
Voter Participation

Session 17

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MIT Department of Political Science
17.263: American Elections

Roadmap

[Variation in Turnout](#)

[Why Do\(n't\) People Vote?](#)

[Manipulating Voter Turnout](#)



Bykowicz, Julie. "Trump's Turn-Out-The-Base Strategy is Tested in Maine County," *Wall Street Journal*, August 14, 2020. © Dow Jones & Company. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.



Collins, Eliza, and Chad Day. "The Door-to-Door Election Battle to Swing an Arizona County," *Wall Street Journal*, September 4, 2020. © Dow Jones & Company. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

Trump Rally in Arizona



"President Trump Campaigns in Prescott." 12News.com. October 19, 2020. © KPXX-TV. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

<https://www.12news.com/video/news/politics/president-trump-campaigns-in-prescott/75-a54a13d3-9805-4014-a1ea-817620d46759>

Biden Get-Out-The-Vote Ad



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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yJa3b6lrdA>

Variation in Turnout

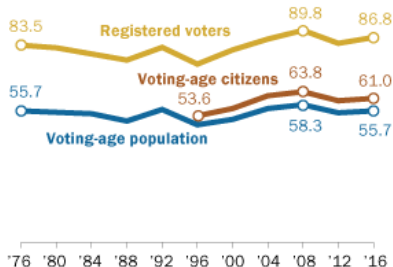
Political Participation as a Political Choice

- ▶ One can think of voting and other modes of political **participation** as a **two-step decision**:
 1. **Do I engage** in some participatory act (e.g., vote), or do I abstain?
 2. If I participate, **how** should I do so (e.g., for whom should I vote)?
- ▶ Of course, participation is only partly voluntary.
 - ▶ Participation requires paying **costs**, whether small or large, and even in a democracy is sometimes impossible (e.g., non-citizens or felons).
 - ▶ There can also be **benefits** to participating (material, psychological, social)—or, equivalently, costs to non-participation (e.g., White et al. on black Democrats).
- ▶ Political participation is thus a **constrained choice** whose outcome depends on individual as well as contextual factors.

Measuring Turnout

Turnout in U.S. presidential elections

Votes cast as a share of ...

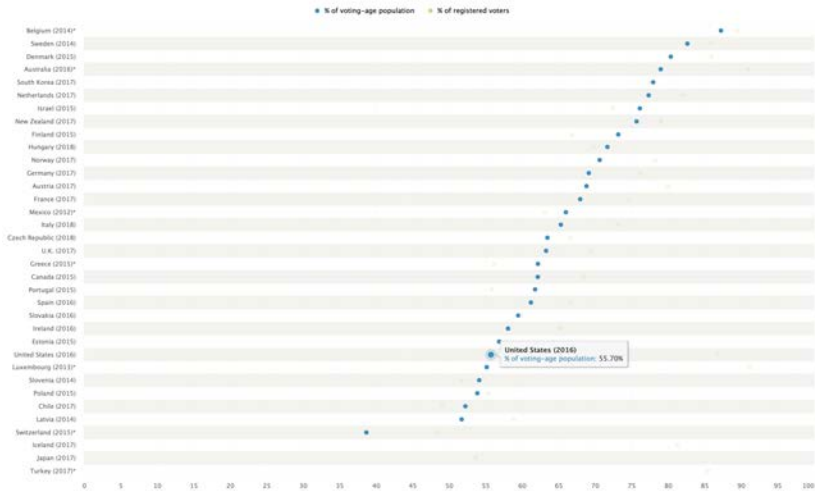


Source: Census Bureau (population estimates), House Clerk's office and Pew Research Center (vote totals).

