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# Features

## Does Television Erode Social Capital? A Reply to Putnam

Pippa Norris, *Harvard University*

During the past thirty-five years many commentators have expressed concern about declining support for the American political system, noting familiar evidence of the steady erosion in electoral turnout (Stanley and Niemi 1995, 78; Teixeira 1992), falling participation in political parties (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993), plummeting levels of political trust (Lipset and Schneider 1987), and weakening civic engagement (Putnam 1995a). Evidence for declining confidence in American government is well-established. The standard National Election Study measures show that in 1954 three-quarters of the American public trusted government in Washington to do what was right 'just about always or most of the time'. By 1994, a quarter of the public proved as trusting. Moreover how far Americans trust each other—or social trust—has also fallen by more than a third since the early sixties (Uslaner 1995; Putnam 1995a).

Not all the evidence points in the same direction, and some alternative forms of political activity may have risen over time (Verba et al. 1995, 70–71). Moreover comparative research (Klingemann and Fuchs 1995) provides no evidence for a uniform secular decline in electoral turnout and confidence in government across advanced democracies, as sometimes assumed by observers. Nevertheless it is widely believed that American democracy has been experiencing a crisis of legitimacy, with angry voters disillusioned by Washington politics as usual.

Many commentators like James Fallows (1996) and Neil Postman (1985), as well as theorists like Rodrick Hart (1994), have argued that

a complex range of factors have contributed towards growing cynicism and apathy about American politics, including events like Watergate, Iran-Contra, and the House banking scandal. But, these critics claim, television is to blame as one of the major culprits. This argument has been commonly heard over the years but rarely defined very clearly, much less systematically proven. The extensive literature on political participation has largely ignored the role of the media in this process. Studies have focussed instead on the 'macro' conditions of participation set by the political system, such as registration laws, voting facilities, and the salience of elections (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Powell 1982; Crewe 1981; Franklin 1996; van de Eijk and Franklin 1996); the 'micro' conditions influencing individual citizens, such as their socioeconomic background, education, age and gender, as well as resources of time and money (Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Nie and Kim 1980; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995); and the 'intermediate' conditions set by mobilizing agencies like parties and interest groups (Piven and Cloward 1988; Rosenstone and Hanson 1993). Only recently have scholars started to legitimize the popular chorus of criticism about the media's role in this process.

In 'Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital' Robert Putnam develops a powerful indictment of American television (see the December 1995 issue of *PS: Political Science & Politics*). In this paper, originally presented as the Ithiel de Sola Pool Lecture at the 1995 APSA Annual

Convention, Putnam argues that television in America has contributed decisively towards the erosion of social capital and civic engagement. 'Social capital' is understood as the dense networks of norms and social trust which enable participants to cooperate in the pursuit of shared objectives. Putnam argues that the more we connect with other people, on a face-to-face basis within the community, the more we trust them (Putnam 1994, 1995a; see also Brehm and Rahn 1995).

The puzzle which Putnam seeks to explain is why America's stock of social capital has been shrinking for more than a quarter century, as demonstrated by the decline in membership of social groups and voluntary associations, and in many forms of collective political participation such as attending town meetings, or working for political parties (Putnam 1995a). After considering a wide range of factors which could have led towards civic disengagement in America, including trends in the structure of the economy, changes in the family, and the growth of the welfare state, Putnam argues that this trend has been closely associated with the arrival of television. Based on analysis of the General Social Survey data from 1974–94, controlling for a range of demographic factors like education, age and income, the study found that the amount of television viewing was strongly and negatively related to social trust, group membership, and voting turnout, whereas the same correlations with newspaper readings were found to be positive (Putnam 1995b, 678). The effects of television have been most marked, it is argued, upon the post-war genera-

tion. Putnam claims that television has destroyed social capital most obviously through displacing social and leisure activities outside the home, but he also suggests, based on secondary studies (Gerbner et al. 1980), that television may have produced a more misanthropic view of the world among viewers.

