The Myth of the Vanishing Voter

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The apparent decline in voter participation in national elections since 1972 is an illusion created by using the Bureau of the Census estimate of the voting-age population as the denominator of the turnout rate. We construct a more accurate estimate of those eligible to vote, from 1948–2000, using government statistical series to adjust for ineligible but included groups, such as noncitizens and felons, and eligible but excluded groups, such as overseas citizens. We show that the ineligible population, not the nonvoting, has been increasing since 1972. During the 1960s the turnout rate trended downward both nationally and outside the South. Although the average turnout rates for presidential and congressional elections are lower since 1972 than during 1948–70, the only pattern since 1972 is an increased turnout rate in southern congressional elections. While the voting age was lowered to 18 in 1971, the lower turnout rate of young voters accounts for less than one-fourth of reduced voter participation.

CONSTRUCTING THE TURNOUT RATE

The turnout rate equals the total number of votes cast divided by the eligible electorate. As straightforward as this calculation may seem, a variety of measures for the numerator and denominator are used around the world (Lijphart 1997). In the United States, researchers primarily rely upon Census statistics of the VAP for the denominator. This is the most readily available number, but it does not constitute the eligible electorate by any but the most extreme definitions. More important, the errors that result are neither random nor constant over time.

We construct the turnout rate for post–World War II elections, 1948 to 2000, by carefully distinguishing the VEP from the VAP. We provide the numbers used in our adjustments so that anyone can redefine the VEP and recalculate the turnout rate to test whether a change in definitions or estimation procedures alters our conclusions.
Numerator: Total Votes Cast

Even a figure as apparently simple as the number of votes cast in an election must be constructed out of disparate data sources. Because the Constitution grants states the authority to regulate elections, there is no requirement of uniform reporting of comparable election data, and there is no national election commission to collect these data. We use information provided by the Congressional Research Service, which in turn contracts Election Data Services to collect voting statistics from each state (see note 8 below).

The ideal numerator for the turnout rate is the total number of voters who cast any ballot for any office, but this measure is not available for all states. Only 17 states reported total turnout in 1948, and 13 still do not report this measure. Using this number where available would bias historical as well as interstate comparisons. Historical studies avoid this problem by using a number reported by all states for all years, the vote for highest office. In presidential election years, this is simply the total number of persons who voted for the presidential candidates. In other election years, this is the largest number of people who cast a vote in a statewide race, usually either for governor or U.S. senator. If there is no statewide race, the vote cast in all U.S. House elections in a state is combined (Crocker 1997, 6).

Using total turnout instead of the vote for highest office would, of course, increase the level of turnout. Our data and the historical analysis of Burnham (1985) suggest that total turnout is on average 2.3% greater than the vote for highest office in presidential elections and 2.6% greater for congressional elections. Nevertheless, if we compare elections or states using the vote for highest office, we are not distorting any comparisons between election years. Until total turnout is routinely reported by all states, researchers concerned with exact turnout figures, either for comparisons with other countries or because of the normative importance attached to a turnout rate of more than 50%, should multiply (not add) the reported turnout rate by 1.023 or 1.026.

Denominator: Voting-Age Population versus Voting-Eligible Population

The turnout rate is highly sensitive to the specification of the total eligible population; seemingly insignificant changes in the denominator can reverse conclusions about the turnout rate. Nearly all reports are based on the VAP from the Bureau of the Census. Both the Congressional Research Service (Crocker 1996, 1997, 1999) and the widely cited Center for the Study of the American Electorate (Gans 1997) rely on the P-25 series of the bureau’s Current Population Reports, entitled “Projections of the Voting-Age Population for States,” for November of each election year. Although the VAP is commonly treated as the “true” error-free denominator, it is an estimate, albeit the best available, of the number of persons of voting age who reside in the 50 states. For non-Census years, the bureau estimates the VAP by adjusting the last full Census to account for deaths, the number of persons who reach voting age, immigration, and the number of people entering and leaving overseas military service. As defined by the bureau in 1998, “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).

