Campaign 2000

Voter Engagement in American Elections (*)

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Synopsis

Many observers believe that the American electorate has experienced a long-term erosion in civic engagement, political participation and campaign interest, resulting in turned-off voters, half-empty ballot boxes and a crisis for American democracy. The conventional wisdom widely predicts that the public is deeply disenchanted with campaign 2000 so that turnout in November will fall still further. Many culprits can be nominated, ranging from the fashionable erosion of social capital to more humdrum voter registration requirements. Some criticize negative ads run by candidates, while others castigate campaigns awash with King Dollar. Among these multiple factors, the news media – particularly television – is a popular candidate for blame. But should the jury convict?

To consider the evidence underlying this debate, this paper sets out the theoretical framework and examines postwar trends in civic engagement in the United States. To update previous work the paper then considers more speculative indicators of voter involvement from the early primaries to the August conventions in campaign 2000.

The study concludes that much of the postwar evidence displays a pattern of trendless fluctuations rather than secular decline. The runes for campaign 2000 remain mixed. It is foolhardy to predict turnout at this stage of the campaign but under certain conditions – notably a tight race, significant policy differences between the major candidates, and competition from third party challengers on the left and right – the naysayers may be proved wrong in November.
Many observers believe that the American electorate has suffered a long-term erosion in civic engagement, political participation and campaign interest, resulting in turned-off voters, half-empty ballot boxes and a crisis for American democracy. The conventional wisdom reflected in endless popular punditry widely predicts that the public is disenchanted with campaign 2000 so that turnout in November will fall still further. Many culprits can be nominated, ranging from the fashionable erosion of social capital to more humdrum voter registration requirements. Some criticize negative ads run by candidates, while others castigate campaigns awash with King Dollar. Among these multiple factors, the news media – particularly television – is a popular candidate for blame. But should the jury convict?

To consider the evidence underlying this debate, this paper sets out the theoretical framework of media malaise and examines postwar trends in civic engagement in the United States. To update previous work this paper then considers more speculative indicators of voter involvement from the early primaries to the August conventions in campaign 2000. The study concludes that much of the postwar evidence displays a pattern of trendless fluctuations rather than secular decline. The runes for campaign 2000 remain mixed. It is foolhardy to predict turnout at this stage of the campaign and there are indicators that the public has been more focused on survivors on desert islands than survivors in presidential races for much of the period between the effective end of the primary contest (March 9th) and the conventions in August. But under certain conditions – notably a tight race, clear policy differences between the major candidates, and competition from third party challengers on the left and right – the gloomier scenarios for voter participation in November may not necessarily transpire.

Theories of Civic Decline and the News Media

The media malaise thesis has become popular in many different forms, discussed in detail elsewhere¹, and here we can focus on the core claims of cultural and structural versions of this thesis. These theories broadly agree about the nature of trends in news coverage of public affairs but they part company in their explanations of the underlying reasons behind this phenomenon. Cultural accounts suggest that the American news industry altered in the late 1960s and early 1970s largely in response to the experience of American journalists in Vietnam and Watergate, producing a more adversarial journalistic-government relationship, more negative campaign news, and a stronger strategic focus in election campaigns². Following these seminal events, in this view American election news become more negative, strategically-oriented and adversarial, across all media, focusing on the horse-race rather than the issues, the techniques of spin rather than the substance of policy, not what-they-said but why-they-said-it, with the result that in the late 1960s and early 1970s the public become increasingly turned off by campaign coverage. “If Vietnam and Watergate marked a time when the press turned against the politicians”, Patterson suggests, “the recent period represents a time when the press turned on them.”³

Structural accounts produce a similar picture of media malaise but they tend to emphasize the economic and technological factors that are assumed to drive this process. Hence those like Neil Postman suggests that standards of American journalism started to head south in the early 1980s, with the shrinkage of the audience for network news, the blending of entertainment and news values
in magazine formats filling the airwaves on cable and satellite stations, and the downsizing of news divisions after they merged into larger entertainment-oriented corporations. Neil Gabler echoes these claims, arguing that entertainment has come to be the predominant value on television news, with the result that the political process has been repackaged into show business. Serious political debate, serious policy problems, serious election coverage becomes marginalized in an entertainment-driven celebrity-oriented society where the one standard of value is whether something can grab and hold the public's attention.

