

Revisiting the Profile of the American Voter in the Context of Declining Turnout

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Abstract

The phenomenon of declining voter turnout in U.S. national elections has been one of the major perplexing issues that political scientists have attempted to explain in recent decades. Today we are face to face with a participation rate that has fallen nearly one-quarter of its initial value since 1960.

My article has aimed at redrawing the profile of the American voter in the second half of the 20th century. Reliable data for the period of 40 years presented a valuable opportunity to add to the picture of the turnout phenomenon in the tradition of a behavioral approach. In the first part of this work I have tested the notion that the overall level of life satisfaction affects the individual's decision whether or not to participate in elections. Known to be directly related to the well-being of its citizens, the economic performance of the entire state was another criterion to be tested as to its effect on the voter turnout over last 40 years. Hence, in this section, I have checked for the impact of macroeconomic indicators such as the minimum wage, unemployment, and inflation rates, as well as the announced percentage of the population temporarily receiving financial assistance from the government. Next, I referred to societal factors and analyzed whether the sense of insecurity or the level of crime has discouraged people to vote. Finally, concerning institutional factors, I measured the changes in the overall turnout since 1960, controlling for an increased population due to foreign-born immigrants.

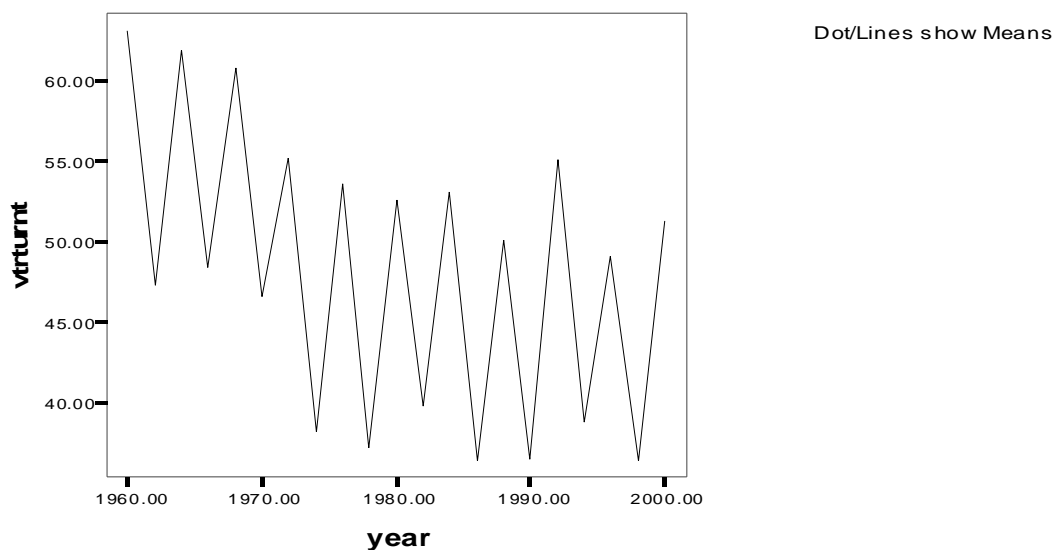
Test results support the general wisdom about political participation in the period in question and lead us to look for causes in the traditional literature, particularly in partisanship ties, schemas, and candidate evaluations. The life-satisfaction of people and the origins of the 'added' population were shown to have had no real effect on turnout. 'Economic variables' failed to explain the phenomenon as well. Crime rates and the assistance for needy families, however found some empirical support. People become more dissociable as they get frightened; thus they participate less. The repercussions of tax payers, however, were dominant in government policies regarding assistance for

needy families. As the number of people receiving government assistance increased, turnout tended to decline.

After having discussed the above factors, I redraw the profile of the “American Voter” and argue whether or not it fits the classic view. Based on the outcomes of this analysis, my estimation of the future of voter turnout concludes this study.

Introduction

The phenomenon of declining voter turnout in U.S. national elections has been one of the major perplexing issues that political scientists have attempted to explain in recent decades. Today we are face to face with a participation rate that has fallen nearly one-quarter of its initial value since 1960: “Turnout in U.S. elections – never as high as that in most other established democracies – has declined significantly since 1960” (Niemi and Weisberg, 33). Thus according to Federal Election Commission data, while almost 64% of the voting-age population did vote for a Presidential candidate in 1960, only about one-half of the eligible population participated in 2000. Similarly in non-presidential elections, a turnout rate of nearly 48% in 1962 by 2002 had declined to 37%. The main factors that most political scientists expect to have a significant effect on the political involvement of the population have dramatically increased in the second half of last century, including the education level of population, political participation of African-Americans, and women.



Political scientists have suggested several ways to understand this growing trend. In their book *Controversies in Political Behavior*, R.G. Niemi and H.F. Weisberg describe possible

reasons for the low political participation under three major categories: the individual, societal, and institutional. By starting from this framework, my work here aims at analyzing a number of variables which might have a significant impact on turnout under each category, and thus, I hope offer a fuller portrait of the American voter in the second half of the 20th century. In the first part of this work, after giving a short description of the voter acting primarily with respect to individual factors, I will test the notion that the overall level of life satisfaction affects the individual's decision whether or not to participate in elections.

Known to be directly related to the well-being of its citizens, the economic performance of the entire state is another criterion to be tested as to its effect on the voter turnout over last 40 years. Hence, in this section, I will check for the impact of macroeconomic indicators such as the minimum wage, unemployment, and inflation rates, as well as the announced percentage of the population temporarily receiving financial assistance from the government. Next, I refer to societal factors and analyze whether the sense of insecurity or the level of crime has discouraged people to vote. Finally, concerning institutional factors, I measure the changes in the overall turnout since 1960, controlling for an increased population due to foreign-born immigrants. According to the data of Census Bureau, in the year 2000, over 10% of the population consisted of people born outside of the United States. Among them, over 10 million people achieved the status of citizen along with the right to vote. After having discussed the above factors, I redraw the profile of the "American Voter" and argue whether or not it fits the classic view. Based on the outcomes of this analysis, my estimation of the future of voter turnout will conclude this study.