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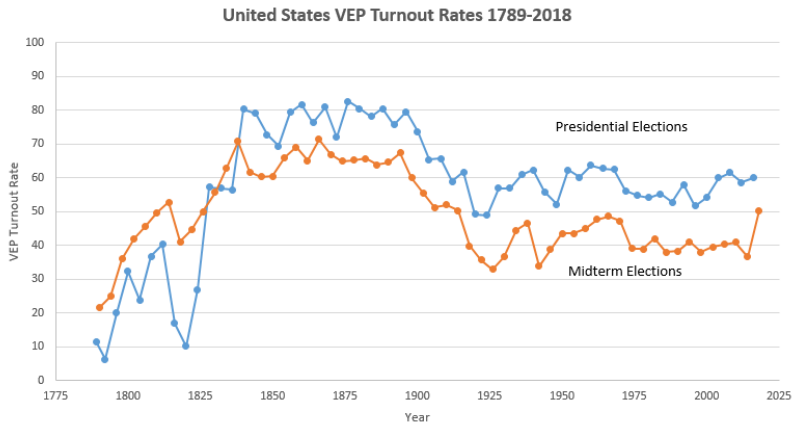
DeSilver, Drew. ["In Past Elections, U.S. Trailed Most Developed Countries in Voter Turnout."](#) November 3, 2020. Pew Research Center. November 3, 2020. © Pew Research Center. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

US Turnout in Cross-National Perspective



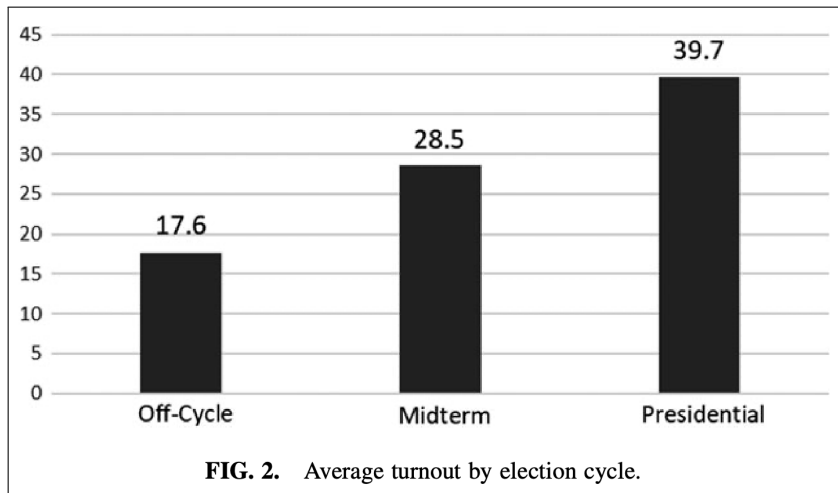
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Presidential vs. Midterm Elections



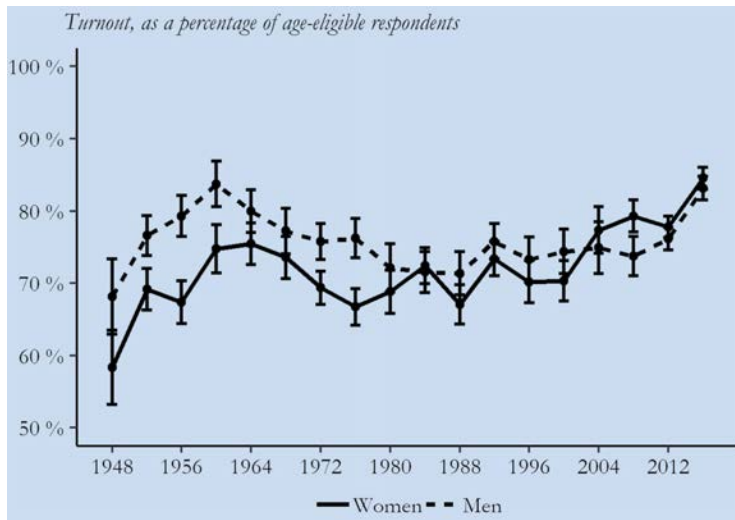
"National General Election VEP Turnout Rates, 1789-Present." United States Elections Project. © Electproject.org. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