Putnam focuses upon the effects of television on social trust and group activism. Others have commonly argued that it is the media's coverage of election campaigns, in particular, which has contributed towards the long-term decay in political trust and involvement. The strands of this argument have been articulated most clearly by Thomas Patterson (1993) in *Out of Order*, which presents a powerful critique of the media. As an institution, Patterson argues, the press is unsuited to the new powers which it has acquired. In particular, journalistic values tend towards an anti-politics bias, skeptical of the major institutions in society, focusing on campaign strategy (who is ahead, who behind) at the expense of issues. The press over-emphasizes change rather than consistency, inside-the-beltway op-ed criticism rather than government success, and questions of personal character at the expense of dry policy debate. Parties tend to be portrayed in an overwhelmingly negative light. Among the public it is argued this produces an excessively cynical, ill-informed, and negative view of politicians, which drives a wedge between candidates and voters, and increases mistrust of the electoral process. As a result, Patterson concludes, voters are poorly informed and ill-equipped to select the best candidate in a crowded nomination race: "A press-based electoral system is not a suitable basis for that most pivotal of all decisions, the choice of a president (Patterson 1993, 52)."

Yet despite the appeal of these claims, which seem to strike a popular chord, many of the attacks on the media are drawn in black-and-white terms, as though there is one television experience, rather than multiple channels and programs, and one audience, rather than different types of viewers. There has

been surprisingly little attempt carefully to establish the antecedent factors which condition the media's ability to shape the public's trust and civic engagement. In particular we do not know whether the public is affected by the simple amount of television viewing, as Putnam (1995b) claims, or whether the contents of what people watch is equally important. All things being equal, we might expect that viewers who were devoted to the *The Newshour* with Jim Lehrer, *C-SPAN*, and *Nightline* might end up as rather well-informed citizens who were well-equipped to become engaged in public life. In other countries like Britain there seems to be a positive link between regularly watching the television news and levels of political knowledge, participation, and efficacy (Norris 1996). From a wealth of previous research in political communications we might also expect that the characteristics of the people who receive the news might condition how they are influenced: for example, partisans might be expected to be less persuadable than independents. Nor have we clearly disentangled the relationship between different indicators of declining support for the American political system. Too often trends over time in social trust, confidence in government, civic engagement, and political participation are banded together without analysing whether these factors are actually linked. Yet the relationship may not be straightforward. For example, observers often blame declining confidence in government for the fall in electoral participation, yet studies have found that trusting citizens are not more likely to vote, engage in campaign activities, or be interested in politics (Citrin 1974; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Theoretically these factors may be unrelated, so that the media may perhaps produce a more skeptical public without any significant consequences for political activism. In the light of this debate, the aim of this paper is to reexamine the impact of the media on civic engagement and political participation in America.

## Data and Methods

Data for this study comes from The American Citizen Participation Study, 1990, directed by Verba, Schlozman, Brady and Nie (1995), which provides the largest and most comprehensive cross-sectional data set on the nature and origins of the political activities of the American public. The study used a two-stage design, with a large random sample of 15,000 members of the public, allowing the selection of a sub-sample of activists for more intensive interviews. These data include a range of items measuring attention to television (news, current affairs programs, and total hours consumption), newspapers, and radio talk-shows (see Appendix A).

The data also provide a wealth of information about all forms of voluntary political activism. These are classified into eight different types, using the definitions provided by Verba et al. (1995), including voting, campaign work, campaign contributions, contacting government officials, protesting, being a member of a range of organization (like veteran's clubs, religious groups, trade unions, sports clubs, neighborhood groups, and charitable associations), and informal community activity to solve a local issue or problem (for details of the categories see Verba et al. 1995: Appendix B). This includes items about parties and elections which are usually seen as 'conventional' political participation, as well as those like membership of sports clubs and community groups, which are closer to Putnam's notion of civic engagement.

