

Who Votes? Congressional Elections and the American Electorate: 1978–2014

Population Characteristics

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INTRODUCTION

Voting is among our most fundamental domestic responsibilities and important civic opportunities. Without free and open elections, American democracy would not exist. Maintaining and improving our system of elections requires not only documenting election results, but also understanding the composition of America's electorate, both historically and presently.

Since 1964, the U.S. Census Bureau has fielded the Voting and Registration Supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS) every 2 years. Generally speaking, national American elections fall into two categories: elections where voters decide on the office of the President and congressional seats, and elections where congressional seats are the highest offices decided. To avoid confusion with presidential elections, the following report refers to nonpresidential year elections as "congressional elections." Election results and voting patterns tend to vary between these two types of elections (specifically, voting and registration rates are lower in years with congressional elections only), and the majority of this report will focus on congressional election years only (2014, 2010, 2006, etc.).

In addition to the requirement that individuals be at least 18 years old, voters in national elections must also be U.S. citizens. Although the Census Bureau has collected voting and registration data since 1964, the CPS has gathered citizenship data only since 1978. Accounting for citizenship status provides a more accurate reflection of the population eligible to vote; therefore, the estimates presented and discussed throughout this report are calculated using the voting-age citizen

Comparing CPS Voting Estimates to Official Reports

The data in this report are based on responses to the November CPS Voting and Registration Supplements, which survey the civilian noninstitutionalized population in the United States. Voting estimates from the CPS and other sample surveys have historically differed from those based on administrative data, such as the official results reported by each state and disseminated collectively by the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives and the Federal Election Commission (FEC). In general, voting rates from the sample surveys such as the CPS are higher than official results (Bauman and Julian, 2010; De Bell, et al., 2015). Potential explanations for these differences include misreporting, problems with memory or knowledge of others' behavior, and methodological issues related to question wording, method of survey administration, and nonresponse. Despite these issues, the Census Bureau's November supplement to the CPS remains the most comprehensive data source available for examining the social and demographic composition of the electorate in federal elections, particularly when examining broad historical trends for subpopulations.

population and go back as far as 1978.^{1,2} Readers interested in earlier years can utilize historical CPS voting estimates calculated regardless of citizenship status. These products are available at <www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/p20/index.html>.

This report's first section, "Historical Turnout in Congressional Elections, 1978–2014," presents reported turnout rates, both overall and by race, Hispanic origin, and age, for each congressional election year from 1978 to the most recent election held in 2014.³

The second section, "Composition of the Electorate in Recent Elections, 2004–2014," presents breakdowns of the voting populations in the last three congressional and presidential election cycles, with a focus on race, Hispanic origin, and age. Data are presented for both presidential and congressional election years, primarily to determine whether there have been electoral composition changes depending on the type of election.

¹ From 1978 to 1992, citizenship status was asked about in the CPS Voting and Registration Supplement. Beginning in 1994, the basic CPS included a question about citizenship status, meaning that the supplement no longer needed to ask about this topic.

² Removing noncitizens from the voting-eligible population increases voting rates, as the population base for calculating the rates becomes smaller, while the number of people who report voting does not change.

³ Federal surveys now give respondents the option of reporting more than one race. Therefore, two basic ways of defining a race group are possible. A group such as Asian may be defined as those who reported Asian and no other race (the race-alone or single-race concept) or as those who reported Asian regardless of whether they also reported another race (the race-alone or in-combination concept). This report shows data using the first approach (race alone). Use of the single-race population does not imply that it is the preferred method of presenting or analyzing data. For further information, see the 2010 Census Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2010 (C2010BR-02) at <<http://census.gov/library/publications/2011/dec/c2010br-02.html>>.

The third section, "A Closer Look at Race, Hispanic Origin, and Age," looks at how voter turnout intersects with demographic characteristics in an effort to better understand the dynamics of recent congressional electorates. By comparing a subpopulation's share of the voting population to their share of the eligible population, an assessment can be made concerning how a given subpopulation has participated in the 2006, 2010, and 2014 congressional elections.

The report's final section, "Traditional and Alternative Methods of Voting," presents results related to voters and their reported method of casting ballots, specifically whether they voted early in person or through the mail. These questions were first asked in the 1996 CPS, and results are presented for the period of 1996–2014. In this section, data are once again included for both presidential

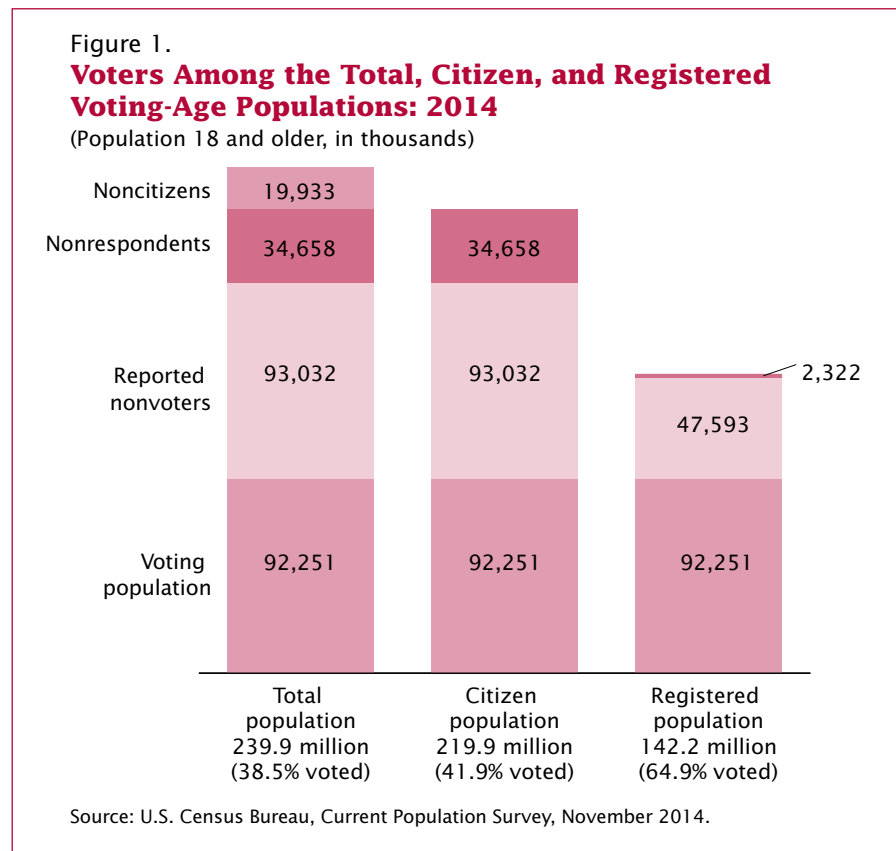
and congressional election years, primarily to better understand how voting methods vary between different types of elections.

UNDERSTANDING VOTING

Voting rates: Voting rates represent the number of voters relative to a given population or subpopulation. For example, in this report overall voting rates are calculated by dividing the total number of reported voters by the total number of eligible voters (i.e., citizens who are at least 18 years old) (Figure 1).

Voting population: This is the estimated number of people who reported voting. In this report, this population will occasionally be referred to as "the electorate."

