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Charles E. Johnson, Jr.

Current Population Reports
Special Studies, Series P 23, No. 102

Issued April 1980



U.S. Department of Commerce

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Johnson, Charles Eyerdal, 1930-
Nonvoting Americans.

(Current population reports : Special studies :
P-23 ; no. 102)

"Issued May 1980."

Supt. of Docs. no.: C 3.186:P-23/102

1. Political participation—United States—History.
 2. Presidents—United States—Election—History.
- I. Title. II. Series: United States. Bureau of
the Census. Current population reports : Special
studies : Series P-23 ; no. 102.

HA203.A218 No. 102 [JK1764] 312'.0973s 80-607123
[323'.042'0973]

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing
Office, Washington, D.C. 20402; Postage stamps not acceptable; currency
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international money order or by a draft on a U.S. bank. Current Popu-
lation Reports are sold in two subscription packages: Series P-20, P-23,
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mailing); Series P-25, P-26, and P-28 are available for \$70.00 per year
(\$17.50 additional for foreign mailing). The single-copy price of this report
is ~~\$2.50~~ **2.50**

Preface

This report is another in the series of analytical reports prepared by demographers in the Population Division of the Bureau of the Census. These reports feature broad speculative analysis and illustrative hypotheses by the authors to aid in understanding the statistics and assessing their potential impact on public policy. The usual scope of these reports is broader than that of annual Census Bureau reports on population trends and characteristics.

The author wishes to express his appreciation to **Richard G. Smolka**, professor of political science at American University and editor of *Election Administration Reports*, and **Richard M. Scammon**, Director of the Elections Research Center, for providing data and assistance in the preparation of this report. Within the Population Division, valuable assistance was provided by **Gilbert R. Felton** in the preparation of the estimates of the population of voting age, by **Paul C. Glick** and **Meyer Zitter** in a critical review of this report, and by **Catherine A. Caruso** in the preparation of the manuscript.

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Nonvoting Americans

An apparent disenchantment with the political process has led to declining voter participation in recent Presidential elections. This report places these recent declines in historical perspective by examining voter participation in each of the Presidential elections from the founding of our Country to the present time. In addition, it presents demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of nonvoting Americans. An examination of the reasons why so many Americans do not vote is also presented, as well as descriptions and evaluations of some of the means that have been adopted or proposed to help increase voter participation.

Americans have never participated as actively and completely as they might have in Presidential elections. Nonvoting Americans constituted a *majority* in every election from 1789 to 1924, as more than one-half of the voting-age population did not vote.¹ From 1928 to 1976, nonvoters constituted a silent *plurality* in every election as the number who did not vote was greater than the number who voted for the winning candidate.

Because of historical variations in the population eligible to vote for President and the impossibility of preparing correct estimates of the population legally eligible to register and vote, it is customary to consider the percent of the population of voting age who voted as the standard for comparing voter turnout in Presidential elections. This standard has been used throughout this report.²

Voter turnout before 1920. In our Nation's earliest Presidential elections (from 1789 to 1824) the popular vote was not the primary determinate of election results.³ It was not until the 1828 election that the popular vote became the dominant factor in electing the President. In that election,

¹ Women could not vote in all States prior to 1920, so that it was not unexpected that the nonvoters would constitute the majority prior to that time.

² Approximations of voter turnout among the eligible population for the years from 1824 to 1968, prepared by Walter Dean Burnham, are included in the Census Bureau publication, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*.

³ The Constitution, in Article II, Section 1, provides for the election of the President of the United States through the establishment of an electoral college in each State for each Presidential election. In the elections from 1789 to 1824, one of the principal methods of determining electoral votes was the election of Presidential electors by the State legislatures themselves.

Andrew Jackson was elected President, but only 22 percent of the voting-age population voted (table A and figure 1). Jackson, an early advocate of democratic participation for the common man, was elected President by only 12 percent of the electorate (figure 2).⁴

Voter participation remained quite low throughout the rest of the 1800's, ranging from 21 percent when Andrew Jackson was reelected in 1832 to 37 percent when Rutherford B. Hayes was elected in 1876.

Table A. Voter Participation Rates Before Universal Suffrage: 1828 to 1916

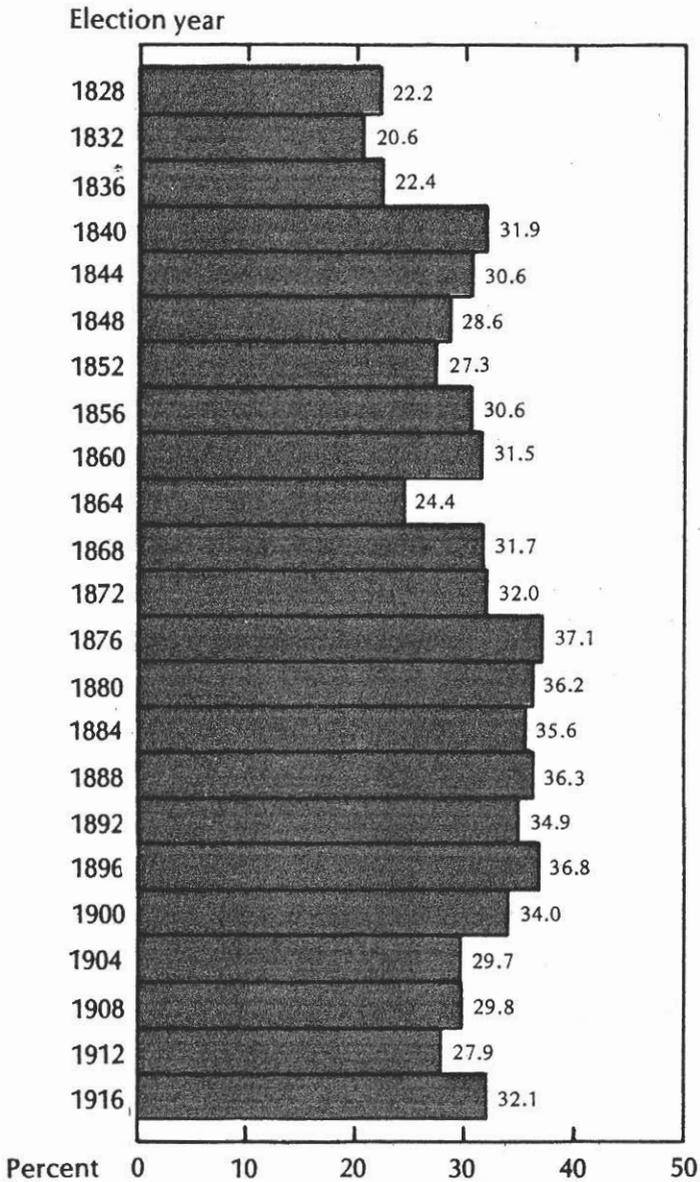
(Resident population)

