During the presidential election of 2000, Thomas E. Patterson, a political scientist and voter-turnout specialist who had recently moved from the University of Minnesota to Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, set himself an ambitious task. He would use a rigorous pattern of regular telephone interviews with ordinary citizens around the country to gauge the shifting psychologies of the American electorate over the course of the campaign. Unlike most pollsters, Patterson wasn’t concerned with which candidates the voters found appealing or even with which issues mattered to them most. Patterson’s aim, instead, was to track how much voters knew about the candidates and issues at different moments during the campaign, to ask what made them pay more attention to the race and what made them pay less attention, and to use those responses to figure out why American voter turnout is so radically low when compared to other Western democracies — a discrepancy which only seems to be growing.

It was a unique and useful project, the results of which have now been published in *The Vanishing Voter*. Patterson develops a detailed, convincing chronological map of the moments during the campaign when voters were more or less involved with the presidential race. He’s drawn some sensible conclusions from the responses — the presidential race is too long, he says, and seems distant to too many voters — and suggests some interesting structural ways to fix the process. But the questions Patterson asks may not be broad enough and the solutions he proposes, consequently, may be far too slight.

The impulse for Patterson’s study, run out of the Kennedy School, is a pretty alarming trend which has inspired a great deal of academic inquiry and public-intellectual brow-knitting. Since 1960, despite a deliberate slackening of the rules governing voter registration, despite rising levels of educational attainment across the country, and despite the abolition of racial barriers to voting, the percentage of eligible Americans who actually cast a ballot has declined steadily. In 1960, according to Patterson’s statistics, 63 percent of eligible voters actually voted; in 2000, just 51 percent did. What’s more, with only two exceptions (1992 and 2000), the percentage of eligible voters who cast ballots in each presidential election was lower than in the immediately previous election.

Some essayists have suggested that perhaps this isn’t so dreadful — Patterson quotes the objections of two of the more prominent, George Will and Robert Kaplan. Both Will and Kaplan have argued elsewhere that low voter turnout may be the mark of a mature democracy — people vote largely when something they value is at risk, and when government hums healthily along, responding to the demands of diverse interest groups, fewer people feel compelled to vote. The political scientist Eric Plutzer takes a more muted position along similar lines: “People have been voting less and less for 30 years, and our democracy hasn’t exactly gone in the toilet,” he told me in a recent interview.

Patterson doesn’t have much time for these arguments. His concern is that low voter turnout leaves American government susceptible to hijacking by particular, minority interests. Ross Perot, he argues, came pretty close to being president, and Patterson doubts that too many Americans really thought a Perot presidency was a very good idea.

But Patterson has a more immediate worry, too. Low voter turnout, he says, means that groups of people who have problems with getting representative numbers to the polls are likely to have issues that concern them ignored: the young, for instance, and racial minorities. There’s a certain evident logic to Patterson’s case here, and it’s an argument that has been repeated elsewhere, notably in a lengthy Washington Post article the Sunday before last election day. That article made the case (echoing Patterson and quoting him as an expert) that politicians routinely discriminate against the issues favored by young voters in favor of the pet issues of older voters because the older a person is the more likely he’ll actually cast a ballot. Just look at all the public hand-wringing over prescription medicine, Patterson argues, an issue which is not of dire importance to most Americans but a pretty urgent matter for senior citizens, who are most likely to vote.

But it’s a real leap to say that those issues which aren’t heavily emphasized during a campaign are ignored by government, and an even greater leap to suggest that those groups politicians don’t routinely cater to are disenfranchised. A nonprofit group called the Youth Vote Coalition polled young voters across the country on
the eve of the recent midterm elections to find out what issues were most important to them. Terrorism and homeland security came up first, taxes second, and crime third. None of these issues was exactly escaping the scrutiny and debate of politicians; the first two were the decisive issues for Republican legislative candidates in that campaign. It’s hard to say, on these grounds, that the interests of young voters are in any substantial way shut out of the public debate. You can make similar arguments for African Americans or people in rural areas, two other groups with historically low turnout. Credit the hustle of politicians eager for votes — any group with a discernible agenda will find an audience.