Voting-age citizens: In the United States, only native-born or naturalized citizens can vote legally in elections. While the Census Bureau has collected voting and



registration data since 1964, the CPS has gathered citizenship data for congressional voting only since 1978. Although the number of voters in any given year is not affected by accounting for citizenship, removing noncitizens from the population base results in higher turnout rates than when the voting-age population is used. For example, in 2014, 92.3 million Americans reported voting. When the voting-age population is used (239.9 million people), the voting rate is 38.5 percent, but when voting-age citizens serve as the population base (219.9 million people), the voting rate increases to 41.9 percent.

Voting-age population: Since 1972, every state has required that voters be at least 18 years of age in order to vote, therefore the voting-age population has historically been a common population base used for calculating voting statistics. Some Census Bureau products, such as the voting detailed and historical table packages, present voting estimates using this population as the base in order to allow historical comparisons all the way back to 1964. The voting-age population does not account for citizenship status.

Registered population: With the exception of North Dakota, every state requires eligible voters to formally register before casting a ballot. In terms of methods and deadlines, registration procedures vary greatly from state to state, but by definition, anyone who is registered is both a citizen and at least 18 years old.

Nonrespondents: Each year when the Voting and Registration Supplement is administered, a certain number of respondents do

Table 1.
**Reported Rates of Voting in Congressional Elections:
1978 to 2014**

(Numbers in thousands)

Congressional election year	Population 18 and older	Citizens		
		Population 18 and older	Voted	
			Number	Rate
1978.....	151,646	142,308	69,587	48.9
1982.....	165,483	154,858	80,310	51.9
1986.....	173,890	161,944	79,954	49.4
1990.....	182,118	166,151	81,991	49.3
1994.....	190,267	177,260	85,702	48.3
1998.....	198,228	183,451	83,098	45.3
2002.....	210,421	190,250	87,762	46.1
2006.....	220,603	201,073	96,119	47.8
2010.....	229,690	210,800	95,987	45.5
2014.....	239,874	219,941	92,251	41.9

Note: Voting rates are calculated by dividing the number of reported voters by the number of eligible voters.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November, select years.

not complete the questionnaire.⁴ Historically, this population has not been separately accounted for in all CPS voting products, but beginning in 2010, these individuals have been reported as a separate category.

HISTORICAL TURNOUT IN CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS, 1978-2014

Since 1978, voting rates have been consistently higher in presidential election years than in congressional election years. In 2014, the overall voting rate was the lowest for a congressional election since the CPS first asked about voting and citizenship status in 1978. At 41.9 percent, the 2014 turnout rate was 3.6 percentage points lower than in 2010 and 5.9 percentage points lower than in 2006 (Table 1).

The number of voting-eligible citizens has increased in every congressional election since 1978, while the number of citizens who reported voting has increased (1982, 1990, 1994, 2002, and 2006) or decreased (1998 and

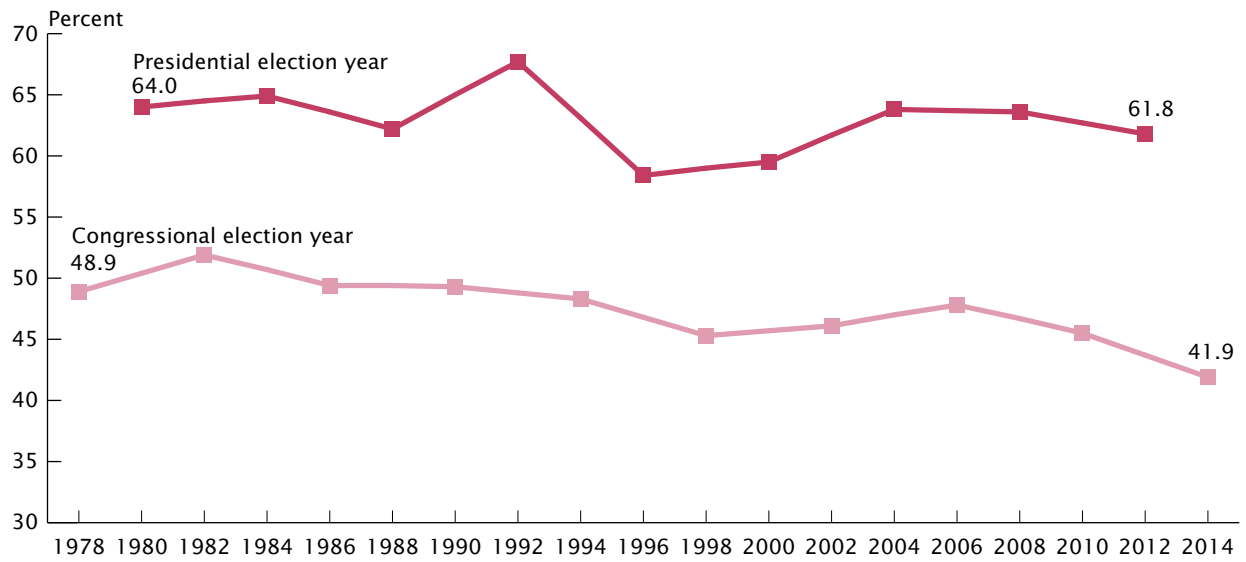
⁴ The "No response to voting" category includes those who were not asked if they voted because the administration of the survey was stopped for some reason, as well as those who responded "Don't Know" or refused to answer the question.

2014) depending on the year.⁵ When increases in the voting population outpace increases in the voting-eligible population, the end result is an increase in the voting rate, but when increases in the voting population do not keep pace with increases in the voting-eligible population, or when the voting population decreases, there is a decrease in the voting rate. Voting rates for presidential elections have shifted from year to year, but have ultimately decreased across the duration of the time series (64.0 percent in 1980 and 61.8 percent in 2012), while voting rates for congressional elections have decreased as well (48.9 percent in 1978, 41.9 percent in 2014) (Figure 2).

In the two most recent congressional elections, the size of the voting population was not statistically different in 2010 (in comparison to 2006), and decreased in 2014 (in comparison to 2010) despite increases in the eligible population in both those years. This resulted in voting rate decreases in both 2010 (45.5 percent, compared with 47.8 percent in 2006) and 2014 (41.9 percent).

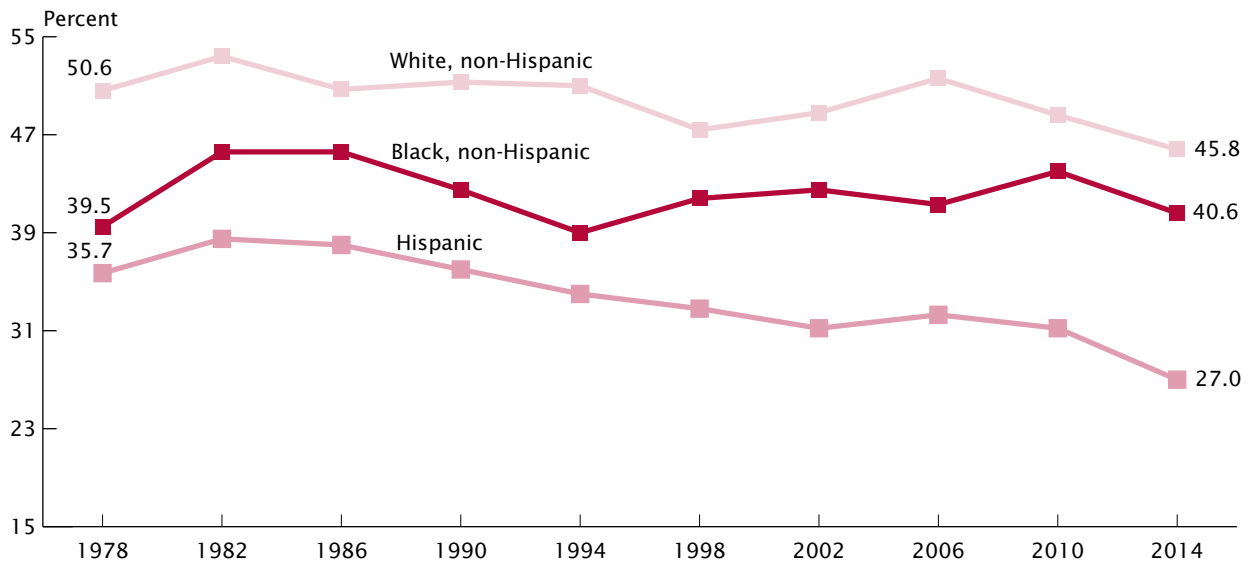
⁵ The apparent change in the voting population was not statistically significant in 1986 and 2010.

