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**On person, two votes ; That's essentially what happens, experts say,
when large groups of electorate don't vote**
by Miles Benson

WASHINGTON -- Imagine an election in which each poor person gets one vote but each wealthy person gets two. A high school dropout gets one vote, but a college graduate gets two. A renter gets one vote, but a homeowner gets two. A 20-year-old gets one vote, but a 60-year-old gets two.

Welcome to American democracy and the 2002 election, where experts say a system of weighted voting has taken hold, in practice, if not in law.

It's what happens when the electorate voluntarily divides itself into voters and nonvoters, diluting the potential strength of some groups and exaggerating the voices of others.

The imbalances will be at work again Tuesday.

"The system is skewed toward the wealthy, the higher-educated and older individuals because they vote at much higher rates than young people, the under-educated and poor, and therefore they are influencing the outcome of policies," said James Thurber, a professor of government and director of American University's Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies.

In other words, the interests of those who vote come first when members of Congress decide which programs will be funded and which cut, whose taxes will go up and whose will go down.

Experts anticipate a turnout as low as 36 percent of the voting-age population this Election Day, with the same predictable patterns:

- Seniors will vote at twice the rate of young citizens.
- The top 20 percent in income will vote at twice the rate of the bottom 20 percent.
- College graduates will be twice as likely to vote as those with only high school diplomas.

"This leads to perpetuation of advantage for the advantaged," said Stephen J. Wayne, professor of government at Georgetown University. "They get better education and better means to maintain their position. People who need to vote to change the system vote the least, and people who contribute most try to maintain their across-the-board advantages."

There is no mystery about why some people turn their backs on voting and some flock to the polls.

"The poor don't vote because they no longer find a home in either party, and others because of the decline in civic education, disinterest in current events and hostility toward government," said Curtis Gans, who heads the nonpartisan Committee for the Study of the American Electorate. "What used to drive people to vote was civic duty. Now it is an interest in specific issue outcomes, a sense of identification with certain leaders or ideological zealotry."

Wayne suspects voting or not voting reflects the nature of many political issues: They are not yes-or-no questions. "Some people face ambiguity and complexity much better than others do," he said. "People who don't understand the issues stay home."

For many, political intensity is like religious intensity. "In general, people with a strong religious commitment, regardless of denomination, are more likely to be voters," said Scott Keeter, associate director of the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

Voting is learned behavior. Citizens raised by parents who voted regularly are more likely to become regular voters themselves, experts said.

And, of course, party activists on both sides will vote, along with members of groups that encourage voting, such as organized labor and the National Rifle Association.

A 30-year-decline in voter turnout has benefited Republicans, Harvard political scientist Thomas Patterson said.

"When you shrink the electorate you get more Republican victories because what you lose at the bottom are voters who are disproportionately Democratic," Patterson said. "If everybody had voted in 1994, instead of 36 percent, we wouldn't have seen a Republican revolution, and if everybody had voted in 2000 instead of just 50 percent, Al Gore would have won handily and the Democrats would have taken the Senate and the House."

The expectation that this election will produce another low turnout is "amazing when you consider the economic conditions we are in and the fact that we had 9/11 and that we may go to war in Iraq," said American University's Thurber.

But this year, those who vote are in the grip of "the politics of disappointment," pollster John Zogby said.

The terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001 provided a "moment of reconnection" with their government for many Americans, Zogby said. "In a big way, they expected a lot from government and other familiar institutions, family and church and so on, to provide for them comfort and security, not the least of which is their future security through their investments." (Two-thirds of voters have 401(k) plans or IRAs and consider themselves investors.)

What followed, though, was "a tremendous letdown," beginning this past spring, Zogby said: "A letdown by church scandals, a letdown by CEO accounting scandals, a letdown in the pursuit of Osama bin Laden and the direction of the war on terrorism."

Beneath the present sour mood is a prevailing sense of cynicism.

Thurber is convinced many refuse to vote based on the absence of real competition in so many races. "There are probably only about 12 tossup races in the House of Representatives and maybe six to eight in the Senate," he said.

"People look at these races and say, 'Look, it doesn't make any difference if I vote, the outcome is preordained because of redistricting and the amount of money going to the incumbents.' There is really only one party in Washington, and that's the incumbency party. In the last midterm election, 1998, 97 percent of those who stood for re-election in the House of Representatives were re-elected. In the Senate the re-election rate was 88.7 percent."

In their 1999 book "Nonvoters: America's No-Shows," Jack C. Doppelt and Ellen Shearer suggested the habit of not voting is deeply ingrained.

"For the majority of Americans for whom voting is neither duty nor ritual, a more fundamental evolution must take place if voting is to be used as an indicator of the legitimacy of a thriving democracy," the authors wrote.

"The voice of the nonvoting majority, with its competing strains of alienation and complacency, political awareness and obliviousness, futility and indifference, speaks of no heroes or icons in the political landscape.

"Nonvoters exhibit little trust in the responsiveness of the political process, not even those who believe it is working. They get little reinforcement at home or on the job for the importance of the political or voting process. What has resulted is a generation of which half its members lives outside the body politic."