Importance of the Issue to Political Science

Despite the controversy surrounding attempts to evaluate the topic, we still should admit that political participation is an important characteristic of democracy as a channel through which people can express their will by attempting to "influence the structure of the government, the selection of government officials, and the policies of government" (Conway, 3). By electing its leaders, people legitimize their authority and obtain a peaceful gateway to solving the disputes within their communities. "Widespread participation is considered by many to be vital to the survival of democracy" (Niemi and Weisberg, 17). The classical view assumes that citizens are actively involved in politics and assumes them to be knowledgeable about the healthy functioning of the liberal society. Yet with such a view, we cannot claim that we have fully understood the mechanics of political participation and elections as a whole. For

instance, it is still not clear why some people vote while others do not. This remains a profound problem for political understandings, not only of democracy, but also of U.S. voters.

My work therefore attempts to make a contribution to our knowledge about arguably one of the major issues, which has left its mark upon the second half of the 20th century – declining voter turnout. Surveys and experiments, as well as newly developed statistical tools, are essential to the understanding of the political behavior in the period we are going to discuss. The National Election Survey has served as a basic source for hundreds of works since 1952. Today, analyzing public opinion in the tradition of a behavioral approach remains the main method of explaining voter behavior. In my work, I rely on survey data, which has explored people's level of life satisfaction. Do people tend to more vote as they feel happier, or is there a negative relationship? Because the United States is a country with a relatively high level of reported life gratification, the results could serve as model for other liberal democracies with similar political cultures. The other important variables here are macroeconomic indicators: unemployment, minimum wage, and inflation rates. Paul R. Brewer, in his article, "Are presidential elections 'All about the Benjamins'?" points out the importance of the economic performance of the state on people's decisions about which leader to vote for. My analysis makes it clear that economic conditions are crucial to the decision of people to vote in all national elections, rather than simply determining the preference for a candidate in a presidential race. The effect of the level of crime as a social concern, the proportion of nationalized citizens who relatively recently achieved their right to vote, together with above factors, will help to revise the portrait of the American voter, thus, enlarging our understanding of voter behavior, the nature of elections, and the problem of low voter turnout.

The Hypothesis

This research aims to examine the separate effects of seven variables on national voter turnout in the period between 1960 and 2000. These are: Coefficient of Happiness, Federal Minimum Wage Rate, Rate of Inflation, Overall Unemployment Rate in the Civilian Labor Force, Percentage of U.S. Population which receives Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, United States Crime Rate, and the Percentage of Foreign-born Population. I expect these variables to have a strong relationship to the level of voter turnout in the questioned period. Thus, I state my Research Hypothesis (H₁) as the following: the mentioned variables¹ have significantly affected voter turnout in the National Elections between 1960 and 2000, and

therefore are responsible for its decline. Consequently, the Null Hypothesis (Ho) to be tested is that there is no relationship between the variables¹ and voter turnout.

Methodology

With respect to the traditional behavioral approach, my research depends on empirical analysis. The historical analysis relies on yearly collected data between 1960 and 2000. While part of my data relies on survey research, most of the analysis is based on aggregate economic data combined with aggregate election data. In this way, I make no claims that all variables perfectly represent the true population and rely on the data source authorities. The extended time-series design applied to the study allows for research in natural, real-life settings. Being dependent on such statistical analysis techniques, the complete procedure is demonstrated in some detail below:

$$Y = a + \beta_k X_k$$

Where,

Y stands for National Voter Turnout

X for appropriate variable in each equation (Happiness, Unemployment, Inflation, Wage, Assistance, Crime, Foreign-born population, Naturalized citizens)

I imply a one-year lag to the macroeconomic variables because of their delayed affect on citizen decision-making. The fact that elections are held once every two years strengthens the importance of the economic indicators of the former year.

The Data

The data for my study relies exclusively on primary sources. National voter turnout, a dependent variable, is drawn from Congressional Research Service reports, Election Data Services Inc., and State Election Offices. As to independent variables, the happiness index is drawn from the *World Database of Happiness*. The U.S. Department of Labor and the Bureau of Labor Statistics are the sources used for an unemployment index between 1960 and 2000. The source for nominal and real minimum wage rates is the U.S. Department of Labor. HHS Administration for Children and Families provided additional data with respect to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. The Disaster Center contributed data for U.S. crime rates. Finally, data on foreign-born and naturalized populations were drawn from the Census Bureau Reports.

Literature and the Research

According to the notion of man as the *Homo economicus*, every individual action should start with a scrupulous cost-benefit analysis. In other words, one should act only if the benefits from participation exceed the costs. This popular approach among economists has found its use in the field of Political Science by way of Anthony Downs. In his book *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957), Downs introduced the idea of a model for the application of economic theory to non-market, political decision-making process. Rationality, as a political behavior, has been developed further by Gordon Tullock (1967), and William Riker and Peter Ordeshook (1968). Tullock concludes that it can be considered as “rational” to be relatively ignorant, and Riker and Ordeshook state that the “behavior of most people can be described by a theory of rational decision making” (Riker and Ordeshook, 1968. p.38). What makes the rational voter model different from its basic economic form is the letter D in $(PB + D > C)$ which stands for the goodwill feeling or satisfaction. Obviously, here the impact of D on turnout is positive. The higher the satisfaction people get from political participation, the more likely they are to vote. However, it is difficult to relate the satisfaction received from voting directly to a comprehensive concept of *happiness*, which represents the relation which I am going to test with respect to overall voter turnout.