Figure 2.
Voting Rates in Congressional and Presidential Elections: 1978 to 2014



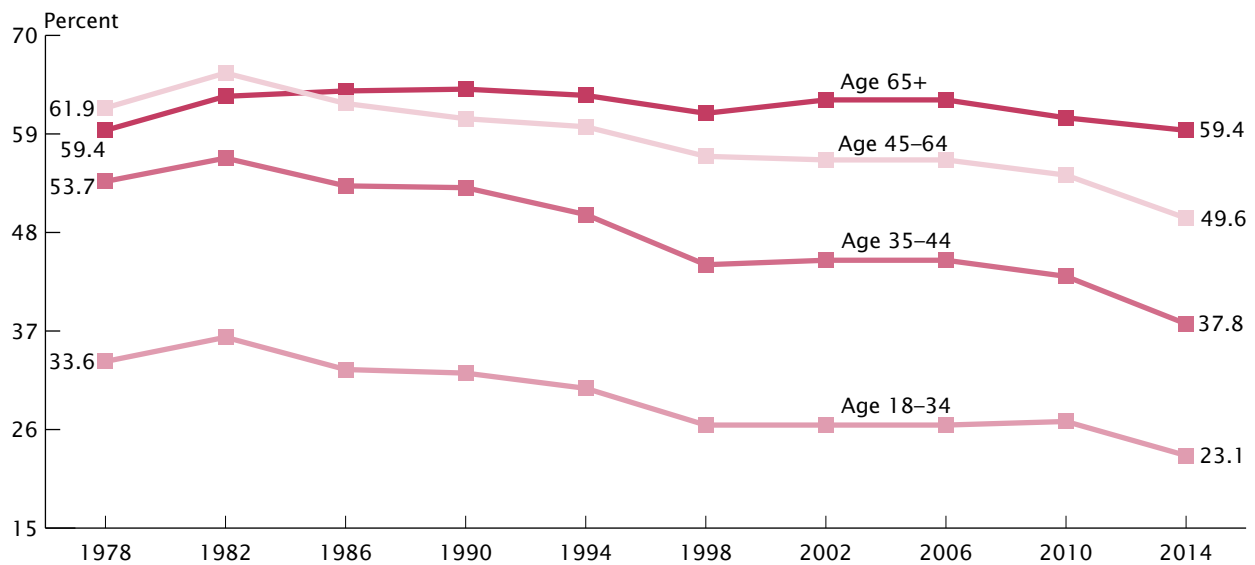
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 1978–2014.

Figure 3.
Voting Rates in Congressional Elections by Race and Ethnicity: 1978 to 2014



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 1978–2014.

Figure 4.
Historical Voting Rates in Congressional Elections by Age: 1978 to 2014



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 1978–2014.

Historically, voting rate levels have been associated with certain demographic characteristics, such as race, Hispanic origin, and age (Brooks and Manza, 1997; File and Crissey, 2010; File, 2013). Since 1978, voting rates for non-Hispanic Blacks and Hispanics have trailed those for non-Hispanic Whites in every congressional election, although the size of those differences has fluctuated depending on the year (Figure 3).⁶

Over the course of the congressional election time-series, voting rates declined for non-Hispanic Whites (50.6 percent in 1978, 45.8 percent in 2014) and Hispanics (35.7 in 1978, 27.0 percent in 2014), but the apparent change for non-Hispanic Blacks over this

⁶ In 2012, a Census Bureau report documented Black voting rates eclipsing White voting rates for the first time in the presidential election (File, 2013). Others have argued that this first happened in 2008. See <www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2013/04/29/black-turnout-was-higher-than-white-turnout-in-2012-and-2008/> and <www.nytimes.com/2013/05/09/us/politics/rate-of-black-voters-surpassed-that-for-whites-in-2012.html?_r=0>.

period was not statistically significant (39.5 percent in 1978, 40.6 percent in 2014).

In recent elections, voting rates have also tended to increase with age (File, 2008; File, 2014). Since 1978, voting rates for 18- to 34-year-olds have trailed those for older Americans in every congressional election, although the size of those differences has fluctuated depending on the year (Figure 4). Since 1986, Americans 65 and older have voted at higher rates than all other age groups. In 2014, for example, the voting rate for the 65 and older group was 59.4 percent, about 10 percentage points above the next-highest age group. The population 65 and older is also the only age group where voting rates did not drop between 1978 and 2014.⁷

In 2014, voting rates increased steadily with age, from a low of 23.1 percent among 18- to

⁷ Voting rates for the 65 and older population were not statistically different in 1978 and 2014.

34-year-olds, to a high of 59.4 percent for those 65 and older (Table 2).

In 2014, 43.0 percent of women reported voting, compared with 40.8 percent of men. Reported voting rates were also higher for non-Hispanic Whites (45.8 percent) than for non-Hispanic Blacks (40.6 percent), non-Hispanic Asians (26.9 percent), and Hispanics (27.0 percent).⁸

Being married with a spouse living in the same household corresponded to higher voting rates (50.9 percent), particularly in comparison with those who reported having never been married (25.9 percent). Native-born citizens were more likely to report voting than naturalized citizens (42.7 percent and 34.1 percent, respectively).

Reported voting rates were also high among those with advanced

⁸ In 2014, voting rates for non-Hispanic Asians and Hispanics were not statistically different. The voting rates for men and non-Hispanic Blacks were also not significantly different.

Table 2.

Characteristics of U.S. Citizens by Voting Status: 2014—Con.

