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Critical Perspectives on Liberal Democracy: Barber and Marx

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Abstract

Liberal democracy has been the most common form of democracy since the Second World War. It has been accepted by many as the best form of government, balancing majority rule with individual rights. However, it is not without its critics. Two of liberal democracy's strongest critics are political theorist Benjamin R. Barber and socialist philosopher Karl Heinrich Marx. This paper analyzes critiques of liberal democracy through Barber's lens of civic engagement and Marx's lens of class conflict. It then compares these two perspectives, particularly the similarities in their critiques of individualism, conditionality, representation, and workplace democracy as well as their ideological differences.

Introduction

Liberal Democracy has been the most common form of government in the western world since the end of World War II. Since the end of the Cold War, liberal democracy has become even more common as the United States of America emerged as a global hegemon whose liberal democratic constitution has been the inspiration of many democratic states across the world. It is both a system and an Ideology which promotes two primary values. The first is majority rule and electoral equality. The second is individual rights and guarantees that neither society nor the government will get in the way of the activities that an individual deems to be good. Liberal democracy is a balancing act, ensuring that the majority opinion can prevail without interfering with the interests of individuals and minorities (Hacker 1957, 1009-1010). Liberal democracies feature varying levels of direct participation and representation, but historically, most liberal democracies have representative systems. Liberal democracy is also commonly accompanied by a capitalist economic system which is intertwined with the liberal view of property rights (Almond 1991, 471).

Because of liberal democracy's historical challenge of balancing individual rights and popular opinion, some theorists have questioned its stability and legitimacy. Benjamin Barber and Karl Marx are two prominent theorists who have a history of critiquing liberal democracy. Barber's critique focuses on concerns of civic disengagement and a lack of democratic values. Marx's critique focuses on class conflict and the exploitation of capitalism under liberal democracy. Barber and Marx's perspectives on liberal democracy are different, but there are some similarities among their critiques such as liberal democracy's emphasis on individualism and its conditionality. The commonalities between these critiques, despite their different origins, perhaps point to some weaknesses of liberal democracy that are in need of being addressed.

Barber's Critique of Liberal Democracy

Benjamin Barber has been critical of liberalism since the 1980s. He takes the communitarian approach to critiquing liberal democracy in his most popular work on the subject *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*. He starts the book by stating that liberal democracy's perceived domination in America, and the rest of the western world, has left Americans with very little else to compare their own liberal politics to, and no ideal which can be used to modify their politics. He claims that liberalism has not always succeeded in resisting its twentieth-century adversaries such as fascism, Stalinism, military dictatorships and totalism and that its internal contradictions are gradually emerging over time. Barber labels liberal democracy as a "thin" democracy (Barber 1984, 3-4). His use of the phrase thin democracy refers to liberal democracy's focus on individualistic and private freedoms rather than the needs of the community as a whole. As a result, its democratic values are prudent and provisional, optional, and conditional (Barber 1984, 4). Because individual rights are prioritized under liberal democracy, the options for solving community problems are limited by how it affects individuals, and the community as a whole is secondary or ignored entirely. Barber sees liberalism and democracy as being intertwined in our liberal democratic conception of democracy and as a result some core democratic values are lost. He puts it best when he asserts that "it is concerned more to promote individual liberty than to secure public justice, to advance interests rather than discover goods, and to keep men safely apart rather than bring them fruitfully together" (Barber 1984, 4).

He states that liberal democracy comprises three dispositions: anarchy, realism, and minimalism. He describes anarchy as the non-politics or antipolitics of liberal democracy. He explains that liberals of the anarchist disposition are those that try to find a way to create a system where citizens, while uniting with their fellow citizens for

common defense, can remain as free as they would be without government (Barber 1984, 6). As Barber states, these liberals are anarchists in that they are independent, believe it is natural for them to be, and they only associate with others because they decide it will be beneficial. He describes the realist disposition as being about power. These liberals are self-interested and only work with others because they believe they will benefit from it. They are Machiavellian and use fear as a tool to advance their interests (Barber 1984, 11-12). The anarchist and realist dispositions are both individualistic and self-interested, however they have different goals, freedom and power. He notes that this conflicts with democratic values. He describes liberal democracy as “schizophrenic” due to its internal contradiction of attempting to protect private rights and seek the public good (Barber 1984, 14). It serves private interests which contradict the public interests it also attempts to serve.

The minimalist disposition is related to the limitations of government. In liberal democracy there is an attempt to limit the powers of the government to protect individual rights. Barber critiques this disposition, stating that the purpose of politics is to adapt to and tolerate conflict, but minimalists simultaneously distrust the government and the people and find themselves stuck in the middle. He goes on to say liberal democracy is in the dilemma of the natural condition that limits man’s potential freedom versus the state that limits his actual freedom. Liberal thought often reduces politics to managing people like a zoo, assuming people are naturally animalistic. It manages behavior and keeps order in an attempt to maintain individual rights. This “thin” democracy then fails to provide the pleasures of participation and the fellowship of association (Barber 1984, 15-24). Ultimately, liberalism in democracy severely undermines democratic values and creates a radically individualistic politics that attempts to simultaneously promote individual freedoms and manage them.

An important critique Barber puts forward is that in liberal democracy, the emphasis is put on the government as the primary source of tyranny, but little to no attention is put on the possibility of tyranny from other sources such as corporations and organizations. Liberals are concerned with a tyrannical government forming if the state is too democratic, but multinational corporations, which are too large to be private and too irresponsible and unaccountable to be public, have a major influence over society (Barber 1984, 256). In this sense, he is concerned with capitalism eroding democratic institutions and prioritizing profit over the common good. He expands on this in his article “The Near Death of Democracy” when claims that capitalism has persuaded us that being a consumer is enough and that being a consumer is all that a citizen is meant to be (Barber 2009, 148-150). In his book, he criticizes both representative and direct democracy and the fact that it is often treated as if these are the only choices. People’s conception of direct democracy is often through “yes/no”

referendums but this simple plebiscitary can be manipulated by misinformation (Barber 1984, 25). Barber also explains that representation is incompatible with freedom because it delegates at the cost of genuine self-government. It is also incompatible with equality because it focuses on legal and electoral equality and not social and economic determinants. Finally, it is incompatible with social justice because it interferes with the community's ability to regulate for their own concept of justice (Barber 1984, 145-146). Barber wants a form of democracy that puts an emphasis on self-government while being resistant to manipulation. Thin liberal democracy does not promote any community or connectedness according to Barber. As a result, people become self-interested and individualistic. This makes it more susceptible to tyranny because people's individual interests can be appealed to by tyrants, and individualism makes it harder to organize against tyranny. He notes that Hitler came to power under a liberal democratic system (Barber 1983, 238-248).

The suggestions for how to create a "strong democracy" are laid out, but first Barber clarifies some things. He explains that creating a strong democracy must be done in a practical way that originates from the current representative system. He also expresses the importance of recognizing liberal concerns. Issues that can arise from mob rule and populism are valid concerns to Barber (Barber 1984, 262-266). This reveals that his critique of liberal democracy does not call for the complete abandonment of liberalism but reforming it.

He gives a list of reforms he would implement to create a strong democracy. The first reform he calls for is neighborhood assemblies where national issues can be discussed regularly in a public space. He advocates for televised town hall meetings and civic education resources for adults to keep citizens engaged and informed. Education is particularly important to Barber because he believes that the knowledge and understanding necessary to create a democratic society must be learned and maintained like a skill (Melville 2013, 261). Strong democracy also includes a system of lay justice at the local level and a system of assigning local offices by lot on a rotating basis to increase direct participation and engagement. It would also include bringing the initiative and referendum to the national level as well as electronic balloting which could come with a number of advantages including making it easier for people with certain disabilities to vote. He also discusses school vouchers for both private and public schools, and he says that this would give poorer students an opportunity to choose the education they want. He would implement a universal citizen service which would help the military to better represent the entire population and make the decision to go to war affect every family. Local volunteer programs that have declined could be bolstered and renewed. Workplace democracy could be encouraged to give workers more of a say in their work. Finally, more public spaces could be constructed for

citizens to meet in (Barber 1984, 267-307). The strong democracy Barber constructs is designed to overcome the lack of direct participation by the citizens and the limitations of liberalism on the people's choices as well as create a government that better reflects the population.

Marx's Critique of Liberal Democracy

In Karl Marx's time, he never committed to writing a work entirely dedicated to his perspective on democracy. Instead, Marx's perspective on democracy must be pieced together using statements and arguments made in many of his works. Before discussing his perspective on liberal democracy in particular, it is useful to understand Marx's thoughts on democracy in general, and what form of democracy he might be in support of. In Marx's 1843 manuscript, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, he challenges Hegel's conception of the state relating to political participation and democracy. In the 1820 book *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel claims that civil society and the state are separate and that the state exists by virtue of the empowerment of a representative or monarch. Essentially, Hegel claims that the population as a whole is external to the state and what determines the state's existence is its institutions, especially the presence of a sovereign (Hegel 1820, 154-155, 257). Marx's response to this, with inspiration from the idea of popular sovereignty, is that "democracy is the truth of monarchy, monarchy is not the truth of democracy" (Marx 1843a, 31). He argues that, due to material forces that drive societal change, all states are democratic at their core, and the more openly democratic a state is designed to be, the closer it is to embracing the reality of its situation. Monarchies and other less democratic states merely hide this reality and are contradictions of themselves because they attempt to ignore their origins in popular sovereignty and are not realizations of democracy (Springborg 1984, 540-541). Hegel sees monarchy as progression from the state of nature. Marx sees monarchy as a regression from the state of nature in the sense that, prior to monarchy, the state of nature better reflects the truth of popular sovereignty and democracy. True progression from the state of nature would be further embracing direct democratic cooperation.

In this critique, Marx comments on Hegel's argument that representation is needed due to the size and diversity of the population. According to Hegel, representation is necessary because it is unrealistic to expect a stable democracy without the mediation of representatives given the size of a state's population (Hegel 1820, 154-155, 250). Marx responds by stating that you cannot simultaneously argue that civil society is external to the state and argue that the makeup of civil society is why the state must be constituted with representatives. This is a contradiction because it would suggest that civil society is not external to the state but rather a major factor in

determining how the state should be constituted. From Marx's perspective, the population either plays a role in the state, or they do not, regardless of direct or indirect participation, and it is clear to him that the population indeed plays an essential, fundamental role, even from Hegel's own perspective (Springborg 1984, 541-543). With this in mind, Marx states that "in a true democracy, the political state disappears", in other words, a true democracy is one in which the artificial distinction between civil society and the state disappears and the people govern themselves (Marx 1843a, 32). This is consistent with what is perhaps the most direct advocacy of a democratic system by Marx later on. In the 1875 document *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx advocates for the eventual creation of a "dictatorship of the proletariat" (Marx 1875, 17). During the transition period from capitalism to communism, a new democratically organized state would be created and controlled (or dictated) entirely by the proletariat as a class, with the goal of dismantling capitalism, suppressing the bourgeoisie, and constructing an equal and classless society.

From the discussion of these writings so far, we can see that Marx takes a pro-democracy perspective, but not from the liberal democratic perspective that is typical of the twenty-first century. Instead, he advocates for what he refers to as "true democracy", a bottom up, direct approach, dominated by the power and interests of the proletariat. Looking deeper into Marx's critique of Hegel, we can see the criticisms of ideas and assumptions associated with liberal democracy emerge at a deeper level. Marx rejects the idea that there is a choice between representative democracy and direct democracy when it comes to political participation. This is because this choice lies within the "abstract political state" that is perceived as separate from civil society (Springborg 1984, 541-542). Therefore, this choice ignores the truth of democracy. His argument poses a direct challenge to the representative model of governance that liberal democracies typically take for granted as the most reasonable.

One of Marx's strongest critiques of liberal democracy comes from his 1843 essay *On the Jewish Question*. In this work, he responds to Bruno Bauer's claim that Jewish emancipation must come in the form of the recognition of equal rights under the law and the separation of religion and state which can only occur once all religious people abandon their religion. Marx argues that political emancipation can be achieved without abandoning religion. The problem he points out is that political emancipation and human emancipation are not the same. Political emancipation, in liberal fashion, is the separation of religion and state, and the guarantee of civil rights and civil liberties. To Marx, achieving this is a great step forward, however religion still exists within civil society. Even those states, such as the United States of America, which have freedom of religion, still contain religious expectations within civil society. The state is now free from religious bias, but man is not free (Marx 1843b, 1-7). Religion is not the true

obstacle to emancipation. Human emancipation is achieved through abandoning the social and economic inequality enabled by the bourgeois state which religion is merely a symptom of (Avineri 1964, 1). Marx is stating that the liberal democratic ideas of political emancipation are not true emancipation for the Jews, or any group, but embracing true democracy and abandoning the bourgeois state and capitalism is true emancipation. Ultimately, the critique of liberal democracy here is that it is limited in its ability to provide true emancipation for any group, regardless of how oppressed they are.

In the 1846 manuscript *The German Ideology*, Marx and his co-author Friedrich Engels lay the groundwork for historical materialism, or the idea that social and political change through history is driven by material conditions. This is in contrast to Hegel's idealism which asserts that history is driven by ideas. Marx asserts that throughout history there have been different eras, each defined by a class conflict. In each of these eras the ruling class has control of both the means of production and the means of mental production. During the current era, both of these means of production are controlled by the ruling bourgeoisie (Marx 1846, 9-13). What he is asserting is that not only does the bourgeoisie control the physical production of material goods, but they also control politics, law, and the media, and are able to craft an ideology to justify their own rule. This ideology is liberalism. Under liberal democracy, things such as freedom, equality, and rights are formal but not real. They are abstract and individualistic (Marx 1846, 36-38). A worker is free to work, but they must work to survive. A factory owner and a factory worker are equal under the law, but one sells their labor, and the other buys labor and profits from it. He is asserting that the rights and freedoms of liberal democracy merely exist to hide the underlying inequalities and comfort the proletariat. It is a tool for domination by the Bourgeoisie.

After the 1848 French revolution, Marx wrote "The Class Struggles in France", an article for the newspaper the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung Revue*. In this article, Marx expands on the idea that liberal democracy is a tool of the bourgeoisie by discussing how the classes behaved during the revolution. The 1848 revolution overthrew the Orleanist monarchy in France, but the revolution was led by bankers and other capitalists. The bourgeoisie, now in power, established state-run workshops to provide jobs for the unemployed (Marx 1850, 77-95). After receiving political pressure from the conservatives and landowners, the workshops were shut down, sparking the June Days uprising by the workers. The uprising was suppressed by the military (Berstein 1939, 337-340). Marx asserts here that liberal ideas claim to be for everyone, but when class struggle appears, liberalism sides with capital and is willing to use violence. Later, during the 1849 legislative elections, the workers began electing socialists to the national assembly, though the conservative Party of Order had remained in power in

every election since the revolution. The popularity of socialism panicked the bourgeoisie who began passing legislation to roll back universal suffrage. In reference to this decision by the ruling party, Marx states that “On May 4, 1848, on December 20, 1848, on May 13, 1849, and on July 8, 1849, universal suffrage admitted that they were right. On March 10, 1850, universal suffrage admitted that it had itself been wrong” (Marx 1850, 340-346). The main point he is making is that liberal democracy is conditional, and the ruling Bourgeoisie are willing to dismantle it if it no longer serves their interests or becomes too useful to the proletariat.

Analysis

Given what we have seen from their writings, Barber and Marx are both strongly critical of liberal democracy for many reasons and there are some similarities and differences. The first difference we can note is that they both acknowledge that the formal legal equalities of liberal democracy do not necessarily reflect the realities of a citizen under liberalism. Barber and Marx both note that the legal equality that liberalism offers does not address social and economic inequalities in society. Equality under the law does not necessarily mean societal equality. Though the way in which they approach it is different, Barber and Marx both see liberalism as conditional. To Barber, liberal democracy's conditionality comes from the fact that it limits the choices of the people. Before any decision made democratically is finalized, it must first pass the test of not conflicting with any of the rules preemptively set by liberalism. To Marx the conditionality is intentionally and entirely controlled by the bourgeoisie. Like Barber, he sees conditionality as an obstacle to certain decisions by the public, but he takes it a step further. Conditionality is a tool used by the Bourgeoisie to frame any action against their interests as a violation of rights rather than an action to achieve true justice and equality. The system itself is conditional and may be discarded if it no longer serves bourgeois interests.

