

# The Myth of the Vanishing Voter

Michael P. McDonald  
University of Illinois, Springfield  
mmcdonal@weber.ucsd.edu

and

Samuel L. Popkin  
University of California, San Diego  
spopkin@weber.ucsd.edu

Presented at the 2000 American Political Science Conference

Washington, DC

Aug. 30 – Sept. 3, 2000

**Abstract:** The apparent steady decline in the national turnout rate since 1972 is an illusion created by using the Census Bureau's estimate of the voting-age population (VAP) as the denominator of the turnout rate. We construct a more accurate estimate, the voting-eligible population (VEP), from 1948-1998 by using government statistical series to adjust the VAP for included, but ineligible, groups such as non-citizens and felons; and excluded, but eligible, groups such as overseas citizens. We show that measurement error, not nonvoting, is increasing. During the 1960s the turnout rate declined dramatically both nationally and outside the South, but the only significant trend since 1972 is an increase in Southern congressional elections. Although the decline in the turnout rate was coincident with the granting of the vote to 18-20 year olds in 1971, we show that the lower turnout rate of these voters accounts for less than one-fourth of the subsequent decline.

We would like to thank Royce Crocker, Jennifer Day, Wally Doerge, Heather McMullin for providing assistance in compiling the data. We also thank Micah Altman, Walter Dean Burnham, Gary Jacobson, Gary King, Andy Kohut, Jonathan Nagler, Warren Mitofsky, and Ray Wolfinger for their insightful comments. Any errors remain the responsibility of the authors.

## Introduction

The decline in national turnout rates in recent United States elections is “the most important, most familiar, most analyzed, and most conjectured trend in recent American political history” (Hansen and Rosenstone 1993: 57). Political researchers, democratic theorists, pundits, politicians and reformers are searching for the causes or promoting cures for the decline in turnout rates. Advocates of loftier and less-expensive campaigns, higher-minded political rhetoric, weightier journalism, public financing, easier registration, online voting or more distinctive platforms all promise to bring back voters that have been driven from the polls by toxic campaigns.

The time has come to rethink the decline in electoral participation. Contrary to conventional wisdom the turnout rate is not steadily declining, voters are not “disappearing” (Teixeria 1992). Although the present turnout rate outside the South is lower and more variable than it was in the 1950s and 1960s, there is no ongoing downward decline. The apparent downward trend in the turnout rate since 1972 is an artifact of measurement errors that overstate the size of the electorate, and do so at an increasing rate. Measurement error, not nonvoting, is increasing, leading to the fallacious perception that the turnout rate among eligible voters is decreasing.

If the turnout rate since 1972 is low and variable, but not in free-fall, then the searches for the causes of lower turnout are misguided. In particular, blaming modern campaigns and campaign coverage for a decline in the turnout rate is akin to blaming the internal combustion engine for the decline in the number of dinosaurs. The much-reviled changes in campaigns and media occurred after the last significant change in turnout.

The academic research on the decline in turnout rate is massive. First placed into historical context by Walter Dean Burnham (1965), an extensive literature seeks to explain why recent turnout rates are declining (e.g., Cavanagh 1981; Abramson and Aldrich 1982; Cassel and Luskin 1988; Leighly and Nagler 1992; Teixeira 1992; Rosenthal and Hansen 1993; Miller and Shanks 1996; Shields and Goidel 1997). The paradox for these studies is that despite factors favoring higher turnout rates; notably

increased education levels, the removal of structural impediments to turnout such as poll taxes and Jim Crow laws, and the easing of registration laws; turnout rates still dropped (Brody 1978; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

Miller and Shanks begin their survey-based analysis of participation assuming a “thirty-year decline in aggregate voter turnout from the early 1960s to the late 1980s,” (1996: 41), a “persistent downward trend [that] is both unmistakable and a potential matter for concern” (1996: 40). Hansen and Rosenstone, echoing the literature attempting to uncover biases in turnout find “the more recent decline of citizen involvement in government has yielded a politically engaged class that is not only growing smaller and smaller but is also less and less representative of the American polity” (1993: 248). Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde believe that this in turn “...undermine(s) the legitimacy of elected political leaders” (1980: 91). Cavanagh goes further, citing declining turnout rates as “contributing to the spirit of intransigence in contemporary American politics and to the resultant institutional paralysis” (1981: 63). Miller darkly warns that when the public disengages “the potential for revolutionary alteration from the political and social system is enhanced” (1974: 951).

Analyses of civic health in America examine the most rudimentary way people participate in their government, voting. Although these analyses are inextricably entwined with the quality of voting statistics and census data, few have checked their accuracy. We have, and we have some good news to report. We find that there is no downward trend in the national turnout rate since 1972. The seemingly ongoing decline in the official turnout rate from 1972 onward is an artifact of the method of using the voting-age population (VAP) estimated by the Census Bureau as the denominator in the turnout rate equation. This estimate, used in official turnout reports, includes categories of persons ineligible to vote; notably non-citizens, disenfranchised felons, persons who have moved to a new residence after registration closed, and the mentally incompetent; and excludes United States citizens eligible to vote, but living overseas.

While it is widely acknowledged that the VAP is substantively different from the eligible population (Andrews 1966; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Mitofsky and Plissner 1981, Burnham 1985;

Wolfinger 1993; Bruce 1997; Gans 1997; Day 1998), no one has collected the data necessary to estimate the turnout rate *over time* among eligible voters. When we calculate an accurate estimate of the voting-*eligible* population (VEP) from the voting-*age* population estimated by the Bureau of the Census, we find that the conventional wisdom of steadily declining turnout rates is an illusion. Since 1972 the proportion of ineligible voters among the VAP has paced the growth of the VAP, thereby artificially deflating the VAP turnout rate by an increasing amount.

## Explaining the Decline in Political Participation

The most common suspects for the causes of the decline in political participation have been feelings of cynicism, distrust and powerlessness, on one hand, and modern campaigns, on the other.

**Efficacy and Alienation.** The turnout rate declined in the 1960s and 1970s during a time of widespread racial strife, conflict over the war in Vietnam and the impeachment of Richard Nixon. Contemporary survey research showed a marked increase in political alienation from or cynicism about government; the percentage of Americans who did not believe the government did “the right thing most of the time,” and who believed “government was run by a few big interests and wasted a lot of money” increased dramatically (Abramson 1983). Distrust and cynicism were assumed to be the causes of declining participation.

Warren Miller and J. Merrill Shanks (1996) contrasted the cynicism and distrust of Vietnam and Watergate with the optimism and patriotism of the preceding era to argue that generational change was responsible for the decline in the voter turnout rate. Citizens who came of voting age before the Great Depression and World War II, the “pre-New Deal generation,” learned through these momentous events that government and participation mattered. Those that followed experienced Vietnam and Watergate, and developed cynicism towards government. “It was the gradual replacement of the habitual voters of the pre-New Deal generations with the non-voting post-New Deal cohorts that produced the thirty year decline in aggregate voter turnout from the early 1960s to the late 1980s” (Miller and Shanks 1996: 41).

Later research has shown, however, that cynicism and distrust are not directly related to turnout. Cynical, distrustful Americans are no less likely to vote than more trusting, less cynical citizens (Popkin and Dimock 1999). Furthermore, distrust and cynicism about government are lower in America than in Europe even though turnout is much higher there than here (Kohut 1998).

Despite evidence to the contrary, cynicism is still strongly linked with declining turnout in national policy discourse. Supreme Court Justice David Souter, writing for the majority in *Nixon v. Shrink Missouri Government PAC*, based his argument for upholding state limits on campaign contributions on a presumed link between cynicism about big interests controlling government and declining turnout. “Leave the perception of impropriety unanswered, and the cynical assumption that large donors call the tune could jeopardize the willingness of voters to take part in democratic governance” (*New York Times* 2000). This is the same position that many Senators use to support campaign finance reform. Senator Richard Durbin, for example, argued that the huge amounts of money contributed candidates leads to campaigns where “self-respecting people have said, ‘We don’t want to sully our hands by even voting’”(National Public Radio 1999). Conservative columnist Arianna Huffington argued that declining turnout rates amidst current prosperity is due to cynicism and alienation: “The economic boom of the 90’s has masked a looming national crisis: a corrupt political system that auctions off public policy to the highest bidder and leaves the overwhelming majority of Americans feeling alienated from their own government” (Huffington 2000:1).

Linked to arguments about cynicism are arguments about efficacy. Persons did not participate because, it was hypothesized, they felt that “People like me don’t have any say about what the government does” and because “Public officials don’t care much what people like me think.” Arthur Miller argues that “such feelings of powerlessness and normlessness are very likely to be accompanied by hostility towards political and social leaders, the institutions of government, and the regime as a whole” (Miller 1974: 951).

Robert Putnam’s “Bowling Alone” (1993) rejuvenated the debates about participation by relating the turnout rate to participation in civic associations. He documented a decline in the number and quality

of traditional civic associations of the kind Alexis de Tocqueville credited with the health and vigor of American political life and joined the psychological dimension - distrust, cynicism and efficacy - with the sociological. Putnam argued that the decline in civic associations is linked to efficacy. Persons who don't associate with fellow citizens do not learn their participation and opinions matter. Civic association generates the trust and feelings of efficacy necessary for political engagement (Putnam 1993).

Recently other scholars have redefined the efficacy argument by moving the focus from the *subjective* powerlessness of the citizen to the *objective* powerlessness of the government. The arguments from the 1960s and 1970s stressed that citizens turned away from government because they believed they were impotent to affect government. The new argument is that government is impotent to affect globalization and citizens have shifted their attention away from this newly neutered government. Michael Sandel explicitly equates globalization with disempowerment: "Today's railroads are CNN, global markets, and the Internet. Even the most powerful nations can't control the forces of this kind of economy. So, a sense of disempowerment arises" (Flint 1996: 16). Curtis Gans also connects globalization to disengagement "People's everyday lives don't seem to get much better, because of the complexity of the world we live in but also because of the government's failure to adapt," so that government is "no longer a vehicle in which to invest much time or faith"(Flint 1996: 16).

**Negative Campaigns .** Scholars and reformers emphasizing modern campaigns as a source of the decline in turnout rates are particularly virulent about the role of negative advertising and "gotcha" journalism. Concern for toxic commercials was generated by the apparent success of the 1988 Willie Horton ads used against Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis by independent advocacy campaigns supporting George Bush's campaign. Walter Dean Burnham argued that this negative advertising was at the heart of declining turnout rates. "The growing political problem is found where the degeneration of political parties intersects with the rise of television advertising, continuous polling, media consultants and consent-messaging election operatives" (Burnham 1988: 22). The "permanent campaign" that Sidney Blumenthal has described is in charge of American politics. It reaches its natural completion with

the saturation of Presidential campaigns by poisonous and irrelevant, personalized negative advertising” (ibid.).