(Numbers in thousands)

Characteristic	Citizens							
	18 and older	Percent	Reported voters	Percent	Reported nonvoters ¹	Percent	Nonrespondents ²	Percent
Total, 18 years and older . . .	219,941	100.0	92,251	41.9	93,032	42.3	34,658	15.8
Age								
18 to 34 years	64,600	29.4	14,945	23.1	37,454	58.0	12,201	18.9
35 to 44 years	34,334	15.6	12,986	37.8	15,883	46.3	5,465	15.9
45 to 64 years	76,882	35.0	38,111	49.6	27,514	35.8	11,257	14.6
65 years and older	44,125	20.1	26,210	59.4	12,180	27.6	5,735	13.0
Sex								
Male	105,299	47.9	43,009	40.8	45,472	43.2	16,819	16.0
Female	114,642	52.1	49,243	43.0	47,560	41.5	17,839	15.6
Race and Hispanic Origin								
Non-Hispanic, White alone	153,750	69.9	70,351	45.8	60,869	39.6	22,530	14.7
Non-Hispanic, Black alone	26,559	12.1	10,789	40.6	10,687	40.2	5,083	19.1
Non-Hispanic, Asian alone	9,296	4.2	2,503	26.9	4,701	50.6	2,092	22.5
Non-Hispanic, other race	5,245	2.4	1,833	34.9	2,718	51.8	694	13.2
Hispanic (any race)	25,092	11.4	6,775	27.0	14,057	56.0	4,259	17.0
Nativity Status								
Native	200,605	91.2	85,667	42.7	83,569	41.7	31,369	15.6
Naturalized	19,336	8.8	6,584	34.1	9,463	48.9	3,289	17.0
Marital Status								
Married, spouse present	113,278	51.5	57,690	50.9	39,814	35.1	15,774	13.9
Married, spouse absent	2,666	1.2	897	33.7	1,265	47.5	503	18.9
Widowed	13,712	6.2	6,538	47.7	5,315	38.8	1,860	13.6
Divorced	24,277	11.0	9,808	40.4	10,899	44.9	3,570	14.7
Separated	4,524	2.1	1,381	30.5	2,461	54.4	682	15.1
Never married	61,484	28.0	15,937	25.9	33,278	54.1	12,269	20.0
Employment Status								
In civilian labor force	141,062	64.1	58,085	41.2	61,145	43.3	21,833	15.5
Government workers	19,559	8.9	11,053	56.5	5,715	29.2	2,791	14.3
Private industry	105,263	47.9	40,695	38.7	47,854	45.5	16,713	15.9
Self-employed	8,659	3.9	4,068	47.0	3,234	37.4	1,356	15.7
Unemployed	7,582	3.4	2,268	29.9	4,341	57.3	972	12.8
Not in labor force	78,879	35.9	34,167	43.3	31,887	40.4	12,825	16.3
Duration of Residence³								
Less than 1 year	25,242	11.5	6,354	25.2	17,763	70.4	1,125	4.5
1 to 2 years	25,805	11.7	9,184	35.6	15,696	60.8	925	3.6
3 to 4 years	23,289	10.6	10,201	43.8	12,374	53.1	714	3.1
5 years or longer	114,472	52.0	65,468	57.2	45,318	39.6	3,687	3.2
Not reported	31,133	14.2	1,045	3.4	1,880	6.0	28,208	90.6
Region								
Northeast	39,712	18.1	15,776	39.7	17,146	43.2	6,790	17.1
Midwest	48,731	22.2	21,571	44.3	20,415	41.9	6,745	13.8
South	82,297	37.4	34,255	41.6	35,336	42.9	12,706	15.4
West	49,201	22.4	20,649	42.0	20,134	40.9	8,418	17.1
Educational Attainment								
Less than 9th grade	5,495	2.5	1,305	23.7	3,269	59.5	921	16.8
9th to 12th grade, no diploma	15,683	7.1	3,396	21.7	9,573	61.0	2,713	17.3
High school graduate	65,610	29.8	22,262	33.9	32,360	49.3	10,988	16.7
Some college or associate degree	66,058	30.0	27,514	41.7	28,304	42.8	10,240	15.5
Bachelor's degree	43,515	19.8	23,151	53.2	13,841	31.8	6,524	15.0
Advanced degree	23,580	10.7	14,624	62.0	5,684	24.1	3,271	13.9

See notes at end of table.

Table 2.

Characteristics of U.S. Citizens by Voting Status: 2014—Con.

(Numbers in thousands)

Characteristic	Citizens							
	18 and older	Percent	Reported voters	Percent	Reported nonvoters ¹	Percent	Nonrespondents ²	Percent
Veteran Status⁴	220,082	100.0	92,428	42.0	93,063	42.3	34,591	15.7
Veteran	21,293	9.7	11,540	54.2	7,023	33.0	2,730	12.8
Nonveteran	198,789	90.3	80,888	40.7	86,040	43.3	31,861	16.0
Annual Family Income⁵								
Total for family members . . .	159,906	100.0	70,201	43.9	65,079	40.7	24,626	15.4
Under \$10,000	4,983	3.1	1,222	24.5	3,246	65.1	516	10.3
\$10,000 to \$14,999	4,465	2.8	1,342	30.1	2,642	59.2	481	10.8
\$15,000 to \$19,999	3,740	2.3	1,152	30.8	2,204	58.9	384	10.3
\$20,000 to \$29,999	11,673	7.3	4,108	35.2	6,603	56.6	963	8.2
\$30,000 to \$39,999	13,222	8.3	5,375	40.7	6,587	49.8	1,259	9.5
\$40,000 to \$49,999	10,372	6.5	4,400	42.4	5,018	48.4	955	9.2
\$50,000 to \$74,999	25,787	16.1	12,368	48.0	11,077	43.0	2,342	9.1
\$75,000 to \$99,999	17,623	11.0	9,322	52.9	6,747	38.3	1,553	8.8
\$100,000 to \$149,999	18,809	11.8	10,429	55.4	6,685	35.5	1,695	9.0
\$150,000 and over	16,935	10.6	9,578	56.6	5,536	32.7	1,821	10.8
Income not reported	32,296	20.2	10,905	33.8	8,734	27.0	12,657	39.2

¹ The "Reported nonvoters" column includes only respondents who answered "no" to the question "Did you vote in the election held on Tuesday, November 4, 2014?"

² Respondents who answered "don't know" and those who did not respond or were not asked the voting question are included in the "Nonrespondents" column.

³ Some states have durational residency requirements in order to register and to vote.

⁴ The veterans estimates were derived using the veteran weight, which uses different procedures for construction than the person weight used to produce estimates in other tables for 2014.

⁵ Limited to people in families.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2014.

degrees (62.0 percent), those who had lived in their current home for 5 years or longer (57.2 percent), and those living in households making over \$150,000 in family income (56.6 percent).⁹ The top tier of the voting rate distribution also included government workers (56.5 percent) and military veterans (54.2 percent).¹⁰

COMPOSITION OF THE ELECTORATE IN RECENT ELECTIONS, 2004–2014

Previous Census Bureau research has documented how the voting population has grown more diverse in recent presidential elections, and it is worth exploring whether the

⁹ Voting rates were not significantly different between the following income groups: \$10,000–\$14,999 and \$15,000–\$19,999; \$30,000–\$39,999 and \$40,000–\$49,999; and \$100,000–\$149,999 and \$150,000 and above.

¹⁰ The voting estimates for living in current home for 5 years or longer, living in households with family income over \$150,000, and government workers are all not significantly different from one another.

same applies to congressional elections (File, 2013). Any examination of voting behavior must consider the type of election. For example, reports of voter turnout may differ by race and Hispanic origin, but those differences may vary by type of election. Therefore, in addition to presenting the characteristics of the 2014 voting population, the following section also explores how the voting population's composition has changed in recent congressional and presidential elections.¹¹

Between 2004 and 2014, there were six national elections: three presidential and three congressional. Across presidential elections during this period, the non-Hispanic White share of the voting population dropped from 79.2 percent in 2004 to 73.7 percent in 2012. Across congressional