One other factor known to have an individual effect on turnout is the question of partisanship. Because of its direct correlation to political involvement, strong partisanship is associated with high voter turnout. In their book *The American Voter*, Campbell and his colleagues, relying on survey data, conclude that partisanship is the major agent in political decision-making, and that those who are least interested in politics are mainly independents. Ruy Teixeira (1987) refers to the problem of declining turnout before by pointing out that 62% of the total turnout decline between 1960 and 1984 was due to declines in partisanship, efficacy, and an increasing reliance on newspapers for election information. Similarly, Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) conclude that a weakened attachment to political parties and their candidates explains 11% of the total decline.

Despite the significance of partisanship, it is not merely the attachment to political parties that has determined the decision of the voter in the last half of the century. According to Verba and his colleagues (1995), political interest, political information, and political efficacy remain important in addition to partisan strength. Thus, there is a higher political interest associated with more engagement in politics (the concept of interest is to be considered more widely within a societal factors framework). In their other work, developing a *Resource Model of Political Participation* (1995), they point to the effects of time, money,

and civic skills on voter turnout. Family, income that is directly related to the economic variables I am going to test, as well as educational impact, surprisingly stood only for 1.5% of the voter turnout explanation.

It is rather interesting to evaluate the educational impact separately. Individual education level has dramatically increased in the period in question. However, civic engagement did not, despite its positive correlation. While others rushed to deny the effect and instead saw other social changes as primary reasons, Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry explain this apparent discrepancy by introducing the notion of relative education. The overall increase in the level of education concluded in a zero-sum effect. Simply put, the high school degree has had the same effect in past as a college diploma does today.

Scholars of Political Science have also attached importance to the cohort effect. Thus the younger electorate, according to authorities, has shown itself to be more apolitical. Studying demographics of the voter turnout on the Presidential elections of 1972, Wolfinger and Rosenstone found the young generation to have lower participation rates than the older one. Therefore, the 26th Amendment of 1969, which lowered the voting age, played a crucial role in overall decline of turnout.

Having discussed the major characteristics of an individual voter, which determine his political decision-making, I now switch to an analysis specified to the topic variables.

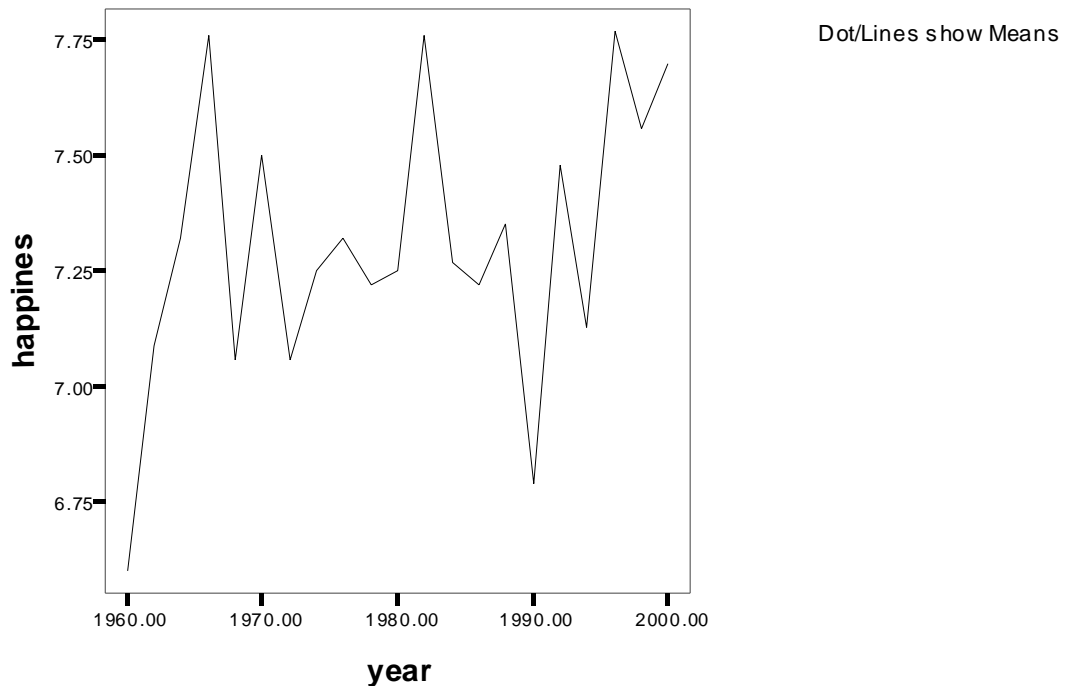
Happiness

While studying comprehensive concepts such as happiness, it is rather important to start with a definition. Happiness, in its broad meaning, is defined as an emotional or affective state of being that is characterized by feelings of enjoyment and satisfaction. More particularly, in my research, happiness stands for the overall subjective appreciation of life-satisfaction as measured by the World Values Survey. To determine the level of satisfaction, responses to the following question "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?" are scaled between 0 and 10.

Despite its wide use in economic theory, the concept of happiness has not yet become prevalent in political science. Bazargan and his colleagues were among the first in their article of 1991 to have examined the impact of physical and psychological conditions on voter turnout among elderly African Americans and Caucasians. As for them, those who consider themselves liberal tend to vote more, thus increasing the turnout. Sandell and Plutzer (2005) investigate the impact of peace in the family on voter turnout. They found that the effect of

divorce among white families depresses turnout by nearly 10 percentage points. However, that of course accounts only for a single aspect of happiness.

The dispersion of the happiness index since 1960s has been as follows:



Starting from its lowest level of 6.60 on the 10-point scale, it raised dramatically to 7.76 in 1966. Despite the latter fluctuation, the country as a whole ended up with the rising trend in the last decade of the 20th century, settling among highly-ranked countries like Denmark, Switzerland, and Finland. Reasons for the abrupt decline and the trends upwards should be carefully analyzed in conjunction with specific, historical events. However, as far as it can be concluded from the graphs, happiness and voter turnout seem to be in inverse relation (weak but negative correlation: $R = -.169$). Does this mean that people become more indifferent to politics as they feel happier, or does it represent an affirmation of the current order?

