# Characteristics of Voters in the Presidential Election of 2016

**Population Characteristics** 

### **Current Population Reports**

By Thom File P20-582 September 2018

### INTRODUCTION

For American citizens, voting is among the most fundamental and important civic opportunities. Since 1964, every 2 years following national elections, the U.S. Census Bureau has fielded the Voting and Registration Supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS).<sup>1</sup> The estimates derived from this survey provide some of the most consistently reliable estimates of the social, economic, and demographic characteristics of American voters available to the public.

National elections generally fall into two categories: elections where congressional seats are the highest offices decided and years where voters decide on the office of the President and congressional seats. Election results and voting patterns tend to vary between these two types of elections. Voter turnout is consistently higher in years with presidential races (File and Crissey, 2010; File, 2015), and this report will focus mainly on presidential election years between 1980 and 2016. More specifically, the following analysis will highlight characteristics of reported voters in presidential election years, with a specific focus on age, race and Hispanic origin, sex, and educational attainment, characteristics that have historically been associated with turnout. (Brooks and Manza, 1997; Dittmar, 2015; File, 2013; File, 2014).

Although the Census Bureau has collected voting and registration data since 1964, the earliest year in this

<sup>1</sup> The supplement is typically fielded during the week immediately following a national election. For example, in 2016, Census Bureau staff conducted interviews during the period of November 13–19.

report is 1980.<sup>2</sup> Readers interested in voting estimates from earlier years can utilize historical CPS voting products available at <www.census.gov/data/tables /time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/voting -historical-time-series.html>.

This report's first section, Understanding Voting, presents an overview of the CPS voting questionnaire and defines various key terms. The report's second section. Who Votes? Shifts in American Voters Over Time: 1980-2016, presents a broad overview of how the characteristics of voters have changed over the last ten presidential elections, with specific focus on the characteristics of age, race and Hispanic origin, sex, and educational attainment. The third section, The 2016 Voting Population, provides a deeper exploration of the most recent 2016 election, and provides analysis across multiple demographic characteristics at the same time, including age and race and Hispanic origin, educational attainment and race and Hispanic origin, and age and educational attainment. The fourth section, How Voters Vote, explores the ways in which voters exercise their right to vote, and includes a comparison of traditional "day-of-election" voting and increasingly popular alternative methods, such as early and absentee voting, going back to 1996. The report's final section, Why Nonvoters Don't **Vote**, presents results of the reasons people give for either not registering or not voting, and includes historical results going back to the election of 2000.<sup>3</sup>



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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Prior to 1978, there is not a readily available data file that allows for the calculation of demographic breakdowns entirely consistent with later years. Also, prior to that year, the CPS did not ask about citizenship status, which is needed to calculate the citizen voting-age population.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Questions about nonparticipation have changed over the years, and results from questions asked before 2000 are not directly comparable to later data years.

# COMPARING CPS VOTING ESTIMATES TO OFFICIAL REPORTS

The data in this report are based on responses to the CPS November 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 records, such as the official reports from each state disseminated collectively by the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives and the Federal Elections Commission. In general, voting rates from sample surveys like the CPS tend to be higher than official results (Bauman and Julian, 2010: DeBell, et al., 2015: McDonald, 2015: Tourangeau, 2010). Potential explanations for these differences include guestion misreporting, problems with memory or knowledge of others' behavior, and methodological issues related to question wording, method of survey administration, and survey nonresponse bias. Despite these observed differences between CPS estimates and official tallies, the CPS data remain the most comprehensive data source available for examining the social and demographic composition of American voters in federal elections, particularly when examining broad historical results.

### UNDERSTANDING VOTING

The CPS is a monthly labor force survey in which interviews are conducted in approximately 56,000 households across the country, with the primary goal of gathering statistics on employment and producing a national rate of unemployment. Each month supplemental questions are asked about a variety of additional topics, such as health insurance coverage, educational attainment, and computer and Internet use, and every November following national elections, the CPS includes supplemental questions about voting and registration.

Either self-responses or proxy responses, where a single respondent can provide answers for themselves and all additional eligible household members, are allowed. The voting questions are asked of all U.S. citizens who are 18 years or older, and these eligibility criteria are determined using questions about age and citizenship status asked during the core survey.

First, respondents are asked if they voted in the most recent election. If they respond affirmatively, they are assumed to have been registered, whereas nonvoters are asked an additional question about whether they were registered. Dependent on these answers, respondents are then asked additional questions about method of voting and registering, and nonparticipants are asked for the main reason they chose to not participate. All respondents are then asked a final question about how long they have lived at their current address.