While negative advertising and campaigning are not new to American politics, Curtis Gans, director of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, argued that the sheer volume of negative ads was responsible for the decline in turnout rates in the 1980s. “What is different is not the type but the volume. Where such ads were once limited to the occasional campaign and accompanied by howls of outrage, they are now the staple of all campaigns.” The result, Gans argues, is “disconnected babble” and declining turnout (*New York Times* 1988).

Steven Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar (1995) conducted sophisticated experiments to test if negative ads affect voters and concluded that modern combative, campaigns with harsh, “negative” advertising are the reason for the recent decline in the turnout rate. They argue that the standard charge hurled at political advertising, that it can manipulate voters, is overstated. The real problem is the withdrawal of moderate voters from highly partisan confrontational campaigns: “Campaign advertising has contributed significantly to the disappearance of the nonpartisan voter and the polarization of elections” (1995: 145-146). Negative campaigning, then, “divides the American electorate into a voting public of party loyalists and nonvoting public of apathetics” (1995: 148). Curtis Gans describes the entire process as the “sinkhole of attack advertising, which pollutes our airwaves for one to two hours a day on every broadcast outlet, gives the public a choice - among all candidates - between bad and awful and urges us not to vote for them - and so we don't” (Gans 1996: A33)

The assumption that negative advertising leads to a decline in the turnout rate since 1988 has become conventional wisdom among reformers concerned with the quality of civic life and campaigns. By 1996, the concern with the impacts upon the country of harsh, negative political ads was so widespread that advertising executives actually feared that increasingly negative political ads would so disgust people that it would destroy the credibility of all commercial advertising and threaten the advertising industry. “The massive distrust of the American people for advertising has been driven to dangerously high levels,” one executive noted, “by that other kind of advertising, political advertising,

and specifically what I would call smear-and-scare advertising” (Elliott 1996: 27). Yet another executive noted that commercial advertisers did not even want their ads running near toxic, odious political ads, and the editor of *Time*, Walter Isaacson, urged people to shame politicians out of sensational advertising to stop the decline of the turnout rate (ibid.).

## **Constructing the Turnout Rate**

Although so many evaluations of civic health and campaign practices depend upon accurate estimates of the turnout rate, very little effort is made to report the most precise statistics. The turnout rate equals the total number of votes cast divided by the eligible electorate. As straightforward as this may seem, a variety of measures for the numerator and denominator are used in reports of turnout around the world (Lijphart 1997). In the United States, researchers primarily rely upon census statistics of the voting-age population in the denominator of the turnout rate. While the VAP is the most readily available number, it is not what constitutes the eligible electorate by any but the most extreme definitions. More importantly, the errors that occur using the VAP to approximate the eligible electorate are neither random nor constant over time. The use of the VAP in the denominator of the turnout rate therefore leads to mistaken perceptions of trends in the turnout rate.

We construct the turnout rate for post-World War II elections, 1948 to 1998, while carefully defining the eligible electorate from the voting-age population. We provide tables with all the numbers used to construct our adjustments to the VAP to arrive at the eligible electorate so that anyone disagreeing with our definitions or conclusions can redefine the eligible population and then recalculate the turnout rate to test whether changing the definitions or changing the estimation procedures alters our conclusions. As we recalculate the turnout rate, we take to heart the words of Walter Dean Burnham in his historical study of the turnout rate:

Let anyone interested plunge into this ocean of data and see for himself, going back to the original data and applying the decision rules set forth in this essay for dealing with them. The closer we are to a position in which results can be replicated by another



scholar, the closer we are to science, and the sooner we can reduce the heteronomy about facts to the smallest possible minimum (Burnham 1985: 644).

### **Numerator: Total Votes Cast.**

Even a number as apparently simple as the number of votes cast in an election must be constructed out of disparate data sources. As the constitution grants states authority to regulate elections, there is no requirement of uniform reporting of comparable election data and there is no national election commission to collect the data. To construct national voting statistics from state election returns, we use data provided by the Congressional Research Service, who in turn contracts Election Data Services to collect the data from each state.

The ideal number to use for the numerator of the turnout rate is the total number of voters who cast any ballot for any office in an election. However, this measure is not available for all states; only 17 states reported total turnout in 1948 and thirteen states still do not report this measure. Using this number where available would bias historical comparisons as well as comparisons between states. Historical studies of turnout avoid this bias by using a number that is reported by all states for all years, the “vote for highest office.” In presidential election years, the “vote for highest office” within a state is simply the total number of persons who voted for the presidential candidates. In non-presidential election years, this is the largest number of persons casting a vote in a statewide race, usually either for the Governor or U.S. Senator. If there is no statewide race, the vote cast in all U.S. House elections is combined and used (Crocker 1997: 6).

Using the total turnout instead of the “vote for highest office” would, of course, increase the level of turnout. In 1996, for example, the “vote for highest office” in the 39 states that reported total turnout was 2.1% higher than the “vote for higher office<sup>1</sup>.” Both our analysis, reported in Appendix A, and the

---

<sup>1</sup> In the 39 states that collected data on total votes, the vote for president was 71.56 million while the total vote for these states was 73.05 million.

historical analysis of Burnham suggest that the ratio of total turnout to vote for highest office is reasonably constant across states and time. Therefore, if we compare elections or states using the “vote for highest office” we are not affecting any comparisons between election years. Persons concerned with exact turnout figures, either for comparisons with other countries or because of the normative importance attached to a turnout over 50%, should multiply the reported turnout rate by 1.02, until total turnout is routinely reported by all states.<sup>2</sup>

### **Denominator: Voting-Age Population versus Voting-Eligible Population.**

The turnout rate is so sensitive to the specification of total eligible population that seemingly insignificant changes in the denominator can reverse conclusions about the turnout rate. Nearly all reports are based on the voting-age population from the Census Bureau. Both the Congressional Research Service and the widely cited Center for the Study of the American Electorate rely on the P-25 series Census reports, “Projections of the Voting-Age Population for the States,” for the November of each election year. Although the VAP is commonly treated as the “true” error-free denominator, the number is actually an estimate of the number of persons 18 and older residing in the fifty states. For non-census years, the voting-age population estimate is generated by the Census Bureau by adjusting the last full census to account for deaths, the number of persons turning 18, immigration, and the number of persons entering and leaving overseas military service. As defined by the 1998 report:

The voting-age population includes all U.S. residents 18 years and over. This consists of both people who are eligible to vote and those not eligible to vote, such as non-citizens, convicted felons, and prison inmates. These projections do not cover Americans living overseas who may vote (Day, 1998: 1).

---

<sup>2</sup> If we multiply the 50-state “vote for highest office” by 1.021, we would arrive at a turnout rate estimate for 1996 of 53.8%, an increase of 1.1 percentage points over the 52.7% we report in Table 1.

**Eligibility.** Who is an eligible voter? Who should be included in the denominator? Is an eligible voter a registered citizen, a citizen who could register, any citizen at all, or any person in the country who could be made eligible to vote? While we do not believe that there is a good argument for including only the registered, all the other possibilities have proponents.

Few defend basing studies of turnout just on registered voters. This is such a restricted definition of eligibility that there is widespread agreement that a turnout rate based only upon the registered gives a misleading picture of civic well being. Such a standard leads to confusing comparison between elections or among states as registration laws vary substantially. Besides, it is virtually impossible to get accurate numbers for registration in most states due to the presence of deadwood on the registration rolls.

Including everyone 18 and older in the denominator has proponents both on normative grounds and practical grounds. Ruy Teixeira has argued for including the entire voting age population because each person within the country who is of voting age could be allowed to vote should the already eligible so decide. “At the most basic level,” he argues, “the voting-age population is the eligible electorate.” “Although it is little known,” Teixeira points out, “citizenship is not a constitutional requirement for voting in the United States. Both the time it takes to become a citizen (national) and the actual restrictions of suffrage to citizens (states) are matters of legislation” (1992: 6, footnote 2).

The VAP is also defended on pragmatic and scholarly grounds. In addition to normative arguments for including everyone, Teixeira makes a pragmatic argument for using the VAP – that adjusting the VAP to remove legally ineligible voters is a “difficult and imprecise process” (1992: 6). Curtis Gans also defends using the VAP on scholarly grounds – that “consistency and comparability are the only way that students and scholars of voting research can do comparative research” (1997: 46).

As Emerson wrote, A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. It is simply not the case that consistency and comparability force scholars to use the VAP. Walter Dean Burnham’s (1985; 1987) pioneering historical work, for example, is based on straightforward methods for estimating the number of eligible citizens in the country for every election. To be sure, collecting the data necessary for

correcting the VAP is a difficult and onerous task, but there is little justification for making policy and normative claims on the basis of a statistical measure as meaningless as the VAP.

**Constructing the VEP.** The VAP both includes and excludes persons eligible to vote. It includes non-citizens, ineligible felons, mental incompetents and people who do not meet the residency requirements. It excludes military personnel and civilians living outside the United States. We construct a more accurate estimate, the voting-eligible population, by using a variety of government statistical series to adjust the VAP.

We remove non-citizens using estimates of the percentage of non-citizens from the Current Population Survey (CPS) and the full Census of Population. We remove persons who are ineligible due to their correctional status using Department of Justice statistics on the correctional population. We add military and civilian personnel living overseas using statistics from the Census Bureau, Department of Defense, Office of Personnel Management, and the United States Consular Service.

We do not make two adjustments. We do not remove the number of persons ineligible due to residency requirements because the CPS mobility question does not use detailed categories to correctly determine how various state residency requirements affect ineligibility. We believe that this number has remained approximately 1 percent of the VAP since 1972.<sup>3</sup> We also do not remove the number of mentally incompetent persons because we lack a reliable source; however, we estimate that this number is approximately .1% of the voting-age population, approximately 250,000 persons in 1995.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Complicating matters, registered voters often move short distances (Cain, Ely, McCue, and McDonald 1990) and will sometimes illegally vote at their old polling place. Registration deadlines also pose barriers to less interested eligible persons who tune in to the campaign too late to register (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

<sup>4</sup> Mentally incompetent persons can be found in high-level care nursing homes that address the special needs of the mentally incompetent. Our estimate is drawn from the 1995 National Nursing Home Survey, the most recent of four surveys conducted in 1974, 1977, 1985, and 1995 by the National Center for

The statistics we use are not fully reported for every year and the various sources occasionally change their definitions. At times we must draw on different sources or impute missing data. The methodologies we employ to create our measures are detailed in the Appendix. In every case we make a conservative adjustment to the VAP so that our corrections to the turnout rates do not overstate the turnout rate.