Local Elections by Election Timing

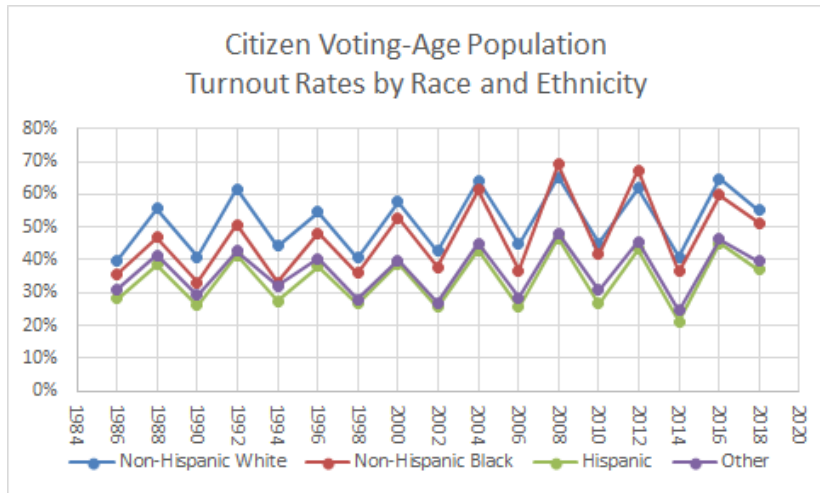


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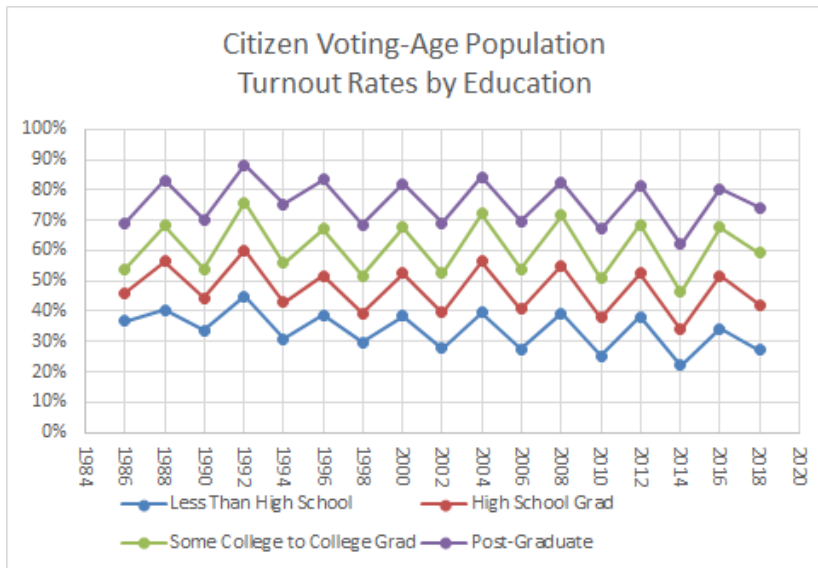
Gender



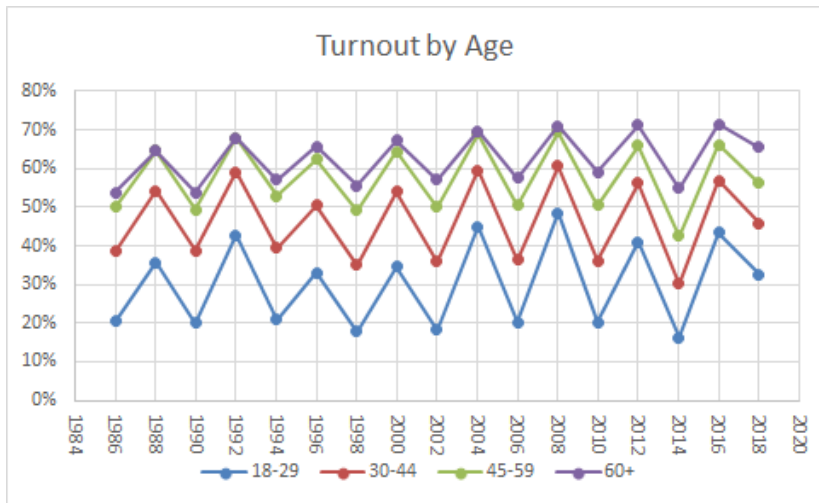
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Why Do(n't) People Vote?

A Basic Rational Choice Model of Turnout

The Calculus of Voting: The expected utility of voting is positive iff

$$\text{Cost} < (\text{Benefit} \mid \text{Win}) \times \text{Pr}(\text{Pivotal})$$

This leads to the **paradox of voting**: An individual voter is extremely unlikely to affect the outcome, it is irrational to vote unless the benefits of voting itself (regardless of the outcome) outweigh the costs of doing so.

