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Undergraduate



A Look At The Merced Voter Turnout and Political
Activity

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Abstract

Low voter turnout and political participation are certainly a cause for alarm for many as ideas of accurate representation of a given community becomes blurred. This paper sets off to define the potential causes for the low turnout, first by singling out the city of Merced and its demographics, and then by offering a potential aid to remedy this problem.



Literature Review

Gains Struggles and Lacks Will

Nothing speaks more to the ineffectiveness of local government than the political action of voting. In theory, voting allows the people of a society to pick and choose which candidates best suit their needs in a political office; a process used to elect candidates that will listen and project the values of the community. In practice however, the city of Merced does not experience the representation by office that the voting process promises. Merced instead faces the risk of supplanting an accurate representation of democracy with a corrupt self-serving government. The reasoning behind the growing corruption of government lies with the low voter turnout of the varying living circumstances of the population: those experiencing a struggle for survival in life and those whose values have changed because they experience apathy towards their government.

Merced Voter Registration at a Glance

Before tackling the reasoning behind the corruption of the Merced government, it would be wise to understand the voting process in Merced, as it is necessary to make comparisons between the theory and the practical application. Before one can vote, they must register with the county of Merced or choose the options of registering in an government office or online. Those registered to vote, cast ballots, usually by mail, to elect office holders that would act as representatives of the district. Political scientists then study the results of the votes, using the voter turnout to measure amount of people within a district that participated in the voting process. Merced's turnout in particular has seen a major decline in the amount of people actually voting for office holders, raising questions of proper representation in the City of Merced. Merced's turnout rate is about 22% of the registered voters, astonishingly small when compared



to the large population of the Merced County. An issue of majority, representative of the needs or preferences of the people, of Merced is created; the question is whether they are being taken into account in the elections of city officials. As the problem of lower voter turnout worsens, the majoritarian model of government is shattered, blurring the idea that the majority wins election, given that the majority of people actually aren't voting. The people of Merced begin to distrust their local government for this very reason, believing that their vote ultimately doesn't count in a corrupt political system. The 22% voter turnout points to the lack of political involvement of the Merced community and their distrust of the political process, uncaring about the select few office holders who may have taken the low voter turnout to their advantage.

In actuality, the people of Merced are unable to vote due to many instances of non-citizenship and economic struggle. The voter turnout becomes a much more complicated problem to tackle than previously expected with the diagnosis ultimately being the lack of awareness within the Merced community. The different struggles and value systems within the demographics of Merced, the lack of education and poverty are causes to the lack of involvement.

Representation, Education, And Labor in Merced

The aforementioned issues of lack of education and poverty clearly indicate a misrepresentation of the people of Merced in political office. The decreased levels of education and income do play a part in shaping how much political participation a city will receive. According to the US Census 68.0% of the population of Merced have degree of High school or lower while 60% of the population falls in the labor force (Census). These numbers detail why many people in Merced aren't voting in elections: they are far too busy working and supporting their families to be interested in politics. Political scientist and writer Aina Gallego states not a



causality of education and work to increased voting, but a definite correlation between the two. Gallegos describes how “Education positively impacts the vote through many intermediary variables; it enhances political interest, the income of the respondent, network centrality, political knowledge” (Gallego, 242). Gallegos explains why those with a lower education level might not take initiative in voting leading to national averages showing that higher education levels correspond with higher income, easier work, and higher interest. The 60% of the citizens in the labor force tell a different story however; it can be deducted that in the city of Merced, those with the high school level education or lower are less likely to vote due to extensive work hours and other basic needs they seek to meet.

Socioeconomic Status Role

Correspondingly, the personal matters of the individuals in terms of household size, and income only hinder the growth of votes casted in elections. The city of Merced in particular experiences an alarming increase in poverty, which alters voter turnout. The poverty rate in Merced is 21%, double the state average along with a staggering 18.8% of unemployment (Merced.ca). This is important because the positive correlation is clear here as well: lower income citizens are less likely to participate in the political life of their town or county due to their unmet needs pertaining to livelihood. The reason behind this is those with less income tend to not want to be bothered by the political process, as their lives are dependent on work or finding work to provide for their families. Political scientist, and researcher from Oxford University, Lucy Barnes details how income of an average voter plays a role in turnout. Barnes estimates the lower voter turnout creates “inequality [which] implies a concentration of resources at the high end of the distribution, providing more resources for redistribution from the perspective of individuals – voters – with incomes below the average”(Barnes, 85). Barnes



shows that the income of the voter indicates where resources such as public goods are being distributed. The higher the income equals more power in terms of being able to vote.

According to the Census statistics, Merced has an average median income of \$43,066, with an average family size of 3.35 (Census). Considering the family size and low income, Merced citizens are not shown to have the level of pull in the political process than those with higher incomes. This unfortunately only heightens the state of government corruption in Merced, as the candidates begin to only target voters of higher income and higher education. The majoritarian model of democracy is shifted to that of Elite theory model, allowing only those with higher education and income to vote and hold power. This not only hinders improvements in voter turnout, but it also presents an example of corruption that the younger generation, those without families or average income, is exposed too. Naturally, large distrust from the governed and apathy about the political process to fix the turnout is created furthering the lack of political involvement.