Election year and winning candidate	Popula- tion of voting age	Voted for		
		Voters	winning candidate	Nonvoters
1828, Jackson	100.0	22.2	12.4	77.8
1832, Jackson	100.0	20.6	11.6	79.4
1836, Van Buren	100.0	22.4	11.4	77.6
1840, Harrison	100.0	31.9	16.9	68.1
1844, Polk	100.0	30.6	15.1	69.4
1848, Taylor	100.0	28.6	13.5	71.4
1852, Pierce	100.0	27.3	13.8	72.7
1856, Buchanan	100.0	30.6	13.8	69.4
1860, Lincoln	100.0	31.5	12.5	68.5
1864, Lincoln	100.0	24.4	13.4	75.6
1868, Grant	100.0	31.7	16.7	68.3
1872, Grant	100.0	32.0	17.8	68.0
1876, Hayes	100.0	37.1	17.8	62.9
1880, Garfield	100.0	36.2	17.5	63.8
1884, Cleveland	100.0	35.6	17.3	64.4
1888, Harrison	100.0	36.3	17.4	63.7
1892, Cleveland	100.0	34.9	16.1	65.1
1896, McKinley	100.0	36.8	18.8	63.2
1900, McKinley	100.0	34.0	17.6	66.0
1904, Roosevelt	100.0	29.7	16.8	70.3
1908, Taft	100.0	29.8	15.4	70.2
1912, Wilson	100.0	27.9	11.7	72.1
1916, Wilson	100.0	32.1	15.8	67.9

⁴ In these early elections, not everyone was permitted to vote because of laws severely restricting the eligibility to register and vote for President. Women, slaves, Indians, non-citizens, illiterates, convicted felons, prisoners, new residents, institutionalized persons, those who had not paid a poll tax, and other groups have not been permitted to vote at various times throughout our history. While many of the legal barriers to voting in Presidential elections have been removed, some legal restrictions on a person's eligibility to register and vote still exist.

FIGURE 1.
Percent of the Voting-Age Population Who Voted:
1828 to 1916

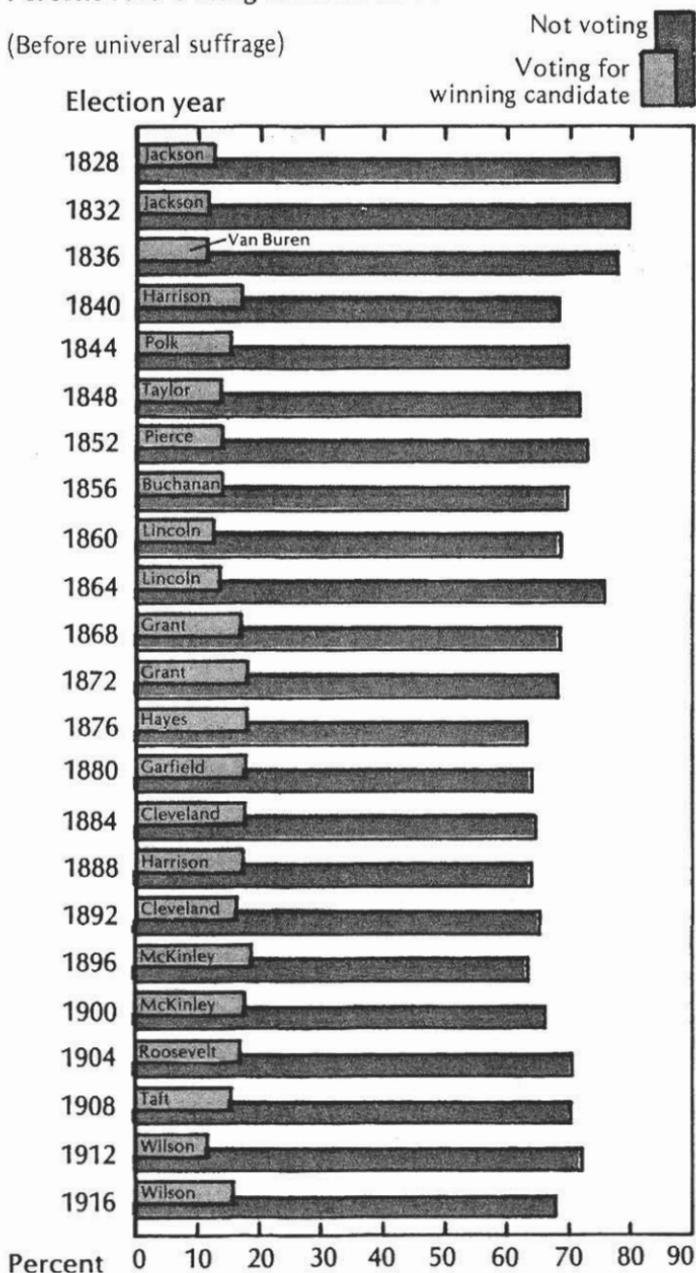
(Before universal suffrage)



Source: table 1.

FIGURE 2.
Percent Voting for the Winning Candidate and
Percent Not Voting 1828 to 1916

(Before universal suffrage)



Source: table 1.

Not only was the total voter turnout quite low during the 1800's, but so was the proportion voting for the Presidential winner. The proportion of the population of voting age casting ballots for the winning candidate ranged from a low of 11 percent in 1836, when Martin Van Buren was elected President, to a high of 19 percent in 1896, when William McKinley was elected.

These election patterns continued into the early years of the 1900's, as voter participation rates remained low and Presidential winners received votes from only a small proportion of the total population.

Voter turnout from 1920 to 1976. In the 1920 election, women were permitted to vote for the first time in every State, as the 19th amendment to the Constitution granting women the right to vote was ratified on August 26, 1920. For the first time, the possibility existed of having more than half of the population of voting age cast their votes for President. However, only 42 percent of the population of voting age voted in the 1920 Presidential election; 26 percent of the voting-age population voted for Warren Harding, the winner, but 58 percent did not vote at all (table B and figures 3 and 4).