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? We do not believe that there is a good argument for including only the registered, but all other possibilities have proponents.

Although registration figures are widely used for the denominator in Europe, few in the United States defend studies of turnout based on registered voters. Turnout based on registration is used in Europe because registration is synonymous with eligibility: It is generally done by the government or required by law (Powell 1986, 21). There is widespread agreement that such a restricted definition of eligibility gives a misleading picture of the turnout rate. If registered voters were to be used as the denominator in the United States, comparisons between elections and among states would be confusing, because registration laws vary substantially. Besides, it is virtually impossible to gather accurate registration figures due to outdated registration rolls.

The inclusion of everyone of voting age in the denominator has proponents on both normative and practical grounds. Teixeira (1992, 6) argues for the VAP because each person in the country of voting age could be allowed to vote, should the already eligible so decide: “At the most basic level, the voting-age population is the eligible electorate. Although it is little known, 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.” Teixeira (1992, 6) also makes a pragmatic argument: Adjusting the VAP to remove ineligible voters is a “difficult and imprecise process.” Gans (1997, 46) defends the VAP on scholarly grounds, because “consistency and comparability are the only way that students and scholars of voting research can do comparative research.”

Nevertheless, consistency and comparability do not force scholars to use the VAP. Burnham’s (1985, 1987) pioneering work, for example, is based on straightforward methods for estimating the number of eligible voters 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 that we shall show is confounded in some surprising ways.
**Constructing the VEP.** The VAP both includes ineligible and excludes eligible voters. It includes noncitizens, disenfranchised felons, mental incompetents, and people who do not meet residency requirements. It excludes military personnel and civilians living outside the United States. Our more accurate VEP uses a variety of government statistical series to adjust the VAP. We remove noncitizens using estimates found in the Current Population Survey (CPS) and the full Census of Population. We remove persons who are ineligible due to criminality based on Department of Justice statistics on the correctional population. We add military and civilian personnel living overseas using statistics from the Bureau of the Census, 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 people ineligible due to state residency requirements because the CPS question on mobility does not employ detailed response categories, so it is not possible to determine how various state residency requirements affect ineligibility. We believe that this number has remained approximately 1% of the VAP. We also do not remove the number of mentally incompetent persons because we lack a reliable source; we estimate that this number is approximately one-tenth of 1% of the VAP, or approximately 250,000 persons in 1995,\(^1\)

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 methods we employ are detailed in the Appendix. In every case we make a conservative adjustment to the VAP so that our corrections do not overstate the turnout rate.

**Further Correction: The Census Undercount.** The VAP estimate does not correct for the undercount of the population in the Census. The undercount is the net product of two errors: Some people are counted more than once (overcoverage), and others are not counted (undercoverage) (GAO 1997).\(^2\) We do not correct for undercounting because we are not aware of a good way to determine how much this affects the VAP estimate generated between censuses. Correcting for undercoverage would actually strengthen the case that there is no ongoing decline in voter participation, as a more accurate count reduces the turnout rate, ceteris paribus. Therefore, by not making this correction we can be confident that we do not overstate trends.

\(^1\) Mentally incompetent persons can be found in high-level care nursing homes that address their special needs. 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 Health Statistics. The exact number of mentally incompetent residents of voting age is unknown, since there is no breakdown of residents by type or age.

\(^2\) Overcoverage and undercoverage are estimated by the Bureau of the Census in a postenumeration survey. A sample of persons in representative areas are interviewed following the Census to determine whether they were recorded once, twice, or not at all. The responses are extrapolated to the entire country to derive estimates of the net errors.

The degree of undercoverage has declined since 1940. According to the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO 1997), the estimated net undercoverage was 5.8% of the total population in 1940; 4.1% in 1950, 3.1% in 1960, 2.7% in 1970, 1.2% in 1980, and 1.8% in 1990. This decline would create the impression of declining turnout rates. For example, suppose that among a constant adult population of 100 million, 50 million voted in both 1940 and 1990. The 5.8% undercount in the 1940 Census would result in a reported turnout rate of 50/94.2 or 52.2%. The same turnout in 1990, with a smaller undercount of 1.8%, would result in a reported turnout rate of 50/98.2 or 50.9%. The increased accuracy of the more recent Census would result in a decline of 1.3% in the reported turnout rate.

