

FORUM 411

Engaging Arizona's Leaders

Disbanding Arizona's **AWOL** Army: Getting Out the Voters

They're everywhere among us. They stand with us in the checkout line, sit a few seats away at the Diamondbacks' game. They're members of an enormous, invisible army that poses among the most serious threats to Arizona democracy. It consists of Arizona's AWOLs, the million-plus men and women who are eligible to vote but consistently do not, passing on the simplest and most powerful of civic tasks. As we approach a primary election in the middle of a statewide budget crisis, they seem poised to go missing again.

You may be one of them.

ARIZONA'S AWOLs IN 2008

Voting-eligible population:*	4,080,672
Total Registered Voters:	2,987,451
Total turnout:	2,320,851
Absent Without Leave:	1,759,821**

*Citizens of voting age who are not convicted felons

**Turnout minus eligible population

Sources: United States Elections Project, http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm, and Arizona Secretary of State

AWOL, the military acronym for "absent without leave," might seem a harsh designation. But for a functioning democracy, this situation reflects a serious public disconnect, a broad-daylight dereliction of civic duty. Voting everywhere is held up as something approaching a sacred duty. We're taught in school about its vital importance to our republican form of democracy. Every single Arizona politician on all sides of every issue sings its praises. Indeed, it was Arizonans who created the Kids Voting program¹ in 1988 that has since gone nationwide.





Yet Arizona consistently records among the lowest voting rates of all states, in a country that records among the lowest rates of all democracies.² In the past 15 national elections, Arizona's turnout of eligible voters³ exceeded 50% just three times, peaking at 57% in the historic 2008 presidential race. In the 2006 Congressional elections, as the Iraq War raged on, terrorism loomed, and Arizona and the nation began a slide into economic disaster, just 39% of eligible Arizonans turned out.

Who are Arizona's AWOLs? We can identify some of them by looking at state and national voting data. Young people tend to vote less. Low-income people tend to vote less. People with low levels of education tend to vote less. Latinos and African Americans tend to vote less. For example, only 7% of all Arizonans who voted in the 2008 general election were under 25 years old; 24% of voters were 65 or older.⁴ For another, Arizona's Latinos made up 19% of eligible voters in 2008, but only 12% of actual voters, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey. Non-Hispanic Whites comprised 70% of eligible voters but 78% of all who turned out. Put another way, 67% of all eligible Non-Hispanic Whites cast ballots in 2008, while only 52% of African Americans and 37% of Latinos did. All told, of course, the million-plus army of Arizona AWOLs includes all population groups.

**“BAD OFFICIALS ARE ELECTED BY GOOD CITIZENS
WHO DO NOT VOTE.”**

-- GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

GETTING REGISTERED

Voters must register 29 days prior to an election.

To register, you:

- must be a citizen of the United States
- must be a resident of Arizona
- must be 18 years of age or more on or before the day of the next regular General Election
- must not be a convicted felon, unless your civil rights have been officially restored
- must not have been adjudicated mentally incompetent

For further information, including what documents are required to register, visit the Arizona Secretary of State's Office at www.azsos.gov/election/prop_200/poll_identification.htm

Why Not?

Why are more than a million Arizonans absent on election day? It's true that voting can be a chore: In the upcoming election, for instance, 356 people are running. Across the different election cycles and governmental levels, Arizonans are asked to cast ballots for—among other offices—the presidency, U.S. Senate, House of Representatives, Arizona Corporation Commission, governor, attorney general, secretary of state, superintendent of public instruction, treasurer, and state mining inspector. The electorate also chooses members of the state senate and house, county attorneys, county sheriffs, county supervisors, justices of the peace and constables, and local mayors and council members.

Then there are initiatives, referendums, and recalls. Indeed, Arizona is among the top five states in the use of initiatives, and many people praise them as vital mechanisms of “direct democracy” that have produced important results. On the other hand, ballot initiatives in particular can reflect the wishes of powerful interests rather than ordinary citizens; critics also argue that deciding complex public issues via the ballot box rather than legislative deliberation worsens the disconnect between voters and lawmakers.