**Further Corrections: The Census Undercount.** The VAP estimates are based upon the census and do not account for the undercount of the population in the census. The undercount is the net product of two errors, the counting of some people more than once (over-coverage) and the missing of others (under-coverage).<sup>5</sup> In this paper we do not correct for the undercount in the census because there is no good way to estimate how much the undercount affects the VAP estimate generated between censuses. Correcting for the undercount would actually strengthen the case that there is no ongoing decline in the turnout rate. Therefore, by not correcting for the undercount we can be confident that we have not overstated true trends in the turnout rate.

The degree of under-coverage has been declining since 1940, although there was a slight increase between 1980 and 1990. According to the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO 1997), the estimated net under-coverage was 5.8% of the total population in 1940; 4.1% of in 1950, 3.1% in 1960, 2.7% in 1970, 1.2% in 1980, and 1.8% in 1990. This decline, *ceteris paribus*, would create the impression of declining turnout rates. For example, suppose that among a constant adult population of 100 million, 50

---

Health Statistics. The exact number of mentally incompetent residents of voting-age from the 1995 survey is unknown since there is no breakdown of the number residents by type or age.

<sup>5</sup> The overcount and undercount are estimated in a post enumeration survey by interviewing a sample of persons in representational areas following the census and determining whether these persons were recorded once, twice or not at all. The responses of persons within these areas are extrapolated to the entire country to derive the total overcount and undercount.

million voted in both 1940 and 1990. The 5.8% undercount in the 1940 census would result in an apparent turnout rate of  $50/94.2$  or 52.2%. The same turnout in 1990, with a smaller undercount of 1.8%, would result in an apparent turnout of  $50/98.2$  or 50.9%. So the more accurate census would result in an apparent decline of 1.3% in the reported turnout rate.

## **The Turnout Rate among the VAP and VEP**

[Table 1]

In Table 1 we report the data necessary to construct the national turnout rate from 1948 to 1998 using the VAP and VEP as the denominator of the turnout rate. In addition, we report an estimate of persons under age 21 and the number who voted in order to account for the effects of the expansion of the franchise under the 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

In recent decades the two major corrections to VAP, non-citizens and ineligible felons, are increasing faster than the rate of population growth. The percentage of non-citizens among the voting-age population steadily increased from 2% in 1966 to 7.5% in 1998. The number of ineligible felons of voting-age steadily increased from the historic average prior to 1982 of 0.5% of the voting-age population to 1.6% in 1998. The number that needs to be added, the number of eligible voters living abroad, remained at nearly the same percentage throughout our analysis, about 1.5%, relative to the resident voting-age population, although the percentage was higher during the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and at the height of the Cold War in the 1980s. During 1990s the percentage of citizens of voting-age living abroad slightly decreased as the United States' overseas military presence declined more than the number of civilians living abroad increased.

## **Analysis**

[Figure 1 and Figure 2]

Figure 1 plots the VAP turnout rate for presidential elections since WWII alongside the VEP turnout rates. Analysts who take the VAP turnout rate at face value are understandably worried about continuing civic erosion, a possible dearth of social capital and the decline of the public sphere in

America. Using the VAP turnout rate, elections in the 1970s and 1980s slipped down almost 10 percentage points from the previous level, with a blip in 1992, and the lowest turnout rate of the postwar period – indeed the lowest turnout rate of the century – was in 1996.

Correcting the data changes the pattern; these adjustments do not simply move the VAP line upward a constant amount. Trends within the measures used to adjust the voting-age population, mentioned above, produce the illusion of steadily declining turnout rates for studies based upon the VAP. With the corrected figures, the 1950s and 1960s are still a high-water mark for twentieth century voting, but the rest of the story changes.

First of all, the turnout in 1992 is no longer just a minor deviation in a period of continual decline. With the corrected data, the 1992 turnout rate is over 60 percent, within the same range as turnout in the 1950s and 1960s. Whatever else one may conclude about media, parties, campaigns and civil society in the current era, turnout rates today can still achieve their former level.

With the adjustments, the 1996 election no longer holds the distinction of the lowest turnout rate for a presidential election since WWII; that dubious honor belongs to the 1948 election. Using corrected eligibility data, turnout in 1996 is now just slightly higher, 52.7% to 52.2%, than in 1948. While this is a small difference, if the two calculations were further corrected for the census undercount, the difference would be more than two full percentage points.

The low 1948 turnout rate is not given the attention it merits. Prominent scholarly public opinion surveys of voting begin with the 1952 election, so scholars studying participation naturally tend to start their analyses then. Because the decline in turnout from the 1960s is so useful to buttress the case for change, reformers also tend to ignore or downplay the low turnout in 1948. But 1948 should have been, according to most arguments in vogue today, a high turnout election. There was no television, no soft money, no relentless barrage of negative advertising, and no candidate-centered primary system. The stakes in 1948 were high and the party differences were clear – would the country continue the New Deal programs of FDR or take a far more conservative path on social programs, the role of the federal government, and the rights of unions? There was also high international tension and debate over how to

respond to Stalin over communist takeovers in Eastern Europe and the Berlin Blockade was a front page story much of the year.

The 1948 turnout rate is not merely an aberration. Walter Dean Burnham (1987) adjusted the historical turnout rates for the presence of non-citizens among the VAP prior to 1948. His numbers show the turnout rate from 1920 through 1948 is strikingly similar to the turnout rate after 1972. In this historical context, the question of low modern turnout rates compared to the 1950s and 1960s is turned on its head. Since the disappearance of the mobilization efforts of the political machines and the appearance of registration requirements in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Burnham 1987), the 1950s and 1960s represent a high water mark for voting. An explanation of lower turnout rates today must also account for the lower rates before then as well.

Figure 2 plots the VAP and VEP turnout rates since WWII for congressional elections. Again, correcting the data changes the pattern. With or without corrections, the turnout rate is still lower since 1970. With corrections, though, the decline is smaller and there is a larger increase in turnout after the low water mark of 1986 before a drop in 1998 to the same turnout level as 1974, 39.1%.

**Twenty-sixth Amendment.** The abrupt decline in 1972 is usually attributed to the adoption of the 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment that granted the franchise to citizens 18-20 (Hansen and Rosenstone 1993: 57).<sup>6</sup> This is a plausible assumption since turnout rates for younger eligible voters are lower than for older eligible voters. Table 1 shows, along with our other adjustments, the turnout rate excluding persons under age 21, derived by using CPS for an estimate for the number of citizens age 18-20 and their proportion among the total votes cast. The average effect of removing 18-20 year olds since 1972 is 1.3 percentage points in presidential elections and 1.7 percentage points in congressional elections. Thus, the expansion of the electorate to include younger voters is only responsible for about one-fourth of the drop in turnout between 1968 and 1972. Ironically, since the large drop in the turnout rate occurred in 1972 it was

---

<sup>6</sup> A handful of States allowed persons under age 21 to vote before 1971: Georgia since 1944 (18+), Kentucky since 1956 (19+), Alaska since 1960 (19+) and Hawaii since 1960 (20+).



assumed that the new voters were a larger part of the change than they actually were. The turnout rate of voters under age 21 was at a high point of 49.2% in 1972 (according to the CPS), and thus their presence in the 1972 election only lowered the turnout rate in that year by a single percentage point.

**Southern and non-Southern turnout rates.** We need to further account for the dramatic rise in Southern turnout rates that occurred in the 1960s to make comparisons of the turnout rate over time. The 1960s civil rights movement, and the Voting Rights Act that produced from it, effectively granted voting rights to Blacks and poor Whites in the South. Accordingly, turnout rates in the South rose dramatically in the 1960s as Blacks and uneducated Whites voted in increasing numbers (Kousser 1999).

[Table 2 and Table 3, Figure 3 and Figure 4]

Is the increase in Southern turnout following the civil rights movement masking even deeper declines in the rest of the nation? Tables 2 and 3 repeat the turnout corrections performed in Table 1 for the non-Southern states and Southern states respectively. Figures 3 and 4 plot the national, southern and non-southern turnout rates for presidential and congressional elections since 1948. Turnout rates in the South rose precipitously as the electorate mobilized, while in the non-South the electorate contracted (DeNardo 1998).

[Table 4]

Table 4 shows the average national and regional turnout rates in congressional and presidential elections for 1948-1998, 1948-1970 and 1972-1998. Basing the turnout rate calculations on the VAP, there is a decline outside the South of 10.8 percentage points in average presidential turnout and a decline of 11.9 percentage points in congressional turnout. The decrease in non-Southern turnout rate is smaller and the increase in the Southern turnout rate is greater for the VEP turnout rate. With corrected eligibility figures the drop is 8.8 percentage points for presidential elections and 9.3 percentage points for congressional elections. Within the South, the increases in the VAP turnout rate for presidential and

congressional races are 7.7 and 8.1 percentage points respectively, but 9.6 and 9.5 points when using corrected figures.<sup>7</sup>

When the South is excluded from the analysis, however, the 1996 turnout rate is lower than 1948, and 1992 is not at the level of the turnouts from 1952-1968. The non-Southern turnout in 1992 is 62.9% but the non-Southern rates in 1952, 1956 and 1960 were all at least five points higher. Furthermore, the 55.8% turnout rate in 1996 is slightly lower than the turnout rate of 57.5% that Burnham (1987) calculated for 1924. For the non-South, the election of 1996 is indeed appear to be a low mark for participation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though, as we will show, this appears to be the consequence of short-term rather than long-term forces.

**Trends.** Critics of contemporary political campaigns and advocates of campaign finance have argued not only that the turnout rate is lower but also that the turnout rate has been steadily declining since the 1960s. If there is a negative trend in the turnout rate – not just a transition to a period of lower turnout rates – then each successive election, *ceteris paribus*, can be expected to have a lower turnout rate than the previous election. By estimating a simple regression of turnout against time – a simple linear trend variable – we test for the presence of a trend and, if there is a trend, estimate how much decline from the beginning to end of the period is due to a trend in turnout, in contrast to differences in turnout that are due to election-specific effects.

[Table 5]

---

<sup>7</sup> The contribution of the Southern turnout rate to the national turnout rate increased over the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1960, approximately one in four eligible voters resided in the South. As in-migration to the South increased, by 1996 the number of eligible voters residing in the South rose to almost one out of three. Thus, decline of the non-Southern turnout rate is somewhat offset by the change in the distribution of the eligible voters across regions. The non-South does not contribute as much to the national turnout rate today as it did in the past.