In the 1924 election, Calvin Coolidge, who had become President upon the death of Warren Harding, easily won over his principal opponents John Davis and Robert La Follette. In this second election since women's suffrage,

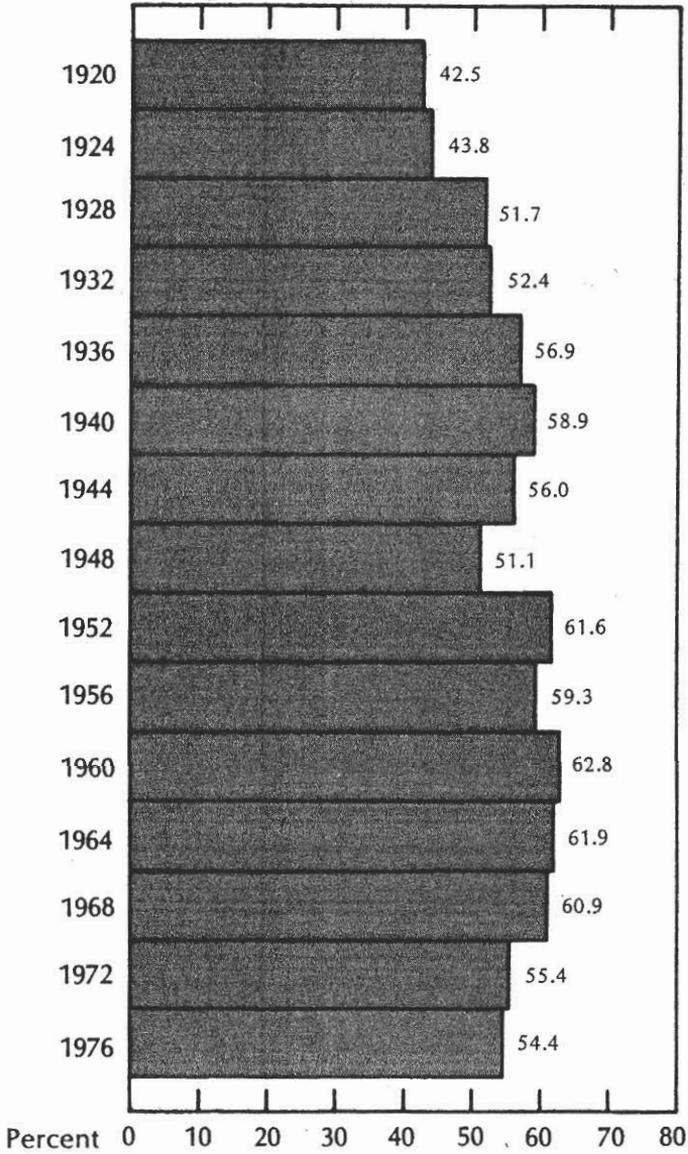
**Table B. Voter Participation Rates After Universal Suffrage:
1920 to 1976**

(Resident population)

Election year and winning candidate	Popula- tion of voting age	Voters	Voted for winning candidate	Nonvoters
1920, Harding	100.0	42.5	25.6	57.5
1924, Coolidge	100.0	43.8	23.7	56.2
1928, Hoover	100.0	51.7	30.1	48.3
1932, Roosevelt	100.0	52.4	30.1	47.6
1936, Roosevelt	100.0	56.9	34.6	43.1
1940, Roosevelt	100.0	58.9	32.2	41.1
1944, Roosevelt	100.0	56.0	29.9	44.0
1948, Truman	100.0	51.1	25.3	48.9
1952, Eisenhower	100.0	61.6	34.0	38.4
1956, Eisenhower	100.0	59.3	34.1	40.7
1960, Kennedy	100.0	62.8	31.2	37.2
1964, Johnson	100.0	61.9	37.8	38.1
1968, Nixon	100.0	60.9	26.4	39.1
1972, Nixon	100.0	55.4	33.7	44.6
1976, Carter	100.0	54.4	27.2	45.6

FIGURE 3.
Percent of the Voting-Age Population Who Voted:
1920 to 1976

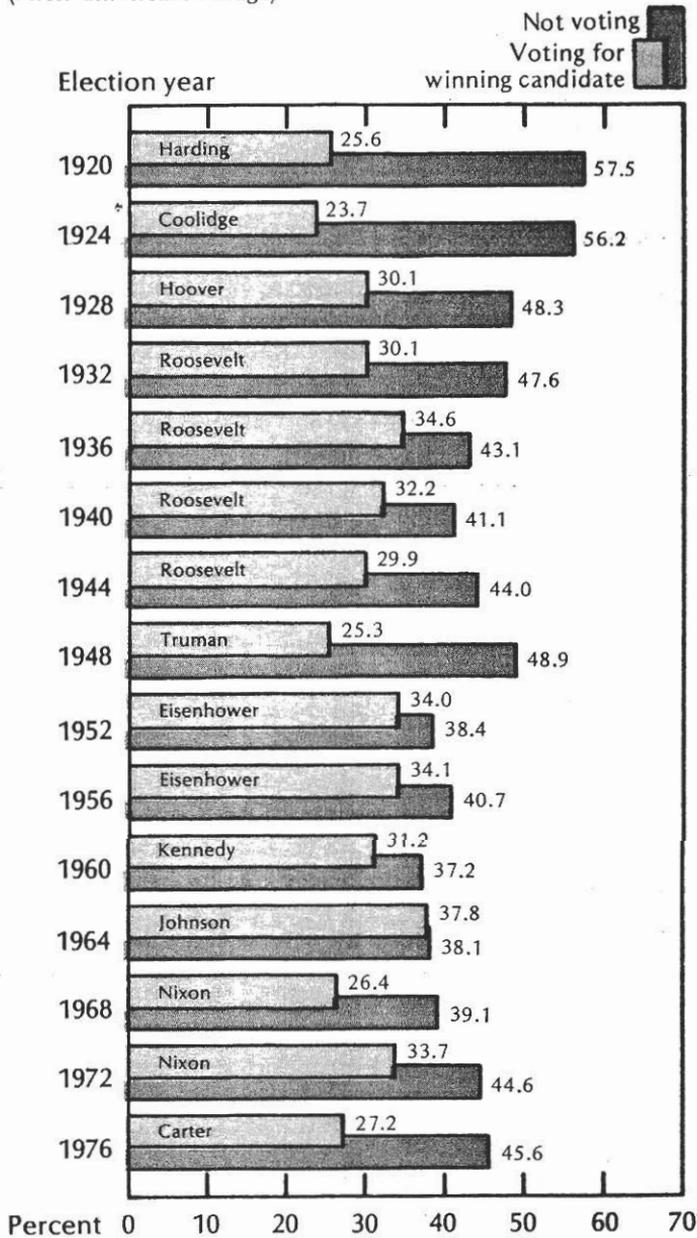
(After universal suffrage)



Source: table 1.

FIGURE 4.
Percent Voting for the Winning Candidate and
Percent Not Voting: 1920 to 1976

(After universal suffrage)



Source: table 1.

less than half the population voted, and Coolidge, for whom 24 percent of the population voted, was easily outdistanced by the "nonvote" of 56 percent.