As for low voter turnout, one school of thought suggests that we really shouldn't worry. Residents are free to choose not to vote, this argument goes, and may abstain simply because they're generally satisfied with the way things are. Yet polls repeatedly show that Arizonans are disappointed with their political leaders, mistrustful of governmental officials, and convinced that those in power seldom work for their interests. A 2009 statewide survey, for example, found that only 10% of respondents believe that their

PRIMARIES MEAN A LOT

Votes Received by Arizona's Legislative Leaders in the 2008 Primary

Sen. Jorge Luis Garcia (D), Senate minority leader	9,788
Sen. Bob Burns (R), Senate president	12,967
Rep. Kirk Adams (R), speaker of the House	10,820
Rep. David Lujan (D), House minority leader	4,860

Source: Arizona Secretary of State

elected officials represent their interests, and only 10% rated officials' performance as "very good."⁵ So why are so many of them AWOL? Several reasons are suggested:

- Arizonans as a whole tend to be younger, less educated, and less wealthy than the national average—all indicators of lower voter turnout.
- The transience of Arizona's population means that many residents are either new to the state, shortly about to leave, or both. They may feel unacquainted with the issues and candidates.
- Many Arizonans are said to be suspicious of government; for example, a 2008 Arizona Indicators poll found that only 7% of respondents trusted local officials "a great deal."⁶
- Arizona law requires voters to register 29 days before an election. Registration requirements are viewed by most scholars as a barrier to turnout.⁷ By contrast, some states permit same-day registration; some countries automatically register citizens as voters.⁸
- People don't bother voting because they feel one vote more or less won't make a difference in an election. This argument is not without merit; one analysis of past American elections found that outcomes are rarely close and almost never decided by one vote.⁹ Indeed, some scholars have argued that, given the personal "costs" of voting, it's irrational to do so.¹⁰

This last issue points to a fundamental truth that also pertains to other forms of civic action: Individual actions that mean little in themselves can, when added together, have a major impact. Whether one person votes or not will almost certainly make no difference in an election outcome. But millions of chronic no-shows can undermine a functioning democracy. Voting, then, is something done to benefit the community as a whole as much as ourselves. Voters can be motivated by a sense of performing a civic duty, or by a desire to communicate their political views to whoever ends up in power. But the act—though performed alone and in secret—may be best understood as an expression of collective concern and mutual respect. If that's so, what message are the million-plus AWOLs sending their fellow citizens?

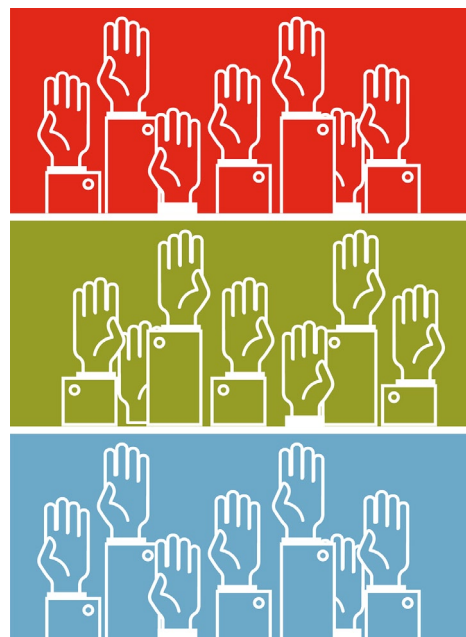
Drawing Better Lines

Some Arizonans say they don't bother voting because the system is "rigged" in favor of one group or another. It may surprise them to hear that many scholars are sympathetic to this view. "Rigged" may be an overstatement, but it is true that voting districts in Arizona and elsewhere are carefully drawn and fiercely contested by both parties because of the outcomes' impact on individual elections and on longer-term political fortunes. The nation's constitutional principle of "one person, one vote" requires all local, state and federal

KEY ELECTION DATES, 2010

- July 26 (at midnight)—Registration for primary election closes
- July 29 - Early voting for primary election begins
- August 24 - Primary Election
- October 4 (at midnight)—Registration for general election closes
- October 7 - Early voting for general election begins
- November 2 - General Election

Source: Arizona Secretary of State



ARIZONA'S TURNOUT IN THE 2008 ELECTION

Age	Reporting as Having Voted*
18 to 24	43.2%
25 to 44	54.7%
45 to 64	66.3%
65 to 74	73.2%
75+	63.4%

