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## **American Games: Voter Apathy and the Rise of Sports, 1880-1917**

In the late nineteenth century, Americans began losing interest in politics, and voter participation greatly decreased. Fed up with corruption, frustrated by the growth of large corporations, and alienated by regionalism, Americans began to lose faith in the political system and in their politicians, especially at the national level. Many historians, Martin Lawrence Kornbluh being among the latest, have examined the causes of this decline, yet there is another side to this story. The first law of thermodynamics, as formulated and accepted in the mid-nineteenth century, states that energy cannot be destroyed, only transformed or diverted elsewhere. Applying this "natural" law to human nature, forces us to ask a different question about this infamous decline in voter participation. If interest and participation in national politics decreased, where then did that "energy" go? Concurrent with this decline of political participation, a national sports craze swept the nation. Americans began to view sports, especially baseball and football, as compatible with the American ideal and free from the corruption that plagued the political arena. Around the turn of the century, sports assumed many of the roles traditionally associated with politics. Sports provided a common language for popular discussion and an increasingly popular outlet for public anxiety and competition. With the breakdown of urban political machines, sports partially filled the vacuum left by the decline of political activity. In this paper, we will argue that with the perceived corruption of politics after the Civil War, the onset of Jim Crow, and the sexual confinements of Victorian morality, Americans of

all races, genders, and regions found new methods of expression in sports.

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