Individualism is a major aspect of liberal democracy on which Barber and Marx share a similar view. Barber is concerned with how liberalism's focus on individual rights affects people's ability to come together and decide on what is best for their community. It is the anarchist and realist dispositions. It is those who under liberal democracy either seek personal power, often at the expense of others, or those who seek freedom from the burden of the common good. Individualism gets in the way of democratic values. Marx would agree with Barber to an extent on this, but Marx also thinks about it another way. Equality and rights under liberalism are individualistic in the sense that they only benefit certain individuals. Each individual experiences the legal freedoms and equalities of liberalism differently depending on their socioeconomic situation. Property rights, for example, tend to benefit those who have

property more than those who do not, and in this sense the individuals experience equal property rights differently.

Workplace democracy is an interesting topic. Barber advocates for having more democratic systems in the workplace because society could benefit from democracy in more areas than the government. By giving workers more control over decisions, their company could better address their wants and needs. Marx would agree that giving workers more control over their work is good, because after all his perspective on democracy is driven by the struggle of the proletariat. However, the way in which Barber wants to implement it, Marx would argue, remains within the liberal capitalist framework, which is fundamentally flawed. Instead, for Marx, workers should gain control over their work through a political and economic system that is controlled entirely by the workers themselves.

Both have negative views of representative democracy. Barber sees representative democracy as incompatible with many important values such as freedom, equality, and social justice because of the disconnect between the people and the political system. He does not completely dismiss the idea of representation, but his idea of strong democracy includes significantly more direct engagement. Marx's conception of democracy is a more direct one. In his critique of Hegel, he shows his idea of democracy to be deeper than any representative or even the state itself. His concept of democracy rejects the idea that a representative is necessary, and he advocates for direct democratically organized action by the people in the "dictatorship of the proletariat". This is an area where Barber and Marx agree on the need to critique a common feature of liberal democracy, but they differ in why it is problematic and the degree to which it must change.

Barber and Marx both want more democracy in general. The primary differences between the two theorists' perspectives are the fundamental differences between communitarianism and communism. These differences are seen in Barber's "strong democracy" and Marx's "dictatorship of the proletariat". Marx wants to abandon liberal democracy entirely while Barber wants to reform. Barber explicitly maintains a sympathy for the concerns of liberals. The flaws he finds in liberalism are exclusively related to democratic engagement and the community's ability to come together to find solutions. The flaws he finds in liberalism are exclusively related to democratic engagement and the community's ability to come together to find solutions. To Barber there is nothing inherently wrong with a system that attempts to protect some rights as long as it continues to prioritize democratic values. He criticizes capitalism and recommends workplace democracy which would likely be met with disapproval from capitalists. However, he does not advocate an end to capitalism, only reform. His vision

for strong democracy can include the use of some private institutions. His idea of a school voucher system would potentially involve children's parents using government paid vouchers to pay for private schools.

Marx finds no sympathy for liberalism. To Marx, it exists only as a tool for the bourgeoisie. Liberal equality, rights, and freedom only exist to hide the underlying inequalities created by capitalism. The issue for Marx is not so much the degree to which liberalism obstructs democratic decision making as it is that the system fails to realize democracy at all. He claims it has biases and operates how and when the ruling class wants it to. It is discarded as soon as it becomes more dangerous than useful to the bourgeoisie. It pretends to care about everyone equally through the law, but societal inequalities show the truth. He wants to end capitalism and thus would not support school voucher systems for private schools, even if it increases democratic engagement. True democracy for Marx is realized outside of liberal illusions and delusions.

Conclusion

Liberal democracy is the most common form of government in the Western world and has spread globally. It is both a system and an idea that promotes majority rule and the protection of individual rights, often through representation. While it has shaped the modern political landscape and brought about certain freedoms, liberal democracy has not been free of criticism. Theorists such as Benjamin Barber and Karl Marx have been prominent voices in highlighting the flaws of both the ideology and the system. Barber critiques liberal democracy through the lens of civic engagement, arguing that it promotes a "thin" form of democracy that neglects community values and democratic participation in favor of individual liberties. Marx critiques liberal democracy through the lens of class conflict, arguing that it is a tool of the ruling class used to maintain capitalist domination and hide real inequality. To Marx, liberal democracy is not real democracy, but a facade used to preserve bourgeois interests.

In their critiques, we can observe several important similarities. Both theorists reject the idea that representative systems truly serve the people, and they challenge the emphasis on individualism in liberal thought. Both express concern over the conditional nature of liberal democracy. They argue that democratic participation is limited by preexisting liberal constraints or the interests of the ruling class. Most importantly, they both advocate for a more democratic society.

However, their visions for achieving that society differ. Barber believes that liberal democracy can be improved through increasing civic participation and implementing institutional reforms. Marx, on the other hand, sees liberal democracy as

inherently flawed and argues that it must be dismantled entirely. These differences in approach highlight the broader ideological divide between communitarian reform and revolutionary socialism. Nevertheless, where their critiques are similar, they may point to important issues in liberal democracy worth addressing.

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The Lost Voice of the Natural State: Exploring Low Voter Turnout in Arkansas

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Abstract

What causes low voter turnout? Some think it is purely tied to laws that make it more difficult to vote. After all, Arkansas has many restrictive voting laws, and its voter turnout consistently ranks at the bottom. However, voter turnout is more complex—it is the product of a myriad of different factors. Using the lenses of institutions, demographics, political competition, political culture, community engagement, and voting laws, this research synthesizes existing literature to holistically explore why Arkansas has the lowest voter turnout in the nation. The research finds that Arkansas is uniquely poised for terrible turnout. Civic participation is essential for democracy to flourish, so research is paramount in states where citizens fail to use their voice.

Introduction

Over 154 million people voted in the 2020 general presidential election—a historic high for the United States. This resulted in a 66.8% turnout among eligible voters, but increased turnout was not universal (Fabina and Scherer 2022). Arkansas actually saw *less* voter turnout compared to the previous presidential election. In 2020, 54% of eligible Arkansans voted, a 4.7% decrease from the 2016 presidential election (Park et al. 2023). During a time where voter turnout seems to be rising, why are Arkansans not going to the polls?

Arkansas's political participation problem is not new. However, during the 2020 presidential election, it ranked 51st in voter turnout across all states and the District of

Columbia (Park et al. 2023; U.S. Election Assistance Commission 2021). Conventional wisdom would attribute this low ranking to Arkansas's voting laws, which restrict voter access, but voter turnout is much more complicated and interconnected.

The purpose of this article is to treat Arkansas as a case study for voter turnout, identifying and qualitatively analyzing the various reasons for the state's low turnout and compiling them in one place. This is important to explore, especially as the Arkansas state motto is "regnat populus," or "the people rule," showing a stark disconnect between the state's ideals and reality.

Literature Review

Voting does not happen in a vacuum. In discussing voter turnout, one needs to address many factors to get the full picture: history, institutions, demographics, community engagement, political culture, partisan politics, campaigning, current events, districting, money, and laws. Existing literature provides insight into these components, each giving context as to why Arkansas has such a low voter turnout.

The prevailing theory surrounding voter turnout is an economic model where people choose to vote if the benefits outweigh the costs (Downs 1957; Riker and Ordeshook 1968). Therefore, any given factor of voter turnout can make voting harder (a cost) or easier (a benefit). However, just because one factor is a benefit and one is a cost does not necessarily mean they cancel each other out, and a *decreased cost* is not the same as a benefit.

The following literature review identifies and discusses how voter turnout is impacted by the following factors: national institutional barriers, demographics, community engagement, political culture, and voting laws.

A Note about Federalism

America's federalist system of government complicates the electoral process and voter turnout. Certain electoral structures are common throughout the United States, so they can be analyzed as affecting the nation as a whole. Other structures vary by state and therefore have to be analyzed at the state level.

This is largely because Article 1, Section 4, Clause 1 of the U.S. Constitution delegates power between the state and federal legislatures. States are the main agents in conducting elections, especially non-federal elections. For example, they have the authority to decide what polling locations are open, and they can decide whether voting by mail is legal (Morley and Tolson n.d.). However, Congress has authority to regulate elections as well. Pivotal pieces of election-related legislation include the Voting Rights

Act of 1965 (VRA), the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (NVRA), the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA) and the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act of 2009 (MOVE). Additionally, states must follow other elections-related amendments in the Constitution that expand voting access (Hale and Brown 2020).

This article will largely concern state-level factors, given they are more pertinent to the discussion of voter turnout in Arkansas, but national level factors are discussed since they also impact turnout.

National Factors

Broadly, national factors take into account the rules and structure of government and how that affects voting behavior. Unfortunately, the structure of United States electoral institutions creates barriers to participation, making it more difficult for elections to be competitive. The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) states that competition increases voter turnout by increasing voters' interest in elections as well as the "resources, attention, and outreach" given to an election (2023). While the exact magnitude is debated, many studies agree that more competitive races lead to higher turnout (Fraga and Hersh 2010; Moskowitz and Schneer 2019; Ainsworth, Munoz, & Gomez 2023). Since competition increases voter turnout, it is important to discuss how it is hindered.

Single-Member Districts and Winner-Take-All

For offices that are neither nationwide nor statewide, elected officials represent districts—pieces of states or counties. The majority of districts in the United States only have one member representing them. This is true for all Congressional districts and most state-level districts (Spencer n.d.). In theory, a candidate in a single-member district (SMD) must appeal to more people to secure their seat instead of relying on a certain subset of their constituency. In reality, the existence of SMDs often means many local races go uncontested. Because of this, SMDs decrease competition, which in general decreases interest, which decreases turnout (Hill 2006).

The winner-take-all system is tied to the existence of SMDs. The United States largely takes a "winner-take-all" approach to elections—that is, the candidate to gain a majority of votes wins. On a district level, this means seats are not allocated proportionally according to what percentage of the vote a candidate received. Winner-take-all systems often lead to lower turnout because it decreases the chances that a voter's preferred candidate will win (Hill 2006).

The Electoral College

An example of a winner-take-all system is the Electoral College, the system by which Americans elect the president. It is established in the U.S. Constitution by Article 2, Section 1, Clauses 2-4. Each state is given a number of electors equal to their number of delegates in Congress, and the District of Columbia has three electors. These electors, casting one vote each, actually choose the president. Whichever candidate wins the most votes in a state is awarded all of that state's electoral votes, except in Maine and Nebraska, where electoral votes are awarded proportionally. In order to win the presidency, a candidate must achieve 270 electoral votes (National Archives 2024).

The Electoral College has faced scrutiny over the years. An important criticism in terms of political competition is the fact that not all votes are created equal. One electoral college vote in a heavily-populated state represents more people than one electoral college vote from a sparsely-populated state. The most jarring comparison is between California and Wyoming, for one electoral vote in California represents about 3.7x more people than one electoral vote in Wyoming. Ergo, voters in states like Wyoming have more power in the Electoral College (National Archives 2021; U.S. Census Bureau 2021b; U.S. Census Bureau 2021c).

This issue, among others, can suppress voter turnout. Few studies have been conducted on this relationship, but empirical data shows that the Electoral College "[reduces] perceived benefits" of voting, leading to lower turnout of eligible voters (Cebula and Murphy 1980, 188). This is supported by a 2016 article from NPR, which notes how turnout is generally higher in swing states, or states with more party competition. Twelve of fifteen identified swing states had turnout above the national average (Kurtzleben 2016). In the other 35 non-swing states, the lack of competition, or the perception that one cannot change the electoral outcome in their state may lead to lower turnout.

Two-Party System

One final institutional barrier to voter turnout is America's two-party system. While there are more than two parties, the Democratic Party and the Republican Party are the only ones with substantial power. The United States, with its two-party system, has lower eligible voter turnout than other countries with multi-party systems, such as Germany and Norway (Wolfinger 1991; Beregovskiy 2019; Desilver 2022). Many places in the United States are effectively under one-party rule given the lack of competition, which further disincentivizes voting (Nivola 2005; Desilver 2024).

Admittedly, every state has a unique partisan makeup. Some, like swing states, are more visibly “purple,” making elections more competitive. However, this points to the fact that states differ in many ways that can impact turnout, from the political party competition to political culture, showing the importance of analyzing state factors.

State-Level Factors

Overall, state-level factors impact willingness, knowledge and ability to vote. Below, the factors of demographics, community engagement, political culture, and voting laws are discussed.

Demographics

The demographic makeup of each state influences its turnout, because different groups have different voting patterns. Prominent demographics include age, gender, race, socio-economic status, and education.

Age

Research shows that younger Americans are less likely to vote than older Americans (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Matsusaka 1995; Blaise 2006). This has been shown over several election cycles. 45-64 year-olds have been the largest age voting bloc since 1980, sans the 1988 and 1992 elections (Fabina and Scherer 2022).

One potential reason turnout increases with age is because political knowledge typically increases with age (Matsusaka 1995). Therefore, informational barriers to voting decrease. However, it is important to note that younger generations are less politically active than older generations were at their age. In fact, younger generations are less involved in social life in general, which can facilitate political participation (Putnam 2000). Thus, the influence of age on turnout may be better explained by community engagement.

Education

Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) find that education is “the most important predictor” of political participation of any demographic. The more education one has, the more likely one is to vote. Nearly half (47%) of non-voters in the 2018 midterms had no college education. Comparatively, of those who voted in 2018, 75% had at least some college education. In addition to correlating with higher turnout, higher education correlates with high propensity—that is, higher-educated Americans are more likely to vote in subsequent elections (Hartig et al. 2023).

There are a couple of theories as to why those with higher degree attainment have a higher voter turnout (Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996; Kim 2023). One, “absolute education theory,” states that education increases turnout due to increasing cognitive abilities and political knowledge (Burden 2009; Berinsky and Lenz 2011). This decreases the information barriers to voting while also giving Americans information to motivate them to the polls. Second, the “relative education theory” states that education is a tool for social mobility (Tenn 2005; Campbell 2009). This emphasizes the socialization aspect of education, positing that increases in income and thus status are the cause of higher voter turnout (Persson 2013).

Income

How, then, does income affect turnout? Polling shows that higher income is linked to high voter turnout (Hartig et al. 2023). Fabina and Scherer (2022) also note how those who make less than \$49,999 per year are underrepresented in vote totals for the 2020 election. (When a group is “underrepresented,” their percentage of the voting age population is higher than their percentage of voters.) Statistical models support this polling data (Filer, Kenny, and Morton 1993; Wilford 2020).

Income is typically associated with one’s ability to vote, for low socioeconomic status creates barriers to political participation. The National Low Income Housing Coalition (2023) lists “less flexible work schedules, transportation barriers, [and] polling place closures” as barriers for low income voters. Additionally, those of lower socioeconomic status are likely more focused on survival than politics (Blair and Barth 2005).

Race

Race is the demographic factor most infamously tied to voter turnout. The United States, (particularly the South) has politically oppressed African-Americans and other racial minorities. To this day, white Americans are more likely to vote than any other race. In 2022, 75% of voters were white, while only 55% of non-voters were white (Hartig et al. 2023). The 2020 election shows a similar story, where white voters were overrepresented by 4.2%. African-American voters were underrepresented by 0.7%, Asian-American voters by 0.5%, and other, non-Hispanic races by 0.3%. However, Hispanic-American voters were the most underrepresented group, being underrepresented by 2.6% (Fabina and Scherer 2022).

Notably, this is not zero-sum. Fabina and Scherer note that African-Americans were overrepresented in the 2008 and 2012 elections (Philpot, Shaw, McGowen 2009; Fraga 2015). Research shows it is not the race of the candidate but competition and

mobilization that lead to higher turnout of certain racial demographics in certain elections (Fraga 2015; Barber and Holbein 2024). Again, the factors of turnout are interconnected.

Other factors of voter turnout have disparate racial impacts. Restrictive voting laws have shown to have a disproportionate impact on people of color, and these laws have increased since 2012 (Fraga and Miller 2022; Morris and Grange 2024). Racial minorities are also more likely to live in precincts with low turnout. These areas—referred to as “turnout deserts”—have low competition and fewer voter mobilization efforts (Barber and Holbein 2022). Importantly, though race is often correlated with socioeconomic status, racial disparities in turnout persist even when controlling for income (Fraga 2015; Morris and Grange 2024).