Table 5 presents the estimated trends from 1948 to 1996 and from 1972 to 1996. We estimate both time periods because there is a deceptive appearance of an overall trend from 1948 to 1996 that is not present in the data after 1972. In accordance with the conventional wisdom on turnout rates, the trend analysis of the national VAP turnout rate shows a substantial downward trend. The analysis predicts a 9 percentage point drop for the presidential turnout rate and a ten percentage point drop for the Congressional turnout rate for elections between 1948 and 1996. The regional trends move in opposite directions. Southern turnout increased nearly 17 percentage points in presidential elections and 19 points in congressional elections while non-Southern turnout decreased 16 points for the presidential election and 18 points for congressional elections.

Correcting the data changes the magnitude of the trends. When we run the same analysis on the VEP turnout rate, the increasing trend in the Southern turnout rate is even stronger; there is now a predicted increase of 20 percentage points from 1948 to 1996 among presidential elections and 22 points for Congress. In contrast with the increased trends of the South, the decreasing non-Southern trend is only two-thirds as large for presidential and three-quarters as large for congressional elections. The national presidential trend, moreover, is small – about four percentage points – and statistically insignificant, suggesting that short-term forces are more responsible for the presidential turnout rate rather than any long-term downward trend.

The overall trends are the result of a well known phenomena discussed in any statistical text. When the data are grouped like a dumbbell with two random clusters of observations separated by a large distance, there will be a significant correlation coefficient. However, if either cluster of the observations is analyzed separately the correlation disappears. The high turnout rate before and low turnout rate after 1972 analyzed separately display no trends – the apparent trend across the entire period is an artifact of the large differences in the turnout rate between the two periods. Between the presidential election of 1968 and 1972, the adjusted national turnout rate fell nearly 5 percentage points. Between the congressional election of 1970 and 1974, the adjusted national turnout rate fell about 8 points. Among the regions, for the South there is a period of a generally low turnout rate followed by a period of higher

rate. For the non-Southern states there is the opposite pattern – a period of a generally high turnout rate followed by lower rate.

The conventional wisdom of an ongoing decline since 1972 is an artifact of using the VAP to calculate the turnout rate. When we recalculate the trends using the VEP turnout rate, the only solid trend is of *increasing* turnout in Southern congressional elections. The high turnout rate in 1992 and subsequent low turnout rate in 1996 are fluctuations around the long-term steady rate since 1972.

If there was systemic, ongoing decline in turnout due to disillusionment, demobilization, a decline in news watching, negative advertising, globalization or any of the other usual suspects, it should appear in the non-Southern data using the corrected VEP. With or without adjustments for the inclusion of younger voters, there are no trends in voting from 1972 onward outside the South.

## **Conclusion**

The apparent steady decrease in the turnout rate in recent decades is an artifact of increasing disparities between the estimates of voting-age population provided by the Bureau of the Census and the actual number of eligible voters. The decline in the VAP turnout rate since 1972 is directly attributed to an increasing trend in the number of ineligible persons counted among the VAP. Contrary to Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde (1998), correcting the denominator does not lead to “relatively small differences in the overall estimate of turnout” (1998: 68). Furthermore, correcting the data changes not just the level of turnout but the patterns of change. Contrary to Teixeira (1992: 25), and as Raymond Wolfinger has noted, using the VAP leads to errors that are unevenly distributed geographically and chronologically, and produces “quite misleading distortions” (Wolfinger 1993: 7).

The great divide in the turnout rate is the election of 1972. With or without adjustments for the inclusion of younger voters, there are no trends in voting from 1972 onward outside the South. From then on we have entered another period of lower turnout rates without trend. Among the VEP turnout rate there is an upward trend in Southern congressional elections since 1972, but virtually no trend – significant or insignificant – in the other non-Southern or national turnout rates. There is no trend to the

VEP turnout rate since 1972; instead a surge in voting occurred in the 1950s, followed by a decline in non-Southern voting rates during the 1960s. By relocating the decline in the turnout rate we challenge theories that base the claim of an ongoing, deepening crisis in America on declining turnout rates.

Of course, there is more than a little irony in describing the 1950s as a golden age of voting. Whether it was the Cold War, a popular military hero as president, the creation of a new national public space by television news that had not yet become cynical and distrustful of national power, this was the high point of twentieth century turnout outside the segregated, Jim Crow South. Old theories will have to be transformed or new theories will have to rise to correctly explain the decline in the turnout rate.

Our corrected estimates of turnout change the diagnosis of current low turnout away from explanations centered on the rise of negative campaigns or increasing voter cynicism, and distrust of government. There is certainly no reason to think that globalization, as Sandel and Gans have actually suggested, is deflating turnout by rendering the federal government ineffective on the important issues of the day. An explanation for why turnout in America is lower than most other industrial democracies, we suggest, must begin with the institutional structure of the political system, not the psychology of the voters or the tactics of the candidates.

G. Bingham Powell noted in 1986 that the American institutional system fosters low turnout. In contrast to parliamentary systems that foster strong national parties and clear lines of responsibility for government performance, responsibility is divided between state and national governments, and between two legislatures and an executive at each level (Powell 1986). Federalism and the separation of powers both make it harder for a voter to gather and process the information about which vote for which candidate for which office, on which date, matters for a given issue. Indeed, the other two industrial democracies with chronically low turnout are Switzerland and Japan, two other countries with diffused lines of authority and responsibility. Furthermore, frequent primary and general elections among the many offices increase the burden of democracy for the American voter.

Anything that diffuses the link between a vote and its policy consequences lowers turnout (Franklin and Mino 1998). The turnout rate, moreover, is lowered the most for voters with less education.

Indeed, the more complex and diffuse a political structure, the higher the correlation between education and turnout. (Powell, op. cit.) In every democracy, better educated persons are more likely to vote than less educated persons, but the differences in turnout are much larger in the United States than anywhere else (Powell 1986 27). The seven percent of the population with advanced degrees produces more votes than the 16 percent of the citizenry who have not finished high school (Popkin and McDonald 1998).

Walter Dean Burnham has argued that today's low turnout reflects the weakness of party identification and party organizations (1982: Chapter 3). This argument has more merit than the arguments centered on attitudes towards government or current campaign practices. The era of relatively high turnout coincided with an era in which both political parties were flourishing, an era that ended with the development of widespread primaries and personalistic campaign organizations. Thus expanding participation in the selection process opens opportunities for the politically most involved and may, at the same time, weaken party cues for the less involved.

The brief period of higher turnout also coincided with the time during which there was a true national public space in America emerging with the rise of national television news. Today television news is reviled for its antagonistic, cynical style (Patterson 1994; Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999). Campaign events such as debates and conventions, even presidential speeches and press conferences have smaller audiences because cable, VCRs, and the proliferation of other media options such as the internet provide citizens more and easier alternatives to political engagement (Baum and Kernell 1999). The problem is not that voters are being turned off by modern campaigns, but that they are never being reached in the first place (Popkin and Dimock 1995).

## Appendix

This appendix describes the data and methodologies we use to construct our measure of the turnout rate among eligible voters. Unfortunately, our data sources do not report all of the data that we need to construct fully each component measure for every year. Where data is unavailable, we develop procedures for imputing the missing data, as detailed below. The following table summarizes the measures and sources for our adjustments:

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Measure</i>	<i>Sources</i>
Turnout	= Number of persons who voted for the “highest office.”	Congressional Research Service report “Voter Registration and Turnout: 1948-1994” and a memorandum on the 1996 election
Eligible population	= Voting-age population	Census Bureau P-25 series reports
	- Non-citizens	Current Population Survey Voter Supplement File, <i>Census of Population</i>
	- Ineligible felons	“Civil Disabilities of Convicted Felons: A State-by-State Survey,” <i>Correctional Population of the United States</i> , “Historical Statistics on Prisoners in State and Federal Institutions, Year End 1925-1986”
	- (Ineligible) Mentally incompetent	No reliable source, see footnote #4
	+ Overseas voting-age citizens	<i>Statistical Abstract of the United States</i> , various reports from government agencies

When we analyze the impact of the adoption of the Twenty-sixth Amendment in 1971, we further adjust the voting age population using estimates of the age distribution of the total population from the census P-25 reports. We determine the number of proportion of voters age 18-20 using the Current Population Survey Voter Supplement File and remove this proportion from the “vote for highest office.”

**Turnout.** The numerator of the turnout rate is the number of persons who voted in a given election. Our national and state turnout data are drawn from a 1996 Congressional Research Service (CRS) report on turnout in the 1948-1994 elections and a 1997 memoranda on turnout in the 1996 election (Crocker 1997; 1998).<sup>8</sup> As described in the text, there are two numbers that are commonly used as the numerator in studies of turnout, “vote for highest office” and total vote. We use the “vote for highest office” in our analysis.

**Voting-age population.** The base number for the denominator of the turnout rate is the national and state voting-age population estimates drawn from the Census Bureau’s P-25 series reports.<sup>9</sup> The Census Bureau compiles these adjustments to the decennial census from various sources that first report preliminary numbers. Six years later, the Census Bureau adjusts these preliminary numbers and release final estimates. Thus, the 1994 and 1996 voting-age population estimates we use are preliminary estimates still subject to minor changes.

---

<sup>8</sup> In 1986 the Congressional Research Service contracted an outside vendor, Election Data Systems, to collect turnout and registration data from the states. Election Data Systems, in consultation with the Congressional Research Service, compiled turnout data from the CRS records, *America Votes*, and information supplied by Curtis Gans to construct turnout data dating back to 1948 (Personal correspondence with Royce Crocker, April 22, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> There is a slight discrepancy between the modern published reports of the 1948 presidential vote totals and historical reports, such as reported in P25-185. We use the slightly larger P25-185 number.



**Non-Citizens.** We use two methodologies to estimate the number of non-citizens among the voting-age population. From 1948 through 1966, we use a methodology proposed by Burnham (1985) in his study of turnout rates in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to interpolate the number of non-citizens for years between censuses. We interpolate the percentage of non-citizens reported in the 1940 and 1950 censuses and between the 1950 census and the 1966 Current Population Survey (the 1960 census did not include a citizenship question). Between 1950 to 1966 the number of non-citizens in the voting-age population was virtually unchanged, from 1.9% in 1950 to 2.0% in 1966. We are confident that this simple procedure does not miss an intervening wave of immigration since legal immigration reported by Immigration and Naturalization Services (1997) was small and stable from 1950 to 1966.

Beginning in 1966, we estimate the number of non-citizens in the voting-age population from the Current Population Survey Voter Supplement Files.<sup>10</sup> The CPS allows us to avoid the problems of interpolation during the wave of immigration that began in the 1970s and peaked in 1991.<sup>11</sup> However, while using the CPS estimate avoids the errors of linear interpolation, it introduces the sampling and measurement errors associated with surveys. In particular, the reported decline of 4.6 million non-citizens between the 1992 estimate of 17.8 million and the 1994 estimate of 13.2 million is puzzling.