Voting Groups*	% Voting
% of all citizens	56.9%
% of males	57.6%
% of females voting	62.1%
% of Non-Hispanic Whites	67%
% of African Americans**	52.4%
% of Asian Americans**	59.9%
% of Hispanics	36.6%

* % of U.S. citizens age 18 or higher

** these data have a large margin of error

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey

Age Groups Voting	% of the Electorate
Under 25	7%
25-34	13%
35-44	15%
45-54	20%
55-64	20%
65+	26%

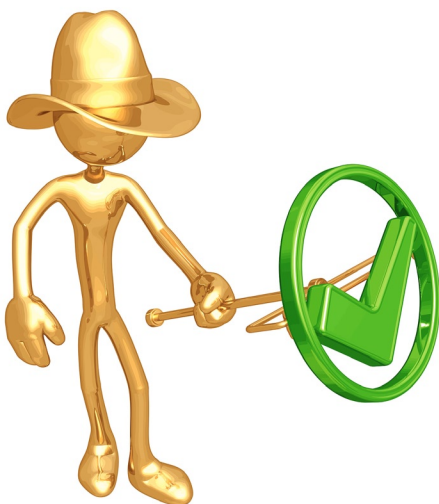
Source: Voter Contact Services' National Political Database

legislative districts to be redrawn every 10 years after the census to keep the districts roughly equal in population. However, states can accomplish this through a variety of ways, and the process has been the subject of numerous court battles.

It is perhaps inevitable that both major political parties seek a pattern of districts that most favors election of their candidates. The outcome in Arizona? Only about four of the state's 30 legislative districts are truly competitive. That is, the state's voting districts have been drawn so that nearly all are "safe" districts—containing clear majorities of Republican or Democratic voters. Thus in some districts, the candidate who wins the Republican primary is virtually assured victory in the general election; in other districts, the same is true for Democrats. This then places great importance on the primary elections, which tend to draw even fewer voters than the general elections. Substantial political power can thus be wielded by legislators whose primary tallies totaled a mere 10,000 votes or so. Primaries can also be dominated by partisan-minded voters who may support more extreme candidates. The partisan nature of primary elections is suggested by the fact that in the 2008 general election, 24% of all voters were neither Republican nor Democrats; in the 2008 primaries only 9% were.¹¹ In Arizona's last seven primary elections for statewide races, turnout has never exceeded one-fourth of registered voters.

In California, enough voters were concerned about the primary elections that they approved a proposition on this year's ballot to establish an "open primary" system. Proposition 14 changes the primary election process for congressional, statewide, and legislative races to allow all voters to choose any candidate regardless of the candidate's or voter's political party preference. The two candidates receiving the greatest number of votes will appear on the general election ballot regardless of party preference.¹² Arizona currently has a "partially closed" primary, in which voters must vote for one party's candidates in non-presidential races, but can choose which party.

One reason Arizona has almost no competitive voting districts is that federal law does not name competitiveness as the ultimate standard in drawing districts. The courts have ruled that other goals, including equalization of populations and geographic compactness, must take precedence. Arizona is also one of 16 states required to have either the Department of Justice or the federal court in Washington, D.C., approve any redrafted maps because of their history of discriminatory practices.¹³ Arizona's district maps are drawn by an Independent Redistricting Commission created by statewide vote in 2000. It contains five members, no more than two of whom can be from the same party. The panel's first efforts were messy at best. Clashes and confusion over the 2004 maps, for example, meant that nine of 30 districts included races where candidates ran unopposed.¹⁴ Final federal recognition and approval of the 2002 districts did not come until 2009.¹⁵ The coming round of re-mapping will likely be just as contentious, especially as Arizona's population growth is likely to earn it a ninth seat in Congress.



Coming Clean

A major effort intended to make Arizona’s electoral system more competitive was narrowly approved by voter initiative in 1998. Only the second of its type in the nation, Clean Elections is an optional program that requires candidates who choose to run as “Clean Elections candidates” to limit their spending and forego money from outside funding sources. To qualify, candidates must collect a specified number of individual \$5 contributions; they can then receive public funding for the primary and general elections, and—until the U.S. Supreme Court recently blocked it—could receive additional funds if needed to match spending by opponents.