There exists the view that periods of tensions are associated with higher political involvement. V.O. Key (1955) state that increased political interest and involvement can be observed in critical elections. Once a critical period passes, popular engagement returns to its normal levels. Looking at presidential elections only, we can notice support for the claim made above. The presidential elections of 1968 were made in the shadow of huge protests against the Vietnam War that did not stop until United States withdrew all its troops from the region. A major decline in the happiness index matches neatly the period between 1968 and

1972. One could expect therefore a perfect correlation between rising political involvement during tension period and voter turnout. However, according to Aldrich and Niemi, “there are many factors that affect turnout (e.g. strength of partisanship in the electorate, feeling of political efficacy or inefficacy, legal requirements for voting, etc)” (Niemi and Weisberg, 413).

ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	44.431	1	44.431	.561	.463(a)
	Residual	1505.876	19	79.257		
	Total	1550.307	20			

a Predictors: (Constant), HAPPINES

b Dependent Variable: VTRTURNT

According to the results of a regression analysis, the life-satisfaction index failed to explain the declining voter turnout phenomenon. The American voter makes his decision whether to vote or not regardless of his life satisfaction. The result confirms the outcome of the prevailing literature that indicates the reasons for an individual’s political decisions are hidden in more specific indicators. In addition to turnout, the happiness index is influenced by many circumstances. At the moment of the survey, which is actually based on a single question, individuals might have considered private family issues as well as any other factors which might not have any relation to political decisions. Thus, in this study I control the relation for one of the determinants of happiness, particularly the economic well-being of citizens. I suppose it is a more careful predictor of life-satisfaction, which is “felt” during the election period. The better the economic conditions, the higher the utility level that the potential voter enjoys. The definition of rational action implied the dominance of expected benefits over costs to the extent of a voter’s knowledge. This has pushed me towards to analyze the expectations as well as the past experience of a voter, which remain the foundation for those expectations.

Economic Voting

Similar to the stronger determinants of political behavior, such as partisanship or group attachment, the economic conditions of a state play an influential role in people's behavior prior to and during an election period. Prior to implies that "economic impact" can be so powerful that it can predetermine the outcome even before the election campaign begins: for example, "The idea that election outcomes are largely predetermined by the health of the economy has gained considerable currency in both the academic literature and pundits' analyses of elections" (Niemi and Weisberg, 184).

Kramer (1971) was one of the first to summarize certain analyses of the economic impact on the voter behavior, and he concludes of the main reasons for "fluctuations" in U.S. voter behavior in congressional elections between 1896 and 1964 that "a 10% decrease in per capita real personal income would cost the incumbent administration 4 or 5 percent of the congressional vote, other things being equal" (Kramer 1971, 141). Referring to unemployment and inflation rates, he claims that "with real income held constant, changes in unemployment or in the rate of inflation have no significant independent effects" (Kramer 1971, 141). My study aims to examine the impacts of exactly the same variables but in the latter period.

Subsequent studies have deepened the analysis and have explored the macroeconomic impacts on political behavior abroad as well as within the United States. Another dilemma arose among those who concentrated on the U.S.: that is, whether voters were forward looking or retrospective. Thus, while Helmut Norpoth (1996a, b) together with Nadeau and Lewis-Beck (2001), and Lacy and Grant (1999) championed the retrospective view; MacKuen (1992a, 1996) stood for the view that voters were forward looking.

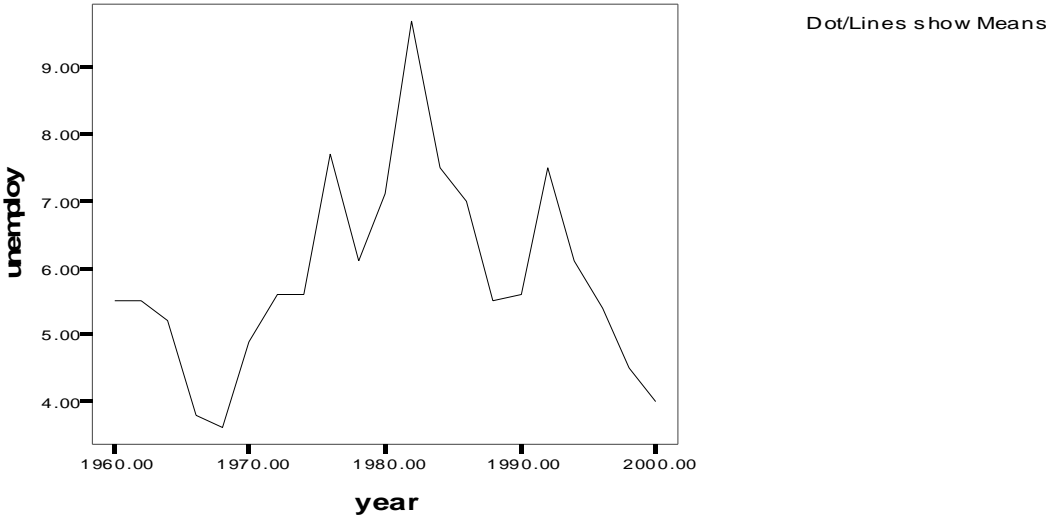
Helmut Norpoth, studying consumer surveys and presidential approval polls between 1960 and 1993, has found that "a president's performance in office is not a question about things to come but about things done" (Norpoth 1996a, 776). For him, Americans ignore predictions of future economic conditions; instead they evaluate its recent performance. Similarly, Nadeau and Lewis-Beck, assuming that economic performance of the state is under the responsibility of the presidential office, claim that citizens are retrospective in evaluating candidates, particularly with respect to an incumbent office. Therefore, thinking of the incumbent, "the voter's primary economic information source comes from the past" (Niemi and Weisberg, 217). Lacy and Grant (1999) touch upon more specific points, stating that in the case of bad economic conditions, retrospective incumbent partisans tend not to participate at all, thus declining the turnout. On the other hand, MacKuen and his colleagues advocate a

reverse telling that “the electorate anticipates the economic future and rewards or punishes the president for economic events before they happen.” (MacKuen et al. 1996a, 597). After being criticized for their statement, the authors published a comment that they lined up with the same idea supported by empirical analysis.

