

# Every Eligible Voter Counts: Correctly Measuring American Turnout Rates

Dr. Michael P. McDonald

*Dr. Michael P. McDonald is a Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Institution and an Assistant Professor at George Mason University. He studies American voting behavior and the electoral system.*

*Phone: (202) 797-6247*

*E-mail: mmcdonald@brookings.edu*

All signs point to 2004 as a vintage year for democracy in the United States. Interest in the campaign and candidates is up. More people are following the election. People see distinct differences between the candidates on the issues. The election is perceived to be close, not only nationally, but also in a greater number of battleground states than in 2000. Many people have already committed to voting, and absentee ballot applications are running at record levels.

This year will undoubtedly set a record for the total number of Americans who vote. If the 2004 turnout rate matches the 1992 turnout rate, as many polling organizations predict when they define “likely voters,” then approximately 122 million Americans will vote, an 17 million increase from the record 2000 presidential turnout of 105 million.

When measured correctly, voter turnout is not declining, as many people believe. This misunderstanding arises because the population ineligible to vote is increasing. Remarkably, the ineligible population commonly is included in the calculation of voter turnout rates, which creates false impressions about historical trends and inaccurate comparisons among the states.

Looking back at turnout rates post-World War II, we can understand why observers have wrongly concluded that American voters are becoming more apathetic. If we calculate turnout rates for everyone of voting age in the United States, there is an unmistakable downward trend since the 1960s, interrupted only occasionally. If we instead base the rates on those eligible to vote, no decline is apparent since 1972. As I will explain, the way in which the turnout rate is calculated can have a substantial impact on our understanding of Americans’ level of electoral participation.

Ideally, we would calculate the turnout rate as:

$$\text{Turnout Rate} = \frac{\text{Total Ballots Cast}}{\text{Number of Eligible Voters}}$$

But, due to the convenience of readily available numbers, the turnout rate is most often calculated as:

$$\text{Turnout Rate} = \frac{\text{Total Votes for President}}{\text{Total Number of Persons Age 18 and Older Residing in the United States}}$$

To correctly understand participation in American elections, we need to examine closely the underlying numbers in the denominator and numerator of the voter turnout rate. Several important demographic trends lurk in these data and have relevance beyond getting the turnout rate right.

## **The Denominator**

Let's start with the denominator in the ideal turnout rate equation: those eligible to vote.

Until recently, the Census Bureau calculated turnout rates based on what is known as the "voting-age population," defined as an estimate of the domestic United States population age 18 and older. Many organizations and individuals continue to use this figure in place of a calculation of those eligible to vote, even though the Census Bureau instead uses citizen-voting-age population in its most recent reports.

As the Census Bureau is careful to state, the voting-age population (VAP) is not equivalent to the voting-eligible population (VEP). The VAP includes persons ineligible to vote: persons residing in the United States who are not citizens, ineligible felons (depending upon state laws), persons who do not satisfy residency requirements, and the mentally incompetent. It also excludes persons who are eligible to vote, namely eligible voters living overseas. Remarkably, in 2004 an estimated 9.3% of the voting-age population is ineligible to vote.

### **Non-citizens**

The increase in the non-citizen population accounts for much of the misperception of American voter turnout trends. In 1972, non-citizens constituted only about 1.5% of the VAP, yet their numbers have been steadily increasing. Today, non-citizens are estimated to be 7.9% of the voting-age population, thus constituting the largest portion of those ineligible to vote.

Although one might incorrectly infer that these non-citizen immigrants are here illegally, the majority are legal residents. The Department of Homeland Security reports that as of 2000, legal permanent residents constituted 10.8 million and unauthorized immigrants 7.0 million of the total estimated 17.8 million non-citizens in the country.

