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Statistical Brief

The Decline in American Voter Turnout

In an era when more and more people worldwide are gaining the right to vote, fewer Americans are taking advantage of their right to cast a ballot. In the November 1990 Congressional elections, 45 percent of persons 18 years old and over reported voting, down 1 percentage point from 4 years earlier. Though there have been fluctuations up and down, the percentage of those voting is now lower than it was 2 decades ago.

This Brief examines differences in voting patterns in the November 1990 elections based on various social and demographic characteristics. It also looks at the overall turnout since the 1960's in non-presidential election years. The data are gathered from supplements to the Current Population Survey (CPS) in November of each Congressional election year. Official returns are lower than estimates obtained in the CPS.

Likelihood of voting is higher with age.

The older one is, the more likely they are to vote. Sixty percent of persons age 65 and over and 56 percent of those age 45 to 64 reported voting in 1990. On the other hand, only 41 percent of those age 25 to 44 years and 20 percent of 18 to 24 year-olds reported voting.

As a result, age groups vote in numbers disproportionate to their size. For instance, 18 to 24 year-olds comprised 14 percent of the adult population in 1990 but only 6 percent of voters. On the other hand, the elderly, who made up 16 percent of the adult population, accounted for 22 percent of voters. Except for the elderly, who actually voted at higher rates in 1990 than in 1966, voting rates declined about 10 percentage points or more for all age groups during the period.

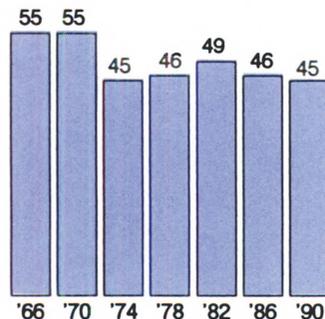
The ratification of the 26th Amendment in 1971, which lowered the voting age in all States to 18, plus the entrance of the "baby boom" generation into the voting-age population in the late 1960's, substantially raised the number of youthful persons eligible to vote—but this accounts for only part of the lowered overall voting rate.

Chances of voting increase with education.

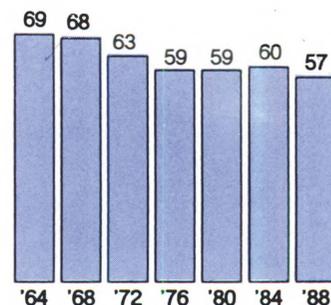
About 63 percent of persons with a college degree voted in 1990, compared to 42 percent with a high school diploma and 28 percent with 0 to 8 years of school completed. Although college graduates made up 20 percent of the adult population, they cast 27 percent of the votes. While those who attended at least some college voted at the same rate in 1990 as in 1986, reported voter turnout rates for other educational groups declined.

Long-Term Decline in Voting Continued in 1990
(Percent who reported voting)

Congressional elections
November 1966 - November 1990



Presidential elections
November 1964 - November 1988



Note: Since 1972, 18-20 year-olds in all States have been able to vote.



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Persons with higher incomes are more likely to vote.

The chances of voting increase with income level, from 31 percent for those earning under \$10,000 yearly to 59 percent for those who earned \$50,000 or more. Turnout rates between 1986 and 1990 increased slightly for those earning \$50,000 or more and those earning under \$5,000, but fell for those in between.

The Midwest leads the way.

The Midwest continued to have the highest voting rate in 1990—49 percent—followed by the West and the Northeast, each with 45 percent. The South had the lowest rate—42 percent. The only region to suffer a significant decline in turnout between 1986 and 1990 was the West, where turnout fell 3 percentage points.

Homeownership and length of residence make a big difference.

Those who have lived at their current address for 5 or more years were more likely to vote than those who have lived there for under a year (58 versus 22 percent). Also, homeowners were almost twice as likely as renters to vote (53 versus 27 percent in 1990).

Gap between Whites and Blacks closed.

Back in 1966, the voting gap between Whites and Blacks was 15 percentage points (57 versus 42 percent); by 1990, it had dropped to 8 points (47 versus 39 percent).

Between 1966 and 1990, turnout actually rose for Blacks age 45 years and over, from 45 to 50 percent. It also rose for Blacks in the South (from 33 to 40 percent), but fell from 52 to 38 percent for Blacks elsewhere. In 1990, turnout for Blacks in the South wasn't significantly different from turnout for Blacks outside the South.

The voting rate for persons of Hispanic origin, which stood as high as 25 percent in 1982, fell to

21 percent in 1990. The low turnout rate for Hispanics reflects, in part, the large proportion (38 percent) of noncitizens among them.

Most workers employed in the public sector vote.

Among those in nonagricultural industries, government workers were far more likely to go to the polls than wage and salary workers in the private sector: 63 versus 41 percent.

How did others stack up in 1990? Forty-five percent of workers in agricultural industries reported voting. Among self-employed nonagricultural workers, 52 percent reported voting. Of those who were not in the labor force (which includes many retired persons), 47 percent cast ballots. The unemployed went to the polls in lower proportions: 28 percent. Occupationally, those in managerial and professional positions had the highest turnout (60 percent); operatives, fabricators, and laborers had the lowest (31 percent).

More information:

Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1990,

Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 453. Also, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1988,* Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 440. Contact Customer Services at the Census Bureau for ordering information 301-763-4100.

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This Brief is one of a series that presents information of current policy interest. It may include data from businesses, households, or other sources. All statistics are subject to sampling variability as well as survey design flaws, respondent classification and reporting errors, and data processing mistakes. The Census Bureau has taken steps to minimize errors, and analytical statements have been tested and meet statistical standards. However, because of methodological differences, caution should be exercised when comparing these data with data from other sources. Reasons for the difference between the official returns and the CPS estimates, are explained in the above P-20 reports.