However, some scholars support both the retrospective view and the prospective. Exploring major Western Democracies, Lewis-Beck finds that both retrospective and prospective evaluations of economic policies are significant to a voter’s behavior, especially in Europe. Mainly relying on the analysis of MacKuen and his partners’ work of 1992, Clarke and Stewart conclude the same “retrospections as well as propections are influential” (Clarke and Stewart, 1994, p.1104).

All in all, it seems clear that in human political thinking, economics definitely matters. However, the studies discussed above, except for Lacy and Grant (1999), have mainly analyzed a person’s decision about voting, whether on presidential or congressional elections, whereas my research questions the definition of the economic impact on a citizens’ decision whether to vote or not to vote at all, ththereby diagnosing the reasons for a declining voter turnout.

Unemployment



Unemployment rates in the United States since 1960 have not been stable. Having started at relatively low levels in 1960s, then peaking at 9.7% in 1982, the rate declined to the level of 4% in 2000. This declining trend since 1982 might have related to the general tendency of turnout in national elections, but such a view fails to explain all of the periods in question.

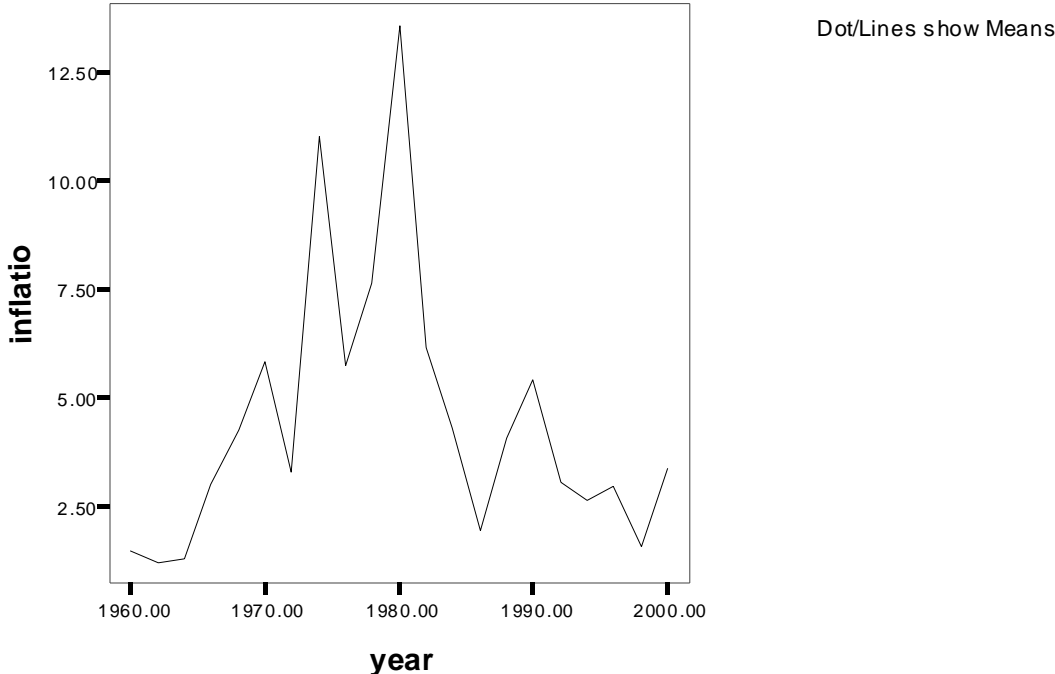
The regression results are far from being significant. The unemployment rate alone fails to explain even a 3% change in turnout. Retrospective analysis should reasonably recommend applying “the delay” effect. The model, including one-year lag, looks as follows:

Coefficients(a)

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	54.178	8.184		6.620	.000
	UNEMPL OY	-1.023	1.353	-.171	-.756	.459

a Dependent Variable: VVRTURNT

Inflation.

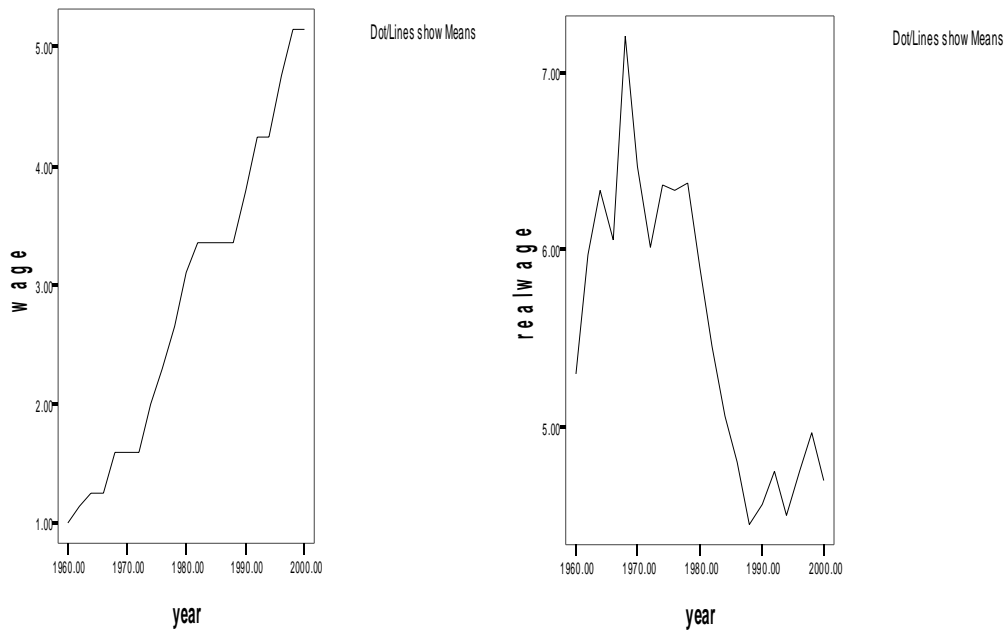


Another important macroeconomic index to be considered is inflation. Similar to unemployment, its pattern here is fairly out-of-balance. The rise of both during the 1970s