Distrusting the local government is indeed a cause for alarm because it only increases the problem of larger amount of nonvoters. Those actually exposed to the voting process, are typically middle-aged to elderly, proving an example of the political process in action to the younger generation. According to table 430 of the Bureau of Census, those aged 45 and older hold over half of all votes accounted for in both presidential and congressional elections (Census). This trend can be explained by the cultural impacts of the older generation; those who were not a exposed to various media biases that may persuade them in opposition of a vote. The regional information of the different city districts found by the Merced Downtown Neighborhood Association detail how those aged 20-60 were found to make up the majority of the voters given the specific district they were in. (DNA 3). This correlation becomes more complicated than



simple interest in the political system. Journalist Matthew Record states “the easiest nuts and bolts answer to why young people don’t vote is there are bureaucratic obstacles to getting registered and then getting to the polling place and voting.” (Record, 1). Record uses statistical data like the census to back the claim that younger people are turned off to the voting process because of inabilities to vote by registration and non-citizenship, and transportation to get them to the voting polls. The growing apathy is very clear here, as young voters simply do not have the resources or the patience to deal with the process of registering and going to vote. Younger voters allow the older generation with different value system to vote accordingly explaining why the turnout is lower for the country given the evidence by the Census. With this in mind apathy does also grow due to a lack of interest in politics as well.

Issues with Attracting the Average Voter

Moreover, the decreasing interest of the voters in the Merced County causes a great decline in the public interest to vote, creating apathy towards the political process and allowing for the representative democracy to fail. This is the topic discussed by published political scientists, Jan Leighley and Jonathan Nagler, who argue in favor of more political publicity to decrease apathy within voters. Using the Oregon registration as an example they note that despite the ease in voting due to a new policy, “citizens ...[are] more likely to cast ballots if the candidates take distinctive positions on issues of importance. If citizens see a difference between the candidates, they will be more likely to vote” (Leighley & Nagler, 1) The argument asserted is that even with the simplicity of registration, voters need clear distinctions between candidates in order to be prompted to vote. This distinctiveness caused by the candidates raise controversy and news, allowing for the word to be spread throughout a district. This limits the effects of the lower economical status. Although the elections are based on a two-party system, they have been



democratically run by officials who win every single election. This can cause corruption from within Merced's government, allowing for certain political figures to notice the trend and win elections substantially by exploiting the flaw of the popular political party from within a small pool of voters.

According to the local newspaper the Merced Sunstar, democrats such as Jim Costa gain almost all of the media attention. This does not address any sort of stimulation from within the Merced community, causing apathy for the citizens. With no opposition, candidates like Costa are able to win elections with relative ease given the low amount of people voting, again questioning whether the city of Merced is practicing a majoritarian model of representation. Publicity raises awareness within a community and repetitive headlines do not attract interest. However those actually viewing the media can vary, different ages and backgrounds might also prevent them from going and casting a vote. Corruption then ensues as politicians can abuse media bias and other outlets of information to confirm their success in a campaign.

Pursuing a more accurate representation within the country is ideal in creating a better democracy. Considering the media biases and the age distributions, those entitled to be heard simply aren't getting the sufficient amount of representation, leaving Merced County to be deprived of any political change. The low voter turnout is indeed the cause of the lack of change but it is not the will of the Merced people to do so. Many examples exist that expose these trends and offer bad models to younger generations who become interested in politics. It is however in our interest to raise the turnout to acquire the best model of a representative democracy and many solutions have been raised to prompt the question. Moving away from the Elite Theory model, Merced can offer several solutions such as pre-registration programs in school districts giving the younger population a better chance to be politically active. Raising the awareness of



younger voters is the best solution in achieving a better-proportioned democracy. It is the only way to reverse the corruption of Merced officials.

How Do We Resolve This?

Without representation, the city of Merced faces the treat of a corrupt government with unlimited self-serving powers and accountable to no constituency. A representative democracy is a right and the American people are owed that their voices be heard independent of income and education level. Upon reviewing and researching the status of such a democracy in the city of Merced, the results are shockingly upsetting. Merced greatly lacks the representation needed because of a multitude of confounding factors such as socioeconomic status, limit and decrease the overall voter turnout. Increasing voter turnout in the city of Merced can be done by addressing the growing apathy, and by solving the issues of poverty and lack of education. The reversal of Merced's low voter turnout can be feasibly achieved by implementing fostering unity within the community with the help of programs and clubs offered by the University of California, Merced.

To improve voter turnout in Merced can be a rather complicated task if the complexity of the issue is not understood. The voter turnout is a means of measuring how many citizens within a community are participating in the political process of voting, a tool very useful in dictating whether the views of the people are being projected by the politicians elected in the specific area. Based on the research gathered, education and economic status of the citizens played the biggest role in effecting the voter turnout because lower educated citizens and those with a lower economic standing made the bulk of Merced's total population, a bulk that was not voting.