The CPS has used three different sets of citizenship questions. The most likely explanation for the decline in the number of immigrants between 1992 and 1994 is the changes in question wording and methodology. From 1966 to 1976, CPS respondents were not directly asked if they were citizens, but they were asked whether they were registered and if they were not registered, they were asked “Why are you not registered to vote?” and “not a citizen” is one of the recorded answers. From 1978-1992, respondents were queried directly about their citizenship status and their “Yes” or “No” answers were

---

<sup>10</sup> The first Voter Supplement File questionnaire in 1964 did not include a citizenship question.

<sup>11</sup> In 1991, Immigration and Naturalization Services (1997) reports 1.8 million legal immigrants entered the United States, the highest number in American history.

recorded. Between 1976 and 1978 there was an increase in the number of non-citizens in the CPS from 4.5 million to 5.8 million. This increase is probably a true increase and not an artifact of changing survey methodology. While the increase is slightly larger than the 1970s trend, Immigration and Naturalization Services (1997) reports an increase in legal immigration in 1978.

In 1994, the citizenship question was changed again to allow more responses to describe the possible types of citizen status. CPS respondents are now asked “What is your citizenship status?” and are coded into five categories: “Native, Born in the United States;” “Native, Born in Puerto Rico or U.S. Outlying Area;” “Native, Born Abroad of American Parent or Parents;” “Foreign Born, U.S. Citizen By Naturalization;” and “Foreign Born, Not a Citizen of the United States.” Moreover, there were other significant methodological changes in the CPS. The 1994 CPS was the first CPS to use the 1990 census as a baseline for the construction of weights and the first to use computer aided interviews.<sup>12</sup>

Is it possible that the number of non-citizens actually declined between 1992 and 1994? We think not. In 1991 and 1992, there were 3.4 million legal immigrants who entered the country and 550,000 naturalizations. In 1993 and 1994, there were 1.9 million legal immigrants and 750,000 naturalizations (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service 1997). Since the net changes in legal immigration and naturalization cannot account for the change, could this large a change occur solely due to large changes in the rates of out migration and illegal immigration? There was increased emphasis on controlling illegal immigration under the Clinton administration, and there was also an increase in anti-immigration legislation. There could have been a true decrease in illegal immigration or an increased reluctance of non-citizens to acknowledge their status. Thus, while the decline in reported non-citizens is at least partially attributable to changes in CPS methodologies, we cannot say whether the 1994 number is more or less accurate than the pre-1994 numbers. We do know, however, that immigration statistics clearly demonstrate an increase in the number of non-citizens in the United States beginning in the 1970s, peaking in 1991, and remaining steady since, consistent with overall CPS trends.

---

<sup>12</sup> Personal communication with Jennifer Day. May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1999.

**Ineligible Felons.** Depending upon state laws, felons may not vote if in prison, on probation, or on parole; and may even be permanently disfranchised.<sup>13</sup> However, four states do not disfranchise even prisoners. The first three categories of disfranchised felons, those in prison, on parole, or on probation, are compiled for 1986 and onward from the *Correctional Population of the United States*.<sup>14</sup> The 1998 report has not been released as of this writing, so we extrapolate the 1998 ineligible felons from the 1986-1996 numbers. Pre-1986, we use ICSPR data set 8912, “Historical Statistics on Prisoners in State and Federal Institutions, Year End 1925-1986,” to provide the number of persons in State and Federal prison.<sup>15</sup>

We do not have a source for the number of felons on probation or parole before 1986, so we must estimate this number. We calculate national and regional estimates for the number of ineligible felons using the ratio between the number of prisoners and the number on probation and parole for 1986 to 1996, where all data are available. With the year as the unit of analysis, from 1986 to 1996 a regression estimates that nationally there were 1.43 ineligible felons on parole or probation for every ineligible felon

---

<sup>13</sup> State laws regarding felons and voting can be found in the Department of Justice report “Civil Disabilities of Convicted Felons: A State-by-State Survey” (1996).

<sup>14</sup> Footnotes in the *Correctional Populations* detail that state agencies report their information with varying levels of accuracy, particularly the number of felons on parole and probation. Fortunately, states that do not report the number of felons on probation or parole tend to be the same states that grant felons on probation or parole the right to vote. Additional error arises from the practice by some states of combining their prison and jail populations into one reported number. Again, we are fortunate in that these five states, plus the District of Columbia, tend to have small prison populations.

<sup>15</sup> No breakdown of Federal prisoners among the states is available. We simply apportion Federal prisoners proportional to the number of prisoners in state facilities.

in prison. The Southern states had 2.43 ineligible probationers and parolees for every ineligible prisoner while the non-Southern states had 1.00.<sup>16</sup>

Before 1972, we make one further adjustment to the estimate of the number of ineligible felons. We must estimate the percentage of felons who are aged 18-20; otherwise, when we subtract felons from the eligible voting age population, we would be overcorrecting the denominator and overstating the true rate of turnout. As we do not know the age distribution of the ineligible felons, we assume that the age distribution of felons is the same as the age distribution of the entire population and we subtract a proportion of felons equal to the proportion of persons age 18-20 among the adult population as reported in the Census Bureau's P-25 series population estimate reports.

Determining the number of felons permanently disfranchised is more difficult. *The Sentencing Project* and the *Human Rights Watch* (1998) conducted an exhaustive study of state data and estimated there were approximately 1.39 million permanently disfranchised felons in 1996. They compiled the number of felons released since 1970 within States that permanently disfranchised felons and adjusted for recidivism. The study did not account for felons that moved or died and did not count felons who voted despite being ineligible (local registrars rarely check criminal records)<sup>17</sup>. Our measure for the total number of disfranchised felons is therefore most certainly an underestimate, and is likely proportional to the number of disfranchised felons that we report since a felon must first go through the correctional system before being permanently disfranchised. If the reported numbers for the 1996 election are

---

<sup>16</sup> The regression estimate of this ratio is very consistent, with a standard error of less than .01. Unless major changes in incarceration patterns occurred in the past, we believe that this imputation method is sound.

<sup>17</sup> A small number of otherwise permanently disfranchised felons have been granted the right to vote through pardons.

accurate, the number of permanently disfranchised felons is slightly less than one half of the 2.85 million disfranchised felons in prison, on probation or on parole.

**Eligible overseas voters.** Eligible voters living overseas are comprised of military personnel, dependents of military personnel, non-military government personnel, and overseas non-government civilians. Our primary sources for this data are the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* and the census of the population. However, the *Statistical Abstract* does not regularly report the total overseas population, let alone their age distribution, we must turn to other data sources and make a number of assumptions to estimate the eligible population overseas. We supplement data from the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* and the census of the population with Department of Defense records of the deployment of military personnel overseas, the number of non-military government personnel found in various Office of Personnel Management reports, and estimates of the total number of civilians abroad provided by the United States Consular Services.

The estimation procedures differ for the periods: 1948-1966; 1968-1982; 1984-1992 and 1994-1996 because the way the overseas numbers are reported changes. For all of these years, we have accurate numbers of overseas military personnel, available on-line at the Department of Defense web site.<sup>18</sup> We assume that military personnel are at least eighteen years old. We must use different techniques, however, for the number of overseas civilians.

*1948-1966.* To arrive at the number of eligible voters living overseas from 1948 to 1966, we estimate the number of eligible overseas citizens for three years for which we have data: 1950, 1960, and 1968 (the estimation procedure for 1968 is detailed in the next section). We then make an interpolation for the number of non-military eligible overseas citizens for the years with missing data. To arrive at the

---

<sup>18</sup> <http://web1.whs.osd.mil/mmid/mmidhome.htm>. Accessed June 1999.

total number of eligible overseas citizens, when then add the number of eligible military personnel deployed overseas.<sup>19</sup>

The 1950 census reports the number of military personnel and their dependents living overseas. Unfortunately, we do not know the age distribution of these groups, so we assume their age distribution is the same as the domestic population. The Census Bureau P-25 series reports summarize yearly estimates of the age distribution of the domestic population. We further assume that military personnel are at least eighteen years old. We then adjust these numbers to remove an estimate of the persons under the age of twenty-one.

The 1960 census reports similar numbers, with one additional category, the number of civilians living overseas. We make the same assumptions and adjustments as before for military personnel and their dependents. We assume that the age distribution of civilians living overseas is the same as the domestic population and remove persons under the age of twenty-one.

*1968-1982.* The overseas eligible voters from 1968 to 1982 are estimated from the 1984 *Statistical Abstract*, Table 4: “U.S. Population Living Abroad: 1968 to 1981”. As data are missing for some election years, we use the closest year to fill in for missing data. Since there is little year-to-year variation in the numbers we believe this is a good approximation. The *Statistical Abstract* provides the same categories as the 1960 census, and we follow the same procedures to estimate the overseas population and we use military statistics to add the military personnel deployed overseas. For all adjustments, after 1971 we only remove an estimate of the number of persons under age eighteen.

*1984-1992.* From 1984 to 1992, the *Statistical Abstract* reports Department of State statistics on the number of non-military persons that would need to be evacuated in the event of a crisis. We use this number as the total of overseas civilians. Again, we make the same assumptions and adjustments for the age distribution of this group as before and use military statistics to add the military personnel overseas. We deflate these numbers by an estimate of the number of persons under age eighteen.

---

<sup>19</sup> For 1948, we simply use our estimate of the 1950 number of overseas civilians.

1994-1996. We estimate the number of eligible voters overseas for 1994 and 1996 using unpublished reports of the overseas civilian population provided by the United States Consular Services. We again deflate this number by the proportion of the domestic population age less than age 18. We then add the number of military personnel abroad provided by the Department of Defense in these years and the number of non-military government personnel from Office of Personnel Management reports (we assume these employees are at least eighteen years old) to arrive at an estimate of the eligible voters overseas.

The number of military and non-military government employees living abroad is likely to be accurate since these are numbers compiled and reported by the government. The estimate of the number of civilians abroad is based on reports by overseas consulates and vary to the accuracy of their reporting. Footnotes that accompany data originating from Consular Services (data for 1968-1981 found in the 1984 *Statistical Abstract* and unpublished data from 1987 through the present provided by the Consular Services) warn that the civilian population is almost certainly an underestimate of the number of civilians overseas.<sup>20</sup> A similar warning accompanies the 1960 census, which stresses that participation occurred on a voluntary basis. Thus, while we are highly confident of the overseas military personnel and government employees, we are not as confident of our estimates of overseas civilians.

