

Low voter turnout has consequences



Jared Roberts

America historically has claimed to be a very strong democracy on the domestic and global levels. However, a recent trend might be threatening this ideal. America's voter turnout has steadily declined since the 1940s and 50s, especially when compared to other advanced democracies. During 2012, the United States had a voter turnout of 53.4 percent of the voting age population, ranking very low compared to the top three countries, with Sweden at 82.6 percent, Turkey at 86.4 percent and Belgium at 87.2 percent, according to the Pew Research Center. When you look closer, the top three countries have compulsory voting laws, which can impact voter turnout, but other advanced democracies without compulsory voting laws, such as the United Kingdom and Canada, also have higher voter turnouts than the United States. In fact, out of the 34 countries surveyed in this study — only six of which have compulsory voting laws — the United States is ranked No. 31 in voter turnout.

Harvey J. Tucker, a political scientist from Texas A&M University, said voter turnout matters because elections are where decisions are made in modern democracies, and if there continues to be a lack of voter turnout, the votes will only represent a small sample of the overall population.

While voting is not the only important thing for a democracy to thrive, it is necessary for it to continue. The reason low voter turnout is so devastating to democracy is the people are not accurately represented — therefore, the country continues to function based on a small group of people's opinions. This means the people who always vote

make the decisions, even if those decisions do not benefit the country as a whole. This can lead to elected politicians who only have major campaign donors, such as corporations or wealthy citizens, on their minds, and pass policies that match the goals of those major donors.

One of the reasons voter turnout is low in the United States is we require citizens to register. Many people do not have the means to register, such as transportation or a valid form of identification, or do not want to go through the trouble of the registration process. Now, I am not saying registration is bad. It does have benefits, such as limiting voter fraud. However, it is one reason we see a lower voter turnout than other countries. Another reason is that we vote during the work week — while companies are required to let people leave to go vote, some people do not feel it is worth their time to leave and come back.

If we continue to let low voter turnout persist without trying to get more people involved, then this democracy — the democracy we praise ourselves for — will cease to exist. But there are things we can do to prevent this. By realizing low voter turnout can lead to a decrease in our democratic ideals, people can understand their impact and become more interested in fixing these problems.

One way to increase our voter turnout is to increase citizens' interest in politics. When people feel more connected to their politicians and the laws they pass, they are more likely to show their support or disapproval. This burden of engaging in the political process falls heavily on citizens — people will have to read about candidates and not just blindly believe the words candidates spout and promise. Also, while it is true one individual vote will not change an election — a reason cited by many people choosing not to vote — if everyone believes their vote will not have an impact, then the masses will fail to make their voices heard. I think one way we can fix this problem — and the lack of interest in politics in general — is to find a way to show people they should care.

Jared Roberts is a freshman political science major from Maryland Heights, Mo.



What do you like least about the residence halls?



Loring Shelburg
Senior

I live off-campus and honestly, the main reason I moved was gender-neutral housing issues. I live with a guy now and so that was a big issue for me. And as I got older, I got kind of tired of freshmen yelling and running down the halls, so that was a big factor too.



John Reinert
Junior

I think that I've never hung out with anyone besides on the first floor lobby or my floor. So a way to create an environment that isn't just so isolated to where you're staying would be very nice.



Amanda Roessler
Senior

...My first year, I lived in Missouri [Hall] and second year I lived in BNB and I feel like my first year was really great and I got to know a lot of people through living there, but when I lived in BNB it was really hard to connect with people. I think in some of the dorms they're really great about having activities and people get really involved but then some of them not so much.



Alicia Campbell
Senior

I know that we've been having a lot of issues with like, maintenance, like I've heard about bug infestations and we had a water leak, which was in Ryle. That was fixed, so that's good. Just trying to get those done as fast as possible and as efficient as possible, I suppose. Also, perhaps ... I know that quite a few people have roommate issues and so, finding some way to resolve those as fast as possible.