**The VAP and VEP Turnout Rates**

In Table 1 we report the data necessary to construct the national turnout rate from 1948 to 2000 using the VAP and the VEP as the denominator. In addition, after 1971 we report an estimate of persons age 18-21 and the number who voted in order to account for the effects of the 26th Amendment. Below, we replicate our analysis within and outside the South to control for the dramatic rise in participation in that region.

In recent decades two major corrections to the VAP, noncitizens and ineligible felons, are segments that are increasing faster than the rate of population growth. The percentage of noncitizens among the voting-age population has risen steadily, from 2% in 1966 to 8.0% in 2000. As for ineligible felons, the historical average before 1982 was 0.5% of the voting-age population, and the figure rose to 1.4% in 2000. The number that needs to be added to the VAP—eligible voters living abroad—remained at nearly the same percentage throughout our analysis, about 1.5%, relative to the resident voting-age population; the percentage was higher during the Korean and Vietnam conflicts and at the peak of the Cold War in the 1980s. During the 1990s the overseas percentage slightly decreased as the U.S. military presence declined more than the number of civilians living abroad increased.

Figure 1 plots the VAP and VEP turnout rates for presidential elections since World War II. A glance at the VAP line shows why analysts who take the VAP turnout rate at face value are understandably worried about civic erosion, a possible dearth of social capital, and the decline of the public sphere in America. During the 1970s and 1980s there was a steady drop of approximately one-tenth of 1% of the VAP, or approximately 250,000 persons in 1995.\(^1\)

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Although an informal view of the 1972–2000 figures in the figure may suggest continuing decline, a prudent and statistically sound assessment is that there is no
post-1971 trend in the presidential turnout rate among those eligible to vote. Regressing the 1972–2000 VEP presidential turnout rate on a linear trend variable produces estimates of a miniscule decline of 0.007 percentage points per election, or a total drop of 0.05 percentage points for the period. Yet, the standard error is so large (0.40) relative to the estimated trend that we cannot reject the null hypothesis of no trend in the presidential VEP turnout rate from 1972 to 2000.

Recent rates are inconsistent and appear susceptible to short-term forces. The VEP in 1992 is no longer a minor deviation in a period of continual decline but is rather within the range of turnout rates 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 attain their former level.

In 1996 the VAP rate reached its low since World War II, and the VEP rate dropped as well, to 52.7%, but that is slightly higher than the low of 52.2% in 1948. This is a small difference, but when the two VEP calculations are further corrected for the Census undercount, we find a difference of 2.5 percentage points.3

The low voter participation in 1948 is not given the attention it merits since the 1952 election is the starting point for most scholarly analyses. Although the decline from the 1950s and early 1960s buttresses the case for reform, the 1948 figure is not merely an aberration. Burnham (1987) adjusted turnout rates for the presence of noncitizens among the VAP before 1948, and his results show that voter participation from 1920

3 After correcting for the undercount the 1948 turnout rate is 49.3% (52.2%/105.8) and the 1996 rate is 51.8% (52.7%/101.8), a difference of 2.5 percentage points.
through 1948 is strikingly similar to the turnout rate after 1972. The highs in the 1950s and 1960s are actually quite unusual for the period after the weakening of political machines (Burnham 1987) and perhaps were more momentary than usually supposed.