caused stagflation, and the energy crisis in the first half of the 1970s badly affected the Carter administration. If the course is considered fragmentary, the behavior of citizens in 1970s would perfectly fit the period of tensions when the political involvement of people increased. However, present research takes advantage of the macro-view, which covers an entire 40 year period. Empirical analysis, even with the delay effect of one year, shows that inflation analogous to unemployment could not explain the fall in national turnout. Only 4% of popular participation can therefore be explained in terms of inflation index. This is rather surprising because economic indexes did not do well so far. But the question remains: what about wages?

Wage

The variable of wage, in the context of this paper, is represented by Federal Minimum Wage Rates. By definition, minimum wage rate is the lowest hourly wage that employers may legally pay to employees. I use minimum wage in this analysis because of its contradictory interpretation. While many advocate its numerous benefits to society, there are numerous critics of it. Proponents of minimum wage believe that it enhances the average living standard, generates incentive to work, promotes consumption, improves the work ethic of those who earn very little, and can stimulate the economic efficiency in order to foster growth. Antagonists criticize such policies for its tendency to do the following: shorten the demand for workers, decrease profit margins of business owners, amplify the price for customers of those job providers who hire minimum wage workers, restrict the freedom of both employers and employees, cut back opportunities for low skilled workers, enhance the cost of government social programs, diminish human capital by instigating people to enter the job market instead of pushing further education, lower the international competitiveness of a country by raising the cost of factor inputs. Thus, due to minimum wage's strong association with the health of economy as a whole, I decided to measure its impact on the political affiliation of people, and therefore its impact on voter turnout.



The above figures indicate the Federal Minimum Wage rate in nominal (left) and real (right) terms. Despite its ascending trend in nominal terms, a tight economy and the stagflation of the 1970s dropped the real wage down to 4-5 dollars per hour (constant dollars, 1996). The outcomes of statistical analysis lead to an explicit interpretation. Nominal values are in a significantly negative relation to turnout ($R^2 = .22.5$). However, this is insignificant when controlled for the effect of inflation. It is natural for minimum wages to rise in countries with positive inflation. The criterion, which really lets citizens “feel” their economic condition, is the real wage. Unfortunately, like inflation and unemployment, real wage failed to explain the whole cycle. The statistical test provided the insignificant results: $F=1.793$ (sig. .196). So far, citizens seem to show no overt reaction to economic variables with respect to elections. There is one more indicator to be considered, which has a relationship with the health of economy.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

Residing between economic and societal factors, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families carries a dual meaning as an indicator. On the one hand, it is a significant factor for the people who directly receive the aid and then show their appreciation during elections. On the other hand, the rest of the population either positively or negatively evaluates the government’s policies about its distribution of tax monies. Despite its significant role as a driving argument in the election campaigns of popular candidates, such assistance has not been studied as a turnout determinant. Here, I use the term ‘assistance’ to represent the percent of the population receiving temporary assistance. In this sense, the period between 1960 and 2000 can be considered in three ways. The 1960s were the years of rapid

growth in terms of assistance. The following two decades were the most generous times of the government, when about 5% of population received steady aid. From the middle of 1990s, aid diminished, almost reaching its initial values (to decide whether this is a good or bad trend is for competent economists).

What matters here is its impact on overall voter turnout in national elections, particularly its effect on a citizen's decision whether or not to vote. Regression analysis offered the first significant result in this respect. Government policies about assistance to needy families matter in people's decision about whether or not to participate. About 20% of the dynamics in turnout can be explained by assistance; however this is not controlling for other variables. Having discussed above factors in context of individual factors I switch to the analysis of societal factors affecting political behavior of people.

Societal Factors

Continuing to speak about individual factors I have already mentioned the effect of cohort. Having considered the role of the 26th Amendment, I explained neither the nature of generational difference nor its reasons. Societal factors, which explain the major contrast among cohorts, are to be considered in this part of the study.

Miller and Shanks have written one of the most comprehensive works explaining voter trends. In their book, *The New American Voter* (1996), they put the clear distinction between generations into political perspective. Those whom they call the New Deal generation were always more politically active than those who followed them. According to Miller, while part of the generational turnout difference "can be attributed to generational differences in party identification and social connectedness, the larger portion of generational turnout differences cannot be directly explained with variables contained in the National Election Studies" (Miller, 1992). Along these lines, Robert Putnam comes up an analysis of the civic landscape. For him, the declining turnout is an outcome of a larger change in American society. Considering the example of bowling leagues, he expresses concerns about an American democracy that faces the problem of a decline in membership in social organizations. The author blames TV in part for a decline in social connectedness. In a similar way, Nie and Erbring have examined the growing impact of the Internet on society. They conclude that "the more time people spend using the internet, the more they lose contact with their social environment." (Nie and Erbring, 2000. p.6).