Gender

Lastly, gender also factors into turnout. Literature indicates that women are more likely to vote than men (Hartig et al. 2023). Of those who voted in the 2020 election, 53.1% were female and 46.9% were male. This trend has remained incredibly consistent, only varying 0.7% from 1980 to 2020 (Fabina and Scherer 2022). The difference is attributed to socialization. The differences in upbringing among boys and girls translates to differences in political interest among men and women (Dassonneville and Kostelka 2020). Additionally, the personality traits expected of and cultivated in women are found to significantly increase turnout (Wang 2014).

While a steady indicator, it is perhaps not a significant one. The difference in vote share between men and women is only 5-6% (Fabina and Scherer 2022). Additionally, in analyzing millions of validated votes across multiple election cycles, Barber and Holbein (2022) find that gender is not a statistically significant indicator in precinct turnout.

Community Engagement

Another prominent state factor for voter turnout is community engagement. The cornerstone of community engagement is social capital, which Robert Putnam (2000) defines as “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (19). Our political system thrives on social capital. The more one engages in their community, utilizing these social networks, the more likely one is to vote. This pattern holds on a larger scale, where states with higher levels of community engagement typically have higher turnout (Putnam 2000). A notable example is Minnesota, which had the highest voter turnout in

2020 and the second highest score on the Social Capital Index (JEC Republicans 2018; U.S. Election Assistance Commission 2021).

Community engagement is its own complex topic. As previously stated, Putnam notes there has been an overall decline in community engagement, which he largely attributes to generational change. He states a growing sense of individualism, spurred and compounded by technology, has caused many to withdraw from civic life, instead retreating to their own bubbles. Those who withdraw from their communities are not inclined to engage in political participation like voting.

Technology also makes it easier for people to be involved in passive activities, another detriment to social capital. People can share petitions without talking to anyone, and they can join the mailing list of a plethora of “voluntary associations” without going to a single in-person meeting. In *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*, Theda Skocpol (2003) notes that newer organizations—specifically nonprofit organizations—are not people-focused. It takes away a forum for people to interact with each other.

However, there are other factors that Putnam notes as contributing to America’s decline in social capital that affect voter turnout. The most prominent of these is urban sprawl—the uncontrolled development around a city, characterized by low-density housing (Banai and DePriest 2014). However, in the context of community engagement, this means that the boundaries in which people live, work, learn, and communicate are increasingly different. Physical disconnectedness makes it hard to build social capital, and voter turnout suffers as a result.

Political Culture

As defined by Daniel Elazar (1966) in *American Federalism: A View from the States*, political culture refers to people’s views on the proper purpose and function of government. How one views the government influences how they interact with it, making political culture another important state factor of voter turnout. Elazar defines three types of political culture: moralistic, individualistic, and traditionalistic.

Moralistic political cultures tend to view government as a means to a better society, viewing the political process in a positive light. On the other hand, individualistic political cultures see individual liberty as paramount. The government primarily exists as a venue to make demands. Outside of delivering on those demands, it is thought that the government’s role should be minimal. Lastly, in traditionalistic political cultures, the government is seen as a way to maintain the status quo. It is run

by elites, for elites, and is thus more tolerant of corruption, as the people do not see themselves as a driving force in the political process.

Voter turnout varies among these different cultures. Moralistic cultures tend to have a higher turnout due to a more positive view of government and a heightened sense of civic responsibility. Because those in traditionalistic cultures do not see themselves as inherently involved in the political process, they are less likely to participate, especially if they consider themselves far removed from the “political elite.” While trickier to generalize, individualistic cultures tend to have higher turnout due to increased political competition. A larger variety of interests see fit to make demands of the government (Johnson 1976; Morgan and Watson 1991). Lastly, while not as widely studied in literature, there is indication that political culture affects voting laws as well. Cultures that value and encourage participation tend to have laws that also value and encourage participation in their electorate (King 1994).

Voting Laws

The state factor that has changed the most in recent election cycles is voting laws. Thousands of laws have been enacted since 2012, with spikes after the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections (NCSL 2024d). These laws largely influence how, when, and where people register to vote and cast their ballots.

Whether or not these laws help or hinder voting depends on the individual law itself, including its implementation. Since election administration largely occurs on a local level, research has found wildly different results in different localities because of their unique contexts, making it hard to cohesively analyze this factor (Alvarez, Bailey, and Katz 2008). However, many studies conclude that overall, voting laws have moderate effects on voter turnout (Highton 2017). While any statistics cited below may seem small, Hershey (2009) importantly notes that these single digit percentages “projected to the voting population [are] not trivial” (88).

Registration and Reforms

Registration is generally seen as a cost to voting in America. It makes voting a two step process, where citizens must register themselves before they can cast a ballot. This extra step is dissuading (Wolfinger 1991; Hershey 2009). Once this step is overcome, however, increased registration has shown to increase participation, so how a state registers its voters matters (Knack 1995; Highton 1997; Avery and Peffy 2005). Reforms in the NVRA, HAVA, and related state laws have increased registration, largely impacting younger voters and frequent movers by allowing voters to register while getting their driver’s license (Hershey 2009; Garnett and Miller 2020). Many states

are exploring new ways to decrease the cost of registration as a way to increase their voter turnout. Three prominent methods in same-day registration, automatic registration, and online registration.

Same-Day Voter Registration

The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) defines same-day registration, or SDR, as the ability of “any qualified resident of the state to register to vote and cast a ballot at the same time” (2024c). As of writing, the NCSL notes that twenty-three states and D.C. currently have SDR (Cohn 2024c; Appendix A1).

According to Project Vote (2015), a nonpartisan nonprofit, SDR is helpful to those who have recently moved and those who have historically not voted, such as racial minorities. SDR also allows states to fix inaccurate voter rolls during the election. Interest in politics often spikes on election day, but many cannot vote due to not being registered beforehand. States can also remedy bureaucratic errors, allowing those who were unknowingly affected to still cast their ballot. However, states vary in their implementation, so the reform may be more effective for states that have less barriers, and thus less costs to SDR (Cohn 2024c).

In 2001, Briars and Grofman noted an increase in turnout of eligible voters of about 4%. While Garnett and Miller (2020) note that adopters of SDR may have seen increased turnout due to “factors unique” to the states, they find a 2% increase in turnout of eligible voters since implementing SDR. The most recent study by Grumbach and Hill finds that SDR increases turnout anywhere from 3-7% among eligible voters (2022).

Automatic Voter Registration

Automatic voter registration (AVR) involves registering citizens to vote when they interact with certain government agencies. These policies come with opt-out options, and it is a relatively new reform. Oregon was the first state to implement AVR in 2016. Since then, 22 other states and D.C. have implemented AVR (NCSL 2024a; Appendix A2).

States that implement AVR see an increase of registration, as citizens merely have to interact with the government, eliminating most if not all of the cost of registration (Griffin et al. 2017; Garnett and Miller 2020). However, due to its relative novelty and methodological complications, it is difficult to gauge AVR’s effects. Current analyses suggest it increases turnout of eligible voters by decreasing registration barriers (Garnett and Miller 2020). However, some note that it may have a negligible

effect on turnout of eligible voters, even pointing out that it leads to a decrease in overall turnout percentages among registered voters due to registering voters that are unlikely to vote (McGhee and Romero 2021). More research is needed to reconcile this discrepancy.

Online Voter Registration

The most prevalent registration reform is online voter registration (OVR), where part or all of the registration process is moved online. Forty-two states and D.C. have implemented OVR, with Arkansas, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, South Dakota, Texas, and Wyoming being the exceptions (NCSL 2025b). This decreases the cost of registration by removing the need to travel in-person to register, and it also decreases the burden on election administrators by removing the need to interpret handwriting (Pérez, Zhou, and Maluk 2015).

OVR has been around for longer than AVR, with Arizona being the first state to adopt it in 2002. Overall, it is seen as having little to moderate effects on turnout of eligible voters. Garnett and Miller's (2020) model showed a 2% increase in turnout in states that only have OVR as a registration reform. This reform is particularly effective in increasing turnout of young voters, as implementing OVR can increase youth turnout by 3% (Yu 2019).

Voting Reforms

States have also implemented laws attempting to increase voter turnout directly. These laws have the same rationale as the economic theory of voter turnout, attempting to decrease costs to voting.

In-Person Early Voting Periods

Early voting is by far the most popular voting reform. It provides a window for citizens to vote if they cannot be present on election day. NCSL (2025a) divides this reform into three categories: in-person early voting, in-person absentee voting, and in-person options for all-mail voting states. All but three states—Alabama, Mississippi, and New Hampshire—have some form of early in-person voting. In-person early voting functions the same as election-day voting, but it occurs before the election date. Theoretically, if the barriers of time and money are eliminated, voter turnout should increase. However, literature reveals a more complicated reality.

One of the earliest studies on early voting by William Lyons and John M. Scheb (1999) shows that early voting does not increase voter turnout like many proponents believe it does. While the reform can lead to increases in turnout, it does not incentivize

non-voters to vote. Instead, it increases voter turnout among likely voters. Later studies affirm this result (Gronke, Galanes-Rosenbaum, Miller 2007; Hamel, Leighley, and Stein 2024). The economic theory of voter turnout can explain this phenomenon. Just because voters have more opportunities to vote does not mean they actually have the drive or the means to do so. Again, a decreased cost is not the same as a benefit.

Mail-In and Absentee Voting

Mail-in voting and absentee voting are both methods by which a voter can cast their ballot without physically going to a voting location. The difference lies in whether or not voters have to request a ballot. Mail-in ballots do not have to be requested, while absentee ballots do, and in some states, voters are required to give an excuse for why they need an absentee ballot. Notably, all states are required to send absentee ballots to deployed soldiers (NCSL 2024f). Both methods of voting were popularized during the 2020 election due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Amlani and Collitt 2022).

States can be divided into three categories: 1) universal mail-in voting, where elections are conducted by sending ballots to all registered voters; 2) no-excuse absentee voting, where a ballot must be requested but no excuse is required to receive one; and 3) excuse absentee-voting, where a ballot must be requested and an acceptable excuse is required to vote (Appendix A3). For states that require an excuse to vote absentee, acceptable excuses vary (NCSL 2024f).

Both mail-in voting and absentee-voting have shown to increase voter turnout among eligible voters, though the exact magnitude of its impact varies by study and the state(s) which the study analyzes (MEDSL 2024; Absher and Kavanaugh 2023). As will be shown in the next section, the increase in turnout for absentee voting is heavily dependent on its administration.

Voting Restrictions

Many states have enacted laws that restrict access to the polls due to concerns of voter fraud. The merit of these laws are heavily scrutinized, because election fraud has been a negligible issue in recent elections. Of the millions of votes cast between 2000 and 2014, thirty-one credible instances of voter impersonation *total* (Levitt 2007). There is little evidence that substantial voter fraud exists, and there is certainly not enough to influence the outcome of elections, making the reasoning for these restrictions dubious (Steimer 2021; Brennan Center for Justice 2024; Lopez 2024; Kamarck 2024). However, the laws exist all the same, and they have shown a negative impact on turnout.

Polling Locations

Recently, many states that conduct in-person voting have been closing, consolidating, or moving polling locations. While this factor is not necessarily a consequence of state voting laws—polling locations and precincts are largely county responsibilities—they are still government decisions surrounding election administration, making it a voting restriction.

From 2012 to 2022, one in five polling locations had closed in the United States. Some closures are attributed to several states moving to universal mail-in voting, but many are not. In fact, in this time frame, several states closed one in ten polling locations without instituting universal mail-in voting: Alaska, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Carolina, West Virginia, and Wisconsin (Rosenfeld et al. 2024). Southern states in particular have closed a substantial amount of polling locations, with some counties in Georgia and Texas seeing an over 50% reduction in polling locations (The Leadership Conference Education Fund 2019). While this is a restriction, it is important to note precincts are not always closed for seemingly arbitrary reasons. Oftentimes, locations are closed for administrative reasons, like not having enough turnout to justify the financial cost of keeping the location open.

Regardless of the reason, the outcome remains the same: a reduction in voter turnout. Fewer polling locations leads to longer lines at the remaining locations, and if there are long lines, some voters will simply opt to leave (Pettigrew 2021; Clune 2024). Additionally, fewer polling locations also means some will have to travel farther to vote (Voting Rights Lab 2020). One study found that, at least in the North Carolina midterms, moving the polling location of one's early voting site made them less likely to vote by upwards of 2.5% (Bitzer, Dukes, and Cooper 2023). While many voters changed their voting method, not every state has that option. Another study looking at specific precincts in Massachusetts and Minnesota found that moving one's polling location 0.285 miles led to a 2-5% decrease in voter turnout (Cantoni 2020).

Voter Identification Requirements

Voter identification (ID) laws require that citizens show identification before they cast their ballot. They are restrictive because, like registration, they add an extra step to the voting process. NCSL (2024e) provides a succinct summary of voter ID laws across the nation in their online report entitled "Voter ID Laws." It describes two ways to measure voter ID laws: strictness and photo identification. If a voter ID law is strict, it means a voter must perform extra steps outside of their polling place if they do not provide identification. Often, this means bringing the preferred form of identification to

a county clerk's office within a certain time frame or the vote being voided. For non-strict ID laws, election officials verify the voter's identity to validate their vote. Photo identification simply indicates whether the required ID has to include a photo.

This creates five categories of voter ID laws: strict photo ID laws, strict non-photo ID laws, photo ID-request laws, ID-request laws, and no documentation laws. Overall, thirty-six states have some form of voter identification laws (NCSL 2024e; Appendix A4). Of these categories, strict photo-ID laws are the most onerous, adding the most steps for a citizen to ensure their ballot is cast and counted.

Because of the complicated nature of these laws, they are particularly hard to study in isolation. Some studies have suggested that, when controlling for certain types of endogeneity, voter ID laws have no effect (Burden 2018; Heller, Miller, and Stephenson 2019). Other scholars have even suggested that, in certain states, mobilization efforts and thus increased turnout occur *because* of voter ID laws due to political messaging (Citrin, Green, and Levy 2014; Valentino and Neuner 2017). However, how exactly voter ID laws affect turnout depends on the state, for the strictness of voter ID laws as well as the demographic and political makeup of the citizenry influences the interplay of these elements (Alvarez, Bailey, and Katz 2008).

Absentee Ballot Changes

In recent years, states have begun to add more restrictions to the absentee ballot process. These restrictions add additional barriers to the absentee voting process, which itself already adds a barrier by requiring voters to request a mail-in ballot be sent to them. This decreases the effectiveness of absentee voting, therefore lowering turnout (Absher and Kavanaugh 2023). Such restrictions include but are not limited to the following:

- Prohibiting the use of ballot drop boxes.
- Signature-matching requirements for acceptance of absentee ballot.
- Notary or oath requirements, where a voter must have the application authenticated before an authorized public official.
- Limiting who can return the absentee ballot for the voter. States vary on precisely who is allowed to return an absentee ballot for someone else.
- Limiting how many ballots someone can return.
- Reducing the timeframe of ballot return
- Moving the date that ballots are sent out closer to election day
- Requiring that voters pay for postage on their mailed ballots.

In total, thirty-eight states have some sort of absentee ballot (or mail-in voting) restriction (NCSL 2024e). It should be noted that the magnitude of turnout is going to

depend heavily on how many restrictions a state has and what those restrictions are. For example, Vermont's only voting restriction from the bulleted list is the 25-ballot limit for returning mail or absentee ballots, and this is far less practically restrictive than Mississippi's notary requirement for absentee ballot applications.

Voter Roll Purges

The NVRA and HAVA explicitly state that voters cannot be purged solely for not voting. However, states still passed such laws, and removing voters from the rolls for inactivity was challenged in federal court. The Supreme Court upheld broad voter roll purges for inactivity in the case *Husted v. A. Philip Randolph Institute* (2018) so long as it was not the sole reason for removal. (Voters also must fail to respond to a notice and vote in two federal elections.)

As such, 20 states have statutes that trigger the process of removal from voter rolls after a certain number of inactive years by putting them on an inactive voters list. After being marked as "inactive," voters must remain inactive for two federal elections to be removed (Voting Rights Lab 2025; Appendix A5).

Unfortunately, unless a state has provided an explicit protection for voters from being removed for inactivity, they are still at risk for such removal. As allowed by the NVRA and HAVA, most states have requirements to remove voters from the rolls after two federal elections if they changed their voter information (typically their address or name) and have not responded to a notice confirming the change. Unless removal for inactivity is solely prohibited, voters in these states are more likely to be removed for being marked as "inactive" in error (Morris et al. 2018; Brower 2022; Moses 2024). Informal voting rules can also ignore statutory language that requires a change in voting information before removing voters for inactivity (Simpson 2022).