The 1928 Presidential election was the first in American history where more than half the population voted. In this election, Herbert Hoover, who had been Secretary of Commerce during the Harding and Coolidge administrations, defeated Alfred E. Smith, then Governor of New York, as 52 percent of the population of voting age went to the polls. However, voters casting their ballots for Hoover (30 percent of the voting-age population), were overshadowed by the 48 percent of the population who did not vote.

Voter turnout has remained above the 50 percent level since 1928. The lowest turnout since then was the 51 percent recorded in 1948 when Harry Truman, who succeeded to the Presidency on the death of Roosevelt, was the Presidential victor. Only 25 percent of the voting-age population cast their ballots for Truman, but he had relatively strong opposition from Thomas Dewey, his major opponent, and from minor party candidates, J. Strom Thurmond and Henry Wallace.

The highest voter turnout recorded in U.S. history occurred in 1960 when John Kennedy, Senator from Massachusetts, and Richard Nixon, Vice President under Eisenhower, competed for the Presidency. Sixty-three percent of the population of voting age turned out to vote in this historic election. In an extremely close election, Kennedy was the winning candidate, receiving votes from 31 percent of the population. But as in all other Presidential elections, the plurality was held by the nonvoters, as 37 percent of the voting-age population did not vote. Thus, for the 14th time in U.S. history, the Presidential winner received less than 50 percent of the votes cast.

Voter participation has declined in each election since 1960. There was almost an exception to the historically apathetic electoral performance of the American people in the 1964 Presidential election. Lyndon Johnson, who succeeded to the Presidency with the death of Kennedy, recorded the near triumph of having almost as many people vote for him as did not vote at all. Johnson received votes from 37.8 percent of the voting-age population, the highest percentage recorded by a Presidential winner, defeating Barry Goldwater, Senator from Arizona. The voter turnout for Johnson was barely topped by the 38.1 percent who did not vote.⁵

In the 1972 election, the age limitation on voting was lowered to 18

⁵In absolute numbers, there were 43.1 million people who voted for Johnson in 1968 and 43.4 million who did not vote. Although Johnson did not win a plurality of the total population of voting age, he did win a plurality of the total population that was legally eligible to register and vote. Included within the 43.4 million people of voting age who did not vote were approximately 8.3 million residents who were not citizens of the United States or who could not meet the residency or other requirements for registration, as estimated by Meyer Zitter and Donald E. Starsinic in their study "Estimates of Eligible Voters in Small Areas: Some First Approximations" published in the *Proceedings of the Social Statistics Section of the American Statistical Association*, 1966.

years in all States as a result of the ratification of the 26th amendment to the U.S. Constitution.⁶

Voter turnout dropped to 55 percent in 1972 after exceeding 60 percent in the previous three elections. Although younger Americans are less likely to vote than older Americans, their lack of participation was not completely responsible for the lower turnout in 1972, as voter participation also declined for those 21 and over.⁷

In the election of 1972, Nixon easily beat George McGovern, Senator from South Dakota. Despite the magnitude of his victory, the number of nonvoters continued to outnumber those voting for the Presidential winner. Thirty-four percent of the population of voting age voted for Nixon in the 1972 election, more than the 26 percent who voted for him in his 1968 victory, but still not equal to those not voting in 1972 (45 percent).

In the election of 1976, voter turnout declined slightly from the 1972 level, as 54 percent of the population of voting age went to the polls—the lowest level since the 1948 election of Harry Truman. Jimmy Carter defeated Gerald Ford, who had become President upon the resignation of Richard Nixon, receiving votes from 27 percent of the electorate. However, 46 percent of the voting-age population did not vote in 1976.

Nonvoting Americans are the Nation's silent plurality, outnumbering those voting for the winning candidate in every Presidential election. The characteristics of this dominant segment of our population and some of the reasons for their nonparticipation in the electoral process are examined in the following sections which are based on statistical information collected by the Bureau of the Census in the Current Population Surveys conducted immediately after each election.

Characteristics of nonvoting Americans.⁸ Nonvoting Americans are not dissimilar to voting Americans. There are basic demographic and socioeconomic similarities that remain, even though differences exist in voter participation rates among various population groups.

For example, both nonvoters and voters are more likely to be women; in the 1976 Presidential election, women constituted 53 percent of both these groups (table C). Women outnumber men in the United States, and

⁶ Prior to this time the voting-age population had been restricted to those 21 and over, except that Georgia had permitted the population 18 and over to vote since 1944 and Kentucky had done so since 1956. Other exceptions included Alaska, which became a State in 1959, where those 19 and over were eligible to vote, and Hawaii, which also joined the Union in 1959, where those 20 and over were eligible to vote.

⁷ See *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1972*, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 253.

⁸ The voting and nonvoting percentages in this section on the characteristics of nonvoting Americans are based primarily on the November 1976 Current Population Survey (CPS). The data in this survey, as in other surveys of voting behavior, overstate the number and percent of persons who voted and understate the number and percent of persons who did not vote. For example, CPS estimates show 59 percent of the population reporting that they voted in 1976 as compared with a 54 percent turnout based on a count of the actual votes cast. For further discussion of this overstatement of voting, see *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1976*, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 322.

Table C. Voter Participation, by Sex, Age, and Race and Spanish Origin: November 1976

(Numbers in thousands. Civilian noninstitutional population of voting age)

Sex, age, and race and Spanish origin	Voters	Nonvoters ¹	Percent voting	Percent distribution	
				Percent not voting ¹	Voters Nonvoters ¹
Total	86,698	59,850	59.2	40.8	100.0
Male	41,079	27,878	59.6	40.4	46.6
Female	45,620	31,972	58.8	41.2	53.4
18 to 24 years old	11,367	15,585	42.2	57.8	26.0
25 to 64 years old	61,646	35,949	63.2	36.8	60.1
65 years old and over	13,685	8,316	62.2	37.8	13.9
Median age	45.1	35.3	(X)	(X)	(X)
White	78,808	50,508	60.9	39.1	84.4
Black	7,273	7,655	48.7	51.3	12.8
Spanish origin ²	2,098	4,495	31.8	68.2	7.5

X Not applicable.

¹ Also includes those who were recorded as "do not know" and "not reported" on voting.² Persons of Spanish origin may be of any race.

even though men were slightly more likely to vote than women in the 1976 election, this small difference did not offset the predominance of women among both nonvoters and voters.

As would be expected, both the typical nonvoter and the typical voter are White, even though there are differences in voter turnout between Blacks and Whites. In the 1976 Presidential election, 61 percent of the Whites reported voting as compared with 49 percent of the Blacks, but Whites still constituted 84 percent of all nonvoters as well as 91 percent of the voters.