James Fallows is concerned that down-market trends have produced the relentless pursuit of sensational, superficial, and populist political reporting on network news, in the attempt to maintain ratings before surfers click to other channels. Structural perspectives emphasize institutional developments in the media that are common to many post-industrial societies, such as economic pressures moving the news industry down-market, the erosion of public service broadcasting, and the emergence of a more fragmented, multi-channel television environment.

What data is available to examine these claims? The standard approach is to use surveys like the NES to analyze the individual-level relationship between those people who are most attentive to newspapers and television and the standard indicators of civic engagement, such as levels of political trust, knowledge and participation. But even if we establish a significant relationship, this approach fails to address the claims that the mass media has a more diffuse impact on American culture which infects both those who do and do not pay attention to the news. What matters, it can be argued, is the way that Monica gate pervaded the airwaves but also the water coolers, whether one watched the impeachment hearings or not. This produces a tougher methodological nut to crack. Unfortunately while there is much impressionistic discussion lamenting the state of modern journalism, we lack direct systematic evidence of trends in the contents and direction of American journalism to see, for example, whether political coverage has become more cynical from the 1960s until today. But as a working hypothesis we can assume that American campaign news did indeed become more negative, strategic and adversarial in the late 1960s, as media malaise theories suggest, and then examine whether the timing of any decline in American civic engagement fits this thesis. If we find either a period-specific stepped fall in civic engagement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, or a secular trend downward that started in this era (with a modest lag), then this provides prima facia support for the Vietnam/Watergate hypothesis. Of course we still cannot disentangle the effects of the actual events surrounding Vietnam and Watergate, from the possible impact of any change in the news culture following these events. Nor can we establish the direction of causality, which could run from public opinion towards the news media. Nevertheless it would be indirect evidence supporting cultural claims. Along similar lines, if we establish that a trend towards declining civic engagement became evident in the early 1980s in America then this would lend prima facia support for the structural claim. On the other hand, if we find a pattern of either trendless fluctuations around the mean, or if we find stable trends over time, or if we find that the timing of any fall in civic engagement does not fit these hypothesis, then this would cast serious doubts on the media malaise case.
Evidence of Long-term Trends in Civic Engagement

To examine a wide range of indicators of civic malaise we draw upon the rich legacy of fifty years of survey data from the series of American national election studies stretching from 1948, prior to the television age, until 1998. Many studies start the clock in the 1960s, for example this is commonplace in claims of falling voter turnout, but this provides a false reading of the patient, and with any time series we need to use all the reliable data-points that are available. The term ‘civic engagement’ encompasses many aspects and here we can examine the trends during the last thirty or forty years in attention to campaign news, interest in government and public affairs, trust in government and politicians, and political mobilization and turnout.

Trends in Campaign Interest

If campaign journalism became more negative in the 1960s and early 1970s, the first possible impact could be that the American public decided to switch off in droves, preferring baseball, movies and sit-coms to election news. Yet if we examine long-term trends in American attention to campaign news, the pattern that emerges most strongly from the NES data since the 1960s is one of stability, rather than any steady linear decline. In this chart we focus on Presidential elections, to remove the fluctuations caused by mid-term contests, although Congressional elections display a similar pattern. Figure 1 shows that from 1952 to 1960, television shot into first place at the media most popular among Americans for following election news, causing a fall in the use of radio news and the print media. But from the 1960 election onwards, attention to television, newspapers, radio and magazines proved fairly stable, with the exception of a few random fluctuations like the temporary dip in the use of newspapers in 1972, which could be the result of measurement error. Reliance upon TV news did not fall consistently over successive elections in the post-Vietnam and post-Watergate era. The only major temporary dips in use of TV news occurred in 1984 (counter-intuitively, under the sunny ‘Morning Again in America’ Reagan campaign), before recovering in 1988 (equally ironically, under the ‘revolving door/Willie Horton negativism of Bush v. Dukakis). These blips are in the opposite direction to the media malaise thesis. Another dip in TV use occurred again in 1996, but it remains too early to see whether this represents another temporary fluctuation or the start of a new trend, and use of radio and magazines experienced a slight surge in these years. If we compare American use of the campaign media during the last fifty years there is no consistent major slide across all indicators.