Without SDR or explicit protection against removal due to inactivity, these administrative processes can prove cumbersome for voters. Erin Gianopoulos (2022) of Wayne State University Law School notes, "Excessive scrubbing is a bar to legitimate voting because it is likely to remove eligible and unsuspecting voters" (276). This cost to voting can lead to lower turnout, as citizens cannot vote if they are not registered, and the process of having a provisional ballot counted varies by state.

Line Warming Prohibitions

A relatively new type of voting law that could reduce voter turnout is prohibitions on "line warming," a colloquial term for giving out minimal value items like food and water to those waiting in a voting line (Bustos 2024). In 2021, three states

had specifically banned giving food or water to people in voting lines—Georgia, Montana, and New York. Montana only bars candidates or campaign-affiliated individuals from giving food and water, while Georgia and New York bar any person from giving food or water. By judicial ruling, Arkansas falls into the latter category, and Florida joined in 2022 (MacGuill 2021; NCSL 2024b). New York’s law was completely struck down by a federal judge, while Georgia’s law was only struck down in part. Florida’s law was upheld (Cohn 2024a).

Because line warming prohibitions are so new, there is not much research on their impacts on voter turnout. However, one study does note that “the longer and *more burdensome the wait*, the more likely that voters will turn away or decline to vote in future elections” (Clune 2024, emphasis added). This indicates that line warming prohibitions, in removing legal avenues for providing comfort to voters, could create a cost to voting.

Methodology

This research is a case study, applying the above literature to answer the following research question: What are the causes of low voter turnout in Arkansas? The answer involves qualitative synthesis of literature and existing data to create a cohesive picture of voter turnout in Arkansas. This synthesis is done through casual process tracing, which explores the drivers and causes that lead to a specific outcome—for this article, it is an exploration of low voter turnout. This is a common qualitative method for political science, particularly when discussing policy outcomes and case studies (Falleti 2006; Blatter, Haverland, and van Hulst 2014). Sources include scholarly literature regarding political science, state and local politics, public administration, election law, and other related fields; scholarly books on voter turnout and elections; state-level databases concerning voting and registration laws, community engagement, elections, and demographics; research reports from nonprofits centered around voting; and relevant news stories.

Barriers and Limitations to Research

The factors in the literature review were chosen because they are more broad and easier to discuss across several elections, so issues like campaign messaging, gerrymandering, and focusing events, while undoubtedly affecting turnout, are not discussed (Highton 2017). Additionally, while this article discusses many statistics and rankings, there is no quantitative analysis. This is largely due to lack of cohesive datasets. The Arkansas Secretary of State website is also currently missing several years of election certifications. Attempts to gain digital copies were fruitless. This made it

hard to holistically analyze state incumbent challenges, political competition, and voter turnout in the 2000s. While a more quantitative approach can be an avenue for future research, the following qualitative analysis creates a cohesive picture of voter turnout in the Natural State.

Discussion

Arkansas in Context

The phenomenon of low voter turnout in Arkansas is not new. In their book *Arkansas Politics and Government*, Diane Blair and Jay Barth (2005) note how Arkansas's turnout in the 1948 presidential election was merely 25% of the voting-age population, 26% below the national average. In 1960, VAP turnout had climbed to 41% in Arkansas, but still lagged behind 23% the country's 64% turnout.

Historically, the Arkansas electoral process has been rife with corruption and suppression. If people participated at all, it was because politics was a source of entertainment. Even then, votes were often inflated and falsified, which were considered "part of the entertainment." All in all, Blair and Barth (2005) note the following:

Political involvement generally accompanies a perception that one has a stake in political outcomes, and the social and economic environment of traditional Arkansas gave relatively few citizens a sharp sense that important personal consequences were to be gained or feared from a particular political result. (26)

Still, despite the state's lackluster performance, Arkansas's voter turnout did increase. Blair and Barth credit this to the Voting Rights Act of 1965 ensuring the enfranchisement of African-Americans, the elimination of poll taxes, and increased political competition and voter registration efforts from the state, political parties and their candidates, and third-party organizations. These authors optimistically state that, at least in 2005, Arkansas was the closest it had ever been to achieving the ethos of its state motto: "regnat populus," or "the people rule." However, the state's cultural and demographic makeup as well as recent changes in voting laws means that Arkansas's motto remains unrealized.

The Case of Arkansas's Low Voter Turnout

Unfortunately, the state is uniquely positioned for terrible voter turnout. To Arkansans, the cost of voting in the Natural State is higher than the perceived benefits. While many factors of voter turnout have remained fairly constant—like its political culture, for example—others have changed substantially in the past few election cycles. All indicate poor turnout. It is the complex interaction of all these factors that leads to Arkansas having consistently low turnout.

Generally, National Factors

Like all states, Arkansas is affected by national factors. All of Arkansas's Congressional and state-level districts are single-member, and candidates are selected in a winner-take-all system. Additionally, the state currently has six votes in the Electoral College—only 2.2% of the votes needed to win the presidency and 1.4% of the total electoral votes. The low impact of the state's electoral votes and the presence of electoral structures that decrease competition likely lead Arkansans away from the polls.

The depressive effect of the two-party system is perhaps most prominent, because Arkansas functionally has a one-party system. Since 2000, all six of its electoral votes have gone to Republican candidates (Electoral Ventures LLC 2025). At the time of writing, the entire Congressional delegation and all of the state's constitutional officers are Republican, and Arkansas has had a Republican supermajority in the General Assembly for about a decade. This one-party dominance decreases competition (Hill 2022).

However, Republican victory was not always so certain. Notably, Blair and Barth (2005) wrote *Arkansas Politics and Government* at a time when Arkansas was undergoing great political change. While still dominated by the Democratic party, the Republican party was beginning to gain popularity, creating competition. Political parties also played a large role in registering and mobilizing voters. While dropping slightly between the 1996 and 2000 elections, turnout among eligible voters increased 8.1% from 2000 to 2004 (Park et al. 2023). This further underscores how the state's current party makeup decreases turnout.

State-Level Factors

Arkansas's low voter turnout is best explained by the following analysis of state-level factors, for across all of these factors, Arkansas is deficient.

Demographics

According to the 2020 Census, the majority of Arkansans are 55+ and white (U.S. Census Bureau 2021a). These two populations have overwhelmingly higher turnout than other groups in the same demographic category. However, Arkansas also has low educational attainment, high poverty, and more men. While 88.6% of Arkansans aged 25 and older have a high school diploma, only 25.1% have a bachelor's degree or higher (Kienlen 2023; U.S. Census Bureau 2023). Additionally, the state's poverty rate was 15.7% as of 2023, which is higher than the national average of 12.5% (Benson 2024; U.S.

Census Bureau 2023). With low educational attainment and high poverty—two of the most important demographic factors in determining turnout—Arkansans face increased informational and resource barriers to voting.

Political Culture

Both historical and contemporary trends show that Arkansas has a strong traditionalistic political culture (Elazar 1966; Johnson 1976; Morgan and Watson 1991; Blair and Barth 2005). Blair and Barth referred to the political elite as a “dynasty” that ruled Arkansas politics for decades. Given the state government’s corrupt history, it is no surprise that Arkansans are suspicious of their government. It is not just the state government that Arkansans do not trust, however. Arkansas also ranked 49th in its trust of the federal government (Park et al. 2023). This strong distrust leads to lower voter turnout.

It is worth noting that, on average, the northwestern part of the state has a higher VRP and VAP turnout than other regions (Blair and Barth 2005; Arkansas Secretary of State 2020). Due to the Ozark Mountains influencing the political geography of the state, Northwest Arkansas has a slightly different political culture. While still traditionalistic, later applications of Elazar’s model sometimes label this region with a moralistic subculture (Savage and Gallagher 1977; Blair and Barth 2005). A heightened sense of civic duty, even if not dominant in the culture, could explain higher turnout in the region. Still, traditionalistic political culture dominates the state, contributing to overall low turnout.

Community Engagement

The 2023 Arkansas Civil Health Survey provides insight to Arkansas’s community engagement (Park et al. 2023). It notes that Arkansas performs poorly across most measures of engagement. It is 34th in community group involvement, 42nd in volunteering, and 47th in social connectedness. The only activity where Arkansans rank above the national average is donating, a notably passive act, where it ranks 23rd. This indicates Arkansans are not involved in their communities.

Why is this? Community engagement is dependent on social capital, of which the state has relatively little (Putnam 2000). Arkansas ranked 46th overall for social capital (JEC Republicans 2018). This is because social capital itself is dependent on trust and connections. As noted above, Arkansans are distrustful as a consequence of the state’s traditionalistic political culture. Along with distrusting the government, Arkansans are also highly distrustful of each other, ranking 48th in this regard (Park et al. 2023).

Additionally, it is hard for Arkansans to form connections with others because they are so spread out. Arkansas's population density is far lower than the national average (U.S. Census Bureau 2023; Cohen 2015). Sprawl only exacerbates this issue. Even small cities in the state are affected by suburbanization, and therefore, many if not most Arkansans live and work or study in separate communities (Yoder 2015; Walkenhorst 2018). Ergo, suburbanization leads to lower community engagement (Putnam 2000). When a relatively small number of people are spread out, it is difficult to build the connections necessary for social capital, depressing the effective mobilization of voters in the state.

Voting Laws

Arkansas's laws make it one of the most difficult states in which to vote (Schraufnagel, Pomante, and Li 2022). Of the eleven voting practices discussed, Arkansas has two reforms (early voting and absentee voting) and all five listed restrictions (changing polling locations, voter identification laws, absentee ballot changes, voter roll purges, and line warming prohibitions). While Arkansas has more reforms than some states, they are undercut by their relatively low effectiveness in practice. Additionally, the state's restrictions create both practical barriers and information barriers, especially for low-propensity voters.

Many of these laws were passed, implemented, or changed after the 2020 election. While Arkansas may overall have very restrictive voting laws, not all individual bills that amend these laws are restrictive. Some, while small, can actually be considered reforms (Appendix B1).

Early Voting

Arkansas instituted early voting in 1995, created by Act 686 of the same year. This occurred about 2 years after the NVRA was passed at the federal level. Currently, for preferential primaries and general elections, the early voting period in Arkansas is fifteen days before election day, closed on Sundays and state holidays. Polls are open from 8:00am to 6:00pm (10 hours) during the week and 10:00am to 4:00pm on Saturdays (6 hours). The Monday before the election, the polls must close by 5:00pm (A.C.A. § 7-5-418).

There have been no big substantive changes to early voting since 2020. Many amendments have added small reforms, largely by decreasing information barriers (Appendix B2). Still, these changes do not mitigate the fact that early voting is a weak

reform that does not increase voter turnout much, if at all (Lyons and Scheb 1999; Gronke, Galanes-Rosenbaum, Miller 2007; Hamel, Leighley, and Stein 2024).

Absentee Ballots and Changes

Of the reforms listed, Arkansas has had absentee voting the longest, first instituted in Act 465 of 1965. While absentee voting is viewed as a reform similar to mail-in voting, the restrictions added to the process in Arkansas greatly diminish the efficacy of that reform and work to decrease turnout. Arkansas notably has the most restrictions of those listed in the Literature Review section.

Currently, Arkansans have to request an absentee ballot through an application. Additionally, they have to have one of three acceptable excuses for not voting in person: 1) being unavoidably absent, 2) having a disability or illness, or 3) observing a religious holiday or discipline (A.C.A § 7-5-402). Deadlines will vary based on the method of return and whether or not the returner is the one who cast the ballot, which can create confusion. Many of these restrictions were added relatively recently. There has also been legislation that can be considered absentee ballot reform, largely increasing valid excuses to vote (Appendix B3). However, while increasing valid excuses does decrease restrictions, it may not lead to increased turnout due to voters still viewing the overall process as a hindrance.

Polling Locations

The authority to decide polling locations in Arkansas lies largely with the County Board of Election Commissioners (CBEC)—a local entity that has the bulk of statutory responsibility in administering elections per A.C.A. § 7-5-101. However, county clerks are largely responsible for early voting locations. Both entities have closed and moved polling locations. Pulaski County often moves voting locations for administrative reasons like construction and low use (Poe 2018; THV11 2024). For example, the Pulaski County CBEC moved a North Little Rock polling location, which faced backlash from constituents in the precinct (Jackson 2022).

This is especially important when you consider the population distribution in Arkansas. Closing or moving polling locations can force voters to travel greater distances to vote. This is troubling when Arkansans cite lack of transportation as a reason for not voting (Park et al. 2023). Additionally, in denser population centers, particularly Little Rock, citizens face longer lines (Russell 2024).

Voter Identification Laws

In 2014, Arkansas implemented Act 595 of 2013, which created strict photo-ID requirements to vote. As a result of this law, voters were required to cast a provisional ballot if they could not provide photo identification, and in order for their vote to be counted, voters had to return to the CBEC or county clerk's office with proper identification. Beforehand, poll workers could request to see identification, but failure to provide it did not impact a voter's ability to cast a normal ballot or have their vote counted.

Arkansas's voter ID laws are among the strictest in the country per NCSL (2024e). These laws have a greater impact on lower income and less-educated populations, of which Arkansas has high amounts, increasing the negative impact of voter ID laws on turnout (Alvarez, Bailey, and Katz 2008; Fraga and Miller 2022).

Voter Roll Purges

Arkansas county clerks, who maintain voter registration lists, routinely purge voter rolls to maintain accuracy as allowed by the NVRA and HAVA. Voters can be removed by request, for moving out of county, death, felony conviction, or failure to respond to a notice of removal after inactivity in two election cycles as stated in the Arkansas Constitution Amendment 51 § 11. While voters can still vote on a provisional ballot if they are removed, they have to go to the CBEC to ensure their vote is counted. This adds a cost to voting, especially if the removal was unexpected.

The language of Amendment 51 states that removal for inactivity should only occur when voters change their name or address and then fail to vote in two election cycles. However, there have been cases of voters being incorrectly marked for removal. In 2022, over 104,000 Arkansans (roughly 5.9% of the state's registered voters at the time) were removed due to inconsistencies in the purging process. Many were marked as inactive voters after only missing one election or registering after the deadline for the 2022 election and therefore not having a chance to vote in a general election or preferential primary. This inactive status means the voter can only miss one more election before being removed from the rolls (Simpson 2022; Moore 2023). Incorrect, outdated, or hard to reach mailing addresses can also lead to Arkansans missing the removal notices, and many notices have been described as "nondescript" and "easy to miss" (Moore 2023).

The Arkansas State Board of Election Commissioners, the main body that promulgates rules and guidance surrounding elections, created a further restriction in April 2024. This rule stated that county clerks could only accept voter registration forms

filled out on paper with ink. This impacted the work of the nonprofit Get Loud Arkansas—a group that attempts to increase political participation of Arkansans—as they registered voters with electronic tablets (Earley 2024). Despite legal challenges, the rule was upheld, meaning those who filled out voter registration forms electronically had their registrations voided (Associated Press 2024; Vote.org 2024). While not a traditional voter roll “purge,” it does amount to registered voters being removed from the rolls, and it leads to voters having to repeat steps to cast their ballot.

Line Warming Prohibitions

Unlike other states with this new restriction, Arkansas has a more ambiguous law that does not prohibit line warming specifically. Act 728 of 2021 prohibited people from being within 100 feet from a polling location if they were not either entering or exiting said location for a lawful reason. It put a harsher penalty on violators of this provision, despite electioneering (trying to sway the choice of voters) already being banned within 100 feet of a polling location in all 50 states (Sullivan 2022). The state’s supreme court upheld this 2021 law despite a lawsuit from the League of Women Voters that noted this, in effect, banned line warming as well (Greenberg 2024).

Conclusion

Low voter turnout in Arkansas is caused by a myriad of interconnected factors. While influenced by institutional barriers at the national level, specific factors at the state level greatly impact Arkansas’s turnout. This includes its demographics that are less likely to vote due to lack of information and ability and its traditionalistic political culture that lessens trust in government. Most salient today, however, is its low community engagement and restrictive voting laws. Arkansas cannot mobilize voters with low social capital, and its laws add many costs to voting on top of other barriers. Truly, Arkansas has all the ingredients for terrible voter turnout.