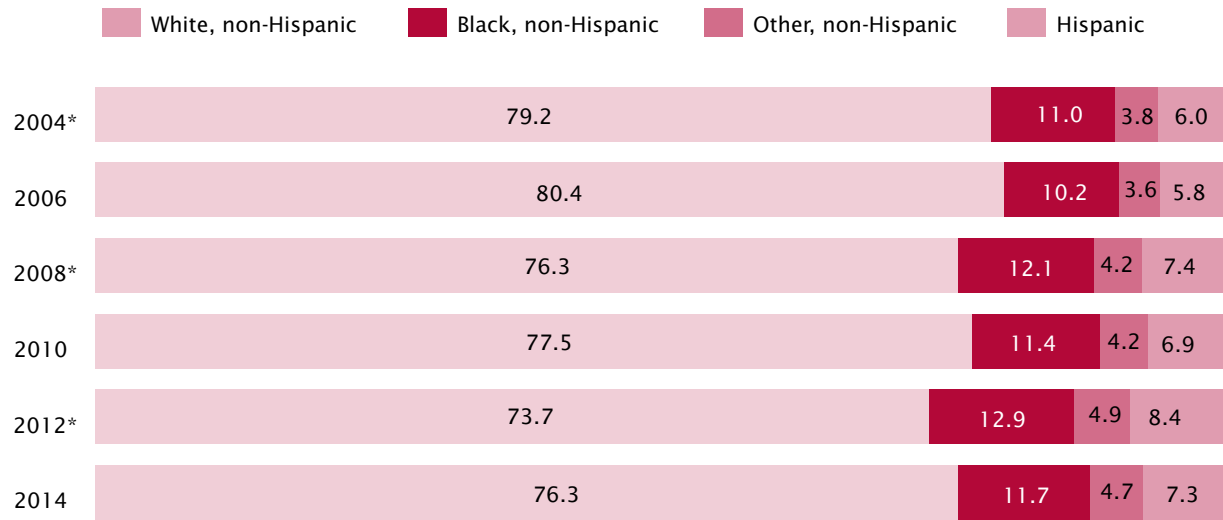
¹¹ When race outcomes are discussed in the remainder of this report, the estimates are for the White, non-Hispanic; Black, non-Hispanic; and Hispanic populations (of any race).

elections, the non-Hispanic White share fell from 80.4 percent in 2006 to 76.3 percent in 2014 (Figure 5). Overall, across the last three election cycles, the share of the voting population that is non-Hispanic White has decreased in both types of elections, although the percentage point shift has been slightly more pronounced in presidential elections (5.5 percent) than in congressional elections (4.1 percent).

Age is another factor that impacts voter turnout (File, 2014). Between 2004 and 2014, no matter the type of election in question, voters between the ages of 45 and 64 years consistently made up a higher percentage of voters than other age groups (Figure 6). This is largely attributable to the fact that the overall population of this age group is larger than the other age groups.

Figure 5.

Race and Hispanic Origin Distribution of the Voting Population: 2004 to 2014

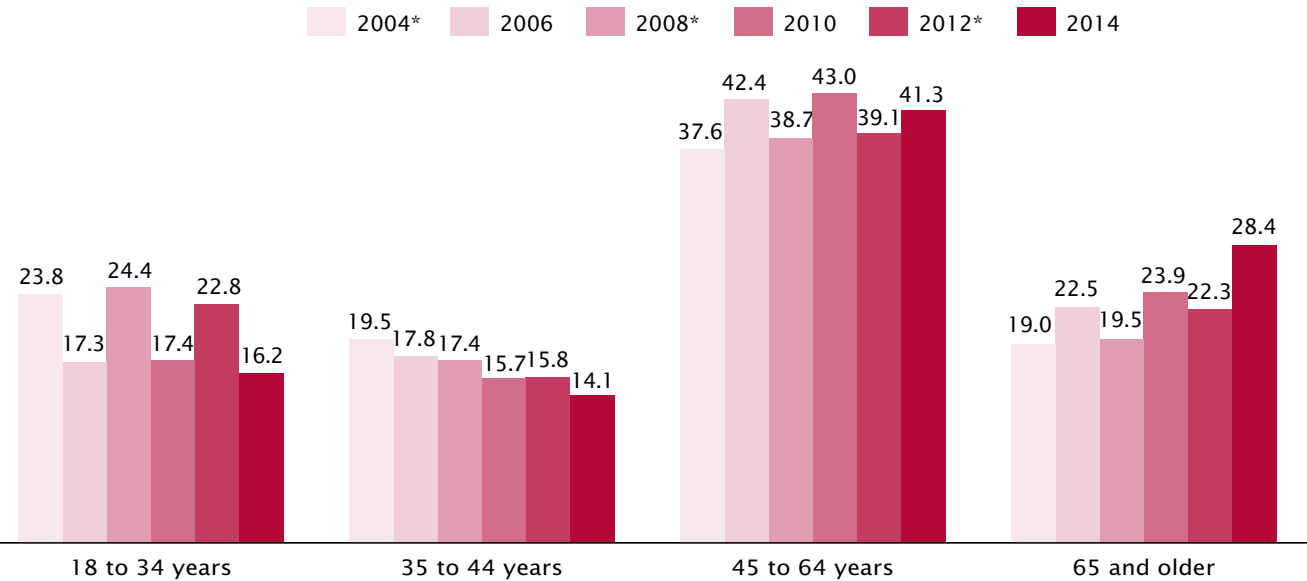


*Presidential election year.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2004–2014.

Figure 6.

Age Distribution of the Voting Population: 2004 to 2014



*Presidential election year.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2004–2014.

Figure 6 is most informative when we look at how the percentages of voters within age groups have changed over time and between elections. For example, young people aged 18 through 34 consistently made up larger percentages of the electorate in presidential election years than in congressional election years.

For 35- through 44-year-olds, there has been a steady decline in share of the electorate for both congressional and presidential elections.¹² Older voters ran in the opposite direction, as voters 65 and older increased their share of the electorate over the course of the time series for both types of elections. Older voters also made up a larger percentage of congressional electorates than presidential electorates.¹³ In 2014, for example, voters 65 and older composed 28.4

¹² The share of the electorate for those aged 35 through 44 were not significantly different for 2006 and 2008 and for 2010 and 2012.

¹³ Between 2004 and 2008 electoral shares were not statistically different for the 65 years and older population.

percent of all voters, compared with 22.3 percent in the most recent presidential election.

Overall, across the last three election cycles, the voting population has grown more racially and ethnically diverse, while the share of the voting population that is 65 and older has also increased, both for congressional and presidential elections. At least part of these observed increases are attributable to population trends, as the American population at large has grown older and more diverse in recent years (Colby and Ortman, 2014). However, the question of whether these changes in the electorate are being driven by simple population change, or by increased or decreased engagement from certain groups, remains an open question, one that this report turns to in the following section.