The Twenty-Sixth Amendment. The drop in turnout between 1968 and 1972 is usually attributed to expansion of the franchise from age 21 to age 18 (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 57). This is a plausible assumption, since turnout rates for younger persons are lower than for older persons. Table 1 shows the turnout rate excluding persons under age 21. The numerator is derived by using the CPS figures to calculate the proportion of all votes reported by persons age 21 and older, and then multiplying that proportion by the total number of votes cast for highest office; the denominator is derived by removing the number of citizens age 18–20 from the VEP (see the Appendix). The average effect of removing this group since 1971 is an increase of 1.3 percentage points in presidential elections and 1.7 percentage points in congressional elections. That is slightly more than one-fourth the decrease of 4.7 percentage points for the VEP turnout rate between 1948–68 and 1972–2000. Because a large drop in voter participation occurred between 1968 and 1972, it is assumed that the new voters were a significant factor in the decline. Yet, the downward trend of the 1960s carries through to the 1972 election even though people age 18–20 are not included prior to 1972. And the turnout rate of voters under age 21 was 49.2% in 1972, according to the CPS, so their presence in that election only lowered the rate by a single percentage point.

Southern and Nonsouthern Turnout Rates. We need to account for the dramatic rise in southern turnout rates during the 1960s to make comparisons of the aggregate turnout rate over time. The civil rights movement led to the Voting Rights Act, which effectively enfranchised blacks and poor whites in the South. Accordingly, voter participation rose dramatically in that region during the 1960s (Kousser 1999).

The increase in southern turnout masks some of the decline in the rest of the nation. The corrections performed in Table 1 are repeated in tables 2 and 3 for nonsouthern and southern states, respectively. Figure 2 plots the national, southern, and nonsouthern age 21+ VEP turnout rate for presidential elections since 1948, thereby controlling for the effects of the extended franchise and the elimination of Jim Crow laws. Turnout rates in the South rose precipitously as the electorate mobilized, but elsewhere the electorate contracted (DeNardo 1998).5

Nationally and regionally, using either VAP or VEP in the denominator of the turnout rate, there are two distinct eras of post–World War II turnout divided by 1971. The national VAP presidential turnout rate is an

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4 Before 1971, four states allowed persons under age 21 to vote: Georgia since 1944 (18+), Kentucky since 1956 (19+), Alaska since 1960 (19+), and Hawaii since 1960 (20+) (GAO 1997).

5 Southern states are Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia. The contribution of the southern turnout rate to the national figure increased over the last half of the twentieth century. In 1960, approximately one in four eligible voters resided in the South. As in-migration to that region increased, the number rose to almost one out of three in 1996. Thus, decline in nonsouthern voter participation is offset by the shift in distribution of eligible voters across regions.
average 7.1 percentage points lower during 1972–2000 than during 1948–68. The VEP turnout rate is also on average lower, but by 4.7 percentage points. The gains in southern presidential turnout rates (an increase on average of 8.9 for VAP and 9.9 for VEP) are offset by losses outside the South (a decrease on average of 11.1 for VAP and 8.6 for VEP).

As shown in Table 2, the nonsouthern VAP turnout rate exhibits continued decline of greater magnitude than the national rate (Table 1), although both patterns are interrupted by the high turnout in the 1992 election.\(^6\) The most noticeable disjunctions between the VAP and VEP nonsouthern turnout rates begin in 1972 (Table 2). For nonsouthern elections we estimate a small downward trend in VEP of 0.22 percentage points per election, with a standard error of 0.44, which implies no statistically significant trend. The southern presidential VEP turnout rate (Table 3) trends upward an estimated 0.87 percentage points per election, with a standard error of 0.37, which gives some confidence (90%) in the trend.\(^7\)

### CONCLUSION

We attribute the apparent decline in turnout rate since 1972 to an increasing number of ineligible persons being counted among the VAP, which is the denominator for the calculations by the Bureau of the Census. We disagree with Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde (1998, 68), who contend that correcting the denominator leads only to “relatively small differences in the overall estimate of turnout.” Correcting the data changes the level of the turnout rate sufficiently to come to some different conclusions about the trends. Contrary to Teixeira (1992, 25), we agree with Wolfinger (1993, 7) that use of the VAP leads to errors that are unevenly distributed geographically and chronologically and produces “quite misleading distortions.”