- ▶ But then why do so many people vote?

Modified Calculus of Voting

To account for the fact that many people do in fact vote, rational-choice scholars proposed a modified version of the calculus of voting:

$$\text{Cost} < (\text{Benefit} \mid \text{Win}) \times \text{Pr}(\text{Pivotal}) + \text{Duty}$$

Two potential components of the “D term” (Duty):

1. **Intrinsic:** doing the right thing, even if no one knows about it
2. **Extrinsic:** contingent on others' observing your actions



Social pressure can thus be a powerful inducement to vote.

Why *Don't* People Participate?

*"In thinking about why some people are active while others are not, we find it helpful to invert the usual question and to ask instead why people do not take part in politics. Three answers immediately suggest themselves: because they **can't**; because they **don't want to**; or because **nobody asked**."*

—Verba, Schlozman & Brady, *Voice and Equality*

Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Harvard University Press, 1995. © Harvard University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

The Civic Voluntarism Model

Reconcile the calculus of voting with social/psychological reality.

The major components:

1. **Resources** (capacity to participate)
2. **Engagement** (desire to participate)
3. **Recruitment** (asked to participate)

Closely tied with social and civic engagement more generally (churches, unions, etc.)

Resources and Participation

Different **resources** are needed for different forms of participation:

- ▶ **Time:** vote, volunteer
- ▶ **Skills:** write letters, organize protest, circulate petition
- ▶ **Money:** donate to candidates and parties

Time is the most equally distributed resources, but in recent decades its importance has decreased relative to money.

Does It Matter Who Votes?

Clearly, voters and non-voters are different. But do these differences matter? How would politics change if, say, everyone voted?

There are several things to say about this.

- ▶ In presidential and congressional elections, voters tend to be more conservative and Republican than non-voters, but the gaps are not huge and universal turnout (arguably) would rarely swing elections.
- ▶ Voter/non-voter differences vary across types of elections.
 - ▶ Local elections esp. dominated by the old, wealthy, and interested.
- ▶ If the composition of the electorate did change dramatically, the parties would adapt their electoral tactics and issue positions.
- ▶ So there could be policy effects without partisan ones.

Manipulating Voter Turnout

Getting Out (and Suppressing) the Vote

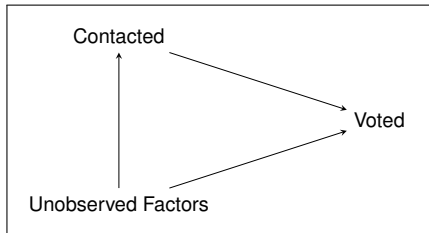
- ▶ Voter turnout is not a fact of nature beyond human influence.
- ▶ Rather, political actors can and often do actively shape the size and composition of the electorate.
- ▶ Some of these actors are at least nominally nonpartisan (e.g., Rock the Vote or the League of Women Voters), but most have an interest in the outcome of the election.
- ▶ Partisan actors thus have incentives to manipulate the active electorate—**mobilizing** their supporters and (perhaps) **demobilizing** their opponents.

How Do We Know What Works?

Observational Approach

Usual approach pre-2000 was to ask survey subjects whether they were contacted and whether they voted, and compare turnout by contact.

What is the problem with this approach?



Experimental Approach

- ▶ Instead of passively measuring the association between contact and turnout, randomly manipulate who gets contacted.
- ▶ Such **field experiments** showed that some turnout techniques that are strongly *correlated* with turnout do not in fact *cause* turnout.
- ▶ Pioneered by political scientists, picked up by campaigns.

Social pressure is powerful. . .

Neighbors mailing

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Dear Registered Voter:

WHAT IF YOUR NEIGHBORS KNEW WHETHER YOU VOTED?

Why do so many people fail to vote? We've been talking about the problem for years, but it only seems to get worse. This year, we're taking a new approach. We're sending this mailing to you and your neighbors to publicize who does and who does not vote.

The chart shows the names of some of your neighbors, showing which have voted in the past. After the August 8 election, we intend to mail an updated chart. You and your neighbors will all know who voted and who did not.

DO YOUR CIVIC DUTY — VOTE!