Prioritize Community and Civic Engagement

Personally, targeting the fringes of dismayed citizens has proven to be most effective in increasing voter turnout. Simple plans such as phone calls, mail or email, and more successfully personal door-to-door outreach can be implemented in neighborhoods surrounding labor-intensive districts to obtain the best results. Professor and Political Scientist Yao-Yuan Yeh, touches upon this topic in his lectures at the University of California, Merced. When asked about the voter turnout problem in Merced, Yeh concluded that “The best and easiest way to increase the voter turnout for senate local elections in Merced is to create a unified community by engaging [the population] in information promoting important issues that effect Merced to appeal to [the [citizens].” (Lecture). Yeh described that exposing certain relevant issues such as crime rate or poverty generally gains the attention of voters, going as far as even pressuring them to vote. Simply by exposure to information, Merced can indeed promote and encourage the vote without alienating the labor-focused majority.

Correspondingly, Yeh also encouraged reading work “*Getting Out to Vote*”, a novel written by Yale and Colombia Political scientist and researchers, Alan S Gerber and Donald P. Green. Using field experiments on randomly assigned individuals, Gerber and Green were able to conclude the validity of turnout increase theory in a real life practice. They concluded that personal contact of voters either by door-to-door caressing, phone calls, voting events, and even flyers had the highest statistical jump of voters. One study in the book pertained to the door to door field experiment of awareness, concluding that “[Despite] geographically dispersed [subjects] and [a] contact rate [of] 9 percent, Voter turnout increased 43.5 -45.3 suggesting a large effect” (Gerber, Green 117). The variety and high number of field experiment such as Gerber and Green’s work give feasibility to programs in Merced as the results are replicable



even in other experiments done by professors and graduate studies at the University of California Merced. Professors such as Jessica Trounstone and Thomas G. Hansford both invoke the political stimuli needed to gain more attention to increase the vote, separately exposing their results of their voter turnout increases and conclusions in their separate journal entrees. The research only strengthens the feasibility of such a procedure to be conducted and with the help of the University of California Merced's students, the increase in voter turnout is inevitable.

The Role of The University of California, Merced

Certainly, the practical tactics of renowned political researchers can be applied to the city of Merced as well. Using the University of California Merced's resources is vital to visualizing the same principles of the experiment because of the funding and sense of community the university promotes with multicultural students. Political organizations on the such as the Democrats at UCM, College Republicans, and Young Americans for Liberty all have members willing to promote their club onto to the UC Campus, using the city of Merced as a means to promote their cause and beliefs. Members of each organization can really tackle the problem by simply using the most effective means of increasing turnout: personal contact. Ideally, club members of 15 or more can set a number of homes to reach not to invoke a forceful vote, but to kindly inform citizens, similarly to how Yeh described, using elections and prevalent social problems. In doing so these organizations promote themselves, social issues, and the University of California, creating a sense of unity in Merced to prompt the increase in votes. Although not every home will have registered voters simply acknowledging the process may be enough to prompt citizens.

Conversely the argument remains about the funding of such a procedure, given that the organizations are not seasoned practitioners of field experiments. This element is lightened



considering the campus itself manages and oversees funding for all its organizations. For example, enlisting the help of the student body government, known as the Associated Students for The University of California, Merced, would be the first place to start. This is not however the only means of obtaining funding. These organizations can also seek the help from other UC campuses or university that have similar organizations. The Young Americans for Liberty for example obtains it's funding from a higher organization under the same name.

Even with the supply of funding, the act of devoting time to simply expose information about the political process is relatively cheap. The Merced Sunstar had a similar idea in promoting the vote by allowing office elections concurrent with the general elections. Sunstar reporter Thaddeus Miller professes an increase in turnout in his article, "Estimating the Electoral Effects of Voter Turnout". Miller argues that an increase in voters can be achieved by moving the election dates to coexist with larger more successful general election dates (Miller). This makes the information gathered by the students at the university to be much more organized. Students are then able to express the views of the candidates of each party, addressing the issues alongside the potential candidates. This level of promotion is similar to the Green and Gerber experiment, which obtain large results. These trends have already been taken into consideration and it is ultimately up to the future students of the university to continue the work.

The on-campus political organizations have already taken the first steps in addressing the low voter turnout. Merced's lack of representation is not a problem taken lightly as it undermines the rights of the citizen to express their ideals to their government. Young Americans for Liberty for example has undergone the proposal steps by simply going out and registering the homeless to vote. This is a promising sign that encourages the unification of a community going against the corrupted Merced local government. However, this process does not occur overnight, it is a



tedious process with a long-term goal of rebuilding the majoritarian representation model of government. The political organizations on campus not only rely on the university resources and funding, but they also rely on those new individuals willing to take the reigns and promote the vote further. The clubs rely on its members, who are willing to devote the time and effort to answer the voting problem within the city. Merced's crisis with voting is like a mental wound in the human emotion, able to heal with the passage of time. And just like the University of California, Merced will grow in size and community over the years, so will the amount of Merced voters.



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