The great divide in the turnout rate is the 1972 election. Based on the VEP, with or without adjustments for the inclusion of younger voters, nationally and outside the South there are virtually no identifiable turnout trends from 1972 onward, and within the South there is a clear trend of increasing turnout rates. Our analysis points to a surge in nonsouthern voting in the 1950s, followed by a decline during the 1960s. Since then, turnout is lower, but there is no “downward trend.” Absent further decline, divided govern-

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\(^6\) For nonsouthern states, we estimate a downward trend of 0.79 percentage point per election, with a standard error of 0.31.

\(^7\) We estimate an upward trend for the southern VAP presidential turnout rate of 0.38 percentage point per election, but with a relatively large standard error of 0.30.
TABLE 3. Southern Turnout Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Vote for Highest Office Age Population (1000s)</th>
<th>Voting Age Population (1000s)</th>
<th>Turnout Rate (1000s)</th>
<th>Ineligible Noncitizens (1000s)</th>
<th>Adj. Felons VAP (1000s)</th>
<th>Overseas Voters VAP (1000s)</th>
<th>Turnout Rate VEP (1000s)</th>
<th>Citizens Overseas Voters Rate VEP (1000s)</th>
<th>Turnout Rate VEP Age 18-20 Age 18-20 Adj. VEP Age 21+</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>4132</td>
<td>17888</td>
<td>23.1 411</td>
<td>+0.5 132</td>
<td>+0.2 84</td>
<td>-0.1 23.7</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>4132</td>
<td>17888</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2590</td>
<td>19417</td>
<td>13.3 369</td>
<td>+0.3 137</td>
<td>+0.1 79</td>
<td>-0.1 13.6</td>
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<td>2590</td>
<td>19417</td>
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<td>1952</td>
<td>7661</td>
<td>20016</td>
<td>38.3 380</td>
<td>+0.7 155</td>
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<td>1954</td>
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<td>20469</td>
<td>16.9 389</td>
<td>+0.3 163</td>
<td>+0.1 202</td>
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<td>20469</td>
</tr>
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<td>7684</td>
<td>20919</td>
<td>36.7 397</td>
<td>+0.7 184</td>
<td>+0.3 200</td>
<td>-0.3 37.4</td>
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<td>3453</td>
<td>21934</td>
<td>15.7 439</td>
<td>+0.3 191</td>
<td>+0.1 199</td>
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<td>3453</td>
<td>21934</td>
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<td>1960</td>
<td>9220</td>
<td>23383</td>
<td>39.4 468</td>
<td>+0.8 195</td>
<td>+0.3 194</td>
<td>-0.3 40.2</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>9220</td>
<td>23383</td>
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<td>1962</td>
<td>5710</td>
<td>24239</td>
<td>23.6 485</td>
<td>+0.5 182</td>
<td>+0.2 239</td>
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<td>1962</td>
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<td>24239</td>
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<td>1964</td>
<td>11166</td>
<td>24869</td>
<td>44.9 497</td>
<td>+0.9 171</td>
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<td>25620</td>
<td>32.7 512</td>
<td>+0.7 147</td>
<td>+0.2 356</td>
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<td>1966</td>
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<td>26734</td>
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<td>+0.4 363</td>
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<td>+0.2 356</td>
<td>-0.3 26.1 2822</td>
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<td>46.2 1095</td>
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<td>+0.5 374</td>
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<td>29.1 1048</td>
<td>+0.9 390</td>
<td>+0.3 427</td>
<td>-0.3 30.0 2927</td>
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<td>+2.0 602</td>
<td>+0.4 578</td>
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<td>+0.7 661</td>
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<td>+0.9 645</td>
<td>-0.6 54.8 2471</td>
<td>844 +1.2 56.0</td>
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<td>25563</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>18082</td>
<td>52212</td>
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<td>+0.7 601</td>
<td>-0.4 37.3 2760</td>
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<td>18082</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Southern states are Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia

FIGURE 2. Regional VEP Presidential Turnout Rate, Age 21+, 1948–2000

Nonsouthern
National
Southern

Year

Turnout Rate
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
ment (Franklin and de Mino 1998), negative campaign-
ing (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995), and declining
civic engagement (Putnam 2000) have not depressed
turnout. Whether due to the Cold War, a popular
military hero as president, the emergence of national
television news media not yet cynical and distrustful of
power, or other factors, it was the 1950s that were
unusual in being the high point of twentieth-century
voter participation outside the Jim Crow South. Old
theories will have to be transformed or new theories
will have to be developed to explain the decline in the
turnout rate during the 1960s.

An explanation for lower turnout in America than in
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 parties and candidates. Powell (1986) notes that
in contrast to parliamentary systems, which foster
strong national parties and clear lines of responsibility
for government performance, responsibility is divided
between state and national governments in the United
States, and between two legislatures and an executive
at each level. Federalism and the separation of powers
increase the costs to voters to gather and process the
information about which vote, for which candidate, for
which office, on which date, matters for a given issue,
and registration is neither done by the government nor
compulsory. Furthermore, the frequent primary and
general elections required to fill the many elected
offices increase the burden of democracy for the voter.
Indeed, the other two industrialized democracies with
chronically low turnout rates are Switzerland and Ja-
pan, countries with diffused lines of authority and
responsibility.

APPENDIX

The data and methods we used to construct our measure of
the turnout rate among eligible voters are described below. Our
sources do not report all the data we needed to construct
fully each component measure for every year. When possible,
we developed procedures for imputing the missing data, as
detailed below.

When we analyze the effect of the 26th Amendment in
1971, we further adjust the VAP using estimates of the age
distribution of the total population from the P-25 Current
Population Reports. We use the Current Population Survey
Voter Supplement File to determine the proportion of
persons age 18–20 among eligible voters and remove this
proportion from the vote for highest office.

Turnout

The numerator of the turnout rate is the number of persons
who vote in a given election. Our national and state data are
drawn from a 1996 Congressional Research Service (CRS)
report on turnout in the 1948–94 elections, a 1997 memo-
randum on 1996, and a 1999 memorandum on the 1998
election (Crocker 1996, 1997). As described in the text, two
numbers found in these reports 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 VAP estimates drawn from the P-25
series Current Population Reports. The Bureau of the
Census compiles these adjustments to the Census from
various sources that report preliminary numbers. The bureau
VAP estimates we use are preliminary figures still subject to
minor changes.

Noncitizens

We use two methods to estimate the number of noncitizens
among the VAP. From 1948 through 1966, we use a tech-
nique proposed by Burnham (1985) in his study of turnout
rates in the nineteenth century to interpolate the number of
noncitizens for inter-Census years. We interpolate the per-
centage of noncitizens reported in the 1940 and 1950 Census
and between the 1950 Census and the 1966 Current Popula-
tion Survey (the 1960 Census did not include a citizenship
question). Between 1950 and 1966 the number of noncitizens
in the VAP was virtually unchanged, rising from 1.9% in 1950
to 2% in 1966. We are confident that this simple procedure
does not miss an intervening wave of immigration, since legal
inflows reported by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization
Service (1997) were small and stable from 1950 to 1966.

Beginning in 1966, we estimate the number of noncitizens
in the VAP from the Current Population Survey Voter Supple-
ment Files. The CPS allows us to avoid the problems of
interpolation during the wave of immigration that began in
the 1970s and peaked in 1991. Yet, use of the CPS
introduces the sampling and measurement errors associated
with surveys. In particular, there is a reported decline of 4.6
million noncitizens between the 1992 estimate of 17.8 million
and the 1994 estimate of 13.2 million that is puzzling. We
believe the change in CPS methodologies is primarily re-
sponsible for the difference.

