Political Participation Essay, Research Paper

Political participation has many different forms. The different forms are placed into two categories, conventional participation and unconventional participation. Some examples of conventional participation are writing letters, attending meetings, working in campaigns, contributing money, contacting officials, and voting. Demonstrations and boycotts are examples of unconventional participation. The most pure and most effective form of political participation is naturally, voting. Despite the fact that voting is our primary way to exercise our freedom, less than half of people eligible to vote in our last election actually did so.

Curtis B. Gans, director of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, is deeply concerned about the low voting turnouts. Gans focuses primarily on the 1996 election. Several factors contributed to what should have been an exceptionally high turn out that year. An additional 5 million citizens were able to vote as a result of the motor-voter law. Candidates, parties and interest groups spent record amounts of money on the campaign. There was an unprecedented level of voter mobilization activities by groups such as labor, business, environmentalists, Christian fundamentalists, women, and youths. The media contributed to public awareness through debates, debate watches, free airtime to candidates, ad watches, and through civic journalism1. Major efforts of objective institutions such as Rock the Vote and First Vote focused on getting youths and non-voters to register and vote. Despite all of these attempts to boost the turn out, there was only a 49 percent turnout, the lowest in 72 years.1

The only thing that you can really say about the disgrace to democracy that occurred in 1996 is why. There are many answers to the question; some have been building up for years. As the result of events such as Vietnam, Watergate, and Iran-Contra, the media over-exposing every scandal, and a series of broken political promises, the seeds of cynicism have been sowed deep within the psyche of the American citizen. Television has turned citizens into spectators of politics rather than being participants as they had been in the past. The increase in technology, specifically computers and the Internet, distract people from engaging in civil responsibilities.1 This means that if Al Gore had never created the Internet, it is possible that there could have been a higher voter turn out.

In addition to the compiling issues of broken trust and apathy, there were also three major problems in the 1996 election1. The first problem was the matter of respect between the candidates. Although they maintained an air of civility during the debates, some of their ads were little more than slander. Both sides aired commercials embellishing facts, making serious allegations about their opponent s legitimacy as a candidate, and most importantly confusing the voters. If both candidates are being depicted as potential threats to the country if elected, how can you decide whom to vote for? The second issue is party alignment. One of the major obstacles that Dole had to face was partisanship. Republicans had moved so far to the right that they had become out of touch with the American public. At least the Republicans knew where they were though. The Democratic Party had an out of date platform and tried to associate itself with the middle class at every possible opportunity. Together, they accomplished