Because younger Americans are less likely to vote than older Americans, there are some basic differences between the age composition of nonvoters and voters. The lowering of the voting age to 18 by the 26th amendment has led to a widening of the gap in the age difference between nonvoters and voters. In the 1976 election, the median age of the nonvoter was 35 years, while the median age of the voter was 45 years.⁹

Generally, nonvoters and voters are evenly distributed across the Nation, although the South Region has more than its expected share of nonvoters. Thirty-six percent of the Nation's nonvoters in the 1976 election lived in the South, while only 30 percent of the voters were Southerners (table D). The 30-percent proportion of voters living in the South was equalled by residents of the North Central Region. The nearly equal number of voters in these two regions in 1976, even though the South had a larger population, occurred because the 65-percent voter turnout reported in the North Central Region in 1976 was considerably higher than the 55-percent turnout reported in the South.

About two-thirds of the Nation's population live in metropolitan areas (one-third live in nonmetropolitan areas). Even though the residents of metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas differ in many ways, they do not differ in voter participation rates; most voters and nonvoters, 68 percent in each category, lived in metropolitan areas in 1976. Within these areas, both the voters and nonvoters were more likely to live in suburban areas than in central cities.

Since most adults of voting age are married, it follows that most nonvoters and voters are also married, although there are some differences in voter participation for different marital status categories (table E). Married people are more likely to vote than never married, widowed, or divorced people. But even with the difference in participation levels between those who are married and those who are not, 62 percent of the nonvoters and 74 percent of the voters in the 1976 Presidential election were married.

There are considerable differences in voter turnout by educational attainment levels, as persons with a college education are far more likely to vote than those with less education. In the 1976 Presidential election, only 29 percent of those with less than 5 years of school reported voting as compared

⁹ There was a 10-year difference between the average age of the typical nonvoter and the typical voter in 1976. But in the 1968 election, before those 18 to 20 years old could vote in every State and both the nonvoters and voters were older than in 1976, there was only a difference of 5 years between the median age of the nonvoters and the voters.

Table D. Voter Participation, by Residence: November 1976

(Numbers in thousands. Civilian noninstitutional population of voting age)

Area	Voters	Nonvoters ¹	Percent voting	Percent not voting ¹	Percent distribution	
					Voters	Nonvoters ¹
Total	86,698	59,850	59.2	40.8	100.0	100.0
Northeast	20,194	13,734	59.5	40.5	23.3	22.9
North Central	25,544	13,693	65.1	34.9	29.5	22.9
South	25,869	21,276	54.9	45.1	29.8	35.5
West	15,091	11,148	57.5	42.5	17.4	18.6
Metropolitan	58,943	40,646	59.2	40.8	68.0	67.9
In central cities	24,406	18,714	56.6	43.4	28.2	31.3
Outside central cities	34,537	21,932	61.2	38.8	39.8	36.6
Nonmetropolitan	27,755	19,204	59.1	40.9	32.0	32.1
Nonfarm	24,822	17,681	58.4	41.6	28.6	29.5
Farm	2,933	1,523	65.8	34.2	3.4	2.5

¹ Also includes those who were recorded as "do not know" and "not reported" on voting.

Table E. Voter Participation, by Marital Status and Years of School Completed: November 1976

(Numbers in thousands. Civilian noninstitutional population of voting age)

Marital status, and years of school completed	Voters		Nonvoters ¹		Percent voting	Percent not voting ¹	Percent distribution	
	Voters	Nonvoters ¹	Nonvoters ¹	Voters			Voters	Nonvoters ¹
Total	86,698	59,850	59,850	86,698	59.2	40.8	100.0	100.0
Married	64,033	37,028	37,028	64,033	63.4	36.6	73.9	61.9
Spouse present	62,231	34,395	34,395	62,231	64.4	35.6	71.8	57.5
Spouse absent	1,803	2,633	2,633	1,803	40.6	59.4	2.1	4.4
Widowed or divorced	9,910	9,334	9,334	9,910	51.5	48.5	11.4	15.6
Never married	12,755	13,488	13,488	12,755	48.6	51.4	14.7	22.5
Elementary:								
0 to 4 years	1,353	3,301	3,301	1,353	29.1	70.9	1.6	5.5
5 to 7 years	3,472	4,795	4,795	3,472	42.0	58.0	4.0	8.0
8 years	6,185	5,843	5,843	6,185	51.4	48.6	7.1	9.8
High school:								
1 to 3 years	10,481	11,735	11,735	10,481	47.2	52.8	12.1	19.6
4 years	33,058	22,607	22,607	33,058	59.4	40.6	38.1	37.8
College:								
1 to 3 years	16,054	7,507	7,507	16,054	68.1	31.9	18.5	12.5
4 years or more	16,096	4,063	4,063	16,096	79.8	20.2	18.6	6.8
Not high school graduate	21,491	25,674	25,674	21,491	45.6	54.4	24.8	42.9
High school graduate	65,208	34,177	34,177	65,208	65.6	34.4	75.2	57.1

¹ Also includes those who were recorded as "do not know" and "not reported" on voting.

with 80 percent of those who had completed 4 or more years of college. However, nonvoting Americans are not always people with low levels of education; the majority of nonvoters (57 percent) and voters (75 percent) in 1976 were persons who had completed at least a high school education.

Most adults in America are in the labor force as are most nonvoters and voters, therefore, the nonvoter is not someone out of the economic mainstream (table F). There is a difference in voter participation by labor force status, as persons in the labor force are more likely to vote than those not in the labor force. But even with this difference, 61 percent of nonvoters and 65 percent of voters were in the labor force in 1976.

One area in which there are some major differences between voters and nonvoters is in their major occupation groups. While the number of Americans who were employed as white-collar workers was slightly larger than the number employed as blue-collar, service, and farm workers, white-collar workers were much more likely to vote than workers employed in these other groups (72 percent and 51 percent, respectively) in 1976. The net result of these differences is that among the employed, white-collar workers constituted 60 percent of the voters but only 38 percent of the nonvoters. Blue-collar, service, and farm workers, however, constituted 62 percent of the employed nonvoters and only 40 percent of the voters.

Another major difference between voters and nonvoters is found in their family incomes. Persons with a high family income are more likely to vote than those with a low income. For example, 77 percent of those living in families with incomes of \$25,000 or more reported voting in the 1976 election, compared with only 45 percent of those in families with incomes under \$5,000.¹⁰ Among nonvoters in 1976, the median family income was considerably lower (\$9,807) than it was for voters (\$13,485).