However, voter turnout is far more complex than even the issues presented here, doubly so in the United States where federal and state governments influence voting structures and behavior. The influence of certain partisan and campaign behaviors on voter turnout were not as heavily discussed, though they undoubtedly affect turnout (Highton 2017). Perhaps future research can add the analysis of factors such as political campaigns and messaging, gerrymandering, money in elections, and certain focusing events that influence the salience of current policy issues.

That is not to say the factors at hand are insufficient. They are very influential and wide-reaching. To address such a complicated problem, a holistic approach is

needed. Laws *and* minds need to be changed if Arkansas wants to increase its voter turnout, for it is as much an issue of culture as it is legislation.

Votes have consequences, as do abstentions, and right now, a small part of the state's population is making decisions that affect every Arkansan. Making your voice heard is critical, not only for enacting your preferred policy priorities, but ensuring government accountability. It is why the voice of the people is so important in a democratic system. Arkansas deserves a vibrant democracy, one that lives up to its motto, where from every corner of the state you can hear the once-lost voices sing.

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Appendix A

States with Certain Reforms and Restrictions

Table A1. States with and without Same-Day Voter Registration.

Same-Day Voter Registration (SDR)*	
States with SDR (23 + D.C.)	California, Colorado, Connecticut, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming
States without SDR (26)	Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Texas

**North Dakota is omitted because it does not have state-wide voter registration.*

Table A2. States with and without Automatic Voter Registration.

Automatic Voter Registration (AVR)*	
States with AVR (23 + D.C.)	Alaska, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, and Wyoming
States without AVR (26)	Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Wisconsin

**North Dakota is omitted because it does not have state-wide voter registration.*

Table A3. States and Methods of Mail-in and Absentee Voting.

Mail-In and Absentee Voting	
States with universal mail-in voting (7 + D.C.)	California, Colorado, Hawaii, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Vermont*
States with no-excuse absentee voting (28)	Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming
States with excuse-absentee voting (14)	Alabama, Arkansas, Connecticut, Delaware, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, New Hampshire, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and West Virginia

**Vermont only has universal mail-in voting during general elections.*

Table A4. States and Types of Voter Identification Laws.

Voter Identification Laws	
States with strict photo ID laws (9)	Arkansas, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Mississippi, North Carolina, Ohio, Tennessee, and Wisconsin
States with strict non-photo ID laws (3)	Arizona, North Dakota, and Wyoming
States with photo ID request laws (13)	Alabama, Florida, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Texas
States with ID request laws (11)	Alaska, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Iowa, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Utah, Virginia, Washington, and West Virginia
States where no documentation is required (14 + D.C.)	California, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Vermont

Table A5. Legality of Voter Roll Purges in the States.

Voter Roll Purges		
States with statutory or constitutional requirements to purge the rolls for inactivity (20)	After one missed election (4)*	Missouri, Montana, North Carolina, and Wyoming
	After two inactive years (3)*	Massachusetts, Ohio, and West Virginia
	After four inactive years (12)*	Alaska, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Wisconsin
	After five inactive years (1)*	Georgia
States without statutory or constitutional requirements to purge the rolls for inactivity (28 + D.C.)	States at risk of voter roll purges for inactivity due to vague/imprecise language*^	Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Texas, Vermont, and Virginia
	States protected from voter roll purges due to inactivity (7)	Colorado, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey, Tennessee, Utah, and Washington

**States in categories with an asterisk are considered to have the restriction of “voter roll purges.”*

^This category is considered to have the restriction largely due state news stories showing that purges for inactivity do occur despite no explicit call for it.

Appendix B

Arkansas Voting Laws

Table B1. Arkansas Voting Laws Profile.

Numbers in parentheses indicate states with certain subsections of these laws. An asterisk within a parentheses indicates that Arkansas is not a part of the subsection.

- *Absentee Voting* — states that require an excuse to vote
- *Polling Locations* — states that have closed >10% of their polling locations from 2012-2022; Arkansas is not included
- *Voter Identification* — states that have strict photo-ID laws

Arkansas Voting Laws Profile				
	Law	Effect on Turnout	Does AR have?	Other States?
<i>Reforms</i>	Same-Day Registration	Moderate increase	No	23 + D.C.
	Automatic Registration	Uncertain (<i>insufficient data</i>)	No	22 + D.C.
	Online Registration	Little to moderate increase	No	42 + D.C.
	Early Voting	Little to no increase	Yes	46 + D.C.
	Mail-In Voting	Little to moderate increase	No	8 + D.C.
	Absentee Voting	Little to moderate increase	Yes	41 (13)
<i>Restrictions</i>	Polling Locations	Moderate decrease	Yes	49 + D.C (12*)
	Voter Identification	Little to moderate decrease	Yes	36 (8)
	Absentee Ballot Changes	Moderate decrease	Yes	38
	Voter Roll Purges	Little to moderate decrease	Yes	33
	Line Warming Prohibitions	Uncertain (<i>insufficient data</i>)	Yes	2

Table B2. Recent Changes to Early Voting in Arkansas.

Recent Changes to Early Voting		
Act #	Year	Change
1063	2021	Allowed voters to cast a provisional ballot during the early voting period if listed as receiving an absentee ballot.
92	2023	Required early voting locations to remain open for county holidays.
263	2023	Required early voting hours to be consistent across all early voting locations.

Table B3. Restrictions Added to Absentee Voting in Arkansas.

Changes to Absentee Voting			
	Act #	Year	Change
<i>Restrictions</i>	1424	2013	Created signature matching requirements, limitations and identity verification requirements on those who return absentee ballots for others, and yearly reapplication requirements for disabled voters and those in long-term care.
	249	2021	Decreased the methods by which a voter could ensure their vote was counted if their absentee ballot was marked provisional due to ballot errors.
	973	2021	Changed the day to receive absentee ballots from the Monday before election day to the Friday before election day.
	320	2023	Required that anyone assisting a voter in filling out an absentee ballot application print and sign their name and provide their address.
	353	2023	Prohibited the use of absentee ballot drop boxes, requiring that all absentee ballots be returned in person to the county clerk's office or by mail.
<i>Reforms</i>	462	2019	Added state active duty as a valid excuse (being "unavoidably absent") to request an absentee ballot for members of the Arkansas National Guard.
	141	2023	Added religious observance as a valid excuse to request an absentee ballot.

Election Administration for Dummies: Exploring the Bureaucracy Behind Elections in Arkansas

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Abstract

Free and fair elections are a fundamental part of American democracy, but unless there is a controversy, few pay attention to the actual administration of elections. Election administration refers to the preparation, management, and conducting of elections by government officials so citizens can cast their ballots. It is a complex feat that requires a complex structure, and Arkansas is no exception. This article provides a novel and cohesive overview of Arkansas election administration at the state and county levels, particularly the delineation of authority and responsibility across jurisdictions. Arkansas election administration has real effects, explored in three recent case studies as well as current relevant legislation, showcasing how administration impacts the delivery of the voice of the people, which impacts how they are governed.

Introduction

Elections serve as the foundation of democracy, shaping the leadership and policies that govern society. While voters focus on candidates and outcomes, the intricate processes behind elections often go unnoticed. However, the administration of elections is crucial in ensuring fairness, accessibility, and public trust in the democratic system. This process is called election administration, which refers to the preparation,

management, and conducting of elections by government officials so citizens can cast their ballots.

In the United States, election administration is complicated. The U.S. Constitution's Elections Clause, found in Article 1, Section 4, says that the "The Times, Places and Manner of holding Elections for Senators and Representatives, shall be prescribed in each State by the Legislature thereof; but the Congress may at any time by Law make or alter such Regulations, except as to the Places of chusing Senators." This gives state legislatures the overall authority to administer federal elections, though Congress can create certain regulations. Because of the 10th Amendment, which reserves powers not delegated to the federal government to the states or the people, the administration and regulation of state elections is entirely left to the states.

States use this authority differently, causing drastic administrative differences not only between states but also between counties within a state, as many states give election authority to counties. This creates a decentralized and extremely complex election system. However, that is only one level, as the federal government also has the authority to pass election laws, particularly around federal elections. This multi-level, decentralized, complex election system can stir problems and controversy surrounding election administration.

The most prolific instance is the 2000 election between George W. Bush and Al Gore. Incredibly close vote counts in Florida led to inspections of election administration methods that made their way to the Supreme Court of the United States in *Bush v. Gore* (2000). Soon after, Congress passed the Help America Vote Act of 2002, which had many provisions affecting election administration in the states. However, just as the states can influence national matters, national conversation can incite state action, as shown by the 2020 election between Donald Trump and Joe Biden. The COVID-19 pandemic and the rhetoric used by Trump regarding the security of the American election system caused unusual public attention to the process of conducting an election, leading to significant changes in election administration nationwide.

Arkansas was one state that passed several laws impacting election administration after 2020. Those laws are easy to find; however, details surrounding Arkansas's election administration as a result of those laws are not. Ergo, this article explores the complexities of election administration in the state, examining the legal framework, key players, and recent challenges that have influenced how Arkansas elections are conducted.

Methodology

This article synthesizes information from a variety of sources to paint a cohesive picture of election administration in Arkansas. Many legal sources, such as the Arkansas Constitution and the Arkansas Code Annotated, were utilized in the synthesis, as well as policy-centered sources like the State Board of Election Commissioners Rules, the County Board of Election Commissioners Manual, and the Election Coordinator Manual. The article then discusses why election administration matters in the state, exploring three case studies that emerged during the 2024 election cycle. This section draws upon news sources, recent legislation, and other Arkansas government resources to illustrate the connection between Arkansas election administration laws and recent problems that have occurred, showing the importance of having an efficient election system.

Election Administration in Arkansas

Election administration, even within the state, is decentralized. The Arkansas Constitution gives counties home rule, meaning that unless the state government has set parameters for action, Arkansas counties and municipalities have the autonomy to decide how many ventures, including elections, are administered. (Ark. Const. amend. 55 § 1(a)). This legal leeway means the actual administration of certain elections may differ by county. For example, one county may hire more staff to help register voters, meaning that the responsibility is split between different professionals, while another county may have that responsibility conducted by a single person.

Arkansas's election laws, found in Title 7 of the Arkansas Code Annotated, set the parameters that all counties must follow for election administration. Thus, these laws create the legal structure for election administration, describing necessary electoral processes and the relevant authority to conduct those processes. The following sections break this legal structure into election tasks and who has the authority to carry out said tasks. Additionally, the sections note places where counties are given autonomy to decide certain aspects of this legal structure, creating the aforementioned variation.

Election Tasks

Election tasks describe the actions that need to occur for elections to be properly administered in the state. The tasks for the state of Arkansas are gathered from the County Board of Election Commissioners Manual, which disseminates details of the Arkansas Code Annotated to county election commissioners. This article has categorized these tasks into three categories: 1) tasks that occur *before* the election to

prepare for the actual conducting of an election, 2) tasks that occur *during* the election that allow citizens to cast their ballots, and 3) tasks that occur *after* the election to ensure votes are properly counted and reported. The table below lists the tasks in said categories:

Table 1: Election Tasks

Time	Before	During	After
Purpose	Preparatory — getting the necessary people, places, and things in order to be able to conduct an election	Conducting — aid voters in casting their ballots, and identifying and resolving issues voters may have	Concluding — disassemble voting sites; counting, certifying, and reporting votes; and investigating illegal activity
Tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Registering voters • Processing absentee ballot requests • Sending out absentee ballots • Selecting and training poll workers • Certifying candidates and issues • Creating and distributing ballots • Drawing precinct boundaries • Selection for early voting and election day locations • Validating and moving voting machines and electronic tabulating devices • Giving public notice of required dates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helping people vote <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Check-in ○ Aiding disabled voters ○ Provisional ballots • Counting absentee and early voting ballots • Monitoring behavior of poll workers • Documentation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “Out of the ordinary” incidents ○ Who voted ○ Use of machines ○ Spoiled ballots ○ Who counted what ballots and when • Troubleshooting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivering completed ballots to counting location • Counting in-person ballots and ensuring machine counts match hand counts • Watching the counting of ballots • Certifying results • Reporting results • Investigating voter fraud and other violations of election law • Storing ballots and election equipment

Source: State Board of Election Commissioners 2024a.

Authority

The authority to perform functions of government is ultimately derived from a founding document that describes the structure, functions, and powers of that government, gaining its legitimacy from the people. For the state of Arkansas, this is the Arkansas State Constitution. Article 3, Section 10 of the Arkansas State Constitution gives the General Assembly the authority to mandate many aspects of elections. In terms of election administration, the General Assembly has vested the authority for the above election tasks in multiple entities and individuals, dubbed “election officials” by A.C.A. § 7-1-101(12).

This section explores these entities and individuals, including who they are, from where in the code they derive their authority, and which tasks they perform. Discussed below are the State Board of Election Commissioners, the County Board of Election Commissioners, election coordinators, county clerks, poll workers, poll watchers, and election monitors.

State Board of Election Commissioners

The State Board of Election Commissioners (SBEC) is created by Section 7-4-101 of the Arkansas Code. The Board consists of seven individuals (SBEC 2025):

1. The Secretary of State;
2. An active county clerk;
3. A former county election commissioner;
4. An appointee of the General Assembly’s Speaker of the House;
5. An appointee of the General Assembly’s Pro Tempore of the Senate;
6. An appointee of the chair of the Arkansas Democratic Party;
7. An appointee of the chair of the Arkansas Republican Party.

The Secretary of State is the only official on the SBEC who is elected by the state as a whole. While the active county clerk is locally elected, they are appointed to the board by the governor. However, both the Secretary of State and the active county clerk serve the board as long as they are in office, and no other member of the board can be an elected official (A.C.A § 7-4-101).

The members appointed by the Speaker of the House and Pro Tempore of the Senate serve two-year terms. The remaining three members (#4, #6, and #7 on the above list) serve four-year terms. Lastly, in terms of criteria for board members, the former county election commissioner must have served for three or more years to be eligible for appointment by the governor. The former county election commissioner and the active county clerk are the only members of the board appointed by the governor (A.C.A § 7-4-101).

The SBEC deals with statewide matters concerning elections. Before the election, it promulgates rules that all counties have to follow and creates training for election officials that all counties must use. It also provides funding for election expenses. Throughout the election, the Board serves as an informational resource. As outlined in the County Board of Election Commissioners Procedures Manual, the SBEC uses its investigative powers to look into reports of illegal voting activity after the election (SBEC 2024a).

The Secretary of State, aside from serving as the chair of the SBEC, has their own responsibilities regarding elections. Before the election, they promulgate their own rules, like those on the operation of vote centers. They receive and certify filings for candidates of constitutional offices and General Assembly seats, statewide ballot measures, and new political parties. Perhaps most notably, the Secretary of State's office posts the official election results in preferential primaries, general elections, and any runoffs (SBEC 2024a).

County Board of Election Commissioners

Because counties administer elections, not the state, every county has a County Board of Election Commissioners (CBEC). As outlined in Section 7-4-102 of the Arkansas Code Annotated, the CBEC is a three-member board. Each member serves two-year terms. Two members are from the majority political party, and one is from the minority political party. According to A.C.A. § 7-1-101, the majority party is the political party that won the most constitutional offices in the last election, and the minority party is the political party that won the second most constitutional offices in the last election. If all constitutional offices are held by the same party, then the minority party is defined as the party that got the second-most votes in the gubernatorial race.

Currently, the majority party is the Republican Party, and the minority party is the Democratic Party. Therefore, every county election commission has two Republican members and one Democratic member, regardless of the party affiliation of other county officials or the county citizens themselves. The members of the CBEC are elected by the county committee of their respective party per Section 7-3-104 of the Arkansas Code Annotated. This is an internal party vote that occurs in odd-numbered years.