Before proceeding we should acknowledge that a major limitation of cross-sectional survey analysis is the problem of disentangling the direction of causality. On the one hand it seems most plausible that watching television news or reading about public affairs would encourage people to become more active in politics. Through paying attention to the news people should become more aware of the serious problems facing their community or the nation, and the role of the government, voluntary associations, and community groups in trying to

**TABLE 1**  
**Correlation of Media Use and Political Participation**

	TV Hours	TV News	TV Pub-Aff	Paper	Radio Talk Show
Voter	-.11**	.11**	.17**	.26**	-.01
Campaign work	-.06**	.04	.05**	.14**	.02
Campaign contribution	-.08**	.08**	.18**	.27**	.00
Contact	-.09**	.04*	.12**	.20**	.06
Protest	-.07**	.05*	.08**	.08**	.04
Member Organization	-.16**	.10**	.16**	.30**	.03
Informal Community	-.09**	.07**	.13**	.15**	.04
Activism Scale	-.17**	.13**	.24**	.39**	.05

Note: For definition of types of activism see Verba et al. 1995:544 and appendix A. The figures represent Pearson correlation coefficients.

\*p < .05 \*\*p < .01

N. = 2,517 weighted cases

Source: American Citizen Participation Study, 1990

solve those problems. On the other hand it may be that those who are already actively involved in public life turn to the news media to find out more about current events. The relationship is probably somewhat reciprocal, and without panel survey data, focus group analysis, or experimental data, we cannot be certain about the direction of causality. Nevertheless, we can replicate Putnam's approach by analysing the associations between media use and civic engagement, without

claiming to develop a comprehensive causal model.

### The Media and Political Participation

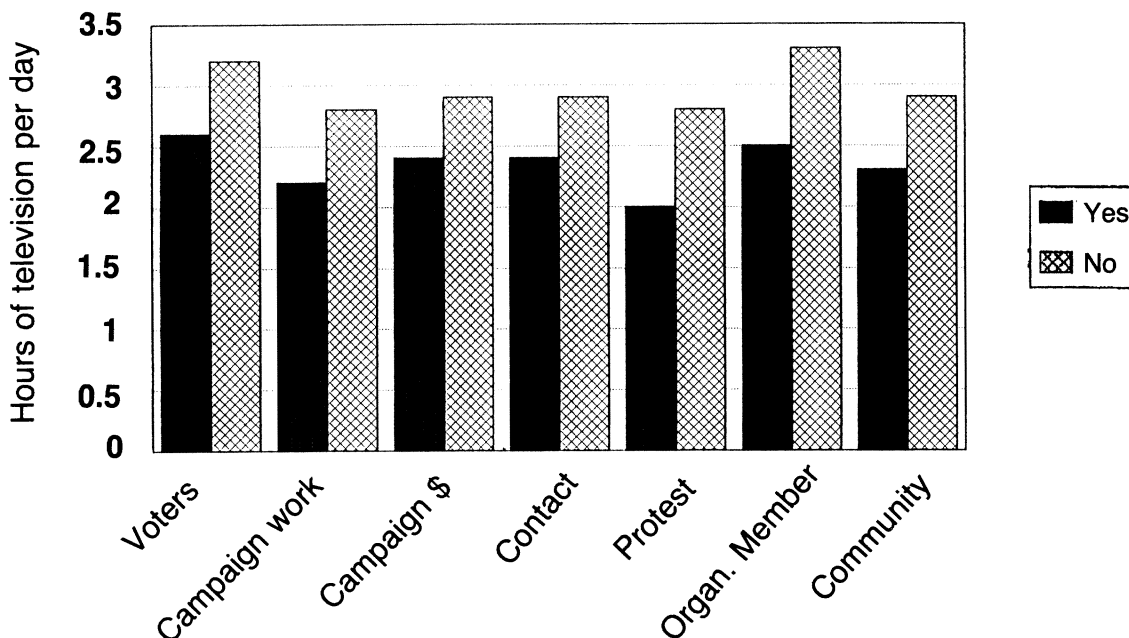
We can start by examining how far the use of different media sources is related to types of political activism, without any controls for the social background of viewers and readers. The initial results of this analysis, presented in Table

1 and Figure 1, confirm the thesis that the amount of time people spent watching television was significantly correlated with every type of political participation. Across every category, the more people watched, the less active they were. Those who had joined organizations like a sports club or church group, for example, spent about 2.5 hours per day watching television, compared with 3.3 hours for non-members. Moreover heavy viewers also proved less interested in national and local community politics, and less likely to engage in political discussions.

