in power. Britain limits campaigns to six weeks and no TV ads are allowed.

Compulsory voting--Some arguments for compulsory voting include: citizens being more vested in government decisions, voting as educational, fewer candidate resources are used to turnout the vote, and voting as a civic responsibility. So how does it work? About 38 countries have tried compulsory voting for some portion of the country or population since 1900. At least eight countries have discontinued the practice. Compulsory voting is generally enforced by a fine, social pressure, or government not hiring non-voters; imprisonment has generally been discontinued.

Ranked-choice voting (RCV)—This type of voting, also called Instant-runoff voting, has been studied in California, especially the San Francisco area. The voter sees a ballot with multiple places to vote for each office: first choice, second choice, third choice with all candidates listed in each space. Voters are advised to vote for their true favorite as first choice and then for acceptable candidates in order. Results show increased turnout and winners that were preferred when compared one-on-one with each of the other candidates.

Preference voting or proportional voting asks the voter to rank the candidates (See Figure 2 from FairVote.org) and seems most useful in contests with multiple positions for the same office, like at-large-school board members. Cambridge, Mass., has had preference voting for many years and shows less decline in turnout than neighboring cities using more standard voting.

Fairfax County--The Elections Office is not doing anything specific about voter turnout; their mission is registering voters and running elections, not voter turnout.

Figure 2 - Preference Voting
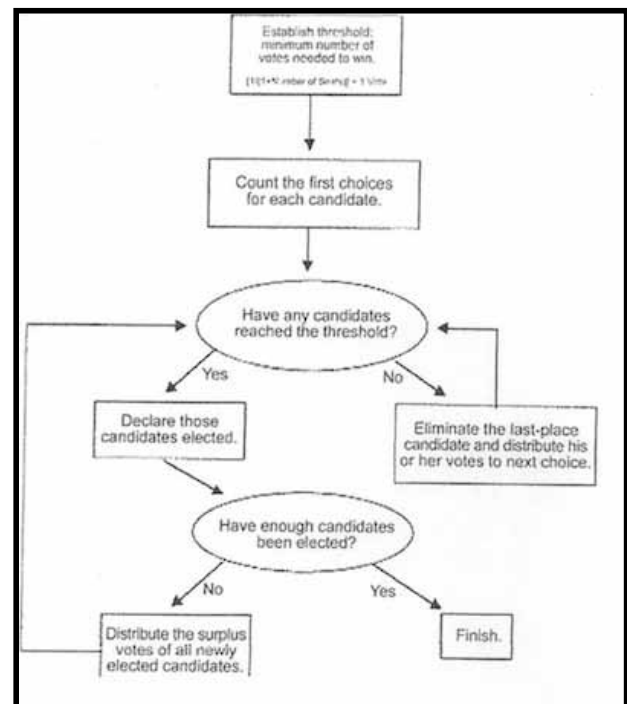
Are there any non-governmental initiatives that might increase voting?−Currently, only merchandisers capitalize on the day by having yet another excuse for a sale. We celebrate July 4, Independence Day, the day we remember the beginnings of our democracy, with much fanfare and fireworks. Perhaps we could create the same enthusiasm each year when exercising our privilege to continue our democratic way of life.

Employers could also assist in creating voter turnout. In advance of Election Day they could remind and encourage their employees to vote. They could provide flexibility in working hours on Election Day so their employees would find it easier to vote.

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Endnotes
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elections.virginia.gov/index.php/resultsreports/registration-statistics/registration-turnout-statistics

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4 U.S. Statistics, especially Census Table 10: www.census.gov

5 "The Worst Voter Turnout in 72 Years," New York Times, November 12, 2014, page A26.

6, 10, 12 Leighley, Jan E. and Jonathan Nagler, Who Votes Now? Demographics, Issues, Inequality, and Turnout in the United States, Princeton University Press, 2014

7 "2014 Mid-Terms: Lessons from 2010 Elections About Turnout Among Registered Youth," Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, Tufts University, 2014

9 "Pratt, L. Henry, of "Win the Future"(c) 3; John S. and James L. Knight Foundation Study: Risks of Not Voting; and www.wtfyoungamerica.org

13 Rigogliosos, Marguerite, "Research-Backed Ways to Get Out the Vote," Stanford Graduate School of Business Symposium, April 17, 2012). www.gsb.stanford.edu/

14 "How to mobilize reluctant voters", Michelson, Melissa, The Washington Post, July 15, 2014.

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14 "How to mobilize reluctant voters", Michelson, Melissa, The Washington Post, July 15, 2014.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you know someone who didn't or doesn't vote? Why don't they?
2. Discuss some of the consequences of low voter turnout.
3. Why do you think turnout is so low in year 3?
4. What do you think would be some of the more effective ways to increase voter turnout in Virginia?
5. What should/f1 can LWVFA do about voter turnout? (The North Carolina League joined with DOJ and others contesting recent changes to NC voting laws.)