Patterson’s central concern, more narrowly, is voter turnout, and so his solutions take the form of structural improvements in the electoral process that might sensibly nudge up the number of people who turn out to vote. The structure of Patterson’s Vanishing Voter Project — the series of telephone polls designed to gauge voter interest — provides him with a narrative of the public’s undulations of interest and boredom. After Super Tuesday, Patterson finds, voters knew less about the candidates than they did before the New Hampshire primary. When the Republican convention opened, potential voters were deeply apathetic. Voters in states that held primaries late in the season knew far less about the candidates, on all counts, than voters in early-primary states. From these tendencies, highlighted by survey, Patterson concludes that the election cycle is far too long; that it pays disproportionate amounts of attention to the issues important to voters in the few states (New Hampshire, Iowa) that have early primaries; that it gives too much emphasis to the ability of candidates to raise money, which turns off large numbers of voters; that the media are too attentive to candidate gaffes and the politics of their personality (I’m with Patterson on this one; there’s nothing so dull as listening to reporters uncharismatically discussing someone else’s charisma); and that all of this turns off voters.

Many of these themes are familiar. His book’s last section, titled “The Politics of Participation: A Model Campaign,” tries to add to the debate by designing a presidential campaign that would answer them.

Patterson’s campaign strips Iowa and New Hampshire of the exclusive contract to lead the primary season and instead establishes a set of four early primaries, one a week. The right to host those early primaries, Patterson says, should rotate among the smaller states, with the particular states differing each presidential election. His campaign then has all of the other primaries held on the next Tuesday, a sort of massive Super Tuesday, and jumps straight into the nominating conventions to avoid the “dead time” his polls found in the early summer.

Patterson says he wants to construct a compact primary campaign that can hold voters’ interest. He would compel the broadcast networks to offer extended coverage of the primary debates and party conventions as well as a one-hour live interview program with the candidates during the general election. He also wants to eliminate the Electoral College, relying instead on the popular vote; adopt election-day registration (which we’ve tried before and given up because it’s so inherently subject to manipulation — remember Bleeding Kansas?); institute later poll-closing hours; and make election day a national holiday.

These measures, Patterson says, will help restore public confidence in the process and make it easier for those people who are inclined to vote actually to do so. There are several sensible criticisms of this model, not least of which is that Patterson may be taking the citizens he surveys at their word a little too readily. He begins each chapter with a few quotations from ordinary folks giving their criticisms of the electoral process. For example:

“I hate all the negativity and the mudslinging” — fifty-three-year-old North Carolina resident.

“The press should report the news instead of making the news” — sixty-year-old Indiana resident.

“The candidates promise all these things and then never follow through” — thirty-six-year-old Florida resident.

Patterson takes these comments very seriously. But what’s disturbing about them is how flavorless they are. When a grad student from the Kennedy School of Government calls you up in North Carolina, or Indiana, or Florida to ask you why you don’t vote, maybe you really are put off by politicians’ mudslinging or an activist press or the false promises of a campaign. But maybe you are also so disengaged from the political process that the only things you know about it are these trite, impossibly simple criticisms of politicians and the press that you’ve heard from radio djs or your co-workers, and so you throw back someone else’s complaints as
your own. This poses a genuine problem for his conclusion. If the real reason people don’t vote is that they are frustrated by the particulars of the political process, then tweaking the political process may do some good. But if voters don’t vote because of a more radical disengagement — they wouldn’t know where to start — and are just quoting someone else’s frustrations, then changing the election’s particulars won’t have much of an effect. I worry that Patterson may be overstating the level of intelligence and information involved in the American public’s continued abstention.

Patterson’s reforms are designed to make it easier and more enticing for a public which he considers inherently interested in voting but turned off from voting by the particulars of the voting and election processes to actually get to the polls. It’s a premise that is not borne out by the history and the context. German voters, English voters, French voters — all of whom turn out at rates upwards of 85 percent for national elections — are deeply interested in the outcome of their elections. But Americans routinely turn out at rates closer to half that, and the particular dynamics of individual races never seem to increase the turnout rates all that much.