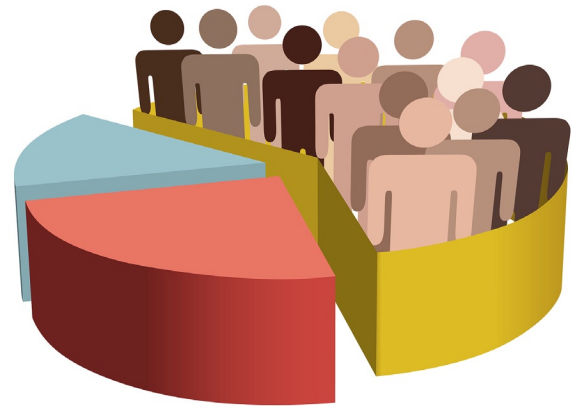
The program has been controversial from the start. Supporters say Clean Elections boosts voters’ confidence in the system, opens the door to a wider range of candidates and loosens the hold of lobbyists and wealthy supporters. Opponents charge that it interferes with voters’ free-speech rights, unfairly penalizes non-Clean Elections candidates and forces Arizonans to support (with public funds) candidates they oppose. Critics also say the relatively small number of \$5 contributions required for candidates to qualify has enabled more extremist candidates to run and win, because they no longer have to appeal to a broad sector of the electorate. Some lawmakers in the 2010 session tried unsuccessfully to eliminate matching funds and to ask voters to repeal Clean Elections altogether. A federal court judge ruled in favor of a separate legal challenge to the matching funds provision, but was overturned by the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals in May. In June, the U.S. Supreme Court blocked the matching funds provision until further notice.

What to Do

A number of law and policy changes have been suggested to increase voter turnout, including:

Proposed Change	Arguments For	Arguments Against
Make election day a holiday.	This wouldn’t require voters to skip work.	Holidays are expensive; those who really want to vote, will.
Permit registration on election day.	Early registration requirements sets up unnecessary barriers.	Prior registration cuts down on voter fraud.
Have every citizen automatically registered at age 18.	This would completely overcome the barrier presented by registration.	This could make fraudulent voting harder to catch; citizens who truly wish to vote will register.
Allow felons to vote after they complete their sentences.	They have already paid their “debt to society.”	They have shown themselves to have no respect for the rule of law.
Make voting compulsory, as it is in many other countries.	Voting is a duty of citizenship and should be enforced as such.	Compulsory voting goes against our notions of personal liberty.
Provide more publicly-funded information about candidates and issues.	Voters who know about candidates and issues are more likely to vote.	Sufficient information is already available; those who are truly interested will use it.
Reduce the number of elected officials.	Many positions that require specific knowledge or training, such as judges and school superintendents, might better be appointed.	Requiring officials to run for office forces them to adhere more closely to the people’s will.
Restrict the use of ballot initiatives.	Often financed by wealthy interests, this mechanism is overused in Arizona and only worsens citizens’ disconnect with their legislature.	Ballot initiatives are the classic expression of “direct democracy” and the last resorts for citizens who find their officials unresponsive.
Encourage volunteerism and other forms of civic activity.	Promoting good civic habits will lead more citizens to vote as well.	“Volunteering” should be just that—voluntary. People should remain free to participate or not and to vote or not.
Adopt an open primary system as California has.	It would reduce the number of extreme candidates.	Party labels actually help voters choose candidates they align with.

Source: Adapted from *By the People, Citizenship in 21st Century America*, Center for Deliberative Democracy, 2007, MacNeil/Lehrer Productions



STARTING THEM EARLY

Kids Voting is a nonprofit, nonpartisan program founded in Arizona in 1988 by three business people who launched a school-based project to introduce children to civic issues and the voting process. They hoped such early exposure would lead to a lifetime of participation and citizenship. In 1991, Kids Voting became two separate organizations: Kids Voting Arizona and Kids Voting USA, which expanded the program throughout the United States. The 2008 election drew the largest Kids Voting AZ turnout in the organization’s history, with 352,506 ballots counted.