Of course, it could still be the case that despite the aggregate trends some Americans have become progressively more disengaged from the campaign, while others have become more involved. There is considerable concern that poorer groups, ethnic minorities, and the less educated have become effectively disenfranchised by American elections. Media malaise could turn off the politically marginalized, rather than mainstream America. To examine the evidence, regression models were run to predict attention to campaign news in successive American Presidential elections, examining the strength of predictors for the major demographic variables (age, education, income, gender
and race) as well as political interest. The standardized betas were then plotted by year to examine trends from 1952-96.

[Figure 2 about here]

The results in Figure 2 show a mixed pattern. Sharp fluctuations in the 1950s can plausibly be attributed to the rapid spread of TV ownership from the affluent elite to mainstream America. Since the 1960s, the clearest trend is by age, where, although the pattern is far from linear, interest in the campaign has become progressively more concentrated among the older age groups. This may be a life-cycle effect, since we have already established that due to a more sedentary lifestyle, older people usually watch far more television (and TV news) than younger groups. We already established that in Europe age proved one of the strongest predictors of attention to TV news, although this pattern has remained stable, not strengthened, during the last thirty years. Alternatively, if a generational rather than life-cycle effect, as Miller and Shanks suggest in their exhaustive study, this represents a genuine cause for concern. This pattern can be linked to diffuse theories of media malaise, since Putnam argues that these findings reflect the development of a ‘post-civic’ baby-boom generation who grew up in the television era. It remains to be seen whether the Internet generation will surf to alternative sources of political information.

Other findings in Figure 2 provide less support for the media malaise thesis. The effects of income and race show a modest downward slope, indicating that the audience for campaign news has slightly widened in these regards over time. The fluctuations in campaign attention for African-Americans can plausibly be traced to the saliency of racial issue in particular elections, like in 1968 (civil rights) and 1984 (the presidential candidacy of Jesse Jackson). The coefficients for education and gender fluctuate quite sharply around the mean, with a slight upwards slope. Despite closure over the years, and the reversal of the gender gap in electoral turnout, even today women continue to display slightly less interest and activism in many conventional forms of political participation in many countries. For reasons that remain unclear, the effects of education rise sharply from the early 1960s to the 1976 election, and then fall again over successive elections. Lastly, the effects of political interest on media attention remain stable and the strongest predictor of news use. What the general pattern suggests is that some fluctuations over time are probably caused by measurement error, such as slight differences in question wording and sampling in successive NES surveys, but overall attention to American presidential campaigns has not become progressively more concentrated among demographic groups, with the important exception of the effects of age.

[Figure 3 and 4 together about here]

Other indicators of civic engagement concern whether the American public follows the campaign and public affairs. If election coverage became more negative in the 1960s and early 1970s, then plausibly people could switch off from politics. Figures 3 and 4 show long-term trends in these indicators, in Presidential and mid-term elections. The results show that interest in the campaign was slightly stronger in successive elections from 1952 to 1976, and then fell to a lower level from 1978 to 1998 (with the exception of the 1992 election were attention rose again). The pattern is far from uniform, for example interest in the 1956 campaign proved similar to that in 1996. Variations over time
could plausibly be produced by many factors, including the closeness of the race, whether an incumbent president was standing for reelection, competition from third party candidates, the salience of the political issues, and so on. The decline of political interest indicates a period-specific shift, but this change seems to have occurred between 1976 and 1978, later than the Vietnam/Watergate thesis would suggest and earlier than the structural proposition of changes in the news industry. Of course Vietnam/Watergate could plausibly have produced a lagged shift, as the journalistic culture gradually changed, but this should still have been evident, all other things being equal, in the 1976 race. In addition, the decline in political interest could be attributed to many things beyond changes in the news culture, for example the heightened generational and racial tensions in American politics could have increased political interest during the 1960s.