### **Felony Disfranchisement**

The voting rights of felons depend on state law. Forty-eight states (plus the District of Columbia) bar felony prisoners from voting, thirty-two states bar those on parole, and twenty-nine bar those on probation. Examining Department of Justice reports on the number of felons located in these states and in the federal prisons suggests that about 3.2 million persons cannot vote because of their felony status. The number of ineligible felons has trended upwards since the early 1980s when prison populations began expanding.

The estimate of felony disfranchisement does not include figures for the fourteen states that restrict ex-felon voting rights to some degree, though since 2000, five states have modified their laws to make it easier for ex-felons to vote. The statistics necessary to construct such an estimate with a high degree of accuracy are unavailable: recidivism, migration, and mortality rates of ex-felons. One estimate, compiled by the Sentencing Project, finds that 1.7 million ex-felons were unable to vote in the 2000 presidential election.

Felony disfranchisement is not racially neutral, as African-American and Hispanic men, groups with larger percentages of felons than the national average, are more likely to be barred from voting than are whites or women. The Sentencing Report finds that 1.4 million black males (13%) are ineligible. In the states that permanently bar felons from voting, 25% are ineligible.

### **Recent Movers**

State law on residency requirements varies from state to state. Some states have an explicit requirement that an individual has maintained residency for a given period, while others are implicitly set with the registration deadline. Thirty-three states have a 28-day or more effective residency requirement.

Statistics on the number of people who have moved following a state's residency deadline is unknown. According to the 2000 census, 8.4% of all persons moved to another state within the past 5 years. If we evenly distribute these individuals by month, then 0.1% of all persons moved to a different state in the month prior to a presidential election, which equates into about 300,000 persons of voting-age.

Unfortunately, we do not know how these persons are distributed among the states with varying residency requirements, so an adjustment to the VAP for movers cannot be made. The impact of moving on voter turnout is probably more pronounced than simple eligibility since persons who are most likely to vote are those who are connected to their community. Recent movers, until they feel a part of their community, do not vote at as high rates as long-time residents.

### **The Mentally Incompetent**

Persons who are found mentally incompetent by a court of law are barred from voting in all states. No good statistics exist for the number of persons who are legally considered mentally incompetent. The number of occupied beds in high-level nursing homes, in which the mentally incompetent often receive care, is about 250,000 according to a recent National Institute of Health Statistics survey.

### **Overseas Citizens**

Overseas citizens consist of private citizens living or traveling abroad; military persons and their dependents; and other government officials, such as those working for the State Department, and their dependents. Surprisingly, the Census Bureau reports that there is no reliable estimate of the number of overseas citizens. Moreover, the statistics that are available do not indicate how overseas citizens are apportioned to the states. The number

of voting-eligible overseas citizens can be crudely estimated at 3.2 million, based on military deployment reports, State Department personnel reports, and reports of private citizens living overseas.