Yet the results also demonstrate that the amount of television which people watch gives only a partial insight into the effects of the media. If we turn to the content of what people watched the picture changes. Those who regularly tuned into the network news were significantly more likely to be involved in all types of political activity, and the relationship between watching public affairs programs on television and civic engagement proved even stronger. This indicates that we should not blame television watching per se for polit-

**FIGURE 1**

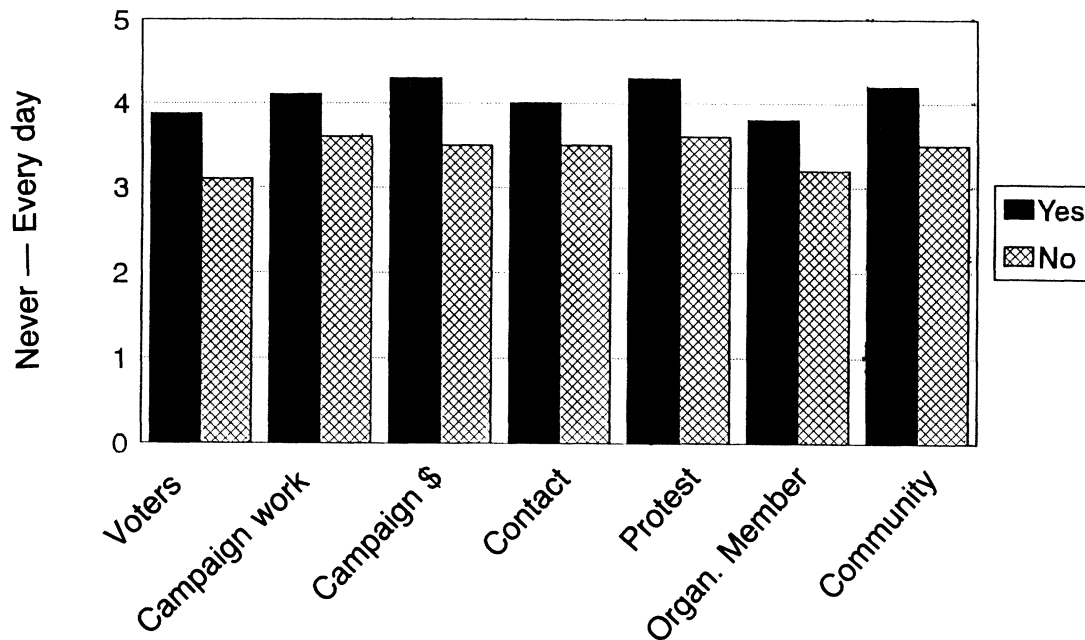
How many hours of TV watched?



Source: American Citizen Participation Study, 1990

FIGURE 2

How often view current affairs programs



Source: American Citizen Participation Study, 1990

ical disengagement, as Putnam suggests (1995b), but rather the contents of what people are watching. Those who are tuning into network news and current affairs programs are also heavily engaged in public life. Newspaper readership was even more significantly related to activism, although interestingly those who regularly tuned into talk shows on radio did not seem to be stimulated to participate in other forms of politics.