The SBEC's Mission Possible: Step by Step Guide for Arkansas County Election Coordinators to Assist Running County Election Processes, to be referred to as the "Election Coordinators Manual," states, "The CBEC's main responsibility is to ensure compliance with all legal requirements relating to the conduct, procedures, and efficiency of holding elections in your county" (SBEC 2024b). Hence, the CBEC largely deals with *decision-making*. Before the election, it decides precinct boundaries, election-

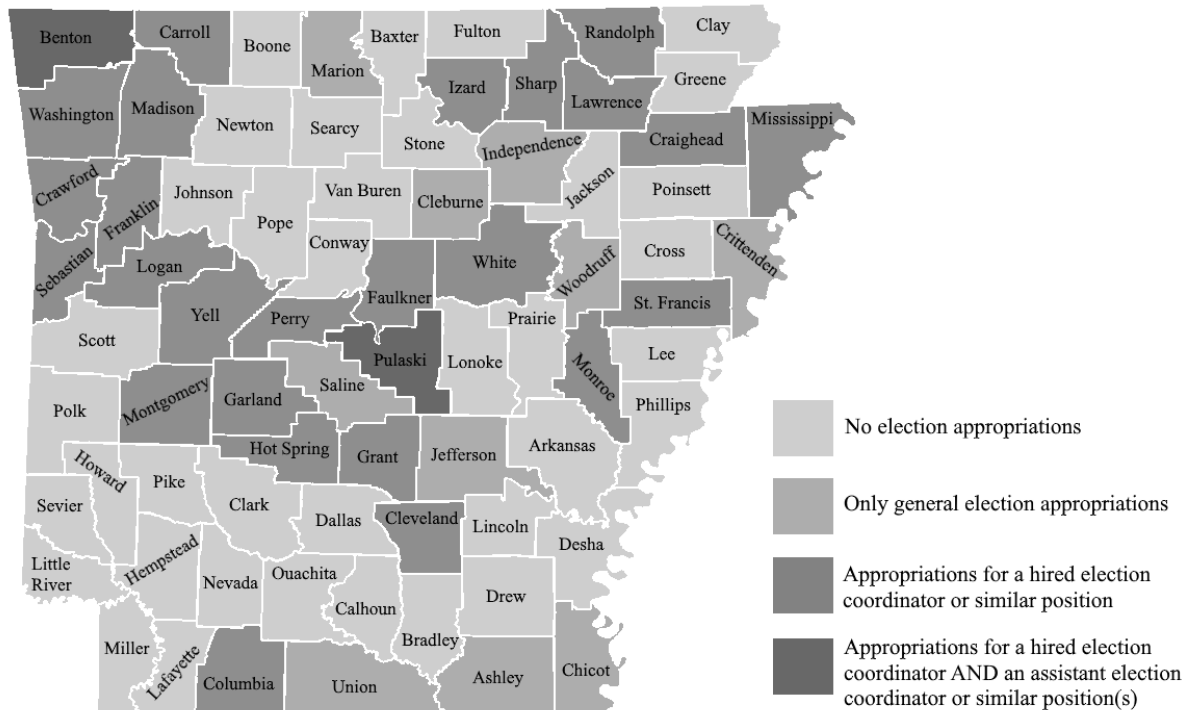
day polling locations, and early voting polling locations outside of the county seat, and the order of candidates on the ballot via a drawing of lots. It additionally approves poll workers and, if they cannot be reached, decides if a person is a valid elector for an absentee ballot application (SBEC 2024a).

During the election, the CBEC handles complaints and issues that occur at the polls, including voting machine malfunctions and voter identification issues. It is also responsible for overseeing the counting of absentee and early voting ballots. Likewise, the CBEC also oversees vote counting for election day votes, and for all vote counts, they make the final determination on whether a contested vote can be counted. The CBEC then sends the results of these counts to the Secretary of State (SBEC 2024a).

After the CBEC, the number of actors involved in the election process can vary drastically depending on factors like the population of the county, resources needed, and available funding.

Election Coordinators

According to Section 7-4-109 of the Arkansas Code Annotated, counties are required to have a person who “does the duties” of an election coordinator. These officials can be “(1) [an] employee of the county, (2) a member of the county board of election commissioners, (3) a county clerk, (4) a deputy clerk or employee of the county clerk, or (5) another eligible person willing to serve as an election coordinator.” However, according to the County Government Salary Survey, only 28 of the 75 counties have appropriated funds for a hired election coordinator or similar position (Association of Arkansas Counties 2024). The two largest counties in the state — Pulaski and Benton — also have professional assistant election coordinators. More counties — 37 of the 75 — have explicit appropriations set aside for elections. See the map on p. 67.

Map 1: Professionalization of Election Coordinators in Arkansas

Source: Association of Arkansas Counties 2024.

Regardless of whether they are a professional election coordinator or merely a deputy county clerk, these individuals must perform the duties of an election coordinator. What are these duties? The Election Coordinator Manual states, “The election coordinator is an extension of the CBEC in helping more with the day-to-day activities and overseeing of the nuts-and-bolts process on a daily basis” (SBEC 2024b). Ergo, more *administrative* tasks, while statutorily left to the CBEC, are often performed by an election coordinator. This includes the physical testing and transportation of voting machines and electronic vote tabulators, recruiting poll workers, and creating and transporting ballots (SBEC 2024a). During the election, election coordinators act as on-the-ground troubleshooters. In this vein, they often work with the county clerk and CBEC. After the election, election coordinators can aid in the storage of voting machines and materials as well as the counting of ballots (SBEC 2024b).

If the person who “does the duties” of an election coordinator is a county clerk, a deputy county clerk, or a county election commissioner, then that individual must also perform the assigned election duties of their respective job alongside the duties of an election coordinator.

County Clerks

County clerks are central figures in Arkansas election administration. They are nonpartisan officials who serve four-year terms, and they are elected in midterm years like the governor (A.C.A. 14-14-502; Ark. Const. art. 7 § 19; Ark. Constit. amend. 41). County clerks conduct several tasks throughout the entirety of the election season. Before the election, they are responsible for various tasks in recordkeeping, certification of local candidates and issues, voter registration, and information posting (SBEC 2024a).

Additionally, county clerks are in charge of absentee voting and certain aspects of early voting. They are the ones who give out, process, and approve absentee ballot applications, and they mail out absentee ballots to approved voters before the election (SBEC 2024a). During the election, completed ballots are sent back to the county clerk (Arkansas Secretary of State's Office n.d.). County clerks also have authority over early voting. As of 2025, county clerks can open an early voting location in the county seat. They are responsible for all voting that occurs there, including the staffing of that location (State of Arkansas 95th General Assembly 2025h; SBEC 2024a). During early voting, the county clerk or deputy clerks assigned by the county clerk perform the tasks as poll workers, but only at the early voting location opened by the county clerk (A.C.A. § 7-5-401; A.C.A. § 7-5-418(b)(2)).

County clerks are also involved in election-day voting. They aid election coordinators and the CBEC in troubleshooting issues during the voting process. For the county clerk, this largely involves dealing with voter registration issues. Additionally, county clerks work together with the CBEC to maintain a list of voters affected by certain ballot errors. Once all the votes have been counted, county clerks receive the certifications for local offices from the CBEC, and the Secretary of State sends a copy of the final election results to the county clerk for recordkeeping purposes (SBEC 2024a).

Much like how election coordinators perform administrative duties statutorily given to the CBEC, tasks statutorily assigned to the county clerk may be given to another official within the county clerk's office. This could be a deputy clerk or an individual hired to perform a specific job function. According to the Association for Arkansas Counties, Washington and Benton counties hire election officials specifically to head absentee voting (2024). Additionally, seven counties — Benton, Chicot, Faulkner, Garland, Independence, Pulaski, and Washington — have appropriations for voting registration personnel in the county clerk's office.

Poll Workers

Poll workers are election officials who work at a polling location. These individuals interact directly with voters. Per A.C.A § 7-1-101, poll workers are

“designated” by the CBEC, but in practice, they are ordinary citizens recruited by election coordinators and approved by the CBEC. All poll workers must attend local training that is certified by the SBEC within a year of the election they are working. Poll workers must be paid, though they may sign an affidavit to forgo pay and serve as a volunteer (SBEC 2024; A.C.A § 7-4-112).

There are three categories of poll workers: election clerks, election sheriffs, and election judges. Election clerks largely check people in to vote and control traffic to the voting machines. Election sheriffs and judges have additional duties on top of those of an election clerk. Election sheriffs deal with potential election violations, while election judges act as supervisors of the polling site. If there is a problem at the polling location, the election judge typically issues the final determination (SBEC 2024a). A.C.A. § 7-4-107 requires that each polling location have a minimum of two election clerks, one election sheriff, and one election judge. However, the actual number of poll workers at any given site is determined by the CBEC, and thus varies wildly from location to location and thus county to county.

Poll workers do the bulk of their work during the election. Depending on their shift, they set up, close down, and manage machinery at polling locations. These individuals help with provisional ballots (if required by law) and spoiled ballots, and they must call the county clerk if a voter is in the wrong precinct on election day. As voters cast their ballots, poll workers are required to document many things, including complaints of voters or poll watchers, issues with voting equipment or ballots, and actions of poll workers (SBEC 2024a). Most importantly, poll workers maintain an accurate list of those who voted at their polling location (A.C.A. § 7-5-211). Outside a polling location, a subset of election clerks called absentee election clerks process, count, and canvass absentee ballots (A.C.A. § 7-5-414).

Poll Watchers and Election Monitors

Also present at the polling or ballot-counting location may be poll watchers and election monitors. Both must be trained in an SBEC-certified course, and neither can interfere with the conducting of elections or influence voters (SBEC 2024a). However, the authority for these roles comes from different sources.

Poll watchers are individuals representing a ballot issue (for or against), candidate (including the candidate themselves), or political party. They must obtain a “Poll Watcher Authorization Form” from the county clerk and present this to an election official at the site they wish to watch. Candidates cannot serve as poll watchers at a polling location on election day, but they can do so during early voting. Election monitors, on the other hand, are appointed by the SBEC, contingent on whether the

SBEC approves a signed, written request (SBEC 2024a). These requests can be filed by anyone, though approved requests typically come from election officials and candidates due to their involvement in the electoral process. According to the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, the SBEC has previously approved requests from the SBEC director, county election commissioners, and candidates themselves. Additionally, the content of election monitor requests must specifically pertain to potential irregularities or violations of election law, ascertained from historical problems or suspicious behavior. Examples from previously approved requests include electioneering violations and counting absentee ballots outside of public view (Wickline 2016; Farrar 2016; Snyder 2024).

Poll watchers and election monitors are similar in that they observe the process and conduct of an election to ensure it is smooth, transparent, and fair. They can compile a list of those who vote at a location and present any concerns to the election sheriff. Additionally, poll watchers can challenge votes in early voting, on election day, and at absentee vote-counting locations. (A poll watcher challenge is a valid reason to issue a provisional ballot to a voter.) Conversely, election monitors cannot challenge votes. They are more straightforward observers who document activity, and they must prepare a post-election report for the SBEC (SBEC 2024a). All of this is to ensure the integrity and transparency of elections. Reports from election monitors in the 2024 election actually led to the decertification of all three members of the Searcy CBEC due to accepting voting machines that were not within the guidelines of state law (Platt 2025).

Why Does Election Administration Matter in Arkansas?

As the above information illustrates, Arkansas election administration is a combination of fragmented authority, legal complexity, and inconsistent resources across counties. It is a system that relies on a vast and layered network of roles, responsibilities, and legal mandates that stretch across multiple levels of government. The number of moving parts, ranging from the preparation of ballots and voting equipment to the oversight of poll workers, absentee processes, and the investigation of irregularities, creates a complex administrative structure. With distinct tasks divided between state entities (like the SBEC and the Secretary of State) and county-level actors (such as the CBEC, election coordinators, and county clerks), each election requires extensive coordination, legal compliance, and logistical execution. Without effective cooperation between state and local governments, political party representatives, and non-partisan individuals, issues can quickly emerge, impacting the method and content of Arkansans' votes.

During the 2024 election cycle in Arkansas, several issues occurred within the election administration, creating obstacles for voters across the state. Three prominent examples will be discussed: the Arkansas Right to Abortion Initiative, early voting locations in Crittenden County, and the hand-counted ballot petition in Saline County. With ambiguities in election law, strict legal requirements, and complex administrative responsibilities, each of these cases demonstrates how problems can evolve in significant aspects of Arkansas election administration.

Early Voting Locations in Crittenden County

A difference in interpretation of early voting laws sparked concerns for voters in Crittenden County, also leading to the involvement of the Arkansas Supreme Court. As the start date for early voting in Arkansas was nearing, the Crittenden County Election Commission did not vote on an early voting location in West Memphis (Democracy Docket 2024). As a result, Crittenden County Clerk Paula Brown selected the Seventh Street Church of Christ as an early voting location. The Crittenden County CBEC then sued the county clerk, arguing that “only a county board of election commissioners has the authority to designate early voting locations anywhere other than the county seat and that, if the board decides not to have early voting in a specific town, there’s nothing the county clerk or anyone else can do about it” (Campbell 2024).

After two days of hearings, Circuit Court Judge Christopher Thyer found that the Crittenden County Clerk does have legal authority to designate an early voting location. However, he also stated that the law was “far from clear on the issue,” hoping that one or both parties would appeal so the Arkansas Supreme Court could review the case (Campbell 2024). The Crittenden CBEC then filed a notice of appeal with the support of political officials such as Attorney General Tim Griffin. Once the Court heard the case, the justices agreed with the Circuit Court Judge’s decision of Crittenden County Clerk Paula Brown’s authority to choose an early voting location.

This case study highlights how ambiguities in election law and conflicts between election officials can affect voter access. While having strict election laws can lead to additional voting barriers, having unclear or vague statutes can lead to confusion and legal disputes. While determining who has the authority to choose early voting locations in this case, Judge Thyer acknowledged the lack of clarity in state law. This reflects the challenge election administrators face when laws are not specific, forcing courts to become arbiters in election administrative processes.

Hand-Counted Ballot Petition in Saline County

Due to improper methods of signature collecting, a local ordinance for hand-counted paper ballots in Saline County was rejected. During this past election cycle,

Saline County was one of many counties that attempted to put “The Hand Marked, Hand Counted Paper Ballot Ordinance of 2024” on the ballot to switch from machine-counting ballots to hand-counted paper ballots. This follows the increase in scrutiny towards election security and the electoral process. To achieve this goal, 5,590 validated signatures needed to be collected from eligible voters in Saline County (Lenora 2024). While verifying the collected signatures and the canvassers in charge of collecting signatures, some issues were found. A Facebook post was found listing 15-20 full-time signature gatherers, promoting to both Arkansas and non-Arkansas residents (Lenora 2024). “Saline County Clerk Doug Curtis noticed that 18 of the canvassers listed their residence to be the same address: 820 Bill Dean Drive in Conway, the address of a Home2 Suites by Hilton hotel” (Lenora 2024). Though it is not illegal to pay canvassers in Arkansas, all canvassers, paid or not paid, must be residents of Arkansas. Because they were collected by non-resident canvassers, over 2,000 signatures were thrown out, and the Saline County Clerk ultimately rejected the petition (Davis 2024). Clinton Lancaster, the attorney who filed a lawsuit following the petition's rejection, argued that all canvassers “were residing in Arkansas while acting as canvassers” (Albarado 2024). However, the lawsuit was dismissed, resulting in the ordinance not making the 2024 ballot and leaving the voters of Saline County to continue using a machine.

This example demonstrates how election administration must balance legal compliance with facilitating voter participation in local governance. Like statewide initiatives, canvassers for local petitions must also meet specific requirements to be a canvasser, such as being an Arkansas resident. Saline County election administrators discovered the invalidity of signatures collected by several canvassers who were not residents of the state, resulting in the initiative not making the ballot. Once again, this shows the consequences of not following administrative requirements in elections.

Arkansas Right to Abortion Initiative

One of the more well-known issues is an error made during the citizens' initiative process that led to the rejection of the Arkansas Right to Abortion Initiative (2024). Arkansas is one of the 24 states that allow citizen initiatives, a tool that enables citizens to propose statutes or constitutional amendments to be put on the ballot and voted on statewide, allowing citizens to bypass their state legislature.

The process begins when a sponsor submits the petition proposal to the Arkansas Attorney General. This includes the full text of the measure, a proposed popular name, and a ballot title. Once it is approved, a copy of the petition, “as it will be circulated,” must be submitted and approved by the Secretary of State (Arkansas Secretary of State's Office 2023). After that, signatures can start being collected. Canvassers, both paid and unpaid, are sent across the state to collect signatures from

registered voters. After signatures are collected, they must be submitted to the Secretary of State to be verified and counted. “An initiated amendment petition must contain at least 90,704 signatures and the required minimum numbers from each of at least 50 counties” (Arkansas Secretary of State’s Office 2023). Once the Secretary of State verifies that the required number of valid signatures has been collected, the measure is qualified for the ballot. If enough signatures are not collected, a form is not submitted, or a required document has an error, then the initiative can be rejected by election officials. This is what happened for the Arkansas Right to Abortion Initiative.