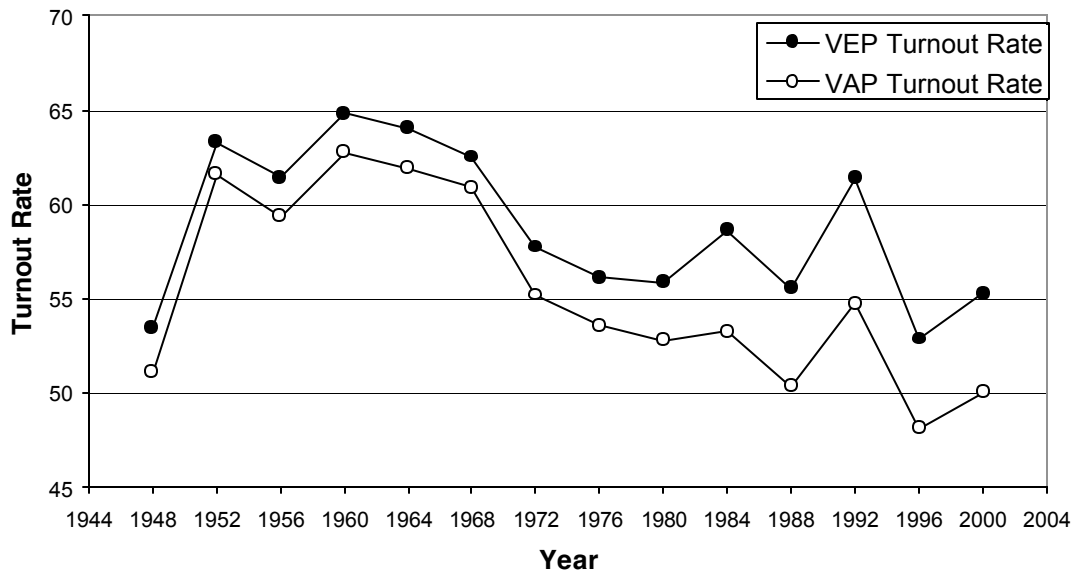
## The Numerator

The number of people who voted in an election should be simple to measure. After all, we have to know the election results in order to declare a winner. Yet there are voters who cast a ballot but inadvertently did not record a vote for president or purposely skipped the presidential choice to vote for a different race on the ballot. Did these people vote?

Perhaps we should calculate turnout rates for all those who cast a ballot, but remarkably we do not know how many people actually cast a ballot in a national election. Most states report the total number of ballots cast, but some do not. Instead of using total ballots cast, those who study participation rely on the number of presidential election votes to gauge participation.

We can estimate the total number of ballots cast by using those states that report the number and inflating the presidential vote for those states that do not. Using this method, the total number of ballots cast is about 2.1% greater than the number of people who voted for president. The result is that we can show participation is even slightly higher than is widely believed.

## Correctly Measuring Turnout Rates



**Turnout Rates in Presidential Elections, 1948-2000**

There has been an increasing gap between VAP turnout rates for presidential voters and VEP turnout rates for total ballots cast as a consequence of an increase in immigration,

larger prison populations, and a slight decrease in overseas citizens when troops returned to the United States at the end of the Cold War. Thirty years ago, it mattered only slightly which statistics one used. But in 2000, there was a 5.3 percentage point difference between the two turnout rates.

Using the wrong statistics also creates misperceptions about differences in turnout rates between the states. For example, California has the nation's largest non-citizen population. The 2000 turnout rate (based on voting-age population) was 44.1%, well below the national rate of 50.0%. In contrast, when using data on those eligible to vote and those who cast a ballot, California's turnout rate is 56.6%, higher than the national rate of 55.3%. If we were to use the wrong numbers, we might conclude California's turnout was in crisis, when in fact participation in California is slightly higher than in other states. As it turns out, much of the previously perceived variation in state turnout rates can be attributed to the presence of ineligible voters.

If we drew a trend line for participation in American elections using the VAP turnout rate, we would come to the sad conclusion that in 240 years, no one would vote. Those concerned about turnout declines equate voting with other civic engagement activities and ominously warn that American democracy is teetering on the brink. Many well-intentioned people promote various cures for a system they believe is on life support.

The good news is that things are not as bad as they are made out to be, and perhaps people are looking for a cure to a non-existent problem. A trend line drawn from 1972-2000 shows no decline in turnout rates. Sure, American participation could be higher, but it is not in the midst of a deepening crisis. And as recently as 1992, participation broke 60% of those eligible to vote, equaling participation during the 1950s and 1960s.

When academic polls and national and state elections are examined, it is clear that voter interest is the most important factor for higher voter turnout. We need more competition and more exciting elections to entice voters to the polls. Regrettably, we have an Electoral College that reduces competition to a few battleground states. Only ten percent of congressional districts are up for grabs due to gerrymandering. Reforming our antiquated electoral system to inject competition may have a greater impact on increasing participation than any initiative aimed directly at urging voters to the polls.

*For more information and statistics, see [http://elections.gmu.edu/voter\\_turnout.htm](http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm).*