Appealing candidates do not dramatically alter the rate at which voters participate. A national war footing and extended television news coverage of September 11, 2001 and the war on terror were not enough, in 2001 or 2002, to affect voter behavior. These are pretty dramatic cultural events, and they have not significantly shaken the patterns of American voting behavior. Isn’t this evidence enough to suggest that those Americans who habitually choose not to vote are fundamentally disengaged from the political process?

During the week leading up to the 2002 elections, I was assigned to the Philadelphia Inquirer’s coverage of a congressional race in suburban Philadelphia between a Republican state senator named Jim Gerlach and a Democrat named Dan Wofford, the son of former U.S. Senator Harris Wofford and himself a longtime public advocate on environmental and educational issues. Both candidates suited the wealthy district well; they were concerned about containing suburban sprawl and ensuring the state established strict standards for local schools, issues that voters cared most about. Gerlach and Wofford were both articulate, capable, and had long local roots and distinguished records. Their race was heavily covered by the local press, who used it mostly as a prompt for that age-old political question, “Whither the Soccer Moms?” (Back with the Republicans, apparently; Gerlach won.)

One of the things I did on election day, when I was chasing the candidates and their posses around suburban Pennsylvania, was to stop and quiz voters about who they voted for, and why. What was striking about these voters — who were not inarticulate and said they thought they had a lot of information on which to base their choices — was how dramatically wrong they were about the positions of the candidates and their parties. I spoke with a schoolteacher from Bechtelsville, Pennsylvania who voted for the Republican candidate, Gerlach, because she wanted to cast a pro-union vote. Her brother and brother-in-law both belonged to municipal unions, and she wanted a candidate whose party supported union positions. But even Gerlach would have acknowledged that Wofford was the pro-union candidate, and her brother and brother-in-law’s union endorsed Wofford. I talked with a lawyer from Bala Cynwyd who voted for Wofford because he wanted to empower the party that would back strong support for the state of Israel. But Wofford would have acknowledged that position described his opponent’s party more than his own. And these were the people who actually managed to vote.

Patterson’s study turns up a lot of oddly compelling statistics. My favorite is the chart meant to assess how the strength of partisanship and degree of knowledge relate to voter turnout. Under the box that contains the intersection of “Strong Partisan” and “Unable to Say Anything About Either Party” sits “74 percent” — a benignly robust number. Wait a minute — there are people out there who consider themselves strong partisans but can’t even say anything to describe their own party? And three-quarters of them vote? Patterson’s researchers aren’t looking for the sky here — “Democrats help working people” or “Republicans are a homeowner’s friend”; “Democrats are baby killers” or “Republicans are corporate slime” — any of these would have counted as saying something about those particular parties. If this group of people who are voting (at a level far higher than most Americans) and who consider themselves staunch partisans can’t even raise themselves to say something crudely positive about their own party or crudely negative about the other party — then how informed can the people who aren’t voting be?
Not that voters have an easy task. American parties, over the past 20 years, have shed the class-based labels that made American party politics so user-friendly for most of the preceding century (and continues to make decisions easy for European voters). If you believed that America’s essential dynamism lay with its small business owners, and particularly if you were a small business owner yourself, you voted Republican. If your faith and affiliations lay with the factory workers, you voted Democratic. Things are a lot more complicated now; party platforms are a huge mess of shifting affiliations and social, economic, and international concerns. There is a great deal of variability not only in position but also in emphasis among the parties, and local candidates are very rarely a simple proxy for the positions of the national parties. There are good reasons why voters are uninformed and disengaged.

But they are uninformed and disengaged, and not incidentally or because they're fed up, as Patterson argues. The people who habitually do not vote are generally clueless about politics. Patterson's own surveys back this up. This is a knotty, difficult problem — and one that will not be solved by small measures.