In summary, the evidence shows that the typical nonvoter is: a White woman in her mid-thirties, a Southern resident, a suburban dweller, married, at least a high school graduate, and a blue-collar worker with a family income of around \$10,000. The typical voter, with some exceptions, is quite similar: a White woman in her mid-forties, a Southern resident, a suburban dweller, married, at least a high school graduate, and a white-collar worker with a family income of about \$13,500.

Reasons for not voting. Many reasons have been advanced to explain why so many Americans stay away from the polls on election day. Primarily, people do not vote either because of physical and legal barriers or psychological reasons, such as lack of interest, apathy, or alienation.

One major study of reasons for not voting and possible remedies to increase voter turnout was the work of the Commission on Registration and Voting Participation, appointed by President Kennedy. This Commission, noting that one-third of the voting-age population did not vote in the 1960

¹⁰ These income figures slightly understate the true income figures because only one global income question was asked in the November CPS and more detailed questions are needed to provide complete income data.

Table F. Voter Participation, By Employment Status, Occupation, and Family Income: November 1976

(Numbers in thousands. Civilian noninstitutional population of voting age)

Employment status, occupation, and family income	Voters	Nonvoters ¹	Percent voting	Percent distribution	
				Percent not voting ¹ *	Voters Nonvoters ¹
Total	86,698	59,850	59.2	40.8	100.0
Civilian labor force	56,125	36,338	60.7	39.3	60.7
Employed	53,314	32,720	62.0	38.0	54.7
Unemployed	2,812	3,618	43.7	56.3	6.0
Not in labor force	30,573	23,512	56.5	43.5	39.3
Total employed	53,314	32,720	62.0	38.0	100.0
White-collar workers	31,806	12,310	72.1	27.9	37.6
Blue-collar workers	14,186	14,316	49.8	50.2	43.8
Service workers	5,769	5,162	52.8	47.2	15.8
Farm workers	1,553	932	62.5	37.5	2.8
Total in families ²	85,451	57,834	59.6	40.4	100.0
Under \$5,000	10,919	13,470	44.8	55.2	23.3
\$5,000 to \$9,999	17,517	16,068	52.2	47.8	27.8
\$10,000 to \$14,999	20,505	13,916	59.6	40.4	24.1
\$15,000 to \$24,999	24,515	10,709	69.6	30.4	18.5
\$25,000 and over	11,995	3,671	76.6	23.4	6.3
Median income	\$13,485	\$9,807	(X)	(X)	(X)

X Not applicable.

¹ Also includes those who were recorded as "do not know" and "not reported" on voting.

² Persons not reporting their family income have been prorated among those who did report.

Presidential election, made numerous recommendations for alleviating the various restrictive legal and administrative procedures required to register and vote. Most of these have since been adopted through legislation.¹¹

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 abolished literacy tests as a prerequisite for voting, removed all barriers preventing Blacks and other minorities from registering and voting, and permitted new State residents to vote for President. The 24th amendment, ratified in 1964, eliminated the poll tax as a qualification for voting, and the 1970 Voting Rights Act Amendments¹² specified that local residence requirements to register and vote should not exceed 30 days.

While these legal actions removed most of the barriers to registration and voting, they did not lead to a dramatic rise in voter participation. In fact, voter participation is lower now than it was in 1960. In that Presidential election, one-third of the voting-age population did not vote, but in the 1976 Presidential election, nearly one-half of the electorate did not vote. Of course, America's recent voting record might have been even lower if it had not been for the introduction of these various legal actions.

There was one legislative action, however, which led to a *reduction* in the overall voter participation rate. This was the ratification of the 26th amendment to the Constitution. This amendment gave persons 18 to 20 years old, a group with traditionally lower turnout rates, the right to vote in all States beginning with the 1972 Presidential election.

Some insight into the reasons why so many people fail to participate in the electoral process is provided by data from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey. Following the Presidential election of 1976, respondents to the Current Population Survey were asked if they had registered and voted, and those who had not were asked the reason why.

Responses to the questions on voter participation indicated that in the 1976 election, 4 out of 10 had not voted,¹³ and most of the nonvoters (8 out of 10) were not registered to vote (tables C and G). By and large, most of the people who were registered actually voted—90 percent in 1976. Among those who were registered to vote in 1976 but did not do so, about 6 out of 10 reported that they were *unable* to vote because they were ill, out of town, unable to take time off from work, or were prevented from voting by some similar reason. The other 4 out of 10 reported that they did not vote in 1976 because they were *not interested* in voting, did not prefer any of the candidates, or else reported some other reason for their lack of desire to vote (table H).

¹¹ See the Commission's *Report on Registration and Voting Participation*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1963; V. Lance Tarrance, Jr., "The Realities of Nonvoting," *Harvard Political Review*, Fall 1973; and Curtis B. Gans, "The Empty Ballot Box: Reflections on Nonvoters In America," *Public Opinion*, September/October 1978.

¹² These 1970 Amendments abolished durational residence requirements as a precondition to voting for President and required the States to register all duly qualified residents who applied not later than 30 days prior to a Presidential election.

¹³ Respondents in the Current Population Survey, as in other surveys of voter participation tend to overreport their actual participation rates which are somewhat higher based on survey results than the actual rate.

Table G. Registration Status and Reason for Not Registering or Voting, for the Nonvoting Population of Voting Age: November 1976

(Numbers in thousands. Civilian noninstitutional population)

Registration status and reason for not registering or voting	Number	Percent
Total reported not voting ¹	48,486	100.0
Registered	10,231	21.1
Unable to vote.	5,887	12.1
Not interested in voting.	4,344	9.0
Not registered.	38,255	78.9
Unable to register.	12,793	26.4
Not interested in registering. . . .	25,462	52.5

¹ Excludes those not reporting on registration or not reporting on reason for not registering or voting.

Table H. Reason for Not Voting, for the Registered Population of Voting Age: November 1976

(Numbers in thousands. Civilian noninstitutional population)

Reason for not voting	Number	Percent
Total reported registered but not voting ¹	10,231	100.0
Unable to vote	5,887	57.5
Illness or emergency	2,157	21.1
Out of town or away from home. . . .	1,561	15.3
Couldn't take time off from work, had no way to get to polls	1,205	11.8
Other reason.	964	9.4
Not interested in voting	4,344	42.5
Did not prefer any of the candidates, not interested in the election this year.	2,060	20.1
Did not get around to it, or forgot or similar reason.	1,846	18.0
Other reason.	438	4.3

¹ Excludes those not reporting on reason for not voting.

The major reason for nonregistration was lack of interest. Actual barriers to registration precluded participation in the electoral process for only a relatively small component of the population; two-thirds of those who were not registered were not interested in registering (table 1). Among those of voting age who reported that they were unable to register, one-third were not U.S. citizens and were ineligible to register. Only 6 percent of those who were not registered reported that they had failed to register because of such barriers as lack of transportation, inconvenient hours or place of registration, or because they did not know how or where to register. A similar proportion reported that they did not meet the residence requirements (30 days in 1976) or had recently moved and just never got around to registering at their new address.