Trends in attention to government and public affairs, rather than campaigns, present a slightly different picture (see Table 4). The proportion of Americans who follow government and public affairs either ‘most’ or ‘some’ of the time in the 1990s is similar to the situation in the early 1960s. Like a rat in a python, the main exceptions to the overall trend concerns heightened attention in the 1964, 1972, 1974 and 1976 elections. As many have observed, the events of these years stimulated political awareness — from conflict over civil rights and urban riots, to anti-Vietnam demonstrations, political assassinations, the rise of second-wave feminism, generational culture wars, and the aftermath of Watergate. From 1976 to 1998 attention returned to the ‘normal’ level evident in the early 1960s. There is no linear decline in interest in American politics. The 1992 Bush v. Clinton v. Perot election, for example, registered the 5th highest level of interest in the entire series. The common assumption that Americans have become increasingly bored with government and turned off from public affairs in recent years, and that this can be attributed to increasingly negative, trivial or strategic coverage in the news media, receives no support from this evidence.

**Trust in Government and Politicians**

Yet the effects of a more cynical culture in journalism should be evident more directly in indicators of political trust in American government and politicians. After all, much of the concern about growing alienation has been generated by the long-term slide in the standard NES indicators of civic malaise. The key question here is whether the timing of the decline in political trust mirrors the events that are believed to have transformed the news culture.

[Figure 5 about here]

Figure 5 maps trends in the standard NES indicators of trust in government, discussed earlier, from 1958 until 1998. The pattern confirms relatively high levels of trust from the 1958-1964, the sharp plunge from 1964 to 1974, the modest slide until 1980, then the revival under Reagan’s first term in the early 1980s, the slide again from 1984 to 1994, then a distinct revival during Clinton’s second term. While earlier observers saw only a linear decline, the most recent figures suggest a far clearer pattern of trendless fluctuations. The key question for this study is how far these patterns can be related to the timing of any assumed changes in the news culture and industry. The ‘Vietnam/Watergate’ hypothesis is certainly given some support from the trends in the early 1970s, although it should be noted that the slide started in 1964-66, before journalists
started to provide highly critical coverage of Vietnam\textsuperscript{12}. But the subsequent pattern in the 1980s and 1990s, with the rise and fall and rise in American political trust, strongly suggests that rather than a secular phenomena, driven by cultural or structural trends in the nature of American journalism, this represents a more events-driven or performance-driven political explanation\textsuperscript{13}. If ‘negative’ campaign coverage increased in the early 1980s, as Patterson suggests, this may be associated with the popularity of presidential candidates but it is unrelated to broader trends in support for the American political trust, which became more positive during this era. Of course we cannot assume that there is any simple and direct link between attitudes towards the political system and the broader pattern of news coverage, since multiple factors can influence political trust. But at the same time if the timing of trends in these indicators of civic engagement fails to match the timing of any hypothetical change in the culture of the news media, even with lags, then we have failed to establish convincing evidence for these hypothetical effects at diffuse level.

**Political Mobilization**

There remains the issue of falling turnout and campaign activism, generating much concern. Even if interest and trust are unrelated to the pattern of campaign coverage in the news media, it could still be that more negative news demobilizes the public. Is there any evidence that trends in American political participation support the diffuse version of the media malaise argument?

Evidence from IDEA indicates that postwar turnout in established democracies has generally remained fairly constant, down only 3% from 1970 to 1990 in the countries under comparison\textsuperscript{14}. Yet turnout in the US has remained far lower than in most other comparable post-industrial societies and it has slid further. The postwar trends shown in Figure 6 confirm that voting turnout peaked at 63.1\% of the voting age population in the 1960 presidential election. In contrast, in the 1996 presidential election less than half (47.2\%) of the voting age population cast a ballot. Many factors may have contributed towards particularly low turnout in the US, including the barriers caused by institutional procedures for registering and voting, the exceptional frequency of American elections, the erosion of partisanship, the two-party system limiting electoral choice, the fragmentation of powers in the US system reducing the saliency of elections, and the weakness of party organizations as mobilizing agencies\textsuperscript{15}. But what is the role of the news media here?

Turnout in presidential contests proved moderate throughout the quiescent 1950s, voting peaked in the 1960s, and then recent decades experienced a return to the levels common in the 1950s. Rather than a long-term linear decline in turnout in presidential elections since the early 1970s, the pattern shows a plateau in the 1960s with trendless fluctuations around the mean. Again turnout, like interest, can also suddenly bounce back: for example, the 1992 election shows the 5\textsuperscript{th} highest voting participation in the series. Such volatility strongly points to political explanations, not secular trends. It is only mid-term elections where there has been a more consistent fall in turnout that started in 1974 and persisted at about the same level, rather than sliding further, in successive elections to date. The contrasts between the pattern in general and mid-term elections suggests that we should look more closely at the reasons for
American disengagement from Congressional politics, rather than at broader changes in the news industry or culture. The fluctuations in presidential-level turnout are plausibly explained by systematic differences in the choices facing American voters in each election: the presence of third parties, the closeness of the race, the strength of the incumbent, the effectiveness of get-out-the-vote drives, and the saliency of hot button election issues, rather than by long-term shifts towards a more negative campaign media ‘turning off’ the American public.