Source: www.kidsvotingaz.org

ARIZONA VOTING IN NATIONAL ELECTIONS

Year	Election	AZ % VEP*	AZ Rank	U.S. % VEP
1980	Pres	46.2%	46	54.2%
1982	Cong	36.0%	42	42.1%
1984	Pres	47.7%	47	55.2%
1986	Cong	37.4%	35	38.1%
1988	Pres	47.7%	44	52.8%
1990	Cong	41.8%	23	38.4%
1992	Pres	55.7%	35	58.1%
1994	Cong	39.1%	35	41.1%
1996	Pres	45.6%	47	51.7%
1998	Cong	31.5%	45	38.1%
2000	Pres	45.6%	49	54.2%
2002	Cong	35.9%	44	39.5%
2004	Pres	54.1%	46	60.1%
2006	Cong	38.9%	35	40.4%
2008	Pres	56.2%	46	61.7%

* % of voter eligible population cast for highest office on ballot

Source: United States Elections Project, <http://elections.gmu.edu/index.html>

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Some of these changes might help. But streamlining the mechanics of voting can only go so far; the more fundamental problem may be that too many Arizona AWOLs fail to see the connection between how they mark a ballot and how their lives are affected every day by government. If they did, one would expect that their oft-stated dissatisfaction with their leaders would prompt more voting rather than less. Instead, their collective shrug suggests that Arizonans' alienation from their political system has reached truly dangerous levels.

The state thus faces an especially challenging chicken-and-egg problem. Arizona's AWOLs must return to the voting booths in sizable numbers if residents are to change their governments in the ways they tell pollsters they desire—and especially if they seek to awaken (reawaken?) a broader sense of shared civic responsibility. But it's arguably the very absence of this community consciousness that leaves so many AWOLs apathetic and indifferent to voting. How can Arizona kick-start the robust civic spirit that it needs to generate a...robust civic spirit? The good news is that we may face a historic opening—the unusually large national turnout for the 2008 general election, especially among

younger voters, may present a positive development to build upon. To do so will require leadership—but of a specific kind: The kind that doesn't wait for someone else to step forward first. It's leadership by many, many individual Arizona AWOLs who take it upon themselves to change their ways and head for the voting booth, thereby also encouraging their fellow abstainers to vote. That is, Arizona's AWOLs need to step up, and show up.

You could be one of them.

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LINKS TO FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT ARIZONA ELECTIONS AND VOTING:

State of Arizona website
<http://az.gov>

Arizona Secretary of State
www.azsos.gov

County Recorder and Election Offices
www.azsos.gov/election/county.htm

League of Women Voters—Arizona
www.lwvaz.org

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Layout by: Zara Gort

¹ See <http://www.kidsvotingaz.org/>.

² *By the People: Citizenship in 21st Century America*, The Center for Deliberative Democracy, 2007, MacNeil/Lehrer Productions.

³ "Eligible voters" are citizens of voting age who are not convicted felons. Other measures of voter turnout may use a denominator of all voting-age residents or all residents who have registered.

⁴ Morrison Institute analysis of an Arizona data file from Voter Contact Services' National Political Database; file created November 2009.

⁵ Gallup Poll conducted for the Center for the Future of Arizona's *The Arizona We Want*, (2009).

⁶ *AZ Views*, Vol.1: Issue 2, October 2008, p.5.

⁷ Brian E. Schaffner, Matthew Streb, Gerald Wright, "Teams Without Uniforms: The Nonpartisan Ballot in State and Local Elections," *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (March 2001): pp. 7-30.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ See Stephen J. Dubner and Steven D. Levitt, "A Swiss Turnout-Boosting Experiment," *The New York Times*, November 6, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/06/magazine/06freak.html>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Voter Contact Services file, *op.cit.*

¹² Website of the California Secretary of State, <http://www.sos.ca.gov/>.

¹³ G:\Districting Resources\SL Mag Ready Set Draw.mht.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* See also Peter T. Calcagno and Christopher Westley, "An institutional analysis of voter turnout," *Constitutional Political Economy*, 2009, 19:94 <http://web.ebscohost.com>.

¹⁵ Berman, David R. "Governance: Districting, or How Arizona Draws the Lines." <http://morrisoninstitute.asu.edu/state-of-our-state/state-of-our-state-governance/state-of-our-state-districting-or-how-arizona-draws-the-lines>.