**Persons age 18-20.** In order to control for the affect of the Twenty-sixth Amendment on the turnout rate, we calculate a turnout rate for persons at least twenty-one years old. From the CPS we calculate the proportion of all votes reported by persons 18-20 and the proportion of votes cast by persons age 21 and older. We use this latter proportion and the total number of votes for highest office to calculate the number of votes cast by persons older than 20. We remove the number of citizens age 18-20 from our measure of the eligible population. We similarly remove estimates of persons age 18-20 among

---

<sup>20</sup> From the reports provided to us by Consular Services, consulates serving a smaller number of persons are less likely to report data and this bias increases backwards in time.

the felons and overseas population, where appropriate, in order to avoid double counting this group. We then calculate a new turnout rate using the adjusted numerator and denominator.

**Regional Analysis.** In order to control for the affect of the civil rights movement on turnout rates in the South, we estimate turnout rates for both Southern and Non-Southern states. We have turnout statistics and voting-age population estimates for all states. We also have the same information for ineligible felons as described above and make the same assumptions to arrive at regional numbers. The CPS is a survey of approximately 100,000 individuals and covers the entire country. We are able to exploit the large regional sub-samples of the CPS to make all of the same adjustments using the CPS from 1966 onward as detailed above.

For the remainder of our adjustments we are missing data and must make some assumptions. Before 1966, we use the national estimate of the proportion of non-citizens among the voting-age population as the regional estimate. In 1966, when we do have numbers for each region, both the Southern and non-Southern proportion of non-citizens were 2% of the regional VAP, so we this is a reasonable assumption. As, we do not know the home state of eligible voters living abroad, we also allocate the overseas population between the two regions, in proportion to the voting-age population of each region.



## References

- Abramson, Paul R. 1983. *Political Attitudes in America*. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman.
- Abramson, Paul R., and John H. Aldrich. 1982. "The Decline of Electoral Participation in American Politics." *American Political Science Review* 76 (September): 502-21.
- Abramson, Paul R., John H. Aldrich and David W. Rohde. 1991. *Change and Continuity in the 1988 Elections* (revised edition). Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- . 1998. *Change and Continuity in the 1996 Elections*. Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- Andrews, William. 1966. "American Voting Participation." *Western Political Quarterly*: 636-652.
- Baum, Matthew and Samuel Kernell. 1999. "Has Cable Ended the Golden Age of Presidential Television?" *American Political Science Review*. 93 (March): 99-114.
- Brody, Richard A. 1978. "The Puzzle of Political Participation in America." In *The New American Political System*, ed. Anthony King. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute.
- Bruce, Peter. 1997. "Measuring Things: How the Experts Got Voter Turnout Wrong Last Year." *The Public Perspective* October 1997. New Haven: The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.
- Burnham, Walter Dean. 1965. "The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe." *American Political Science Review* 59 (March): 7-28.
- 1982. *The Current Crisis in American Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 1985. "Those High Nineteenth-Century American Voting Turnouts: Fact or Fiction?" *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 26(4): 613-644.

--. 1987. "The Turnout Problem." In A. James Reichley, ed., *Elections American Style*. Washington DC: The Brookings Institution.

Cain Bruce E., David Ely, Kenneth McCue, and Michael P. McDonald. 1990. "Mobility and Voter Registration in California." Presented at 1990 APSA conference. San Francisco.

Cassel, Carol A., and Robert C. Luskin. 1988. "Simple Explanations of Turnout Decline." *American Political Science Review* 82 (December): 1321-30.

Cavanagh, Thomas E. 1981. "Changes in American Voter Turnout, 1964-1976" *Political Science Quarterly* 96 (Spring): 53-65.

Congressional Quarterly. 1991. "Efforts to Adjust 1990 Census Fail." *CQ Almanac* 1991: 180-183. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.

Cox, Gary W., and Michael C. Munger. 1989. "Closeness, Expenditures, and Turnout in the 1982 U.S. House Elections." *The American Political Science Review* 83 (March): 217-231.

Crocker, Royce. 1996. "Voter Registration and Turnout: 1948-1994." CRS Report for Congress: CRS-122. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.

--. 1997. "Voter Registration and Turnout: 1996." Memorandum. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.

Day, Jennifer C. 1998. "Projections of the Voting-Age Population for States: November 1998." Current Population Reports, P25-1132. Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census.

Elliott, Stuart. "Advertising Agencies Make a Pitch to Politicians and Consultants, Urging Them to Clean Up Their Act" *New York Times*, April 29, D27.

Fellner, Jamie and Marc Mauer. 1998. "Losing the Vote: The Impact of Felony Disenfranchisement (sic) Laws in the United States." Washington DC: Human Rights Watch and The Sentencing Project.

Flint, Anthony. 1996. "Has Democracy Gone Awry?" *Boston Globe*, October 20, Sunday Magazine.

Franklin, Mark and Wolfgang Mino. 1998. "Separated Powers, Divided Government, and Turnout in US Presidential Elections" *American Journal Of Political Science* 42 (January): 316-326.

Gans, Curtis. 1996. "Voter Malaise Hobbles the Nation." *Newsday*, November 11, A33.

--. 1997. "Measuring Things: How the Experts Got Voter Turnout Wrong Last Year." *The Public Perspective*, October. New Haven: The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

Huffington, Arianna. 2000. *How to Overthrow the Government*. New York: Regan Books.

Kohut, Andrew. 1998. "Deconstructing Distrust: How Americans View Government." The Pew Center for the People and the Press. March 1998.

Kousser, Morgan J. 1999. *Colorblind Injustice: Minority Voting Rights and the Undoing of the Second Reconstruction*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Kovach, Bill and Tom Rosenstiel. 1999 *Warp Speed. America in the Age of Mixed Media*. New York: The Century Foundation.

Leighley, Jan E., and Jonathan Nagler. 1992. "Individual and Systemic Influences on Turnout: Who Votes? 1984." *The Journal of Politics* 54 (August): 718-740.

Lijphart, Arend. 1997. "Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma." *American Political Science Review* 91 (March): 1-14.

Merriam, Charles Edward and Harold Foote Gosnell. 1924. *Non-Voting: Causes and Methods of Control*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Miller, Arthur H. 1974. "Political Issues and Trust in Government: 1964-1970." *American Political Science Review* 68 (September): 951-72.

Miller, Warren E., and J. Merrill Shanks. 1996. *The New American Voter*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

National Public Radio. 1999. "Morning Edition." October 15.

*New York Times* (Editorial Desk). 1988. "Don't Blame Registration on Low Voter Turnout." *New York Times*, November 24, A22.

*New York Times*. 2000 "Excerpts from the Supreme Court Ruling on Campaign Contribution Limits." *New York Times*, Jan 25.

Oreskes, Michael. 1989. "Vicious Circles: What Poison Politics Has Done to America." *New York Times*, October 29, D1.

Patterson, Samuel C., and Gregory A. Caldeira. 1983. "Getting Out the Vote: Participation in Gubernatorial Elections." *The American Political Science Review* 77 (June): 675-689.

Patterson, Thomas E. 1994. *Out of Order*. New York: Vintage Books.

Plissner, Martin and Warren Mitofsky. 1981. "What if They Help an Election and Nobody Came?" *Public Opinion Quarterly* (February/March): 50-51.

Popkin, Samuel L. and Michael P. Mc Donald. 1998. "Who Votes?" *Bluebook: Ideas for a New Century* Vol. I (Fall): 28-29.

Popkin, Samuel L. and Michael A. Dimock. 1999. "Political Knowledge and Citizen Competence" in Stephen Elkin and Karol Soltan, eds., *Citizen Competence and Democratic Institutions*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Powell, G. Bingham Jr. 1986. "American Voter Turnout in Comparative Perspective." *American Political Science Review* 80 (March): 17-44.

Rosenstone, Steven J., and John Mark Hansen. 1993. *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*. New York: Macmillian Publishing Company.

Rosenstone, Steven J., Donald R. Kinder, Warren E. Miller, and the National Election Studies. 1999. American National Election Study Cumulative Data File, 1948-1998 [Computer file]. 10th ICPSR version. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies [producer], 1999. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 1999.

Shaffer, Stephan D. 1981. "A Multivariate Explanation of Decreasing Turnout in Presidential Elections, 1960-1976." *American Journal of Political Science* 25 (February): 68-95.

Shields, Todd G., and Robert K. Goidel. 1997. "Participation Rates, Socioeconomic Class Biases, and Congressional Elections: A Crossvalidation." *American Journal of Political Science* 41 (April): 683-691.

Teixeira, Ruy. 1992. *The Disappearing American Voter*. Washington DC: The Brookings Institution.

U.S. Bureau of the Census; edited by Susan B. Carter. 1997. *Historical Statistics of the United States on CD-ROM [computer file]: Colonial Times to 1970*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. (various years). *Current Population Survey: Voter Supplement File*, (various years) [Computer File]. ICPSR version. Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census [producer], (various years). Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], (various years).

U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. (various years). *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (various years). Washington DC: G.P.O.

U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. (various years). *Correctional Populations in the United States*, (various years). Washington DC: U.S. Department of Justice.

U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. 1997. *Historical Statistics on Prisoners in State and Federal Institutions, Yearend 1925-1986: United States* [Computer file]. ICPSR ed. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [producer and distributor].

U.S. General Accounting Office. 1997. "2000 Census: Progress Made on Design but Risks Remain." Washington DC: U.S. General Accounting Office.

U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. 1997. *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service*, 1996. Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Wolfinger, Raymond E. 1993. "Building a Coalition to Ease Voter Registration." Presented at the 1993 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. Washington, DC.

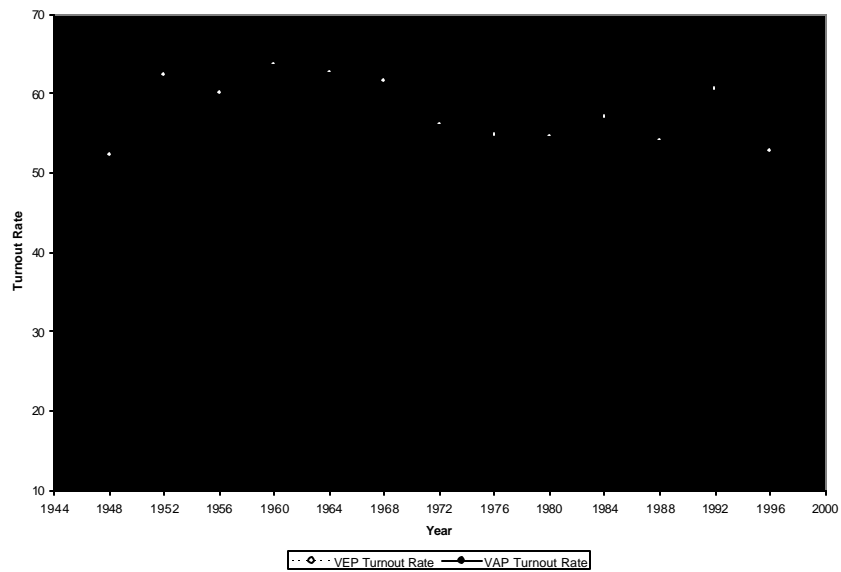
Wolfinger, Raymond E., and Stephen J. Rosenstone. 1980. *Who Votes?* New Haven: Yale University Press.