The CPS has used three different sets of citizenship
questions. From 1966 to 1976, respondents were not directly
asked if they were citizens but whether they were registered
to vote. If not, they were asked why, and “not a citizen” was
one of the options. From 1978 to 1992, respondents were
queried directly about their citizenship status, and their “yes”
or “no” answers were recorded. Between 1976 and 1978 the
CPS revealed an increase in the number of noncitizens, from
consultation with the CRS, compiled data from the CRS records,
America Votes, and information supplied by Curtis Gans to construct
turnout figures dating back to 1948 (personal correspondence with
Royce Crocker, April 22, 1999).

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

10 The first CPS Voter Supplement File questionnaire, in 1964, did
not include a citizenship question.

11 In 1991, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (1997)
reports 1.8 million legal immigrants entered the country, the highest
number in American history. Immigration has since declined slightly
but still remains at historical highs.

12 There is a spike in noncitizens between 1980 and 1982. Some of
that is due to a flood of immigrants from Cuba who participated in
the Mariel boatlift, as well as to new asylum laws that were
introduced in late 1980.
4.5 million to 5.8 million. This is probably a true increase and not an artifact of changing survey methods. Although the increase is slightly larger than the 1970s trend, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (1997) reports a rise in legal immigration in 1978.

In 1994, the CPS citizenship item was changed again to determine possible types of status. Respondents were given five options: “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 significant methodological changes that may affect the CPS estimates. The 1994 CPS was the first in our analysis to use the 1990 Census as a baseline to construct weights and the first to use computer-aided interviews.13

Is it possible that the number of noncitizens 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 decline, could a decrease this large occur solely due to large changes in the rates of out-migration and illegal immigration? There was heightened emphasis on controlling illegal entry under the Clinton administration, as well as more anti-immigration legislation. There could have been a true decline in illegal entry or greater reluctance of noncitizens to acknowledge their status, but we cannot say whether the 1994 number is more or less accurate than previous years. We do know, however, that legal immigration statistics clearly reveal a rise in the number of legal entrants that began in the 1970s, peaked in 1991, and declined slightly thereafter, consistent with the overall CPS trend. The numbers are consistent with two possibilities: less overreporting of citizenship in 1994 than in 1992, or more underreporting in 1994 than in 1992. Thus, while our calculation of the VEP for any one election is susceptible to errors in the CPS survey methodology, we are confident that the overall pattern of the trends in noncitizens we discuss is correct.

Ineligible Felons

Depending upon state law, felons may not vote if in prison, on probation, or on parole, and they may even be permanently disfranchised.14 Four states, Maine, Massachusetts, Utah, and Vermont (now three, following the 2000 adoption of a restrictive constitutional amendment in Massachusetts), did not disfranchise even prisoners during the period of study. The first three categories of disfranchised felons (in prison, on parole, or on probation) are compiled for 1986–96 from the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, annual Correctional Populations of the United States.15 Nearly all prisoners and parolees and half of all probationers have been convicted of a felony (U.S. Depart-

15 Footnotes in Correctional Populations detail that state agencies report their information with varying levels of accuracy, particularly the number of felons on parole and probation. States that do not report these data 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. These five states (Alaska, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, and Rhode Island), plus the District of Columbia, tend to have small prison populations.
16 No breakdown of federal prisoners among the states is available. We divide federal prisoners among states by assuming that states have the same share of federal prisoners that they have of state prisoners.
17 In 1994, about 30,000, or 1.2%, of the felony prisoners were identified as noncitizens (U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1996).
18 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 this imputation method is sound.
19 A small number of permanently disfranchised felons have been granted the right to vote through pardons.

Eligible Overseas Voters

Eligible voters living overseas are comprised of military personnel and their dependents, nonmilitary government
personnel, and nongovernment civilians. Our primary sources for these figures are the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* and the Census. Because the *Statistical Abstract* does not regularly report the total overseas population, let alone its age distribution, we must turn to other sources and make a number of assumptions. We supplement the *Statistical Abstract* and the Census with Department of Defense records, various Office of Personnel Management reports, and estimates provided by the U.S. Consular Services of the total number of civilians abroad (which includes those working for private companies).