Yet turnout by itself can be the product of many institutional factors. What of other indicators of conventional political participation and campaign mobilization? The NES battery of items, already used at individual level, monitors whether Americans have become less engaged in campaigns. If campaign coverage has become more negative, this should certainly have turned off voters. Yet the evidence across the long series of general elections in Table 7 shows that the proportion of Americans who persuaded others how to vote by discussing the candidates, arguably the least demanding form of participation, remains fairly high. The pattern shows trendless fluctuations rather than a secular decline, closely following trends in the other indicators of campaign interest that we have already observed. The sharpest decline is the proportion of Americans wearing a button or displaying a bumper sticker, both minor activities that have become unfashionable. Since the sixties there has also been a modest long-term decline in activism within parties, indicating the erosion of grassroots party organizations, although the proportion of party workers active today is similar to the situation in the 1950s. As Rosenstone and Hansen have found, the proportion of Americans engaged in other types of campaigning remains fairly stable, such as those contributing money or going to a political meeting\textsuperscript{16}. Despite concern about declining civic engagement, and dramatic changes in the nature of American campaigns, activism has been remarkably stable over the last fifty years. The idea that more negative campaign news has discouraged participation, either in the early 1970s or the early 1980s, receives no support from the trends.

Trends in Campaign 2000

What is the evidence that the public has been turned off by recent developments in campaign 2000 so that turnout will decline further in this election? Beyond long-term trends, many popular commentators have pointed to a number of reasons why the public may be asleep at the wheel this year, including, it is contended (in no particular order), Clinton fatigue, gridlock in Congress, peace and prosperity so that there are no urgent issues crying out for attention, globalization so that government is seen as increasingly powerless to affect social and economic trends, a campaign awash with special interests and gazillions of dollars, stage-managed conventions that the public watches less, and the rush to compete for the center ground by the two major candidates. We lack systematic evidence about the public involvement in campaign 2000, which will have to await the exit polls and national election survey once the dust has settled, nevertheless we can piece together scattered pieces of evidence which suggest a mixed picture of civic engagement. During endless stretches of campaign 2000, from the end of effective primary competition after Super Tuesday until the August conventions few seemed to be paying much attention, and even the boys on the bus seemed bored by the rituals of stump speeches,
balloons and bunting in the transition towards what appeared to be the inevitable George W. coronation. Nevertheless certain factors could confound the naysayers who currently predict widespread desertions of the pooling booth.

What are the trends in voter involvement in the campaign? The Vanishing Voter project at the Shorenstein Center has regularly monitored the nation’s weekly pulse since early November 1999 using four items measuring voter attention to the campaign, political discussion, recall of campaign news and thinking about the election. The results in Figure 8 show that these measures track each other fairly closely, increasing confidence in the reliability of the indicators, although news recall tends to produce a higher measure than political discussion. The trend shows a consistent pattern that can be fitted fairly closely to the major events in the campaign, including erratic attention in late 1999, the fall around Christmas that year, the sharp rise leading towards the Iowa caucus on 24 January, another sharp peak around the New Hampshire primary on 1st February that runs through with some fluctuations through the early primaries until Super Tuesday on March 8th, with a precipitate fall after Bradley and McCain withdraw leaving Bush and Gore to trudge through the remaining contests. In April and May attention returns to the levels evident pre-primaries, with a few random fluctuations, a temporary spike around the choice of Chesney for GOP VP, then rising interest from the GOP convention in Philadelphia to the LA Democratic convention in mid-August. In short, the American public seems like a sleeping giant that awakes, rationally, when something actually happens.