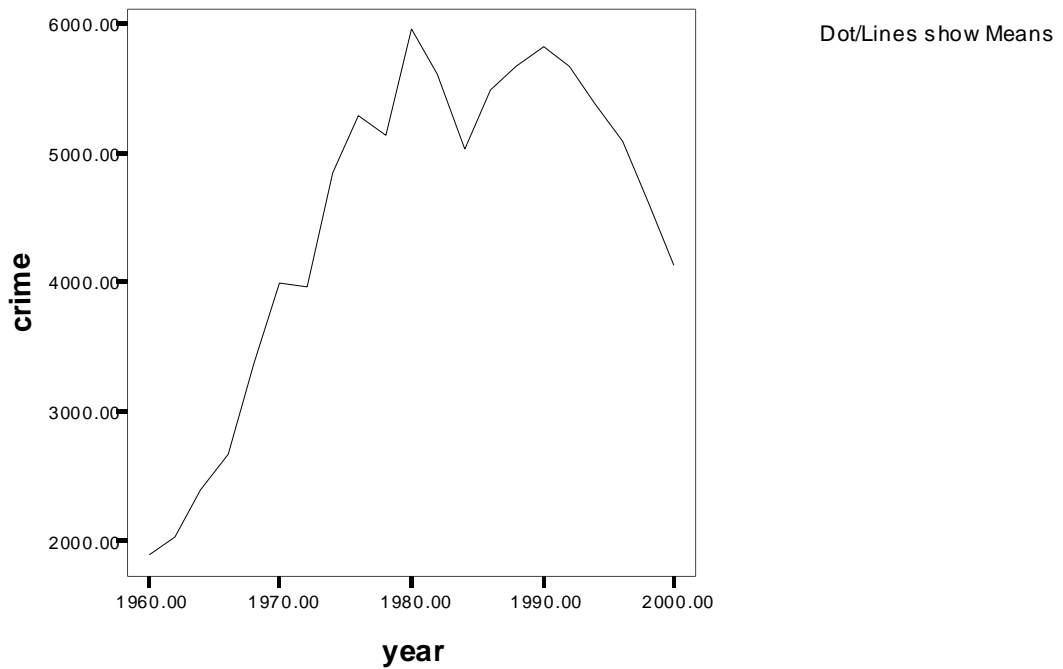
Brehm and Rahn discuss civic engagement and point to the issue of interpersonal trust. They claim that "an increase in the level of civic participation leads to an increase in positive beliefs about others, leading to greater participation." (Brehm and Rahn, 1997, p.1018). They touch on one other aspect, which directly relates to a variable I am going to test, crime, saying that "common experiences with crime, or simply the fear of walking at night near one's community, further undermine trust in others." (Brehm and Rahn, 1997. p.1018).

One other important book for looking at the declining turnout effect through a societal perspective is Dalton's *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (1996). Here Dalton considers the leading European democracies in parallel to the United States, and he concludes that turnout decline was the common experience almost everywhere, pointing to a change in society as a whole. Inglehart's thesis of a 'culture shift' supports Dalton's idea. For him, industrial democracies have undergone changes in their basic values. However, his view of civic engagement is different than that of Putnam. Inglehart suggests that as people get wealthier, they become less motivated by material goods, while their desire for personal relations and civic values rises.

Recently scholars have discovered another societal effect upon turnout – negative advertisement. Ansolabehere and Iyengar in their book *Going Negative: How Political Advertising Shrinks and Polarizes the Electorate*, stress negative advertising's unfavorable effect on turnout. They claim, "the tone of political campaigning contributes mightily to the public's dwindling participation and growing cynicism" (Ansolabehere and Iyengar. 1995. p.105). The findings of Kahn and Kenney support such a statement. For them, "when campaigns degenerate into unsubstantiated and shrill attacks, voters stand to stay home" (Kahn and Kenney. 1999. p.877). On the contrary, Lau, Sigelman, Heldman, and Babbitt (1999) are doubtful about its straightforward effect and argue that "the literature provides no significant support for the suppositions that negative political ads are especially disliked, are especially effective, or substantially undermine public support for and participation in the electoral process." (Lau, Sigelman, Heldman, and Babbitt. 1999. p.860).

Crime

Having discussed major trends known to have societal effect on voter turnout, I now turn to the crime factor raised by Brehm and Rahn (1997). Crime is strongly associated by citizens with a sense of fear about society that potentially compromises their sense of interpersonal reliance. According to scholars, crime tends to discourage civic engagement and finally affects participation negatively. In addition, statistical crime rates are affected by cultural changes and shifts in the political environment. My test will be to define its effect on political behavior during election periods. Do higher crime rates push people to express their reaction through ballots, showing their concern about environment, or does crime make its crucial impact on people by making them more cynical?



As seen in the above graph, crime has steadily increased until the last decade. Its fall in the 1990s was significant, but the rate finally ended up above the initial level. Statistical analysis supports the statements of Brehm and Rahn, which warned us about the negative effects of crime. For a period of forty years, the crime rate was shown to have had a significantly unfavorable effect upon political participation. With an overall significant F value for the equation, the crime rate alone succeeded to explain 26% of change in turnout. Other statistics are given below.

Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	63.525	6.203		10.240	.000
	CRIME	-.003	.001	-.508	-2.574	.019

a Dependent Variable: VTRTURNT

To conclude: as crime rates increase, citizens tend to become more asocial and participate even less in elections.