MAPLE DR	Aug 04	Nov 04	Aug 06
9995 JOSEPH JAMES SMITH	Voted	Voted	_____
9995 JENNIFER KAY SMITH		Voted	_____
9997 RICHARD S JACKSON		Voted	_____
9999 KATHY MARIE JACKSON		Voted	_____
9999 BRIAN JOSEPH JACKSON		Voted	_____
9991 JENNIFER KAY THOMPSON		Voted	_____
9991 BOB R THOMPSON		Voted	_____
9993 BILL S SMITH			_____
9999 WILLIAM LUKE CASPER		Voted	_____
9989 JENNIFER SUE CASPER		Voted	_____
9987 MARGA S JOHNSON	Voted	Voted	_____
9987 TOM JACK JOHNSON	Voted	Voted	_____
9987 RICHARD TOM JOHNSON		Voted	_____
9985 ROSEMARY S SUE		Voted	_____
9985 KATHRYN L SUE		Voted	_____
9985 HOWARD BEN SUE		Voted	_____
9983 NATHAN CHAD BERG		Voted	_____
9983 CARRIE ANN BERG		Voted	_____
9981 EARL JOEL SMITH			_____
9979 DEBORAH KAY WAYNE		Voted	_____
9979 JOEL R WAYNE		Voted	_____

“The chart shows the names of some of your neighbors, showing which have voted in the past. After the August 8 election, we intend to mail an updated chart. You and your neighbors will all know who voted and who did not.”

Social pressure is powerful. . . but it can provoke a backlash

Neighbors mailing

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9999 KATHY MARIE JACKSON	_____	_____	_____
9999 BRIAN JOSEPH JACKSON	_____	_____	_____
9991 JENNIFER KAY THOMPSON	_____	_____	_____
9991 BOB R THOMPSON	_____	_____	_____
9993 BILL S SMITH	_____	_____	_____
9999 WILLIAM LIKHE CASPER	_____	_____	_____
9989 JENNIFER SUE CASPER	_____	_____	_____
9987 MARSA S JOHNSON	_____	_____	_____
9987 TOM JACK JOHNSON	_____	_____	_____
9987 RICHARD TOM JOHNSON	_____	_____	_____
9985 ROSEMARY S SUE	_____	_____	_____
9985 KATHRYN L SUE	_____	_____	_____
9985 HOWARD BEN SUE	_____	_____	_____
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9979 DEBORAH KAY WAYNE	_____	_____	_____
9979 JOEL R WAYNE	_____	_____	_____

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Tom Hinkeldey
 @TomAthink

Hey @tedcruz your brilliant public shaming campaign has inspired me to caucus on Monday...For @marcorubio

Post by Tom Hinkeldey
 811 Ave 27th
 Houston, TX 77001

RECEIVED CIVIC OFFICIAL PUBLIC NOTICE

VOTING VIOLATION

You are receiving this election notice because of low expected voter turnout in your area. Your individual voting history as well as your neighbors' are public record. These scores are published below, and many of them will see your score as well. CAUCUS ON MONDAY TO IMPROVE YOUR SCORE and please encourage your neighbors to caucus as well. A follow-up notice may be issued following Monday's caucuses.

	GRADE	SCORE
STEFFANY HINKELDEY	F	55%
DONNA HOLSTEIN	F	55%
TIM JOHNSON	F	55%
HEATHER JOHNSON	F	55%
THOMAS HINKELDEY	F	55%

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Voter Suppression

See slide 30 for credits.



Supreme Court Rejects Pandemic-Spurred Voting Changes in Wisconsin

Mail-in ballots must arrive by Election Day in critical state, dealing Democrats a loss



Trump 'army' of poll watchers could frighten voters, incite violence, election officials warn

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Kendall, Brent, and Jess Bravin. "Supreme Court Rejects Pandemic-Spurred Voting Changes in Wisconsin," *Wall Street Journal*, October 26, 2020. © Dow Jones & Company. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

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Hughes, Trevor. "Trump 'Army' of Poll Watchers Could Frighten Voters, Incite Violence, Election Officials Warn," *USA Today*, October 14, 2020. © USA Today, a division of Gannett Satellite Information Network, LLC. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

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