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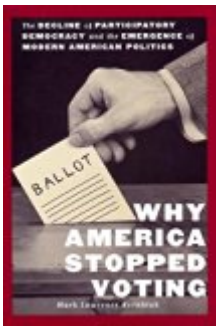

Mark Lawrence Kornbluh. *Why America Stopped Voting: The Decline of Participatory Democracy and the Emergence of Modern American Politics.* New York: New York University Press, 2000. xv + 243 pp. $40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8147-4708-7.

Reviewed by Mark W. Summers

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Somewhere around the dawn of the twentieth century, the political system reformed itself so badly that it may never recover. The law made voting cleaner, more orderly, more honest. The parties lost their grip over the election process and, to some extent, over the hearts of the electorate. At the same time, and not by coincidence, Americans dropped out of active political involvement in droves. More of them could vote than ever before; fewer of them wanted to. This is the story that historians have told, and with as many explanations for why and how it happened as there are monographs on the subject. Now Mark Lawrence Kornbluh brings that scholarship together and adds to it, in the first really comprehensive survey of *Why America Stopped Voting*.

An associate professor of history at Michigan State University, Kornbluh has had this book years in the making, since it began as a dissertation at Johns Hopkins, but the results are well worth the wait. Looking first at what partisanship meant in the 1800s, and how it permeated white adult males' lives, this monograph chronicles the transformation, rounding up the usual suspects and a good many more besides. It turns out that many of the competing historians are right, and mistaken only in deprecating rival theories of vote decline. Voters stopped voting for various reasons including the party system no longer had the organizational machinery or the set of rewards (the spoils, that is) to bring them out in force; the press and popular culture turned partisanship into a dirty word; social changes made politics so much less central to the public's sense of how to amuse itself; the voting laws were changed to make it harder for would-be electors simply to show up on Election Day and cast a ballot; American politics in the 1890s evolved into two sectional, uncompetitive one-party systems, instead of a national, competitive two-party system; functions that once the party-run state had done were taken out of the arena of competitive politics and handed over to administrative agencies; and, the needs of the burgeoning republic were growing too technical for political hacks to handle them, and too diverse for grass-roots democracy to meet them all. The growth of an administrative state only sped up as the partisan competitiveness diminished. With no pressing

need for spoils, and with laws on the books cutting into the range of those spoils, the parties no longer were willing to fight to the death to keep every function of government in their hands, and, with some of the most ticklish responsibilities, even welcomed the chance to be free of what might be a political liability if the voters had to pass on how elected officials had handled matters. But the more independent agencies made policy, the less reason voters had to reward or punish parties at election time--or even to show up at all. Government became something separate from politics and still more from the people. Somehow, in making good government, reforms had stripped it of its good name as a people's government.

Kornbluh is at his very best in analyzing voter turnout, using sophisticated methods and statistical techniques. He shows when the vote fell off and where, and by how much. This is no modest achievement. Nor is it so paltry an accomplishment to give a convincing, comprehensive synthesis of the reasons why and the mechanics of how this shift occurred. It matters, if we are to appreciate the mess that American politics are in today, and how little hope there is of reversing the trend.

And yet, granting that *America Stops Voting* is a tremendous work of synthesis, and a very useful echo of many other fine books and discoveries (and, when it comes to statistical analysis a very good work of original scholarship in the decline of popular politics, South as well as North), the delving moles of the historical profession cannot read the endnote without a pang--however impressed and admiring they certainly will be. There can hardly be a secondary source that Kornbluh has missed. That is the book's strength, and the shadow of what many readers will find its weakness. To see how politics worked--and stopped working--there are so many other sources that capture both the life and the day-to-day meaning better than an article in a scholarly journal: legislative debates, memoirs, newspapers, congressional hearings, and private manuscripts, to name just a few. Anyone wanting to see vote buying in all its rich variety would do well to dip into the Houk Family Papers in Knoxville, and for the excitement, the hoopla, and the sinuous partisan designs behind so many reforms, newspapers like the *New York Herald*, the *New York Sun*, and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, to name but a few, hardly can be done without. Kornbluh has none of them. A quotation from the Congressional Record turns out to be a quotation second-hand, taken from a history of Republican administrative structures, but there are not even many of these. Readers hoping for a glimpse of the mysticism and fanaticism that stirred the heart and soul of the partisan, the white-hot passion of the reformer, had best look elsewhere. Those who are comfortable with vote-explaining formulae like "PPVI=[abs(P%Dy - P%Dy+4)] + [abs (P%Ry - P%Ry+4)]/2" will aappreciate the quantitative measures, as well as accepting them on faith. Those that love a mystery (one easily solved, fortunately, if one reads the text at the same time as the tables) will delight in pie-graphs labeled Figure 4.9, 4.10, 4.11, and so on, with no other explanation or title explaining just what the pie-graphs represent.

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