A CLOSER LOOK AT RACE, HISPANIC ORIGIN, AND AGE

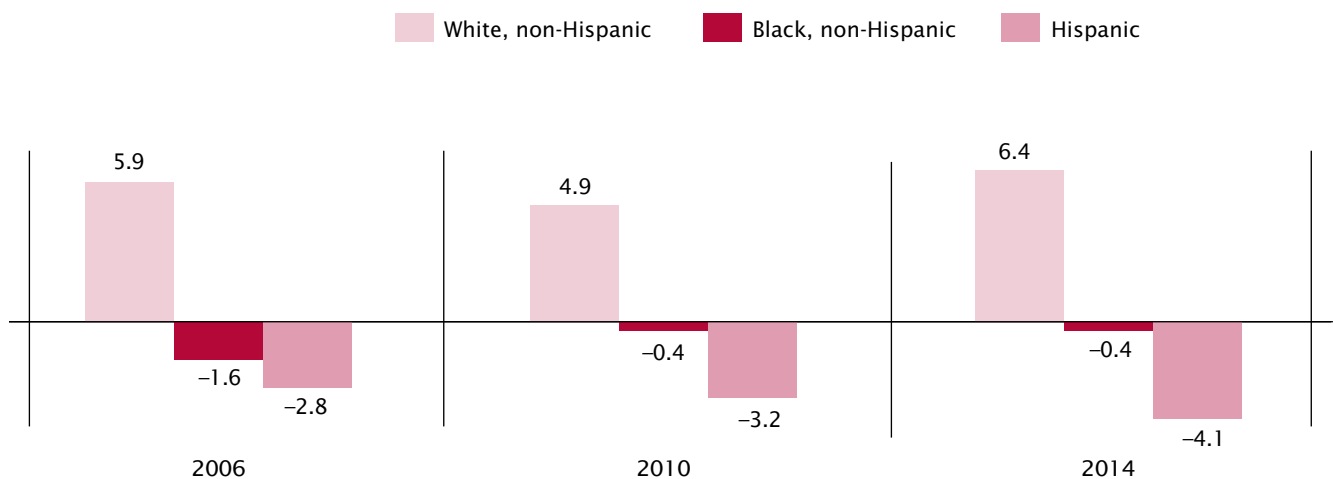
The following section looks specifically at how voter turnout

intersects with voter eligibility in an effort to better understand the dynamics of recent congressional electorates. By comparing a subpopulation's share of the voting population to their share of the voting-eligible population, an assessment can be made concerning how a given subpopulation is voting relative to their eligibility. For example, if a subpopulation based on age or race accounts for both 50 percent of the voting population and 50 percent of the eligible population (i.e., citizens 18 and older), then it can be said that this subpopulation is voting evenly with their eligibility. However, in many instances, a subpopulation will report voting in either higher or lower percentages than their share of the eligible population would indicate.

Figure 7 displays these results by race and Hispanic origin. In 2006, non-Hispanic Whites made up 74.5 percent of the voting-eligible population and 80.4 percent of the population that actually voted.

Figure 7.

Differences Between Shares of the Eligible Population and Voting Population by Race and Hispanic Origin: 2006 to 2014



Note: -0.4 is not significantly different from zero.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2004–2014.

Figure 8.
**Differences Between Shares of the Eligible Population and Voting Population
 by Age: 2006 to 2014**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2004–2014.

This means that in the congressional election of 2006, non-Hispanic Whites’ share of the vote exceeded their share of the eligible population by 5.9 percentage points.¹⁴

In the following congressional elections of 2010 and 2014, non-Hispanic Whites continued to make up a larger share of voters than of the eligible population, by 4.9 percentage points in 2010 and by 6.4 percentage points in 2014.¹⁵

Meanwhile, in 2006, minority groups made up a smaller share of the electorate than they did of the eligible population: non-Hispanic

Blacks by –1.6 percentage points and Hispanics by –2.8 percentage points. In 2010 and 2014, however, non-Hispanic Blacks’ share of the vote grew to a level consistent with their eligibility.¹⁶ During the same period, the difference between Hispanics’ share of the vote and share of the eligible population had fallen to –4.1 percentage points.

Figure 8 displays these results by age. In 2006, young people aged 18 to 34 made up 28.9 percent of the voting eligible population and 17.3 percent of the population that actually voted. This means that in the congressional election of 2006, the 18- to 34-year-old share of the vote was lower than their share of the eligible population by –11.6 percentage points. In the following congressional elections of 2010 and 2014, young people continued to vote at rates lower than their

eligibility, first by –12.1 percentage points in 2010, then by –13.2 percentage points in 2014.¹⁷

Over the course of the last three congressional elections, people aged 35 to 44 also made up a smaller share of voters than they did of the eligible population, although to a lesser degree than 18- to 34-year-olds (–0.9 percentage points in both 2006 and 2010; –1.5 percentage points in 2014).¹⁸ People aged 45 to 64 accounted for a larger proportion of voters than of eligible population in each election, while individuals 65 and older have made up a larger share of voters than their share of eligible population in every congressional election since 2006.¹⁹ Moreover,

¹⁴ For any demographic group, their share of the voting population reflects turnout relative to other groups. For example, an increase in women’s share of the voting population would occur if their turnout increased and men’s turnout either decreased or was not significantly different. Alternatively, an increase of women’s share would occur if the voting rate of men decreased while women’s turnout either decreased or was not significantly different.

¹⁵ The differences observed between turnout and eligibility rates for non-Hispanic Whites in 2006 and 2014 were not statistically different.

¹⁶ Voting at a level consistent with eligibility means that a subpopulation’s share of the eligible population and voting population were not statistically different.

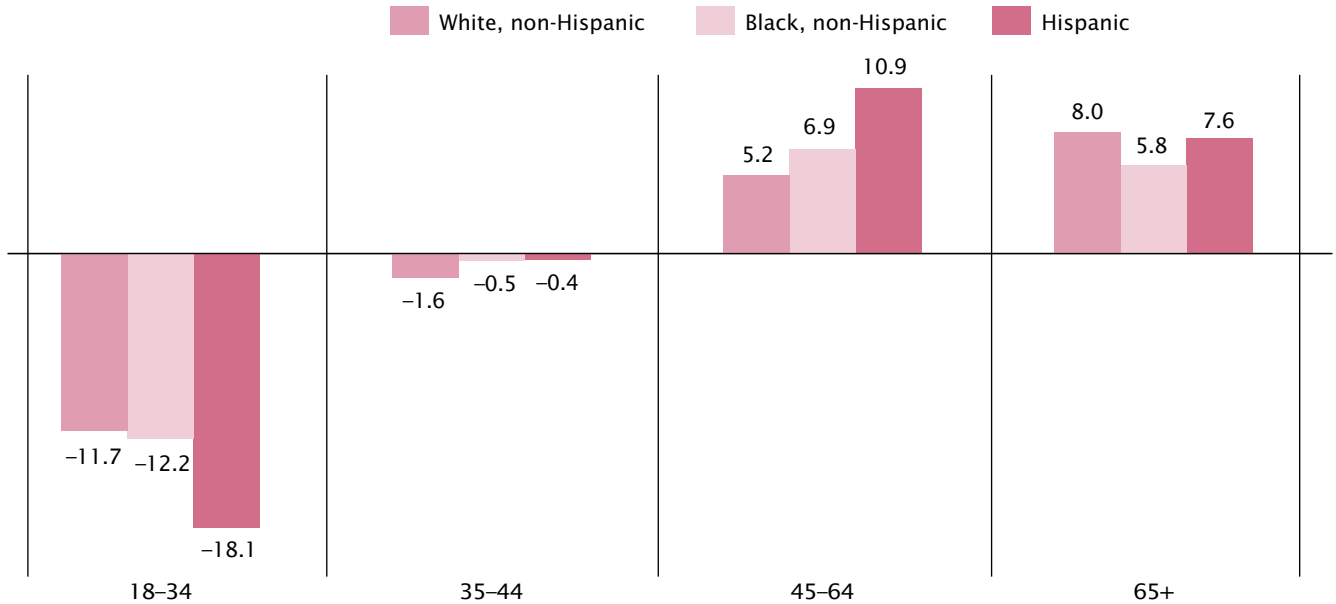
¹⁷ The differences observed between turnout and eligibility for 18- to 34-year-olds in 2006 and 2010 were not statistically different.

¹⁸ The –0.9 estimates in 2006 and 2010 were not statistically different.