But is the cup half-empty or half-full? Are these levels of involvement to be decried as too low or to be praised as rational? Obviously any evaluation depends in large part upon the values underlying theories of democracy. But one way to tackle this issue is to compare these indicators with others taken half way through the campaign and before the official general election is launched on Labor Day. The NES is unavailable during this period but we can compare some of the surveys conducted in previous presidential elections by the Pew Research Center on the People and the Press. Figure 9 provides comparisons since 1988 and the evidence shows that the proportion who said they had thought about the coming presidential election ‘quite a lot’ in mid-summer was slightly lower this year (46%) than in the three previous contests, but nevertheless the difference was not substantial.

Another indicator monitored by Pew is how closely people say that they are following news about the presidential election and the results of this indicator in Figure 9 shows that about one fifth said they were following ‘very closely’ in July 2000, about the same as in the previous three presidential elections. Slightly fewer that usual said that they were following ‘fairly closely’ but even here the fall is fairly modest – from 46% in 1988 to 38% in 2000. Similar patterns are evident when people are asked how far they are following what’s going on in government and public affairs: 38% responded ‘most of the time’ in June 2000, about the same as in previous election years since 1988.

Therefore the limited polling evidence prior to the official campaign suggests more a picture of ‘steady state’ or a modest slippage rather than a dramatic decline in voter engagement with politics and elections this year.
Moreover we can suggest at least three reasons why there might be a greater than average incentive to turnout in this contest, if the race continues to prove tight, if the major candidates continue to present substantially different appeals on some of the classic policy issues like tax cuts, health care and social security that have long divided American party politics, and if there is an effective challenge from third party candidates such as Nader and Buchanan.

Trends in voting intentions since April in Figure 10 show how far George W. Bush enjoyed a lead over Al Gore that widened substantially in mid-summer, leading to the widespread assumption in the media that the presidential race was cut and dried. The closure of the race in the series of polls since the start of the Democratic convention, with a modest lead for Gore in some polls, has dramatically changed the framing of the contest by the news media. Time will tell whether this proves a short-lived post-convention bump or the start of a new phase in the campaign. Support for the idea that this will not fade comes from economic forecasting models based on factors such as consumer confidence which predict that Gore will win, although with estimated margins ranging from a bare majority (53% of the two-party vote) to a comfortable one (66%) \(^\text{18}\). If the campaign is perceived as a tight race this could well produce a greater incentive for parties to seek to mobilize their base, \(^\text{19}\) and for voters to get out to the ballot box. In addition, the latest available state polls (in late July 2000) show that in 11 states containing 123 electoral college votes in total the difference between the two major candidates is less than 10%, including in Michigan, Florida and New Jersey. The map in Figure 11 based on state polls shows no single region where each candidate can assume predominance, although Gore is strongest in the North East and California, while Bush leads most in the south.

Lastly, prior to the conventions it was widely assumed that the competition was for the center ground, with both major candidates, drawn from similar preppy backgrounds, offering relatively similar ‘Third Way’ policies. Yet the speeches at the conventions revealed that although both candidates could appear at first sight to be cut from the same cloth, in fact they offered substantially different visions for where America should be heading. For the Republicans, despite the inclusive images projected by ‘compassionate Conservatism’, the core platform focuses on using the budget surplus to introduce major tax cuts. In contrast, the Democrats made a pitch for their traditional policies, using the surplus for funding Medicare and Social Security. There are also major enduring differences on social issues like abortion and gay rights. And the campaign for Nader on the Green ticket and the presence of the Reform party also widens the political spectrum. If the major candidates continue to stress policy differences as they head into the Fall debates, this again suggests that the American public, if they are paying attention, will have a clearer incentive to vote since they could well believe that casting a ballot could make a difference. It is too early to tell whether the race will continue to be close, and whether the candidates will continue to press these themes, but there is at least the potential here that could sustain voter involvement and therefore maintain turnout at the ballot box.
Conclusions: Malaise, What Malaise?

No single piece of evidence about civic engagement that we have considered here can be regarded as decisive, this is not a neat and tidy issue, but the sheer weight of findings points in a consistent direction. The long-term pattern of trends in American civic engagement raises many puzzles requiring further analysis and this study can only sketch some of the possible explanations. But the media malaise thesis blaming changes in journalism for changes in American political interest, trust, and participation fits the timing of these trends too loosely to prove convincing. American journalism may, or may not, have changed as a result of the experiences of Vietnam and Watergate in the late 1960s/early 1970s or the rise of entertainment values in the news industry in the 1980s. But, if so, these events did not have any discernable consistent impact upon the American public, according to the indicators we have examined. It turns out that despite all the possible reasons why America may be ‘different’ to other democracies in these regards, in fact the evidence seems to point towards a remarkably similar pattern in the United States and in Europe.