Analysis of the Voting and Registration Supplement can vary based on the selected population universe. Typical population universes used by researchers include the total voting-age population (anyone aged 18 and older), the citizen voting-age population (anyone aged 18 and older who is also a citizen), and the registered voter population.

Potential respondents to the survey can be broadly categorized into one of the following groups:

Noncitizens—If a respondent to the core CPS labor force survey indicates not being either a nativeborn or naturalized U.S. citizen, they are not asked the voting and registration questions. In 2016, of the estimated 245.5 million votingage individuals, 21.4 million were non-U.S. citizens.

Nonrespondents—Potential citizen voting-age respondents sometimes do not answer the voting and registration questions for a variety of reasons, including not knowing a valid answer or refusing to answer. In 2016, after post-data collection weights were applied, about 15 percent of the total estimated citizen voting-age population did not have a valid response to the main CPS voting question.

*Nonvoters*—This group includes citizen voting-age respondents who reported not voting on election day. In 2016, there were an estimated 53.9 million nonvoters.

*Voters*—This is the estimated number of people who reported voting. In 2016, there were an estimated 137.5 million voters. The majority of the following report is focused on these individuals.

*Registered*—If a citizen voting-age respondent reports having not voted, they are asked separately

if they were registered to vote.4 In 2016, there were an estimated 157.6 million registered individuals, including all voters and registered nonvoters.

As noted earlier, voting rates are routinely calculated using a variety of population universes (Figure 1). In the most recent presidential election, there were an estimated 137.5 million voters. Although this estimated count of voters does not change, calculated voting rates do change depending on the universe of analysis, as calculated voting rates increase as population universes decrease. For example, in 2016 the voting rate was 56.0 percent for the voting-age population, 61.4 percent for the citizen voting-age population, and 87.3 percent for the registered population. The remainder of this report will focus primarily on reported voters regardless of population universe.

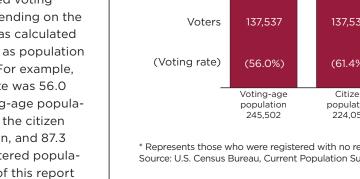
<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of the CPS, reported voters are assumed to have been registered.

### Table 1. Voting and Registration: 1980-2016

(Numbers in thousands)

					Citizens			
Presidential				Registered			Voted	
election year	Total, 18			90 percent co	onfidence		90 percent co	onfidence
	and older	Total	Number	interv	'al	Number	interv	'al
2016	245,502	224,059	157,596	156,854	158,338	137,537	136,772	138,302
2012	235,248	215,081	153,157	152,528	153,786	132,948	132,286	133,610
2008	225,499	206,072	146,311	145,668	146,954	131,144	130,481	131,807
2004	215,694	197,005	142,070	141,420	142,720	125,736	125,068	126,404
2000	202,609	186,366	129,549	128,900	130,198	110,826	110,155	111,497
1996	193,651	179,935	127,661	127,009	128,313	105,017	104,344	105,690
1992	185,684	173,784	126,578	126,036	127,120	113,866	113,290	114,442
1988	178,098	168,495	118,589	117,934	119,244	102,224	101,542	102,906
1984	169,963	162,627	116,106	115,541	116,671	101,878	101,282	102,474
1980	157,085	150,742	105,035	104,737	105,333	93,066	92,689	93,443

Note: Numbers are based on weighted reports of voting behavior derived from a survey sample. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 1980-2016.



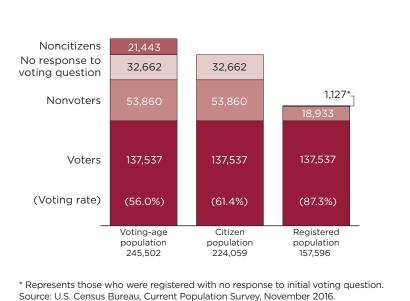
### WHO VOTES? SHIFTS IN AMERICAN VOTERS OVER TIME: 1980-2016

In every presidential election since 1980, the size of the nation's citizen voting-age population has increased, from 150.7 million in

1980 to 224.1 million in 2016 (Table 1). In each election cycle across this time series, the number of voters has also typically increased, from 93.1 million in 1980 and 137.5 million in 2016. Exceptions occurred in 1988, when the number of voters was not statistically

### Figure 1. Voters Among the Total, Citizen, and Registered Voting-Age Populations: 2016

(Population 18 years and older, in thousands)



different from 1984, and in 1996, when the number of voters decreased from the previous presidential election by 8.8 million.