¹⁹ The differences observed between turnout and eligibility rates across elections for those aged 45 to 64 were not significantly different.

Figure 9.

Differences Between Shares of the Eligible Population and Voting Population by Race, Hispanic Origin, and Age: 2014



Note: -0.5 and -0.4 are not significantly different from zero.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2004–2014.

the magnitude of their voting differentials for individuals 65 and older has increased to 8.3 percentage points in 2014 (up from 5.3 percentage points in 2006 and 6.0 percentage points in 2010).

Figure 9 displays 2014 results for each race and Hispanic origin group by age in an effort to illustrate where the differences in voting and eligibility rates are most pronounced. Among Hispanics in the most recent congressional election, young people between the ages of 18 to 34 made up 43.5 percent of the Hispanic eligible population and 25.4 percent of the Hispanic population that actually voted. This means that among Hispanics, 18- to 34-year-olds made up a smaller share of voters than of the eligible population in 2014 by -18.1 percentage points, the largest observed gap in either direction.

Hispanics between the ages of 45 to 64 showed one of the largest

differences between turnout and eligibility (10.9 percentage points), while Hispanics 65 and older were more prevalent among voters than among the eligible population by 7.6 percentage points.²⁰ Young non-Hispanic Whites and non-Hispanic Blacks, aged 18 to 34, voted at levels below their eligibility (-11.7 percentage points for non-Hispanic Whites and -12.2 percentage points for non-Hispanic Blacks). Non-Hispanic Whites and non-Hispanic Blacks aged 45 to 64 made up a larger share of the electorate than of the eligible population (5.2 percentage points for non-Hispanic Whites and 6.9 percentage points for non-Hispanic Blacks), as did non-Hispanic Whites and non-Hispanic Blacks aged 65 and older (8.0 percentage points for

²⁰ The difference observed between turnout and eligibility rates for 45- to 64-year-old Hispanics was not statistically different from the difference observed between turnout and eligibility rates for both 65 and older Hispanics and 65 and older non-Hispanic Whites.

non-Hispanic Whites and 5.8 percentage points for non-Hispanic Blacks).²¹

Overall, these results point to an electorate that is growing older and more diverse, although non-Hispanic Whites continue to be a larger portion of the voting population than of the eligible population. Young people across all races and origins had shares of the voting population that were lower than their eligibility, although this disparity was largest for young Hispanics, while older Americans, regardless of race and Hispanic origin, had shares of the voting

²¹ The difference observed between turnout and eligibility rates for young non-Hispanic Whites (-11.7) was not statistically different from young non-Hispanic Blacks (-12.2). The difference observed between turnout and eligibility rates for 45- to 64-year-old non-Hispanic Blacks (6.9) was not statistically different from 45- to 64-year-old non-Hispanic Whites (5.2), 65 and older non-Hispanic Blacks (5.8), and 65 and older non-Hispanic Whites (8.0). The difference observed between turnout and eligibility rates for 45- to 64-year-old non-Hispanic Whites (5.2) was not statistically different from 65 and older non-Hispanic Blacks (5.8).

population that were higher than their share of the eligible population in 2014. This increased electoral engagement among older Americans is not simply the product of the American population aging as a whole, as the low levels of voting among young people and the high levels of voting among older Americans have increased in recent congressional elections, even after accounting for changes in age distributions.

TRADITIONAL AND ALTERNATIVE METHODS OF VOTING

Many states have policies in place to allow eligible voters to cast ballots before Election Day, either during an early voting period, by voting with an absentee ballot, or both. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), there are currently 14 states where early voting is *not* offered and an excuse is required to vote with an absentee ballot.²²

The NCSL has provided the following summary of early voting across states:

Early Voting. *In 33 states and the District of Columbia, any qualified voter may cast a ballot in person during a designated period prior to Election Day. No excuse or justification is required.*

Absentee Voting. *All states will mail an absentee ballot to certain voters who request one. The voter may return the ballot by mail or in person. In 20 states, an excuse is required, while the other 27 states and the District of Columbia permit any qualified voter to vote absentee without offering an excuse. Some states offer a permanent absentee ballot list: once a voter asks to be*

²² For more information on the NCSL and their summary of early voting for states, see <www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/absentee-and-early-voting.aspx>.

Table 3.

Overall Method of Voting: 1996 to 2014

(Numbers in thousands)

Election year	On election day ¹	Alternative voting		
		Total	Before election day ¹	By mail
1996*	89.5	10.5	2.7	7.8
1998	89.2	10.8	2.4	8.4
2000*	86.0	14.0	3.8	10.2
2002	85.9	14.1	3.4	10.7
2004*	79.3	20.7	7.8	12.9
2006	80.4	19.6	5.8	13.7
2008*	69.3	30.7	14.3	16.4
2010	73.5	26.5	8.4	18.1
2012*	67.2	32.8	14.3	18.5
2014	68.9	31.2	10.3	20.9

*Presidential election year.

¹ Voted in person.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 1996–2014.

added to the list, s/he will automatically receive an absentee ballot for all future elections.

Mail Voting. *A ballot is automatically mailed to every eligible voter (no request or application is necessary), and the state does not use traditional precinct poll sites that offer in person voting on Election Day. Three states use mail voting.*²³

The CPS first asked about early and absentee voting in 1996 and has done so in every voting supplement since.²⁴ In 2014, 10.3 percent of voters reported voting in person before Election Day, while 20.9 percent reported voting by mail, meaning that in the most recent congressional election, nearly a third of all voters reported some form of alternative voting (31.2 percent) (Table 3).²⁵

The level of alternative voting in 2014 represents about a threefold increase since 1996, when only

²³ In Colorado, Oregon, and Washington, all ballots are cast through the mail. In 2014, a reported 30.6 percent of mail voting in the CPS came from those three states.

²⁴ Between 1996 and 2002, the CPS asked a single question about timing and method of voting. From 2004 onward, the CPS has asked two questions, one about voting in person or by mail, and another about voting early or on Election Day.

²⁵ The estimates presented in this section are only for individuals with valid responses to the method and timing questions.

10.5 percent of voters reported voting by alternative methods. Over this period, alternative voting has increased in a seesaw pattern, with alternative voting rates tending to increase in presidential election years, decrease slightly in the following congressional election, and then increase again in the following presidential election.²⁶

In 2008, for example, the rate of alternative voting increased to 30.7 percent and then dropped to 26.5 percent in 2010. In the next presidential election, 2012, the rate of alternative voters once again increased (32.8 percent) before dropping off slightly again in the most recent congressional election of 2014 (31.2 percent).²⁷

In most years of this analysis, non-Hispanic Whites and Hispanics have reported relatively comparable rates of alternative voting.²⁸ In 1996, the rates for non-Hispanic Whites were slightly higher than for Hispanics, whereas in the two most recent

²⁶ The years 1998 and 2002 were exceptions, as alternative voting rates were not significantly different in comparison to the prior presidential election year in those two instances.

²⁷ The 2008 rate of alternative voting is not statistically different from 2014.

²⁸ Between 1998 and 2010, the rates of alternative voting for non-Hispanic Whites and Hispanics were not statistically different.

Figure 10.
Alternative Method of Voting Reported by Race and Hispanic Origin: 1996 to 2014



*Presidential election year.
 Note: Alternative method includes those who voted early and/or by absentee ballot.
 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 1996–2014.

congressional elections, the rates for Hispanics have been higher than for non-Hispanic Whites. Alternative voting rates for non-Hispanic Blacks, meanwhile, have tended to lag behind those for both Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites (Figure 10).