Jacob Stuckmeyer
Junior

I lived in C-Hall and I'd say probably one of the worst things about it was maybe trying to study in the lounge areas. Quiet hours were enforced, but there would be times where I'd go in there and there'd be people there not studying and playing games and stuff that made it difficult to concentrate ... But that's probably the worst thing, I think.

Truman should have democratically run residence halls



Will Chaney

When my grandfather attended Kansas State University, he lived in a "cooperative housing" arrangement called the Scholarship House. The 45 residents rotated through various duties, such as cooking and cleaning, and had meetings where they determined the common rules, decided what the House's budget would be and how it would be spent. It operated more or less democratically, with the exception of a "house mother" who created the work schedule, made sure that everything ran smoothly and taught basic table manners. Housing cooperatives have thrived in this country for many years, challenging students to directly participate in the creation of their living conditions. Truman State should follow this example and give democratic control of residence halls to the students who live there.

Several American universities formed dormitory cooperatives during the Great Depression as a way for students to save money on housing costs. They were basically housing cooperatives on a larger scale — students did most of the daily chores, elected leadership and decided on the rules residents would follow. Despite the disappearance of dormitory cooperatives during the 1950s, cooperative student housing is still common in the United States, with about 240 cooperatives serving 51 universities, according to a September 2007 US News article. Students who live in these mostly off-campus arrangements work about five hours a week, roughly the equivalent of Truman's scholarship jobs program. The costs are often less than half of what school dorms charge for room and board. For example, cooperative Robison Hall at University of California, Los Angeles, charged \$4,601 per year during 2007, less than half the university-run dorm price of \$11,212, according to the same article. This means each hour of work is equal to \$39 saved, making cooperatives a very economically attractive housing option.

In addition to the financial benefits, cooperative dormitories would provide indispensable experience in learning how to work with peers and participate in the democratic process. Students would attend regular meetings and voice their opinions about different issues they feel are relevant. They also would have to listen to opposing viewpoints and reevaluate their own positions about campus issues. This would supplement the critical thinking, argumentation and public speaking aspects of our liberal arts education through hands-on practice.

Many students at Truman currently complain about curfew rules, student adviser duties, emergency planning and other policies without having a real outlet to share their ideas. If residence halls were democratic, residents would be able to voice their concerns at the deliberations and debate potential resolutions, which would lead to meaningful solutions. In addition to making changes, students might gain a new appreciation for rules they otherwise thought were unnecessary. For example, while many residents — myself included — currently complain about fire drills, they might come to a new understanding of why such annoyances are essential once given the responsibility of creating safety policies. The powers and responsibilities that result from direct participatory democracy would grow our understanding of what it takes to run a society, even on a small scale like Truman. Perhaps most importantly, students would feel their opinion actually matters.

Such a fundamental change probably would have to be accompanied by other alterations to campus life, and might come into conflict with the University's nondemocratic institutions. Parts of the Student Conduct Code, which was written by the administration without the consent of the student body, might fall out of favor with students as they begin to openly discuss campus issues. For example, students in one residence hall might prefer quiet hours at an earlier or later time than what it is now, depending on the social environment of that residence hall. Students would have to work with the administration to resolve such conflicts on a case-by-case basis, and they would have to make compromises. Other rules and practices the nondemocratic institutions have created might also be challenged. The hiring and firing process for hall directors, student advisers, housekeepers and student workers might be changed according to the wishes of the student body.

In addition to changing the Code, the University might also create checks on student power. Major decisions that affect other parts of campus outside dorm life initially could require the approval of the administration. Students should keep an open dialogue with the administration as they take over the new responsibilities, and as students become more acclimated to running campus life, fewer checks would be necessary.

This is not to say everything will be changed — many University rules and policies generally are agreeable and would remain as they are now. Instead of wiping the slate clean and starting over, students would use their newfound democratic power to improve existing structures and truly make the most of their university experience.

Will Chaney is a sophomore economics major from Bridgeton, Mo.