These preliminary results are interesting yet it could be that the relationships we have examined so far are spurious, if they are produced by differences in the social background of the audience for different media. It is well-established that those who regularly read newspapers, listen to talk radio, and view television news are not distributed equally among all groups. Just over half of all adults report reading a daily newspaper, and readers tend to be disproportionately older, white, more affluent, well-educated, and male, with the generational gap growing over the years (Stanley and Niemi 1995, 48–49). About 14 percent of the population regularly watch network

news on a weekday night, and viewers tend to be older than average, and slightly less affluent, although in other regards they form a fairly representative cross-section of the American population, with little difference by gender, race, and education (Stanley and Niemi 1995, 48–49). Listeners to talk-show radio are more distinctive since they tend to be better educated, more often male, more politicized and more conservative than the average American (Kohut and Parker 1996).

Since these background variables may also affect civic engagement we need to analyze whether the relationship between media use and political activism continues after controlling for the education, gender, employment status, race, age, and family income of the audience. Using OLS regression analysis, as shown in Table 2, the strongest and most consistent predictor of different types of activism proved to be education, influencing every category except informal community work. Generational differences were also evident, with older citizens far more likely to vote, give campaign donations, and be mem-

bers of organizations, although less likely to be involved in protest activity like demonstrations, as many other studies have found. Income differentials proved a strong predictor of campaign contributors, but also of voting, campaign work, and membership of organizations. In this analysis the modest gender differences proved insignificant, while race was only significantly related to contact activity and joining organizations.

After controlling for these factors, newspaper readership continued to be significantly associated with six out of eight indicators of activism, with a particularly strong relationship with voting. In contrast, once we had controlled for background, watching current affairs programs was only significant on four indicators. Watching television news was associated with social engagement, although not directly with any of the conventional forms of political participation. Once controls were introduced, the amount of television which people watched rarely proved significant except for voting and informal community activity. Lastly, contrary to the assumption that listen-

**TABLE 2**  
**Effects of Media on Activism**

	Voter	Campaign Work	Campaign Contrib	Contact	Protest	Organ. Member	Informal Community	Activism Scale
<b>SOCIAL BACKGROUND</b>								
Education	.19**	.10**	.22**	.09*	.09**	.24**	.06	.26**
Gender	-.07*	-.02	.00	.04	-.01	-.02	-.01	-.01
Employment Status	.04	-.05	.03	-.03	-.18**	-.01	.08	-.02
Race	.04	-.03	-.03	.10**	-.04	.09**	-.01	.06
Age	.30**	.02	.13**	-.04	-.17**	.09**	.06	-.09**
Income	.07*	.08*	.21**	.06	.05	.10**	.03	.18**
<b>MEDIA USE</b>								
TV Public Affairs	.08**	.05	.05*	.06	.03	-.01	.07*	.09**
TV News	.04	.00	-.02	.02	.05	.09**	.03	.06*
TV Hours	-.08**	-.03	.02	-.03	-.06	-.03	-.10**	-.07*
Paper	.24**	.11**	.12**	.15**	.03	.14**	.05	.18**
Radio	.01	.01	.01	.03	.05	.00	.05	.02
R2	.36	.05	.18	.07	.06	.17	.05	.19

Note: Standardized OLS Regression coefficients

\*p < .05 \*\*p < .01 See Appendix for details of coding.

Weighted N. = 2,517 cases

Source: American Citizen Participation Study, 1990

ers to talk-show radio would be more politicized, listenership proved to be insignificantly related to activism.

### The Media and Political Attitudes

In addition to the direct effects on civic engagement, critics have commonly charged television with producing a cynical and ill-informed public, alienated from government and the community in which they live. In order to examine some of the evidence for this charge we can compare the political interest, sense of political efficacy, and political knowledge of different media users. Again we rely upon the battery of items which Verba et al. (1995: Appendix B) use for scaled measurement. The measurement of interest includes interest in local community affairs as well as in national politics. The knowledge scale includes correct answers to eight items, including name-recognition of representatives and awareness of some constitutional issues and concepts. Political efficacy measures how far citizens felt that they could influence local and national government, with a four-item scale. Since these attitudes could also be expected to vary according to social background, these are entered into the regression models used earlier.