Institutional Factors

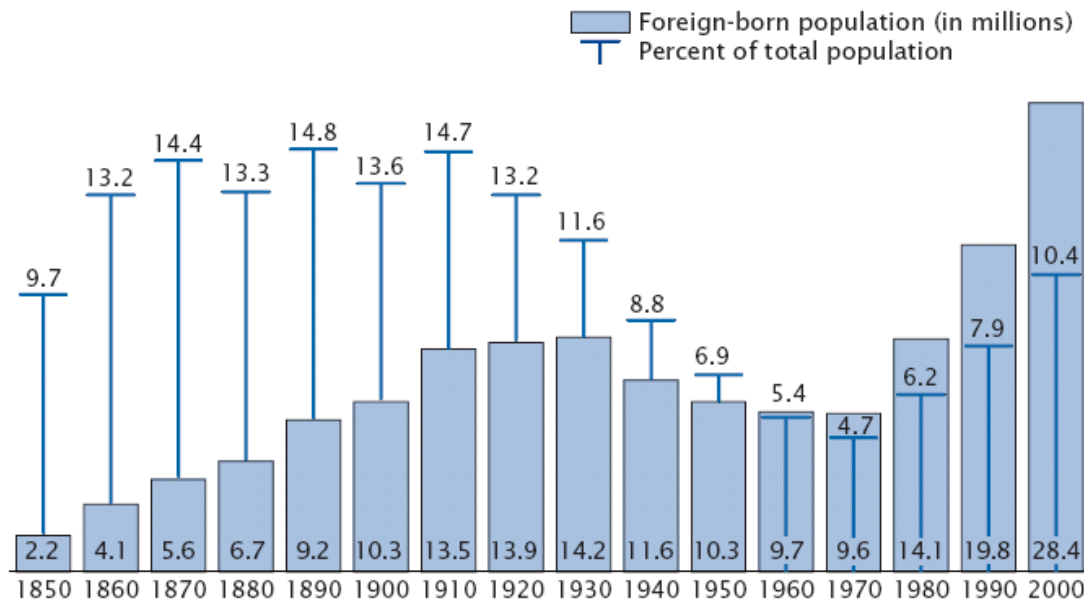
Rules and regulations related to political participation traditionally played an important role in determining the final turnout level in national elections. In the last two decades, scholars of political science have made claims about several institutional reasons for this low turnout. Thus, as early as 1980, Wolfinger and Rosenstone cited the issue of registration, mentioning the positive effect of liberalization of it. Powell in his article, "American Voter Turnout in Comparative Perspective," speaks of two key factors that played a significant role in defining the level of popular participation. These are party system and registration laws. He states that voter turnout is "disadvantaged 13% by the party system and institutional factors, and up to 14% by the registration laws." (Powell 1986. p.17). Several scholars have found supporting results to those of Powell. Mitchell and Wlezien, for example, agree with the idea that liberalization would increase turnout. However, they are suspicious about the predominance of this institutional effect: "Implications of liberalized voter registration laws on the composition of the electorate would be relatively minor." (Mitchell and Wlezien. 1995).

In response to this problem, a few new solutions have been brought forward. Among them, the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 has been put into practice. Known as 'motor voter,' this policy, according to Highton and Wolfinger, accounted for about 5% to 9% of turnout. Among other suggested factors were mail-voting, compulsory voting, and Sunday voting. Southwell and Burchett argue for the significance of all-mail voting saying that "all-mail format is a major stimulus to voter participation" (Southwell and Burchett. 2000).

The United States has different regulations across states. In this respect, North Dakota, Wisconsin, and Minnesota are concessive due to their original implementation. Wattenberg in his study sees decline there too. Thus, we must look for reasons for decline in the societal and individual factors.

Foreign-born and Naturalized Population

It is also interesting to consider the impact of population growth due to immigration. Accommodating itself to individual as well as societal and institutional factors, migration to the United States should have had significant impact on the formation of culture, particularly with respect to political behavior. McDonald and Popkin (1999) have addressed the issue before, claiming that turnout has not declined since the 1972 Presidential elections. The decline in the percentage of the population occurred because of the growing number of aliens who were ineligible to vote. Below are statistics reflecting the foreign-born population. According to the data of the Census Bureau, over 10% of the U.S. population was born abroad.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1999a, Table 1, and 2001, Table 1-1.

While admitting both the individual and societal impacts, I test the effects of the foreign-born and naturalized population on national voter turnout within an institutional framework. The term “foreign born” simply implies a person born outside of his country of residence. “Foreign borns” are often non-citizens, but are also frequently naturalized citizens of a country. Naturalization therefore implies an act whereby a person acquires a citizenship different from that person's citizenship at birth. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 provided the opportunity of naturalization for illegal aliens who had been in the country for at least four years. How has their presence then affected turnout? Thinking of popular political participation, can we question the correctness of those regulations which let foreigners achieve the status of citizens within 5 years?

Statistical outcomes state the following: neither the up-hilling proportion of the foreign-born population nor the ascending number of naturalized citizen explains the phenomenon of declining turnout. Their relation with respect to turnout failed to show significance. Does this mean that those people coming from different backgrounds had no effect? Hardly. It would be more accurate to say that they neatly dissolve into American society within time. If the first generation shows a significant difference, their children become much more adapted; and finally, the third generation has had almost no observable difference within natural population.

Conclusion

This paper has aimed at redrawing the profile of the American voter in the second half of the 20th century. Reliable data for the period of 40 years presented a valuable opportunity to add to the picture of the turnout phenomenon in the tradition of a behavioral approach. Test results support the general wisdom about political participation in the period in question. Some controversies, however, took place in the testing of economic variables. I offer two reasons. First, the macroeconomic conditions of a state are associated more with a presidential race than with congressional elections. However, my thesis was to test the decline of national turnout, which includes both presidential and congressional races. Secondly, previous research has shown economic factors to be determinants about how people vote as well as for whom they vote. My thesis implies a personal decision whether or not to vote. The life-satisfaction of people and the origins of the 'added' population were shown to have had no real effect on turnout as well. All the above leads us to look for causes in the traditional literature, particularly in partisanship ties, schemas, and candidate evaluations. Crime rates and the assistance for needy families, however found some empirical support. People become more dissociable as they get frightened; thus they participate less. The repercussions of tax payers, however, was dominant in government policies regarding assistance for needy families. As the number of people receiving government assistance increased, turnout tended to decline.

We have learned quite a bit about voting behavior in the U.S since the 1960s. However, we have also had to admit that the issue remains complex and full of controversies, so that it is still difficult to predict the future of voter turnout. Turnout remains low despite the increasing levels of education. And even so, the levels of knowledge continue to be very limited. The role of campaigns is also not clear, as many decide whether to or how precisely to vote before they even begin. Changes in party systems as well as instability in partisanship all make forecasting future turnout rates a somewhat dicey game.

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