Among those who indicated an insufficient amount of interest in registering, the majority (55 percent) gave themselves an excuse to legitimize their failure to register: they did ~~not~~ get around to it, forgot, did not know they

Table 1. Reason for Not Registering, for the Population of Voting Age: November 1976

(Numbers in thousands. Civilian noninstitutional population)

Reason for not registering	Number	Percent
Total reported not registered ¹	38,225	100.0
Unable to register	12,793	33.4
Not a citizen	4,383	11.5
Residence requirement not met or recently moved and never got around to it.	2,591	6.8
No transportation, hours or place inconvenient, did not know how or where to register.	2,443	6.4
Permanent illness or disability	1,383	3.6
Other reason	1,993	5.2
Not interested in registering.	25,462	66.6
Did not get around to it, forgot, didn't know had to, or other similar reason	14,043	36.7
Did not prefer any of the candidates or not interested in election this year.	6,959	18.2
Did not want to get involved in politics.	2,320	6.1
Vote would not make a difference.	758	2.0
Other reason	1,382	3.6

¹ Excludes those not reporting on reason for not registering.

had to, or some similar reason. The rest reported that they were not interested in the election, the candidates, or politics, or some similar reason such as a belief that their vote would not make a difference.

Can voter participation be increased? Since most of the barriers to registration and voting in the United States have been removed by legal actions, it appears that the majority of Americans who do not vote are just not interested in voting. Still, most Americans who are registered to vote actually do vote on election day, so efforts have continued to simplify the registration process in the hopes of further increasing voter turnout.¹⁴

One proposal to increase voter participation is to permit voter registration by mail. Several bills were recently introduced in Congress that would have required the Federal Government to provide for the mail registration of all eligible voters.¹⁵ However, none of these proposals were enacted by the Congress, as critics of the bills cited the possibilities of fraud, the costs and complexity of inaugurating and maintaining the system, and the fact that voter apathy seemed to be the primary reason for low voter turnout. However, even though no Federal legislation was passed, 16 States and the District of Columbia adopted or greatly expanded procedures for registration by mail between the Presidential elections of 1972 and 1976.

States permitting registration by mail did not mail registration cards to all addresses, as was proposed for the national mail registration system, but allowed the distribution of mail registration forms by political parties, civic and labor organizations, and other groups. However, in these areas, which contained nearly one-half of the U.S. population, overall voter turnout did not increase between the 1972 and 1976 elections. In fact, there was a decline of 2 percentage points (from 56 percent to 54 percent) in the voter participation rate in these mail registration areas. In those States which did not permit registration by mail, voter turnout remained the same (55 percent) in both 1972 and 1976. California and New York, the two most populous States in the Nation, inaugurated post card registration between 1972 and 1976, but the voter participation rate declined by 9 percentage points in California and by 5 percentage points in New York between these elections.¹⁶

Of course, the use of mail registration did not, in itself, lead to the decline in voter turnout; nine of the States which adopted a mail registration system, as well as the District of Columbia, had increases in voter participation. But since there was an overall decline of 2 percentage points in the voter par-

¹⁴ See Richard G. Smolka, *Registering Voters by Mail: The Maryland and New Jersey Experience*, American Enterprise Institute, Washington, D.C., 1975; and Richard G. Smolka, *Election Day Registration: The Minnesota and Wisconsin Experience in 1976*, American Enterprise Institute, Washington, D.C., 1977.

¹⁵ For a discussion of some of these proposals see *The Concept of National Voter Registration*, Hearing before the Subcommittee on Census and Statistics of the Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, House of Representatives, 92d Congress, Serial No. 92-51, Washington, D.C. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972.

¹⁶ Data on mail registration was abstracted from *Election Day Registration*, *op. cit.*, and from information provided by Richard G. Smolka, editor, *Election Administration Reports*.

ticipation rate in the States which began mail registration systems, it is clear that the system, at least as it is presently practiced, has no proven effect on voter participation. However, it is possible that voter participation rates might have dropped even more without the mail registration system.

Moreover, even though a mail registration system might make registration easier for the voters, this method has not been universally accepted by the public, for the voters in the State of Washington repealed a newly passed mail registration law in 1977 by a 2-to-1 margin.

Another major innovation designed to increase voter participation is the proposal to permit people to register to vote on election day. A bill to permit election day registration throughout the United States was introduced in Congress in 1977, but failed to become law.¹⁷ However, election day registration was inaugurated in Minnesota and Wisconsin for the 1976 Presidential election. Voter turnout was somewhat higher in these States in 1976 than it had been in 1972, as voter participation increased from 68 percent to 72 percent in Minnesota and from 62 to 66 percent in Wisconsin.

However, not all of the gain in voter turnout in these States was directly attributable to election day registration. In Wisconsin, some localities did not require registration in either the 1972 or 1976 elections. Other localities, which did require registration in both these elections, changed their system to permit election day registration in the 1976 election. Richard G. Smolka, in his study of election day registration, noted that voter participation was higher in Wisconsin in 1976 than it was in 1972 in all localities. In Minnesota, there was also the possibility that voter turnout may have increased because Walter Mondale, a native son, was on the ballot.¹⁸

The increase in voter turnout in States with election day registration, was small and accompanied by procedural problems, as Smolka notes:

Election day registration probably contributed to a marginal increase in voter turnout, about 1 or 2 percentage points both in Minnesota and in Wisconsin, but it also encouraged many voters to wait until election day to register. It caused confusion and long lines at the polls, and errors were made that permitted hundreds of voters to vote in the wrong precincts or wards.¹⁹

Other procedural changes in the registration system have also been proposed in attempts to increase voter turnout in Presidential elections. Rosenstone and Wolfinger, of the University of California, studied the effect some of these proposed changes in registration laws might have on voter turnout. Using data from the November 1972 voting supplement to the Current Population Survey, they concluded that some further gains in registration could be made if States permitted people to register up to 1 week

¹⁷For a discussion of this proposed act see *Universal Voter Registration Act of 1977*, Hearings before the Committee on House Administration, House of Representatives, 95th Congress, Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977.

¹⁸Election Day Registration, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-46 and 53-54.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 68.

before the election and if registration offices were open during normal business hours, evenings, and Saturdays.²⁰

Summary. Voter participation, as measured by the percent voting among the population of voting age, has been relatively low throughout American history. In every American Presidential election until 1928, more than one-half of the population of voting age did not vote because of legal restrictions and barriers to registration or lack of interest. The first time more than one-half of the population voted was in the election of 1928, 8 years after universal suffrage was established. The high point of voter participation occurred in the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon election when 63 percent of the population voted. However, since that time, electoral participation has declined, with only 54 percent of the voting-age population voting in the 1976 election.

