

# CENSUS BRIEF

U.S. Department of Commerce  
Economics and Statistics Administration  
BUREAU OF THE CENSUS



## “Too Busy” to Vote

**A** COMBINATION OF NO TIME OFF from work or school or being “too busy” was the reason given most often by people for not voting in the 1996 presidential election, according to a Census Bureau survey taken shortly after the 1996 balloting.

The survey also shows that a little over half of the respondents (54 percent) reported going to the polls in 1996 — a 34-year low for a presidential election year.<sup>1</sup> The highest turnout during that period was 69 percent in 1964.

### DIFFERENT TIMES — DIFFERENT REASONS

As the reported voting turnout has declined, the ranking of reasons for not voting has shifted. In 1996, for example, slightly more than 1 in 5 nonvoters (22 percent) reported they could not take time off from work or school or were too busy to vote. In 1980, only 8 percent gave this reason.

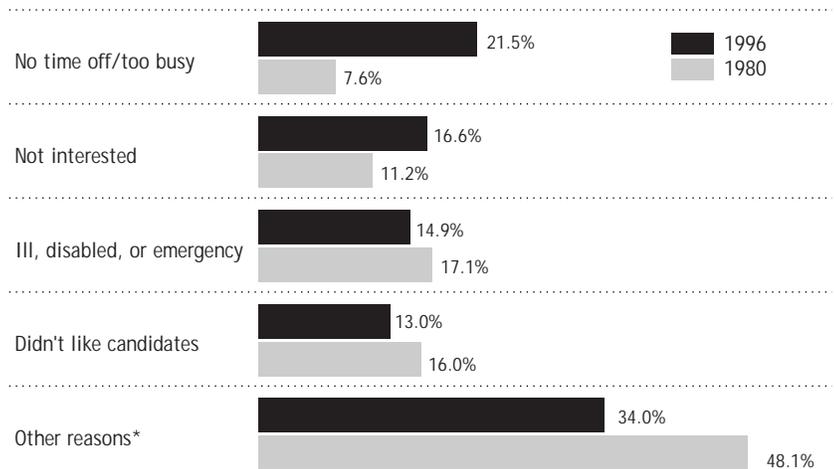
“Perhaps it’s a sign of the times,” said Lynne Casper, Census Bureau population analyst and coauthor of the report. “The hectic schedules of

people and increasing demands of employers may have contributed to the substantial increase in the percentage of nonvoters.” Among other reasons given for not voting in 1996, the report said, were “no interest” or “did not care,” which jumped to 17 percent in 1996; those reasons were cited by only 11 percent in 1980.

“It appears a significant proportion of those who are registered are more apathetic about the political process these days,” Casper said.

Other leading reasons people gave for staying away from the polls in the 1996 presidential election were “ill, disabled or kept away by a family emergency” (15 percent) and “didn’t like the candidates” (13 percent). “Out of town” was the answer given by 11 percent; 4 percent said they had “no transportation,” and 3 percent either refused to answer or gave

### REASONS GIVEN FOR NOT VOTING BY THOSE REGISTERED TO VOTE



\*Includes no transportation, out of town, forgot, lines too long, and don't know/refused to answer.

<sup>1</sup>The reported voter turnout using Current Population Survey (CPS) data is higher than the official turnout of 50 percent as recorded by the Clerk of the U.S. House. The CPS results routinely overestimate turnout in presidential elections by 5-to-12 percent, due to factors such as nonvoters reporting they did vote because they want to show they are civically responsible and respondents misreporting for others in their household.

no reason. All other reasons, including “forgot” and “lines too long,” accounted for 16 percent of the responses.

**NEARLY 50 PERCENT OF VOTER REGISTRANTS USED NVRA METHODS**

Coinciding with the downward voting trend, registration, too, was down, with just 66 percent of the voting-age population reporting that they had registered. This was the lowest registration rate in a presidential election year since the Census Bureau began collecting these data in 1968, when it was 74 percent. From 1992 to 1996, the drop in registration was slightly more than 2 percentage points. Blacks and Hispanics did not experience a significant decrease in registration between these two elections.

Since the 1996 presidential election was the first in which people could make use of the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA), which went into effect on Jan. 1, 1995, the Census Bureau gathered data to compare the use of NVRA's registration methods with more traditional ones. About half of those registering since Jan. 1, 1995, used the NVRA procedures, including:

- registering while obtaining a driver's license (used by about 3 out of 10 people);
- visiting a public assistance office; and
- mailing in a registration form.

The reported use of NVRA registration methods was not enough, however, to forestall the continued downward trend in registration.

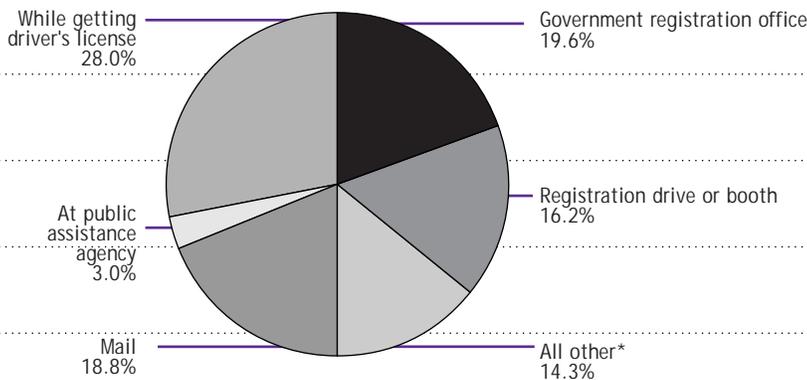
“The drop in the overall registration rate is somewhat surprising given that the NVRA required states to lighten the burden of registration,” said Loretta Bass, Census Bureau population analyst and the report's other author.

The choice among registration methods varied according to income and education level. Those with family incomes below \$15,000 or who had less than a high school education, for example, tended to use public-assistance agencies and special voter-registration drives or booths. People from families earning above \$15,000 annually or who had a high school or higher education were more likely to use the motor-vehicle office or to register by mail.

**SOURCE OF DATA**

The voting and registration data were collected in the Current Population Survey (CPS), which is based on a sample of about 50,000 households nationally. The questions were asked of the survey respondents in November of 1996, a few weeks after the presidential election.

**METHOD OF REGISTRATION FOR THOSE WHO REGISTERED AFTER JANUARY 1, 1995**



Total does not add to 100 percent due to rounding.  
 \*Includes at school, hospital, campus; at polls on election day; other place/way; and don't know or refused to answer.

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This Brief is one of a series that presents information of current policy interest. 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, use caution when comparing these data with data from other sources.