Arkansans for Limited Government sponsored the measure, which “would have allowed for abortions up to 18 weeks after fertilization and exceptions after that time for rape, incest, and instances where the fetus would not survive outside of the womb” (Cochrane 2024). Organizers submitted more than 101,000 signatures (Demillo 2024a). However, the Secretary of State’s office rejected over 14,000 signatures due to failure to submit a sworn statement that identifies paid canvassers by name and confirms that those canvassers had received proper training (Pipia & Kamisar 2024). The group stated that it had provided the necessary documentation and had stayed in contact with the Secretary of State’s office throughout the entire process to ensure all rules and regulations were being followed. “State records show that the abortion campaign did submit, on June 27, a signed affidavit including a list of paid canvassers and a statement saying the petition rules had been explained to them” (Demillo 2024b). More documentation was submitted on July 5th, including affidavits from each paid worker acknowledging that the group provided them with all the required rules and regulations.

The issue was brought before the Arkansas Supreme Court. The Court ruled, in a 4-3 decision, to uphold the state’s rejection, stating, “the sponsor failed to file the paid canvasser training certification” (Demillo 2024b). The majority said that the statement needed to be submitted in one bundle, and “the June 27 filing did not cover 74 of the paid gatherers used by the abortion campaign” (Demillo 2024b). Because of the petition’s rejection, the initiative was not put on the 2024 ballot, taking the choice away from Arkansas voters. Arkansas’ current abortion law still stands, banning abortion at any time during pregnancy unless the woman’s life is at risk.

The Arkansas Right to Abortion Initiative illustrates key challenges within election administration, specifically relating to administrative complexity and bureaucratic compliance. Citizen initiatives must meet specific procedural requirements in order to qualify for the ballot, which election administrators must enforce. This reflects the strict administrative compliance required and the consequences of even minor errors or misinterpretations.

Bills Introduced During the 2025 Legislative Session

As described above, Arkansas election administration is an extremely convoluted process that involves several local and state actors. As if it were not complicated enough, new laws and regulations are constantly being debated by lawmakers. During the 2025 legislative session, 63 election-related bills were introduced and signed into law, impacting various aspects of election administration (Ballotpedia 2025). The following table lists the bills that were introduced, what it does, their impact, and the act number.

Two major themes dominated the bills that passed: increasing requirements for ballot initiatives and electoral safeguards. In the former category, several bills were passed adding new restrictions to the state's direct democracy process, such as requiring canvassers to check a person's photo ID before collecting their signature. Some advocacy groups believe that these new restrictions were passed because the Arkansas Right to Abortion initiative almost made the ballot (Lopez 2025). Republican lawmakers argue that adding restrictions to the soliciting process and gathering signatures "will protect the integrity of direct democracy and discourage fraudulent behavior," while Democratic lawmakers claim "the restrictions will have a chilling effect on the people's right to initiate new laws and constitutional amendments" (Grajeda et al. 2025). The legislature also passed additional voter registration, voter ID, and absentee voting requirements, wanting to ensure a secure election process. This continues the efforts that were started following the 2024 election and the rhetoric claiming the US election system was not secure (Goldman 2024). However, some argue these requirements disenfranchise Arkansas's black, brown, elderly, disabled, and rural voters (ACLU of Arkansas 2025).

When using the 2025 session as an example, the Arkansas legislature appears reactionary, especially towards measures that potentially challenge the status quo. This is an important observation because it provides insight into the direction, motivation, and potential impact of state lawmakers on the future of election administration in Arkansas. Increasing voter restrictions can also increase the burden on election administrators by adding layers of complexity to their responsibilities. New rules often require administrators to implement additional verification procedures, track

Table 2: 2025 Arkansas Election Administration Bills

Bill Number	What It Does	Impact	Act Number
SB291	Extends the deadlines for filing complaints of election law violations with the SBEC	Expands the timeframe for complaints, potentially increasing the number of complaints filed	Act 279
SB293	Requires additional voting information to be posted at polling locations	Adds to the list of tasks poll workers must complete before election day	Act 487
SB294	Requires election audits of any county without 100% accuracy	Increases the administrative burden regarding election results	Act 280
SB295	Allows the SBEC to pay a “certified election monitor”	Increases state-level monitoring of local polling locations	Act 281
SB296	Requires the designated early voting site to be in the county seat	Changes in discretion regarding early voting locations If this were the law during the 2024 election, West Memphis would not have had an early voting location	Act 282
SB299	Places restrictions on helping the elderly or disabled vote	Adds to the list of tasks poll workers must complete on election day	Act 403
SB479	Requires a person assisting a voter with a disability to present identification	Creates an additional barrier for voters with a disability	Act 593
HB1574	Requires a paid canvasser to be an Arkansas resident and domiciled in the state	Limits who can and can’t be a paid canvasser, potentially making it harder to hire paid canvassers	Act 453
SB208	Requires canvassers to view a potential petitioner’s photo ID before obtaining their signature	Adds to the list of requirements canvassers must complete before obtaining petition signatures, potentially making it harder to collect signatures	Act 240
SB188	Requires public posting on the Secretary of State’s website of statewide initiative petitions and referendum petitions	Expands access to initiative petitions and referendum petitions	Act 272

Source: State of Arkansas 95th General Assembly 2025a-j.

compliance with stricter eligibility standards, and manage increased documentation. As a result, administrators face a greater risk of logistical challenges, delays, and inadvertent errors, all of which can undermine the efficiency and accuracy of the election process. The efficacy of election administration in Arkansas may be reliant on the amount of funding or staffing available per county.

Conclusion

This article provides a clear overview of election administration and relevant problems in Arkansas. Election administration in the state is complicated with confusing organization and statutory language. Because Arkansas has home rule, there is also great variation in the implementation of election laws across counties, and overlapping statutory authority creates confusion for county officials. This variation has created several problems that will continue to test the clarity and efficacy of our election administration laws and structures. This topic is ever-changing and sparsely studied, leaving a lot of room for future research. Other studies can explore the impact of partisanship on Arkansas election administration efficacy, the relationship between election administration and political participation, and the sociopolitical environment surrounding elections and election administration in the state.

These processes are important to study because of their relationship to our democratic system. Living in a democracy means the people have a say in what their government does, and election administration is the conduit that delivers our opinions. The previously discussed issues with implementation and interpretation influence Arkansans' ability to exercise their right to vote, to use their voice. It impacts what they know, what they vote on, and what processes govern their voting experience. The aforementioned variation can cause information asymmetries, where a family member in one county has different ordinances than one in another county, leading to confusion. New laws add extra steps to put citizens' initiatives on the ballot, potentially impacting their role in determining their own governance.

Increased awareness of election administration allows for Arkansans to more effectively participate in their state democracy, and this awareness can come from both the individual level and the county level. Citizens can exercise diligence in getting election information from their county governments, and county governments can ensure that their election information is readily available and easily understood. While the average Arkansan may not know about the administration behind elections, its

impacts are becoming more and more evident, exposing the importance of how elections are conducted.

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Comparing the Levels of Democratization in Pakistan and India: A Study of Political Trajectories and Challenges

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Abstract

This comparative study examines the levels of democracy in India and Pakistan, exploring how various factors—such as economic development and political leadership—have contributed to distinct democratization processes, despite the countries' geographic proximity. Through a combination analysis of Polity IV scores and GDP per capita, the study explores how civic culture and leadership styles influence the strength and stability of democracy. The research finds that while both India and Pakistan exhibit democratic features, India shows a higher degree of democratic consolidation. This is largely attributed to its more inclusive political culture and leadership that has, over time, demonstrated greater adaptability. The study ultimately highlights that political leadership is a crucial factor in shaping democratic quality in both countries, though its influence manifests differently in each context.

Introduction

In this research, I ask the question: What are the factors responsible for the variation in the level of democracy in India and Pakistan? It is hypothesized that the level of democracy in India and Pakistan is primarily influenced by three key factors: colonial legacy, political leadership, and economic development. These factors have shaped the political landscapes of both nations, contributing to the evolution of their democratic institutions and practices.

Literature Review

General Literature on the Importance of Democracy

Since our earliest days, we have heard the word *democracy* countless times. For many of us, it is almost impossible to imagine life without it. However, do we truly understand what this word means? Do we have a consensus on its definition?

In his article *Democracy and Human Development*, John Gerring describes democracy as "a political dynamic favorable to the needs and interests of the less advantaged citizens in a society." Similarly, Joseph Schumpeter defines democracy as a comprehensive political process, an "institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote." History has shown us that, in many instances, the citizens fought to establish the system we now call democracy. This historical struggle serves as a reminder to humanize the concept of democracy—it represents the efforts of millions who sought to have their voices heard. Whether the democratic system is perfect, ideal, or full of flaws is ultimately a matter of individual reflection and consideration. Huntington's definition of democracy provides a more effective framework for understanding the term. His conceptualization emphasizes the extent to which elections are open, free, and fair; the limitations on political power; the degree of institutionalization and stability; and the presence of electoral competition alongside widespread voter participation (Huntington 1991, 7–13).

However, a criticism that Doorenspleet raises regarding Huntington's interpretation of democracy is its failure to incorporate a dimension of inclusiveness in his measure. Doorenspleet proposes a remedy, partially based on political participation (Gates, Scott, 2007). This alternative, called 'minimal democracy,' is a dichotomous measure based on two key concepts: participation and competition. To qualify as a democracy under this definition, a country must grant participatory rights to at least 80% of its population and meet a series of institutional criteria related to political competition (Gates, Scott, 2007). This stricter measure results in fewer countries being classified as democracies during earlier periods compared to Huntington's original approach. By combining elements from both Huntington and Doorenspleet's theories, we can move closer to a comprehensive understanding of what democracy truly entails.

There are some patterns of democratization that countries share over the years and across time. According to Scott Gates, Håvard Hegre, Mark P. Jones, and Håvard Strand in their article, *Global Patterns Of Democratization 1800–2000*, the concept of "waves of democratization," proposed by Samuel Huntington, provides a framework for understanding the historical trends of democracy's rise and fall globally. According to

Huntington, democratization has occurred in three distinct waves, each followed by a period of democratic decline or "reverse wave." In the article, *Global Patterns Of Democratization 1800–2000*, the waves are explained as follows:

The first wave of democratization began in the early 19th century, around 1814, and saw a gradual expansion of democratic governance worldwide, especially in the West. This period marked the initial spread of democratic ideals, with an increasing number of countries adopting electoral systems and granting political rights. The wave peaked after World War I, as democratic principles gained prominence in the global political landscape.

However, this progress was not without setbacks. The onset of the Great Depression in 1929 and the concurrent rise of Fascism and Communism in Europe led to a reverse wave of democratization during the 1930s. Many nations regressed into authoritarian regimes, highlighting the fragile nature of democratic transitions during this era.

The second wave of democratization emerged after World War II, driven by the Allied victory and the subsequent decolonization of Asia and Africa. This wave was relatively short-lived, peaking in the late 1940s and early 1950s as newly independent nations adopted democratic governance.

Yet, by the late 1950s, a second reverse wave began to unfold. The rise of autocratic regimes in many decolonized nations and political instability during the 1960s and 1970s undermined democratic progress. The period also saw heightened Cold War tensions, which often prioritized stability over democratic reforms.

The third wave of democratization began in the late 1970s, driven by political transitions in Southern Europe, Latin America, and parts of Asia. This wave gained momentum with the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, resulting in democratic transitions in Eastern Europe and former Soviet states. The third wave marked a period of significant global democratization, with many nations embracing democratic governance.

Despite this progress, signs of a reverse wave emerged in the late 1990s. Democratic backsliding became evident in regions like Africa and the former Soviet Union, where fragile democracies reverted to authoritarian rule. While the third wave has seen remarkable growth in the number of democracies, its long-term sustainability remains uncertain.

What is more, this phenomenon, 'Waves of Democratization,' is largely explained by three interconnected factors: systemic shocks (such as wars), the formation of new states, and political neighborhood effects (Gates, Scott., 2007).

Systemic Shocks and Democratization: Systemic shocks, especially wars, play a pivotal role in shaping waves of democratization. Historically, global wars have resulted in democratization spikes for several reasons:

1. War-induced regime changes: Non-democracies are more likely to experience political transformations during and after wars.
2. Victors imposing democracy: In the aftermath of systemic conflicts such as World War I, World War II, and the Cold War, victorious democracies promoted or imposed democratic systems on defeated states. For example, following World War I, the Treaty of Versailles facilitated the creation of democratic states in Europe.

Formation of the New States and Fragile Democracies: Systemic shocks often lead to the creation of new states, which are disproportionately prone to both democratization and backsliding. These states, born in periods of upheaval, frequently adopt democratic systems initially, influenced by the democratic victors and their international models. However, they often lack institutional consolidation, leaving them vulnerable to autocratic reversals when faced with economic or security crises.

1. Post-World War I: The breakup of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires resulted in several new democracies. However, many of these states backslid into autocracy during the 1930s due to political instability and the rise of fascism.
2. Post-World War II: Decolonization in Africa and Asia led to the emergence of many fledgling democracies. While some succeeded, many backslid into autocracy in subsequent decades, reflecting the fragile nature of their political institutions.
3. Post-Cold War: The dissolution of the Soviet Union produced new states with initial democratic frameworks. However, these states experienced rapid and severe democratic backsliding, demonstrating a pattern consistent with earlier waves.

Political Neighborhood Effects: The regional political environment significantly influences the stability and trajectory of democratization. Democracies are more likely to survive and flourish when surrounded by other democracies, whereas proximity to autocracies poses threats to their stability.

1. Security threats: Autocratic neighbors can compromise democratic institutions, either through direct aggression or by fostering internal instability.
2. Cascade effects: Democratization or authoritarianism often spreads regionally. For example, the democratization of Eastern European states after the Cold War influenced neighboring countries to adopt democratic practices.

The question of whether there will be a reversal of the third wave of democratization carries significant weight in political discourse today. Predicting the future of global democracy is a complex task, as it involves numerous variables—political, economic, and social—that can evolve unpredictably. While unforeseen events and circumstances can disrupt the course of history, it is difficult to envision a scenario where the global shift toward democracy, which has been steadily progressing over the last several decades, would be entirely undone.

Despite its imperfections, democracy remains the most widely accepted and practiced form of governance across the globe. As Richard Rose highlights in his article, "Testing the Churchill Hypothesis: Popular Support for Democracy and Its Alternatives," the words of Winston Churchill that "*democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time*" resonate deeply within the political context of modern societies. Churchill's statement, though delivered with some irony, encapsulates the paradox of democracy. It is a system that, despite its flaws and susceptibility to corruption, remains the most effective way of safeguarding individual rights and freedoms. Democracy, as Churchill implied, is not perfect, but it stands in stark contrast to other forms of government that have historically proven to be more oppressive and unstable.

In reflecting upon the trajectory of democracy since the third wave of democratization, it is important to acknowledge that while democracy is not without its challenges, ranging from corruption to inefficiency, it provides mechanisms for addressing and rectifying these issues (Richard Rose, 1996). Democratic systems allow for checks and balances, free elections, and avenues for peaceful political change. Moreover, the very fact that individuals can voice their dissatisfaction with the system without fear of reprisal is a testament to democracy's value in preserving personal freedoms.

While it is difficult to predict the future, the historical record of democracy's expansion and its relative successes compared to other forms of government make it unlikely that we will witness a wholesale reversal of the third wave of democratization.

As Rose suggests, most of the people still express strong support for democracy, even when confronted with its imperfections. Unless a more just or effective system arises, one that surpasses democracy in securing individual rights and freedoms, it seems unlikely that the world will forsake democracy for another form of governance. Thus, while the challenges of democracy are undeniable, its capacity to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances keeps it relevant as the most viable system for ensuring the rights and liberties of individuals in an increasingly interconnected world.

General Literature Connecting the Independent Variables

There is a paradox between political leaders and democracy, which lies in the tension between allowing leaders to have the power necessary to govern effectively and protecting the freedoms and rights of citizens within a democratic framework (Teles, Filipe, 2012). Filipe continues to explain in his article that the essence of democracy can be heavily influenced by the individual at the helm of the nation. A single decision or shift in leadership approach can steer a country toward a more authoritarian regime, significantly diminishing the freedoms and rights of its citizens, and resulting in a sharp decline in its democracy score. Teles emphasizes that this complex dynamic underscores a critical paradox in political leadership: democracy is ideally grounded in the protection of individual freedoms, yet leaders in democratic systems often find themselves in situations where they must curtail certain liberties or exercise authority in ways that may appear authoritarian.