As the results in Table 3 show, again education and income consistently proved to be significant indicators of political attitudes, as many studies have found, while age and race were also related to political knowledge. Turning to the measures of media use, reading newspapers was positively associated with knowledge, efficacy and inter-

**TABLE 3**  
**Effects of Background and Media Usage on Attitudes**

	Know- ledge	Efficacy	Interest
<b>SOCIAL BACKGROUND</b>			
Education	.21**	.13**	.13**
Gender	.09**	-.02	-.01
Employment Status	.03	.01	-.02
Race	.13**	.03	-.01
Age	.14**	-.01	.01
Income	.12**	.07*	.07*
<b>MEDIA USE</b>			
TV Public Affairs	.01	.02	.11**
TV News	.02	.13**	.10**
TV Hours	-.08**	.09**	-.13**
Paper	.23**	.17**	.33**
Radio	-.01	-.01	.03
R2	.26	.11	.26

Note: Standardized OLS Regression coefficients

\*p < .05 \*\*p < .01 See Appendix for details of coding.

Weighted N. = 2,517 cases

Source: American Citizen Participation Study, 1990

est, indeed the strongest predictor of these attitudes in the equation. Just as consistently, the hours people spent watching television was negatively associated with these attitudes: people who watch a great deal of television know less about politics, feel less able to affect government, and are less interested in politics. To this extent, the common charge against the medium was sustained, although the direction of causality has to remain an open question. Yet watching public affairs programs on network news was associated with greater interest in politics, and those who watched the news also had a higher sense of efficacy. We need further analysis of these attitudes, with better measures of what programs what people were watching, and panel survey data, to start to disentangle this relationship further.

### Conclusions

Critics have commonly attacked television for a host of ills in American society, ranging from violence among children to racism, illiteracy, alienation, and lack of civic involvement. The pervasiveness of television culture throughout American society has made it an easy target for those of the right and left who feel it is the cause of the malaise in public life. Yet the very per-

vasiveness, like the air around us, makes it particularly difficult to establish the truth of the charges.

The analysis presented in this study suggests that the relationship between civic engagement and television viewership is more complex than sometimes suggested. While the amount of television viewing does seem to support the Putnam thesis, other evidence regarding what American viewers tune into suggests that watching news, and particularly current affairs programs from *Nightline* to *60 Minutes* does not seem to be damaging to the democratic health of society, and may even prove beneficial. In short, the charge that television is the root cause of the lack of confidence and trust in American democracy seems on this basis (in the weaker version) unproven, and (in the stronger claim) to be deeply implausible.

We get, from American television, a diversity of channels, programs and choices. If some choose *C-Span*, *Meet the Press*, and *CNN World News*, they are likely to end up somewhat more interested in the complex problems and issues facing American government at the end of the twentieth century. Could we be better informed and more involved? Of course. But compared with most democracies America is already high as a nation of joiners, with a dense network of civic associations. And it is not self-evident that turning off the television, and talking with our neighbors, or even going bowling, is necessarily the best way of addressing the long-term problems of confidence in American government or trust in a deeply-divided American society.

## Appendix A

Media Use was measured by the following items:

**TV\_HOURS:** how many hours per day respondents had watched television in the past seven days.

**TV\_NEWS:** how often respondents had watched national news broadcasts (using a seven point scale).

**TV\_PUBAFF:** how often respondents had watched public affairs programs (using a seven point scale).

**TABLE APPENDIX A1**  
**Correlations between Types of Media Use**

	TV News	TV Hours	TVPUBAFF	Newspaper
TV Hours	.07**			
TV Public Affairs	.33**	.06**		
Newspaper	.21**	-.10**	.29**	
Radio	.01	.01	.06	.07*

Source: American Citizen Participation Study, 1990

**RADIO:** How often respondents had listened to radio call-in talk shows (RADCALL1), or expressed an opinion on such shows (RADCALL2).

**NEWSPAPER:** How often respondents had read a newspaper (READNEWS), how much attention they paid to national politics and public affairs in newspapers (READNAT), and how much attention they paid to local politics and community affairs in newspapers (READLOC).