The number of people voting for the President has, in every case, been less than the number of people not voting at all. Lyndon Johnson, in his 1964 victory, came the closest of any President to winning a plurality among the entire population of voting age.

Those who do not vote in Presidential elections are generally similar to those who do vote, even with differences in voter participation rates among the various subgroups of population.

Most of the legal barriers which limited registration and voting in earlier years have been removed, so the primary reason people do not register and vote is because they are not interested. Two-thirds of those who were not registered reported they were not interested in registering. Most nonvoters are not registered (8 out of 10 in the 1976 election), and most of the people who are registered vote (9 out of 10 in the 1976 election).

More Americans might vote if there were further easing of registration procedures. For example, in Canada and Great Britain, where the governments initiate the registration process rather than leaving it up to the individual, 76 percent of the eligible population voted in the May 1979 elections.²¹ However, in the United States, the increased use of mail registration in some States between 1972 and 1976 did not lead to an increase in voter participation, and the use of election day registration in Minnesota and Wisconsin in the 1976 Presidential election led to only modest gains in voter turnout. Even with these limitations, efforts to ease the registration procedures are still worthwhile, for as Richard M. Scammon noted:

Democracy does not require total voter participation, and totalitarian elections with their 99.9 percent voter turnouts are mere exercises in contempt of the democratic idea. But democracy does require that the voter have not only the right to vote, but also an administratively easy way to put that right to use.²²

²⁰ Steven J. Rosenstone and Raymond E. Wolfinger, "The Effect of Registration Laws on Voter Turnout," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 72, No. 1, (March 1978), pp. 22-45.

²¹ Reported by Richard M. Scammon, Director of the Elections Research Center of the Governmental Affairs Institute.

²² Richard M. Scammon, "Electoral Participation," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 371, (May 1967), p.71.

Table 1. Voter Participation in Presidential Elections: 1828 to 1976
(Numbers in thousands. Resident population)

Election year and winning candidate	Percent distribution							
	Population of voting age	Voters	Voted for winning candidate	Nonvoters	Population of voting age	Voters	Voted for winning candidate	Nonvoters
Before universal suffrage:								
1828, Jackson	5,201	1,155	647	4,046	100.0	22.2	12.4	77.8
1832, Jackson	5,914	1,218	688	4,696	100.0	20.6	11.6	79.4
1836, Van Buren	6,710	1,505	765	5,205	100.0	22.4	11.4	77.6
1840, Harrison	7,566	2,412	1,275	5,154	100.0	31.9	16.9	68.1
1844, Polk	8,840	2,701	1,338	6,139	100.0	30.6	15.1	69.4
1848, Taylor	10,081	2,879	1,361	7,202	100.0	28.6	13.5	71.4
1852, Pierce	11,582	3,162	1,601	8,420	100.0	27.3	13.8	72.7
1856, Buchanan	13,235	4,045	1,833	9,190	100.0	30.6	13.8	69.4
1860, Lincoln	14,880	4,690	1,866	10,190	100.0	31.5	12.5	68.5
1864, Lincoln	16,450	4,011	2,207	12,439	100.0	24.4	13.4	75.6
1868, Grant	18,019	5,720	3,013	12,299	100.0	31.7	16.7	68.3
1872, Grant	20,176	6,460	3,597	13,716	100.0	32.0	17.8	68.0
1876, Hayes	22,724	8,422	4,037	14,302	100.0	37.1	17.8	62.9
1880, Garfield	25,462	9,217	4,453	16,245	100.0	36.2	17.5	63.8
1884, Cleveland	28,275	10,053	4,880	18,222	100.0	35.6	17.3	64.4
1888, Harrison	31,377	11,383	5,447	19,994	100.0	36.3	17.4	63.7
1892, Cleveland	34,522	12,061	5,555	22,461	100.0	34.9	16.1	65.1
1896, McKinley	37,745	13,907	7,102	23,838	100.0	36.8	18.8	63.2
1900, McKinley	41,077	13,500	7,218	27,109	100.0	34.0	17.6	66.0

1904, Roosevelt	45,498	13,521	7,628	31,977	100.0	29.7	16.8	70.3
1908, Taft	49,919	14,884	7,675	35,035	100.0	29.8	15.4	70.2
1912, Wilson	53,830	15,037	6,297	38,793	100.0	27.9	11.7	72.1
1916, Wilson	57,708	18,531	9,128	39,177	100.0	32.1	15.8	67.9
After universal suffrage:								
1920, Harding	62,988	26,748	16,143	36,240	100.0	42.5	25.6	57.5
1924, Coolidge	66,414	29,086	15,718	37,328	100.0	43.8	23.7	56.2
1928, Hoover	71,185	36,812	21,392	34,373	100.0	51.7	30.1	48.3
1932, Roosevelt	75,768	39,732	22,810	36,036	100.0	52.4	30.1	47.6
1936, Roosevelt	80,174	45,643	27,753	34,531	100.0	56.9	34.6	43.1
1940, Roosevelt	84,728	49,900	27,308	34,828	100.0	58.9	32.2	41.1
1944, Roosevelt	85,654	47,977	25,607	37,677	100.0	56.0	29.9	44.0
1948, Truman	95,573	48,794	24,179	46,779	100.0	51.1	25.3	48.9
1952, Eisenhower	99,929	61,551	33,936	38,378	100.0	61.6	34.0	38.4
1956, Eisenhower	104,515	62,027	35,590	42,488	100.0	59.3	34.1	40.7
1960, Kennedy	109,672	68,838	34,227	40,834	100.0	62.8	31.2	37.2
1964, Johnson	114,090	70,645	43,130	43,445	100.0	61.9	37.8	38.1
1968, Nixon	120,285	73,212	31,785	47,073	100.0	60.9	26.4	39.1
1972, Nixon	140,068	77,625	47,170	62,443	100.0	55.4	33.7	44.6
1976, Carter	150,127	81,603	40,831	68,524	100.0	54.4	27.2	45.6

Note: The population of voting age for the United States for each Presidential election year 1828 to 1920 was based on the population enumerated in each decennial census beginning in 1820 and ending in 1930 published in *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970 Bicentennial Edition*, Part 2. The census data for a few census years was adjusted slightly to reflect nonreporting of age. Linear interpolation in the number of persons 21 years old and over in consecutive censuses provided estimates for each of the election years. The estimates of the population of voting age for election year beginning with 1932 were published previously in Current Population Reports, Series P-25, No. 732.

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