However, exceptions were observed in the presidential elections of both 2008 and 2012, when reporting of alternative voting increased among non-Hispanic Blacks to a level not significantly different from both non-Hispanic Whites and Hispanics in 2008 and to a level not significantly different from non-Hispanic Whites but still trailing Hispanics in 2012.

SUMMARY

In 2014, the overall voting rate was the lowest for a congressional election since the CPS first asked about voting and citizenship status in 1978. However, certain demographic patterns were observed, as voting rates were highest for

Americans 65 years and older, non-Hispanic Whites, individuals with high levels of education, and those with relatively high incomes.

Overall, across the last three election cycles, the voting population has grown more racially and ethnically diverse. Still, despite this recent diversification, non-Hispanic Whites continued to make up a larger share of voters than of the eligible population, while Hispanics continued to make up a smaller share of voters than of the eligible population. Meanwhile, non-Hispanic Blacks reported voting at a level not statistically different from their eligibility in 2010 and 2014.

In recent elections, voting rates have been low among young people and high among older Americans. These results are not the product of the American population aging as a whole, as both the low level of engagement among young people and the high level of engagement among older Americans have

increased in recent congressional elections, even after accounting for changes in age distributions.

Finally, since 1996, Americans have reported about a threefold increase in alternative voting methods. In most elections, alternative voting has been significantly higher among non-Hispanic Whites and Hispanics than for non-Hispanic Blacks, with exceptions observed in both 2008 and 2012, when alternative voting for non-Hispanic Blacks increased.

ACCURACY OF THE ESTIMATES

The population represented (i.e., the population universe) in the Voting and Registration Supplement to the November 2014 CPS is the civilian noninstitutionalized population living in the United States. The excluded institutionalized population is composed primarily of individuals in correctional institutions and nursing homes.

The November CPS supplement, which asks questions on voting and registration participation, provides the basis for estimates in this report. The first question in the 2014 supplement asked if respondents voted in the election held on Tuesday, November 4, 2014. If respondents did not respond to the question or answered “No” or “Do Not Know,” they were then asked if they were registered to vote in the election.

As in all surveys, the CPS estimates are subject to sampling and non-sampling error. Data users should observe the size of standard errors when interpreting the data presented in this report and accompanying table packages. The larger the margin of error, the less reliable the estimate. All comparisons presented in this report have taken sampling error into account and are significant at the 90 percent confidence level.

Nonsampling error in surveys is attributable to a variety of sources, such as survey design, the respondent’s interpretation of a question, the respondent’s willingness and ability to provide correct and accurate answers, and post-survey practices like question coding and response classification. To minimize these errors, the Census Bureau employs quality control procedures in sample selection, the wording of questions, interviewing, coding, data processing, and data analysis.

The CPS weighting procedure uses ratio estimation to adjust sample estimates to independent estimates of the national population by age, race, sex, and Hispanic origin. This weighting partially corrects for bias due to undercoverage of certain populations, but biases may still be present when people are missed by the survey who differ from those interviewed in ways other than age, race, sex, and Hispanic origin. We

do not precisely know the effect of this weighting procedure on other variables in the survey. All of these considerations affect comparisons across different surveys or data sources.

Further information on the source of the data and accuracy of the estimates, including standard errors and confidence intervals, can be found at <www.census.gov/apsd/techdoc/cps/> or by contacting the Demographic Statistical Methods Division via e-mail at <dsmd.source.and.accuracy@census.gov>.

The CPS estimates used in this report are an important analytic tool in election studies because they identify the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of people by voter status. However, as discussed earlier, these estimates may differ from those based on administrative data or exit polls.

Each state’s board of elections tabulates the vote counts for each national election, while the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives reports these state results in an aggregate form for the entire country. These tallies, which are typically viewed as the official results for a specific election, show the number of votes counted for specific offices. In the elections discussed in this report, the official count of comparison is either the total number of votes cast for the office of the President (in presidential election years) or the total number of votes cast for a House of Representatives or Senate seat (in congressional election years).

Discrepancies occur in each election between the CPS estimates and these official counts.²⁹ In previous

²⁹ Information about state regulations for registration and voting can be found at the NCSL Web site at <www.ncsl.org> or from the individual state election offices, which are typically (but not always) the state’s Secretary of State office.

years, the disparity has varied, with official tallies typically showing lower turnout than the estimates used in these types of reports.³⁰ Differences between the official counts and the CPS may be a combination of an understatement of the official numbers and an overstatement in the CPS estimates, as described below.

Understatement of Official Vote Tallies: Ballots are sometimes invalidated and thrown out during the counting process and therefore do not appear in the official counts as reported by the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives. Official vote counts also frequently do not include mismarked, unreadable, and blank ballots. Additionally, because the total number of official votes cast is typically determined by counting votes for a specific office (such as President or U.S. Representative), voters who did not vote for this office, but who did vote for a different office in the same election, are not included in the official reported tally. In all of these instances, it is conceivable that individuals would be counted as voters in the CPS and not counted in the official tallies.

Overstatement of Voting the CPS: Some of the error in estimating turnout in the CPS is the result of population controls and survey coverage. Respondent misreporting is also a source of error in the CPS estimates. Previous analyses based on reinterviews showed that respondents and proxy respondents are consistent in their reported answers and thus misunderstanding the questions does not fully account for the difference

³⁰ The official count of votes cast can be found on the Web page of the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives at <<http://history.house.gov/Institution/Election-Statistics/Election-Statistics/>> or on the Web page of the Federal Election Commission at <www.fec.gov/pubrec/electionresults.shtml>.

between the official counts and the CPS. However, other studies that matched survey responses with voting records indicate that part of the discrepancy between survey estimates and official counts is the result of respondent misreporting, particularly vote overreporting for the purpose of appearing to behave in a socially desirable way (Holbrook and Krosnick, 2009).

As discussed earlier, the issue of vote overreporting is not unique to the CPS. Other surveys consistently overstate voter turnout as well, including other highly respected national-level surveys like the American National Election Studies (ANES) and the General Social Survey (GSS). The potential reasons why respondents might incorrectly report voting in an election are myriad and include intentional misreporting, legitimate confusion over whether a vote was cast or not, and methodological survey issues related to question wording, method of survey administration, and specific question nonresponse.

Voting Not Captured in the CPS: The CPS covers only the civilian noninstitutionalized population residing in the United States, and therefore does not capture voting for citizens residing in the United States who were in the military or living in institutions. The CPS also does not capture voting for citizens residing outside the United States, both civilian and military, who cast absentee ballots.³¹

³¹ Demographic information for Armed Forces members (enumerated in off-base housing or on-base with their families) are included on the CPS data files. However, no labor force information is collected of Armed Forces members in any month. In March, supplemental data on income are included for Armed Forces members. This is the only month that nondemographic information is included for Armed Forces members.

MORE INFORMATION

Detailed table packages are available that provide demographic characteristics of the population by voting and registration status. The Census Bureau also provides a series of historical tables and graphics, in addition to an interactive “Voting Hot Report.” Electronic versions of these products and this report are available at <www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting>.

CONTACT

U.S. Census Bureau Customer Services Center
1-800-923-8282 (toll free)
<https://ask.census.gov/>

SUGGESTED CITATION

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USER COMMENTS

The Census Bureau welcomes the comments and advice of users of our data and reports. Please send comments and suggestions to:

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Washington, DC, 20233-8500

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