The intercorrelations between these measures are presented below. The results show that some of the items were significantly related to each other: frequent watchers of television news often also watched television public affairs and read newspapers. Those who often watched television public affairs programs were also often newspaper readers. Nevertheless, although statistically significant, none of these correlations proved particularly strong. Since we are interested in exploring the relationship between different types of media use this suggests it is legitimate to treat these as independent variables which are not measuring the same thing.

## Measures of Participation.

These follow the conventions which are outlined in Appendix B of Verba et al. (1995), except that in this study no distinction is drawn between 'political' and 'non-political' organizational membership.

The types of activity which are included in the study are voting, campaign work, donating campaign money, contacting officials, protesting, belonging to an organization, and informal activity within the community to solve a local problem. Summing these categories produce a total activity scale.

## Notes

1. The author would like to thank Derek Bok and Barbara Pfetsch for comments concerning an early draft of this paper which

was presented at the ECPR Joint Workshops at Oslo in March 1996.

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## Voter Turnout in U.S. Presidential Elections: An Historical View and Some Speculation

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An examination of presidential voting patterns between 1828 and 1992 for all counties and most large cities in the continental U.S. (approximately 135,000 cases altogether) confirms that there has been a decline in turnout rates<sup>1</sup> since 1960, as most commentators have suggested. For the nation as a whole, turnout in presidential elections dropped 20% from 64% in 1960 to 51% in 1988. Turnout rebounded slightly in 1992 to 55%, due perhaps in large part to the interest generated by Ross Perot.

As striking as these data appear, they must be put in historical perspective to be properly understood. Graph 1 displays the turnout rate for every presidential election between 1828 and 1992 (See Table 1 for a listing of the actual rates). It shows that while turnout in the presidential election of 1988 was the third lowest since 1828, surpassed only in 1920 and 1924 (with turnout rates of 44% in each election), the 1960-1988 decline is not unprecedented in U.S. electoral history. In an earlier 28-year period (1896-1924), turnout rates in presidential elections declined from 72% to 44%. This is a 39% decline in

turnout almost double that experienced between 1960 and 1988.

Graph 1 also shows that while most commentators use the 1960 election as a basis for gauging changes in turnout, it is a somewhat misleading baseline. Turnout in 1960 was 64%, which was the highest turnout rate for U.S. presidential elections since 1900. The 1960 election capped a 36-year rise in turnout rates, and represented a 45% increase over the low points registered in 1920 and 1924. Indeed, with the exception of 1944 and 1948, when the nation was preoccupied with World War II and its aftermath, the period between 1928 and 1968 shows a steady increase in presidential turnout rates. The period between 1952 and 1968 shows an average turnout rate of 62%, which is almost halfway between the historical highs of the last quarter of the nineteenth century (72%) and the historical lows of the first quarter of the twentieth century (54%).

The 1968 election is used as a cut-off here because for most of the country, there is no significant decline in turnout rates until 1972, when the franchise was expanded

to include those 18 and older. The nation's turnout rate dropped from 64% to 61% between 1960 and 1968, about one-quarter of the 13 point decline that occurred between 1960 and 1988. The remaining 10 point drop, which accounts for 77% of the 1960-1988 decline, occurred after 18, 19 and 20 year-olds became part of the eligible voter pool. This does not suggest that the newly enfranchised voters account for all of the decline, but they quite clearly account for a considerable portion of the post-1968 deterioration.

The data also demonstrate that recent trends in turnout differ dramatically across locale types (cities, suburbs, small towns, rural areas). We divided the counties and cities in our study into six different categories: (1) the 32 main, "tier 1" center cities<sup>2</sup> of the twentieth century (New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Dallas, etc.);<sup>3</sup> (2) cities and counties that include the suburbs of those 32 main center cities; (3) counties that include 37 smaller, "tier 2" center cities (San Jose, Birmingham, Charlotte, Tampa, El Paso, Austin, Richmond, Sacramento, Des