The estimation procedures differ for the periods 1948–66, 1968–82, 1984–92, and 1994–96 because of changes in reporting. For some time periods there are separate numbers for military dependents, nongovernment personnel, and "other civilians," while for other years all nonmilitary categories are combined. For all years, we have accurate numbers on overseas military personnel, available on-line from the Department of Defense web site. The post-Vietnam high was 609,000 overseas personnel in 1988, while today there are 240,000. We assume the age distribution of soldiers overseas is the same as the domestic population. We must use different techniques, however, for the number of overseas civilians.

**1948–66.** To arrive at the number of eligible voters living overseas from 1948 to 1966, we estimate the nonmilitary number for the three years for which we have data: 1950, 1960, and 1968. We then interpolate that number for the years with missing data and add the number of eligible military personnel overseas (these data are available throughout the series). The 1950 Census reports the number of military personnel and their dependents living overseas. We do not know the age distribution of these groups, so we assume the relative proportions younger and older than 21 are the same as in the domestic population and that military personnel are at least 18 years old. We use the P-25 series report, which summarizes yearly estimates of the age distribution of the domestic population, to adjust the overseas population by removing the estimated number of persons under age 21.

The 1960 Census reports similar data and an 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 age 21.

**1968–82.** 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." Data are missing for some election years, so we use the closest year to fill in. 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 civilian population, then use Department of Defense statistics to add the military personnel. For all adjustments, after 1971 we only remove an estimate of the number of persons under age 18.

**1984–92.** From 1984 to 1992, the *Statistical Abstract* reports Department of State statistics on the number of nonmilitary persons who would need to be evacuated in the event of a crisis. We use this as the total of overseas civilians. Again, we make the same assumptions and adjustments for the age distribution of this group as before, and we use similar military statistics. We deflate these figures by an estimate of the number of persons under age 18.

**1994–98.** We estimate the number of eligible voters overseas for 1994 and 1996 using unpublished reports of the overseas civilian population provided by the U.S. Consular Service. We again deflate this number by the proportion of the domestic population under age 18. We then add the number of military personnel abroad, provided by the Department of Defense, and the number of nonmilitary government personnel, from Office of Personnel Management reports (we assume these employees are at least 18 years old) to arrive at an estimate of the eligible voters overseas.

**2000.** For 2000 we used the 1998 proportion of overseas citizens multiplied by the 2000 voting age population since the 2000 numbers were not available as of this writing.

The number of military and nonmilitary government employees living abroad is likely to be accurate, since these data are compiled and reported by the government. The estimates of civilians abroad is based on reports by consulates, which vary in the accuracy of their reporting. The total number of overseas civilians reported in 1998 was 3.1 million, a high since World War II. Footnotes that accompany data originating from the U.S. Consular Service (for 1968–81 in the 1984 *Statistical Abstract*, and unpublished data from 1987 through the present provided by the Consular Service) warn that the civilian population overseas is almost certainly underestimated. A similar warning accompanies the 1960 Census, which stresses that participation in counting was voluntary. We are highly confident of the overseas military and government employee figures, but we are less confident about our estimates of overseas civilians.

### Persons Age 18–20

In order to control for the effect of the 26th Amendment, we calculate a turnout rate for persons at least 21 years old. From the CPS we calculate the proportion of voters age 18–20 and the proportion age 21 and older. We use this latter figure and the total 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 VEP. We similarly remove estimates of persons in that age group among felons and the overseas population, where appropriate, in order to avoid double counting. We then calculate a new turnout rate using the adjusted numerator and denominator.

### Regional Analysis

In order to control for the effect of the civil rights movement on voter participation in the South, we estimate turnout rates for both southern and nonsouthern states. We have turnout statistics and VAP estimates for all states. We 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 exploited the large regional


21 For 1948, we use our estimate of the 1950 number of overseas civilians.

22 Based on information provided to us by the U.S. Department of State, consulates that serve a smaller number of people are less likely to report data, and this bias increases backward in time.
REFERENCES