**Table 1. National Turnout Rates**

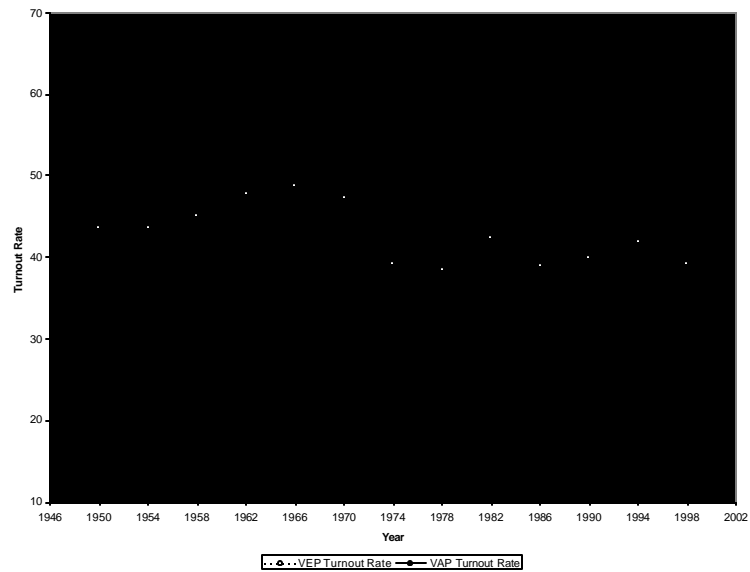
Year	Vote for Highest Office <sup>a,b</sup> (1000's)	Voting-Age Population <sup>a,b</sup> (1000's)	Turnout Rate VAP (%)	Non-Citizens <sup>a,b</sup> (1000's)	Adj. (%)	Ineligible Felons <sup>a,b,c</sup> (1000's)	Adj. (%)	Overseas VAP <sup>d</sup> (1000's)	Adj. (%)	Turnout Rate VEP (%)	Citizens Age 18-20 <sup>e</sup> (1000's)	Voters Age 18-20 <sup>f</sup> (1000's)	Adj. (%)	Turnout Rate VEP Age 21+ (%)
1948	48833	95573	51.1	2198	+1.2	349	+0.2	440	-0.2	52.2				
1950	41984	98134	42.8	1880	+0.8	374	+0.2	391	-0.2	43.6				
1952	61552	99929	61.6	1899	+1.2	380	+0.2	1131	-0.7	62.3				
1954	43854	102075	43.0	1939	+0.8	415	+0.2	987	-0.4	43.5				
1956	62027	104515	59.3	1986	+1.1	430	+0.2	981	-0.6	60.2				
1958	47203	106447	44.3	2129	+0.9	468	+0.2	951	-0.4	45.0				
1960	68838	109672	62.8	2193	+1.3	484	+0.3	912	-0.5	63.8				
1962	53141	112952	47.0	2259	+1.0	497	+0.2	1113	-0.5	47.7				
1964	70645	114090	61.9	2282	+1.3	490	+0.3	1212	-0.7	62.8				
1966	56188	116638	48.2	2363	+1.0	449	+0.2	1621	-0.7	48.7				
1968	73213	120285	60.9	2766	+1.4	423	+0.2	1856	-0.9	61.5				
1970	58014	124498	46.6	3148	+1.2	441	+0.2	1765	-0.7	47.3				
1972	77719	140777	55.2	3640	+1.5	469	+0.2	1581	-0.6	56.2	10725	4819	+1.0	57.2
1974	55944	146338	38.2	4148	+1.1	522	+0.1	1510	-0.4	39.1	11288	2126	+1.7	40.8
1976	81556	152308	53.5	4558	+1.7	628	+0.2	1562	-0.5	54.9	11706	4322	+1.5	56.4
1978	58918	158369	37.2	5825	+1.4	680	+0.2	1753	-0.4	38.4	11630	2062	+1.6	40.0
1980	86515	163945	52.8	6827	+2.3	729	+0.2	1803	-0.6	54.7	11538	4066	+1.5	56.2
1982	67616	169643	39.9	10892	+2.7	921	+0.2	1982	-0.5	42.3	11094	2028	+1.8	44.1
1984	92653	173995	53.3	13252	+4.4	1025	+0.3	2361	-0.7	57.2	10302	3799	+1.3	58.5
1986	64991	177922	36.5	12223	+2.7	1296	+0.3	2216	-0.4	39.0	9839	1625	+1.4	40.4
1988	91595	181956	50.3	13942	+4.2	1523	+0.4	2527	-0.7	54.2	9732	3206	+1.3	55.5
1990	67859	185888	36.5	16297	+3.5	1832	+0.4	2659	-0.5	39.8	9644	1629	+1.4	41.2
1992	104405	189687	55.0	17826	+5.7	2094	+0.6	2418	-0.7	60.6	8546	3445	+1.1	61.7
1994	75106	193163	38.9	13205	+2.9	2510	+0.5	2229	-0.4	41.8	9464	1502	+1.4	43.2
1996	96266	196928	48.9	13948	+3.7	2847	+0.7	2499	-0.6	52.7	10021	3081	+1.3	54.0
1998	72537	200929	36.1	15070	+2.9	3149	+0.6	2937	-0.5	39.1	10416	1378	+1.5	40.6

Note: Numbers subject to rounding. Please see the appendix for a full explanation of the sources and assumptions we make to create this table.

**Figure 1.**  
National Presidential VAP & VEP Turnout Rates



**Figure 2.**  
National Congressional VAP & VEP Turnout Rates





**Table 2. Non-South Turnout Rates**

Year	Vote for Highest Office <sup>a,b</sup> (1000's)	Voting-Age Population <sup>a,b</sup> (1000's)	Turnout Rate VAP (%)	Non-Citizens <sup>a,b</sup> (1000's)	Adj. (%)	Ineligible Felons <sup>a,b,c</sup> (1000's)	Adj. (%)	Overseas VAP <sup>d</sup> (1000's)	Adj. (%)	Turnout Rate VEP (%)	Citizens Age 18-20 <sup>e</sup> (1000's)	Voters Age 18-20 <sup>f</sup> (1000's)	Adj. (%)	Turnout Rate VEP Age 21+ (%)
1948	44129	76182	57.9	1752	+1.4	206	+0.2	356	-0.3	59.2				
1950	39393	77254	51.0	1468	+1.0	221	+0.1	313	-0.2	51.9				
1952	53890	77710	69.3	1476	+1.3	225	+0.2	899	-0.8	70.1				
1954	40386	79734	50.7	1515	+1.0	240	+0.2	785	-0.5	51.3				
1956	54343	81823	66.4	1555	+1.3	248	+0.2	781	-0.6	67.3				
1958	43750	82649	52.9	1653	+1.1	267	+0.2	751	-0.5	53.7				
1960	59618	86289	69.1	1726	+1.4	274	+0.2	717	-0.6	70.1				
1962	47431	88711	53.5	1774	+1.1	279	+0.2	874	-0.5	54.2				
1964	59476	89221	66.7	1784	+1.4	279	+0.2	948	-0.7	67.5				
1966	47803	91018	52.5	1820	+1.1	257	+0.1	1265	-0.7	53.0				
1968	59658	93594	63.7	2153	+1.5	245	+0.2	1444	-1.0	64.4				
1970	48488	96520	50.2	2413	+1.3	241	+0.1	1368	-0.7	50.9				
1972	63485	108494	58.5	3038	+1.7	241	+0.1	1219	-0.6	59.6	8621	4000	+1.2	60.8
1974	47171	111878	42.2	3244	+1.3	268	+0.1	1155	-0.4	43.1	9090	1840	+2.0	45.1
1976	64689	115823	55.9	3475	+1.7	314	+0.2	1188	-0.6	57.1	9284	3429	+1.8	58.9
1978	48490	119832	40.5	4673	+1.6	335	+0.1	1326	-0.4	41.7	9408	1746	+2.1	43.8
1980	67453	123573	54.6	5314	+2.5	362	+0.2	1354	-0.6	56.6	9659	3238	+2.0	58.6
1982	54595	126707	43.1	8869	+3.2	468	+0.2	1478	-0.5	45.9	8557	1638	+2.1	48.0
1984	71034	129436	54.9	10484	+4.8	542	+0.2	1752	-0.7	59.1	7931	2912	+1.6	60.7
1986	49490	131994	37.5	9636	+3.0	681	+0.2	1638	-0.5	40.1	7399	1237	+1.5	41.6
1988	69977	134951	51.9	11066	+4.6	802	+0.3	1866	-0.7	56.0	7372	2449	+1.4	57.4
1990	51326	136703	37.5	12850	+3.9	956	+0.3	1957	-0.5	41.1	7117	1180	+1.5	42.6
1992	78842	138934	56.7	14171	+6.4	1165	+0.5	1772	-0.7	62.9	6268	2602	+1.1	64.0
1994	57023	141438	40.3	10042	+3.1	1352	+0.4	1628	-0.5	43.3	6847	1140	+1.5	44.8
1996	67365	133692	50.4	10161	+4.1	1543	+0.6	1784	-0.7	54.4	7055	2223	+1.4	55.8
1998	55123	145081	38.0	11461	+3.3	1711	+0.5	2121	-0.5	41.1	7356	1047	+1.6	42.7

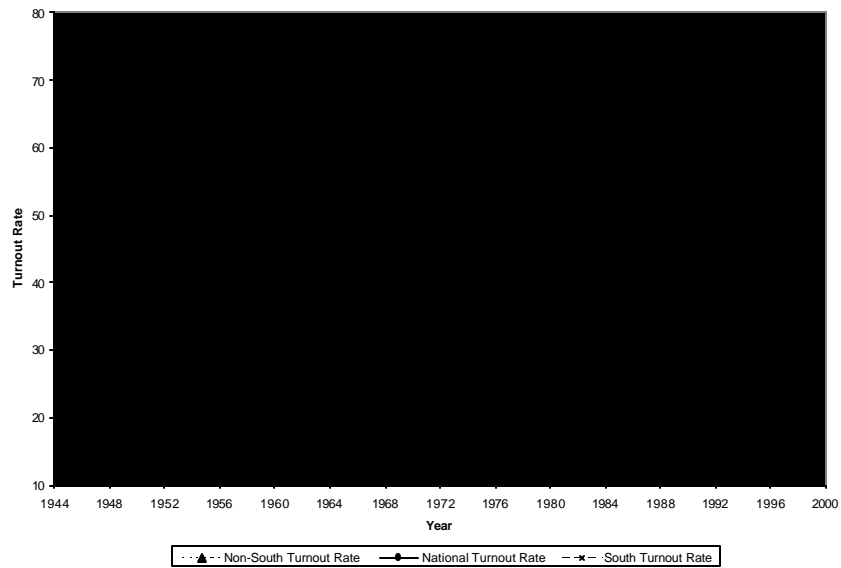
Note: Numbers subject to rounding. Please see the appendix for a full explanation of the sources and assumptions we make to create this table.