The article *Political Leaders: The Paradox of Freedom and Democracy* explains how the tension between upholding democratic ideals and exercising necessary authority is most pronounced during national crises. In such moments, leaders may find it imperative to prioritize security, order, or policy changes, all of which may require temporary restrictions on freedoms. For example, during times of war, terrorist threats, or public health emergencies, measures such as curfews, surveillance, or emergency powers might be imposed, potentially infringing upon individual rights in the name of the greater good. The same article discusses how these actions, while justified by leaders as essential for the stability and well-being of the nation, often raise questions about the balance between public safety and personal freedoms.

Another variable that influences democracy is the economic level. The creation of a large middle class is essential to democracy. In his article *Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy*, Lipset suggests that economic development, including higher levels of industrialization and urbanization, supports the rise of a middle class, which is essential for democracy. As nations develop economically, they tend to experience social changes that foster the growth of a more educated and politically active middle class. Lipset asserts that this class is important because it

provides the social and economic foundation necessary for democracy to thrive. What is more, the middle class, which emerges in more economically developed societies, has a vested interest in political stability and is generally more supportive of democratic values. A large middle class helps create a society where power is distributed more evenly, thus reducing the likelihood of extreme power imbalances or authoritarian rule. This class typically values stability, the rule of law, and economic freedom, all of which align with democratic principles (Lipset, 1959).

Another independent variable that can significantly influence the development and stability of democracy is political culture. In his article *Liberal Democracy: Validity and Method Factors in Cross-National Measures*, Bollen explores the intricate relationship between political culture, colonial legacies, and the preparedness of indigenous populations for democratic governance. Bollen argues that this relationship is complex, shaped not only by the inherent political and social structures of a nation but also by the historical legacy of colonial powers and the methods they employed in governing their colonies.

Bollen suggests that the colonial experience plays a pivotal role in shaping the political culture of post-colonial nations. Colonial powers, through their systems of governance, often left a lasting imprint on the political institutions and practices of the territories they controlled. These colonial legacies, whether in the form of authoritarian rule, limited political participation, or the imposition of Western-style institutions, significantly influenced the political development of the indigenous populations. In many cases, the colonial rulers' governance strategies did not foster democratic norms, leaving the populations ill-prepared for the challenges of self-governance and democratic rule after independence.

Furthermore, Bollen emphasizes that the methods used by colonial powers in their administration of colonies were not uniform and had varying degrees of impact on the political culture of different regions. In some colonies, the imposition of democratic structures or the integration of some democratic principles might have facilitated a smoother transition to democracy after independence. In contrast, other colonies, where more authoritarian or exploitative systems were implemented, faced greater challenges in establishing democratic institutions once the colonial powers withdrew.

Levels of Democracy in India and Pakistan

The Democratization Process in India

India inherited a robust democratic framework from its colonial period, as British India was governed by a parliamentary system. After independence in 1947, India

adopted a democratic constitution that established a secular, federal structure with strong provisions for individual rights and equality. The Indian National Congress (INC), led by figures like Jawaharlal Nehru, was instrumental in shaping the early democratic processes (Agarala Easwara, 1989).

British Influence

The article *Pakistan since Independence: An Historical Analysis* by Abdullah Ahsan emphasizes that the British colonial legacy had a profound impact on India's democratization process, primarily due to the institutional structures and governance models left behind by the British Empire. During colonial rule, Britain established a centralized administrative system, which laid the foundation for India's political institutions post-independence. However, this centralized system was designed to maintain British control rather than foster democratic values.

The British introduced legal and administrative systems that, while sophisticated, were not intended to democratize India. These systems, particularly the bureaucratic structures, did not encourage political participation by the masses, nor did they nurture local political leadership. Instead, the system served the colonial rulers' interests and prevented the growth of autonomous political structures at the grassroots level (Ahsan, Abdullah, 2003). In fact, the British often used a "divide and rule" strategy to maintain control, which played a role in creating social, religious, and regional divisions in India (Ahsan, Abdullah, 2003). This fragmentation made the unification of the diverse nation challenging after independence. These divisions hindered the formation of a unified political entity, making the democratization process more complex.

Political Leaders

Abdullah Ahsan continues in his article, highlighting that Indian political leaders played a crucial role in shaping the democratization process, especially after gaining independence in 1947. The policies and actions of key leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, and later Rajiv Gandhi influenced both the political landscape and the economic development of India.

As India's first Prime Minister, Nehru envisioned a democratic, secular state combining modernity with India's cultural heritage (Ahsan, Abdullah, 2003). The article *Pakistan Since Independence: A Historical Analysis* explains how Nehru advocated for a mixed economy with significant state involvement and worked to integrate India's diverse regions into a unified democratic framework. He also played a key role in institutionalizing democratic norms through the Indian Constitution and championed economic planning to achieve social and economic justice.

Economic Development

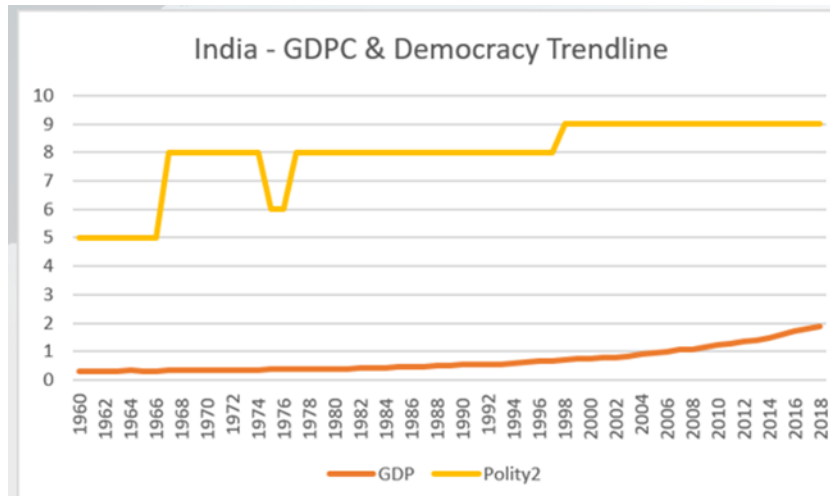
Abdullah Ahsan also has discussed the effects of the economic development process in India. Economic development in India has been closely tied to the country's democratization process. As the economy grew, political awareness and participation increased, which strengthened democracy. However, the growth was uneven, and one of India's challenges was ensuring that the benefits reached all segments of society.

- **Post-Independence Economic Planning:** After gaining independence, India adopted a socialist-oriented economic model focused on public sector enterprises, state control, and economic planning. While the goal was equity, the model led to inefficiencies and slow growth, which affected the sustainability of democracy. However, it also helped maintain political stability by addressing poverty and inequality to some degree.
- **Economic Liberalization (1991 and beyond):** In 1991, under Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, India introduced significant economic liberalization. These reforms, such as opening the economy to foreign investment, reducing trade barriers, and promoting private enterprise, led to higher growth rates, a stronger middle class, and greater global integration. This economic success provided a more stable foundation for democracy by encouraging transparency and accountability from the government.
- **Impact of Economic Inequality:** Despite the overall economic growth, significant inequality remained, particularly in rural areas. This inequality sometimes led to social unrest, posing challenges to democracy. Regional disparities, caste-based inequalities, and religious tensions hindered full democratic participation, requiring leaders to balance economic growth with efforts to reduce poverty and provide opportunities for marginalized groups.

Empirical Evidence:

The correlation between GDP per capita and the level of democracy in India, represented by $r=0.612$ with $p<0.001$, suggests a moderate to strong positive relationship between the two variables. This means that as India's GDP per capita increases, there tends to be a corresponding increase in the level of democracy. However, this suggests that other factors may also influence the level of democracy, beyond just economic growth. The fact that the p-value is less than 0.001 indicates that this relationship is

statistically significant, suggesting that the observed correlation is unlikely to be due to random chance.



Correlations

		GDP	Polity2
GDP	Pearson Correlation	1	.612**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	59	59
Polity2	Pearson Correlation	.612**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	59	59

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Democratization Process in Pakistan

Narasingha P. Sil, a professor of European and English history at Western Oregon University, explains in his article *India-Pakistan Conflict: An Overview* how Pakistan was created as a homeland for Muslims in the Indian subcontinent, to integrate Islamic values into governance. This contrasted with India, which sought to maintain a secular identity. Pakistan's ideological foundation was centered on the notion of a Muslim-majority state, leading to considerable debate on how Islam should shape its political system (Narasingha, 2009).

Abdullah Ahsan has argued that Pakistan has experienced frequent military coups, including military rule under General Ayub Khan (1958–1969), General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988), and General Pervez Musharraf (1999–2008). He also has stated that these military regimes undermined the democratic process. While the military justified its rule as a means of stabilizing the country, it often failed to establish a lasting democratic order. Under General Zia, Pakistan underwent a process of Islamization, which emphasized Islamic laws and values. However, this led to sectarian tensions and a fragmented society, as different Islamic sects and political groups disagreed on the interpretation of Islamic law, deepening divisions within the country.

British Influence

In his article *Pakistan Since Independence: An Historical Analysis*, Ahsan Abdullah has contended that the British did not adequately prepare Pakistan for democracy before its independence in 1947. This view is based on the assertion that the colonial administration left behind a legacy that hindered the development of a stable democratic system in the newly formed state of Pakistan.

The British colonial rule in India primarily focused on maintaining control over the subcontinent and did not foster the kind of democratic practices or institutions that would later support a stable political system (Ahsan, Abdullah. 2003). The British governance model in India was also not rooted in democratic ideals; rather, it was a system of indirect rule, where power was concentrated in the hands of the British Crown and its representatives. The British established a bureaucratic system to administer the colonies, which meant that political power was often controlled by a small elite, with little emphasis on democratic participation or the development of a strong civil society (Ahsan, Abdullah, 2003).

Furthermore, the British left Pakistan with a political structure and institutions that were inadequate for the demands of an independent, democratic nation (Ahsan, Abdullah, 2003). The country's first constitution, which took nine years to formulate, was

heavily influenced by British colonial practices and had many similarities to the British democratic system (Ahsan, Abdullah, 2003). However, the scholar notes that vested interests, particularly those created by the British colonial administration, disrupted the process and ultimately led to the abrogation of the constitution by a military coup.

Political Leaders

In *Pakistan Since Independence: A Historical Analysis*, Ahsan Abdullah discusses the influence of political leadership on Pakistan's democratic process. He highlights the challenges faced by early leaders like Liaquat Ali Khan, who struggled to unify the country post-independence. Leaders like Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971-1973) and General Zia-ul-Haq (1978–1988) attempted to reshape Pakistan with policies that often leaned towards authoritarianism and Islamization, which contributed to political fragmentation and sectarian tensions. The prevalence of corruption among leaders like Benazir Bhutto (1988-1990) and Nawaz Sharif (1990–1993) further undermined public trust and weakened democratic institutions. Additionally, political fragmentation and the failure to build strong democratic systems paved the way for military interventions, disrupting the democratic process. The constant cycle of military and civilian rule prevented Pakistan from establishing lasting democratic norms. Abdullah argues that the failure to prioritize strong institutions, transparent governance, and a unified vision has kept Pakistan's democracy fragile and unstable.

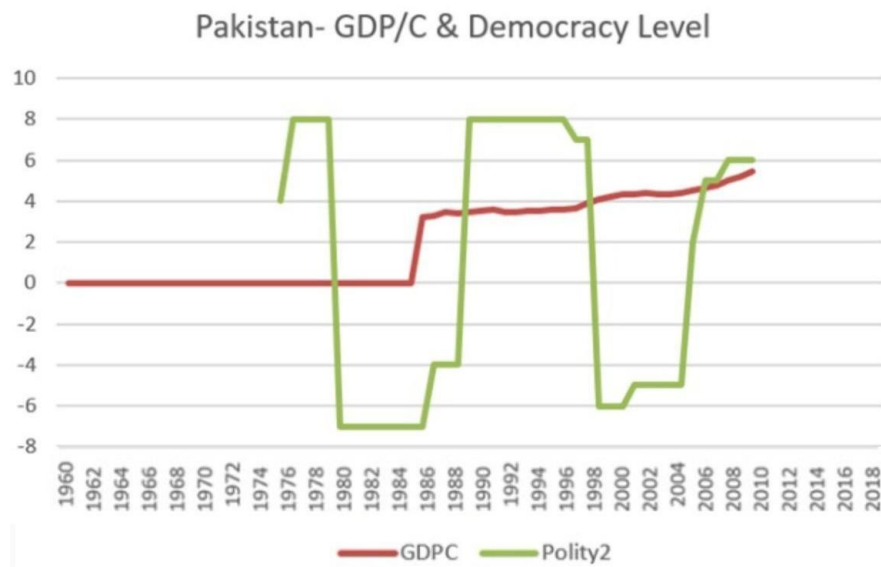
Economic development

In the article *Democratization in Pakistan: An Analysis of Politics (2002-2013)*, Sahar and Sumbal explain the link between economic development and democracy in Pakistan. Economic challenges such as poverty, inequality, and dependence on external aid have perpetuated a cycle of weak governance and limited democratic participation. Persistent economic crises have constrained governments, forcing them to prioritize immediate survival over long-term reforms. These scholars emphasize that economic underdevelopment undermines trust in democratic institutions. Without equitable distribution of resources and access to basic services like education and healthcare, citizens are unable to engage meaningfully in democratic processes. This creates a fragile democracy vulnerable to authoritarian alternatives, as the population loses faith in the system's ability to deliver tangible benefits. Moreover, the interplay between economic and political instability exacerbates governance issues. Military interventions, often justified as necessary responses to economic crises, disrupt democratic processes and erode civilian authority. Without sustainable economic growth, efforts to consolidate democracy remain precarious.

Empirical Evidence

Figure 5 highlights the trends in Pakistan's GDP per capita and Polity V score (a measure of democratic quality) from 1960 to 2018. The GDP per capita data shows a constant growth starting in the 1990s, which coincides with Pakistan's economic liberalization. The polity score fluctuates, with a decline during the late 1980s and early 1990s, a recovery in the 1990s, and a generally positive trend in the 2000s and 2010s, reflecting a stable democratic environment. The correlation coefficient ($r = -0.079$) and p-value ($p = 0.683$) indicate a very weak negative correlation and a statistically insignificant relationship between GDP per capita and democracy in Pakistan.

This weak and non-significant correlation suggests that while both economic performance and democratic quality have improved over time, they do not directly influence each other measurably or consistently during this period. Other factors, such as political instability, low-level governance quality, and external economic conditions, may play a more substantial role in shaping both the economy and democratic practices than a simple linear relationship between the two variables.



Correlations

		GDPC	Polity2
GDPC	Pearson Correlation	1	-.079
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.683
	N	29	29
Polity2	Pearson Correlation	-.079	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.683	
	N	29	41

Analysis

The democratization processes in India and Pakistan, despite their shared colonial history, diverged significantly due to differences in political leadership and economic development. In India, Jawaharlal Nehru's leadership laid the foundation for a democratic, secular state, institutionalizing democratic norms through the Constitution and promoting a mixed economy. This helped foster a stable democracy that evolved alongside economic growth, particularly after the 1991 liberalization reforms. Economic development in India contributed to a growing middle class that demanded greater political accountability, reinforcing democracy.

In contrast, Pakistan's leadership, under pressure to assert its identity as a Muslim-majority state, often resorted to authoritarian rule, particularly during military regimes. Economic development in Pakistan has been inconsistent and not strongly correlated with democratic consolidation, with political instability and authoritarianism hindering growth.

This leads to the question of whether economic development drives democracy or if democracy fosters economic growth. In India's case, economic development supported democratic consolidation, while in Pakistan, the absence of democratic institutions and the focus on authoritarianism suggest that economic growth alone cannot guarantee democracy. Political leadership, historical context, and inclusive governance are essential for a country's successful transition to and sustainability of democracy.

Conclusion

In this study, I aimed to explore the factors responsible for the variations in the level of democracy in India and Pakistan. My hypothesis suggested that political culture, colonial legacy, political leadership, and economic development would explain the differences in democratic outcomes between these two countries.

On the other hand, Pakistan's political trajectory was deeply influenced by the fear of being dominated by a Hindu-majority India, leading to the creation of an authoritarian state driven by the need to preserve and assert an Islamic identity. This quest for survival as an Islamic nation led to political decisions that favored centralized control and authoritarian governance, which have hampered Pakistan's democratic development.

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