Equally important, even the general ‘declinism’ thesis that has become so pervasive in accounts of American democracy receives little systematic support from the evidence. Yes, there have been important shifts over time in American civic engagement but the pattern in political interest, trust and turnout can be understood to reflect ‘1960s exceptionalism’, a bump in the road, rather than a steady secular decline. As always, with any analysis of trends, the selection of starting and ending points is critical. It is disingenuous and misleading to take the peak of turnout, in 1960, as the starting point for any analysis rather than examining the continuous series available in the NES from the early 1950s. Arguably most Americans would willingly opt for the more quiescent politics of the 1950s and the 1990s, rather than the heated and conflictual, if more participatory, 1960s. At the end of the twentieth century it appears that American democracy, and the American news media, is far healthier than many naysayers would have us believe.

It would be foolhardy to make any prognostications about the pattern of participation and turnout in the forthcoming November elections. Many developments between now and then could confound expectations, whether a torrent of negative ads, a steady widening of the lead for the front-runner, or a series of personal attacks in the debates. But before we assume that everything will inevitably be for the worse in the worst of all possible worlds, based on the analysis of both long-term trends and more scattered evidence from the campaign there are grounds to believe that trendless fluctuations in participation are as likely as secular decline.
Figure 1: Attention to campaign news, US Presidential elections 1952-96.
Predictors of Attention to Campaign News, US 1952-96

Source: NES 1952-96

Dot/Lines show Means

Linear Regression
Figure 3: Interest in political campaigns, US 1948-96

Q: "Some people don't pay much attention to political campaigns. How about you, would you say that you have been very much interested, somewhat interested, or not much interested in following the political campaigns so far this year?" Source: NES 1948-96
Figure 4: Interest in government and public affairs, US 1960-98
Figure 5:

Trends in American Political Trust

1958-1998

Source: NES Percentage Difference Index #
Figure 6

US Voting Turnout, 1946-96

Source: IDEA

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Figure 7: Campaign activism, US Presidential elections 1952-96
Figure 8:

Voter Involvement Index

Note: 1. “During the past week, how much attention did you pay to the presidential election campaign: a great deal, quite a bit, just some, only a little, or none?” 2. “Now we’d like you to think about the past day only. During the past day have you discussed the presidential campaign with anyone?” 3. “Still thinking about the past day only. Can you recall a particular news story about the presidential campaign that you read, saw, or heard during the past day?” 4. “Now we’d like to know about the past day only. During the past day, have you been doing any thinking about the presidential campaign, or is this something that you haven’t been thinking about?”

Source: Vanishing Voter Project, Joan Shorenstein Center, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Field work by ICR. Each survey is of a minimum of 1,000 adults nationwide. Questions reported below were asked of half the sample.
Figure 9:

Trends in Political Interest,
Mid-summer 1988-2000

Note: Interest ‘Quite a lot of interest in the coming Presidential election’.
Follow public affairs ‘Follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time’.
Follow news: ‘Follow news about candidates for the presidential elections very closely’.
Source: The Pew Research Center on the People & the Press.
**Figure 10:**

**Trends in Voting Intentions, April-August 2000**

Note: Average of all national US trial heat polls 1<sup>st</sup> April to 24<sup>th</sup> August 2000. Date is from the first day of fieldwork.

* Among registered voters ^ Excludes running mates

Source: [http://www.pollingreport.com/election.htm](http://www.pollingreport.com/election.htm)
Figure 11: Bush lead over Gore in State Opinion Polls, late July 2000

(*) It should be noted that parts of this chapter are drawn from Chapter 13 Pippa Norris A *Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Post-Industrial Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, October 2000).

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16 For a general discussion of these trends see Steven J. Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen. 1993. *Mobilization, Participation and Democracy in America*. New York: Macmillan. The temporary increase in donations that occurred in 1976 may have been caused by the new campaign finance reforms regulated by the Federal Election Commission.

17 At the time of writing, the official nominee for the Reform party ticket remains to be determined legally in many states.