**Table 3. South Turnout Rates**

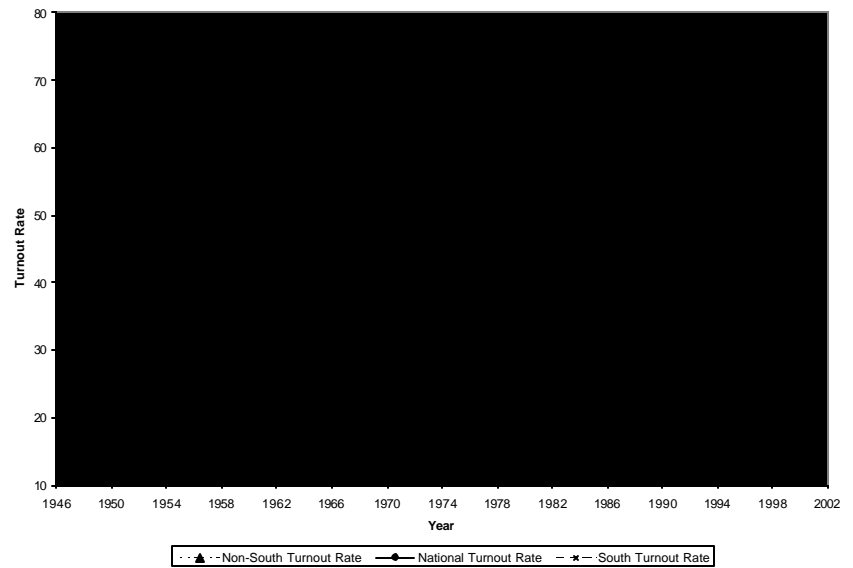
Year	Vote for Highest Office <sup>a,b</sup> (1000's)	Voting-Age Population <sup>a,b</sup> (1000's)	Turnout Rate VAP (%)	Non-Citizens <sup>a,b</sup> (1000's)	Adj. (%)	Ineligible Felons <sup>a,b,c</sup> (1000's)	Adj. (%)	Overseas VAP <sup>d</sup> (1000's)	Adj. (%)	Turnout Rate VEP (%)	Citizens Age 18-20 <sup>e</sup> (1000's)	Voters Age 18-20 <sup>f</sup> (1000's)	Adj. (%)	Turnout Rate VEP Age 21+ (%)
1948	4132	17888	23.1	411	+0.5	129	+0.2	84	-0.1	23.7				
1950	2590	19417	13.3	369	+0.3	133	+0.1	79	-0.1	13.6				
1952	7661	20016	38.3	380	+0.7	151	+0.3	232	-0.4	38.9				
1954	3469	20489	16.9	389	+0.3	159	+0.1	202	-0.2	17.2				
1956	7684	20919	36.7	397	+0.7	179	+0.3	200	-0.3	37.4				
1958	3453	21934	15.7	439	+0.3	186	+0.1	199	-0.1	16.1				
1960	9220	23383	39.4	468	+0.8	190	+0.3	194	-0.3	40.2				
1962	5710	24239	23.6	485	+0.5	177	+0.2	239	-0.2	24.0				
1964	11168	24869	44.9	497	+0.9	167	+0.3	264	-0.5	45.6				
1966	8385	25620	32.7	512	+0.7	143	+0.2	356	-0.4	33.1				
1968	13555	26734	50.7	615	+1.2	177	+0.3	412	-0.8	51.4				
1970	9526	27980	34.0	700	+0.9	210	+0.3	397	-0.5	34.7				
1972	14234	32282	44.1	613	+0.9	266	+0.4	363	-0.5	44.8	2668	797	+1.4	46.2
1974	8772	34458	25.5	896	+0.7	323	+0.2	356	-0.3	26.1	2822	307	+1.4	27.5
1976	16866	36486	46.2	1095	+1.4	358	+0.5	374	-0.5	47.6	3010	877	+1.8	49.4
1978	10427	38541	27.1	1156	+0.8	393	+0.3	427	-0.3	27.9	2993	334	+1.4	29.3
1980	19062	41024	46.5	1518	+1.8	487	+0.6	449	-0.5	48.3	3000	858	+1.6	49.9
1982	13020	43231	30.1	2032	+1.5	509	+0.4	504	-0.3	31.6	3048	352	+1.6	33.2
1984	21618	45030	48.0	2792	+3.2	610	+0.7	609	-0.6	51.2	2872	886	+1.5	52.7
1986	15501	46571	33.3	2655	+2.0	615	+0.4	578	-0.4	35.3	2764	403	+1.4	36.7
1988	21617	47827	45.2	2870	+2.9	721	+0.7	661	-0.6	48.1	2694	757	+1.3	49.4
1990	16533	49109	33.7	3438	+2.5	876	+0.6	703	-0.5	36.3	2821	446	+1.4	37.7
1992	25563	50595	50.5	3693	+4.0	928	+0.9	645	-0.6	54.8	2471	844	+1.2	56.0
1994	18082	52212	34.6	3237	+2.3	1158	+0.8	601	-0.4	37.3	2760	362	+1.5	38.8
1996	24392	53609	45.5	3109	+2.8	1304	+1.1	715	-0.6	48.9	2645	732	+1.2	50.1
1998	17414	55848	31.2	3518	+2.1	1424	+0.8	816	-0.4	33.7	3054	279	+1.5	35.2

Note: Numbers subject to rounding. Please see the appendix for a full explanation of the sources and assumptions we make to create this table.

**Figure 3.**  
**Regional Presidential VEP Turnout Rate Age 21+**



**Figure 4.**  
**Regional Congressional VEP Turnout Rate Age 21+**



**Table 4. Average Turnout Rates**

<i>Geographic Level</i>	<i>Election Type</i>	<i>Years</i>	<i>Turnout Rate VAP</i>	<i>Turnout Rate VEP</i>	<i>Turnout Rate VEP 21+</i>
National	Presidential	1948-1996	55.9	57.9	–
		1948-1968	59.6	60.5	–
		1972-1996	52.7	55.8	56.8
	Congressional	1950-1998	41.2	42.7	–
		1950-1970	45.3	46.0	–
		1974-1998	37.6	39.9	41.5
Non-South	Presidential	1948-1996	59.7	61.9	–
		1948-1968	65.5	66.4	–
		1972-1996	54.7	58.0	59.0
	Congressional	1950-1998	45.4	47.0	–
		1950-1970	51.8	52.5	–
		1974-1998	39.9	42.3	44.1
South	Presidential	1948-1996	43.0	44.7	–
		1948-1968	38.9	39.5	–
		1972-1996	46.6	49.1	50.1
	Congressional	1950-1998	27.1	28.2	–
		1950-1970	22.7	23.1	–
		1974-1998	30.8	32.6	34.1

**Table 5.**  
**Regression of Turnout Rates versus Constant and Trend:**  
**Estimated Overall Change in Turnout Rates**

<i>Dependent Variable (Turnout Rate Denominator)</i>	<i>Election</i>	<i>Years</i>	<i>Number of Elections</i>	<i>Estimated National Change</i>	<i>Estimated Non-South Change</i>	<i>Estimated South Change</i>
VAP	Presidential	1948-1996	13	-8.98* (3.57)	-15.90* (3.77)	+16.74* (4.61)
		1972-1996	7	-3.95 (2.31)	-5.43 (2.48)	+2.48 (2.39)
	Congressional	1950-1998	13	-9.85* (2.77)	-17.65* (2.76)	+18.74* (4.13)
		1974-1998	7	-1.37 (1.64)	-3.93 (2.19)	+7.69* (2.60)
VEP	Presidential	1948-1996	13	-4.77 (3.51)	-11.31* (3.81)	+20.32* (4.39)
		1972-1996	7	+0.12 (3.19)	-1.01 (3.46)	+5.66 (2.98)
	Congressional	1950-1998	13	-6.90* (2.64)	-14.53* (2.65)	+21.51* (4.03)
		1974-1998	7	+0.94 (1.85)	-1.62 (2.30)	+9.94* (2.95)
VEP Age 21+	Presidential	1948-1996	13	-2.99 (3.30)	-9.32* (3.54)	+22.13* (4.33)
		1972-1996	7	+0.08 (3.08)	-1.29 (3.26)	+5.23 (3.01)
	Congressional	1950-1998	13	-4.83 (2.32)	-12.33* (2.28)	+23.54* (3.85)
		1974-1998	7	+0.62 (1.91)	-2.32 (2.44)	+9.98* (2.91)

*Notes:* Coefficient on constant not shown. Estimated overall change computed by multiplying trend coefficient by number of elections minus one.

\* Statistically different from zero at  $p < .05$ . Standard errors in parentheses.

**Table 6. Comparison of National Election Study Turnout Rates to VAP & VEP Turnout Rates for Presidential Elections 1948-1996**

Year	Turnout Rate <i>NES</i>	Turnout Rate <i>VAP</i>	Rate Difference <i>NES-VAP</i>	Turnout Rate <i>VEP</i>	Rate Difference <i>NES-VEP</i>
1948	63.7	51.1	12.6	52.2	11.5
1952	73.0	61.6	11.4	62.3	10.7
1956	72.9	59.3	13.6	60.2	12.7
1960	79.0	62.8	16.2	63.8	15.2
1964	77.7	61.9	15.8	62.8	14.9
1968	75.5	60.9	14.6	61.5	14.0
1972	72.7	55.2	17.5	56.2	16.5
1976	71.6	53.5	18.1	54.9	16.7
1980	71.3	52.8	18.5	54.7	16.6
1984	73.6	53.3	20.3	57.2	16.4
1988	69.7	50.3	19.4	54.2	15.5
1992	75.1	55.0	20.1	60.6	14.5
1996	71.8	48.9	22.9	52.7	19.1