Even in years where the number of voters has increased, the size of these increases have not always been consistent. For example, between 2000 and 2004, the number of voters increased by 14.9 million, the largest increase in the time series explored in this report. As highlighted above, between 1984 and 1988, the number of voters did not increase in a statistically significant way.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to variations in overall voters, the composition of the voting population has changed according to a variety of social and demographic characteristics as well. Since 1980, the greatest percentage of voters have typically been between the ages of 45 and 64, regardless of the election in question (Figure 2).<sup>6</sup> In 1988 and 1992, the greatest proportion of voters were aged 30 to 44, but in most other elections, 45- to 64-year-olds have made up the largest share of voters. Overall, the percentage of voters who were aged 45 to 64 increased from 32.5 percent in 1980 to 37.6 percent in 2016, while the share of voters who were aged 30 to 44 decreased from 28.4 percent in 1980 to 22.5 percent in 2016.

Meanwhile, since 1988, young people aged 18 to 29 have made up the smallest percentage of voters, while elderly voters aged 65 and older have progressed from comprising the smallest percentage of voters in 1980 (16.8 percent) to the second largest percentage in 2016 (24.2). In 2016, the percentage of voters aged 65 and older actually surpassed the percentage of voters who were 30 to 44 (Figure 2).

For the most part, from 1980 to 2012, the share of voters who were

non-Hispanic White decreased from one presidential election cycle to the next (Figure 3).<sup>7</sup> For example, in 1980, 87.6 percent of voters were non-Hispanic White, but by 2012, this number had decreased to 73.7 percent. Over this same period of elections, the distribution of voters who were either non-White or Hispanic increased in most elections.<sup>8</sup> However, in 2016, for only the second time in this series, the percentage of voters who were non-Hispanic White (73.3) was not statistically different from the previous presidential election, meaning that the typically observed year-to-year decrease did not occur in this most recent presidential election cycle. Additionally, 2016 was only the second election

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> The differences between the voter increases of 1996-2000, 2004-2008, and 2012-2016 were not statistically significant from one another.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> In 1984, the percentage of voters who were between the ages of 30–44 and 45–64 were not statistically different.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Between 1988 and 1992, the share of voters who were non-Hispanic White were not statistically different.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Between 1988 and 1992, the share of voters who were either other race non-Hispanic or Hispanic of any race were not statistically different. Between 1996 and 2000, the share of voters who were other race non-Hispanic were not statistically different. Additionally, between 1984 and 1988, and 1988 and 1992, the share of voters who were non-Hispanic Black were not statistically different.

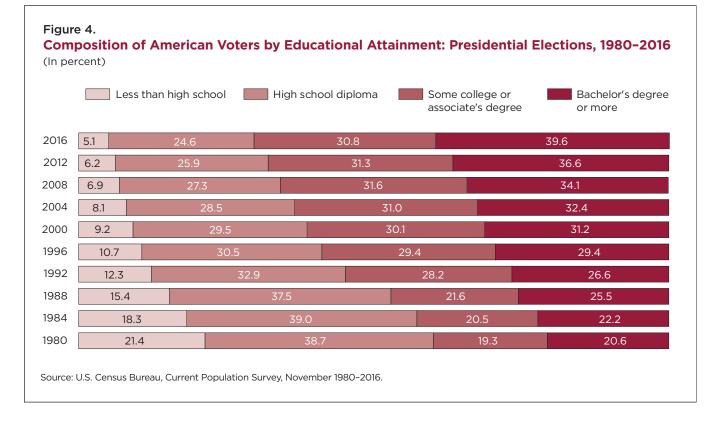
(In perc	cent)			
	18-29 yea	rs old 30-44 yea	ars old 45-64 years old	65 years and older
2016	15.7	22.5	37.6	24.2
2012	15.4	23.1	39.1	22.3
2008	17.1	24.8	38.7	19.5
2004	16.0	27.3	37.6	19.0
2000	14.3	27.3	35.5	20.0
1996	14.9	31.8	33.0	20.3
1992	17.7	33.1	30.2	19.0
1988	18.1	32.0	30.5	19.4
1984	21.7	30.2	2 30.4	4 17.7
980	22.3	28.4	32.	5 16.8

### Figure 3. Composition of American Voters by Race and Hispanic Origin: Presidential Elections, 1980–2016

(In percent)

	White non-Hispanic Black non-Hispanic Other race non-Hisp	panic Hispanic
2016	73.3	11.9 5.5 9.2
2012	73.7	12.9 4.9 8.4
8008	76.3	12.1 4.2 7.4
2004	79.2	11.0 3.8 6.0
2000	80.7	11.5 2.4 5.4
996	82.5	10.6 2.2 4.7
1992	84.6	9.9 3.7
988	84.9	9.8 3.6
1984	85.5	10.0 3.0
980	87.6	8.9 2.6

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 1980-2016.



in this time series where the share of non-Hispanic Black voters decreased, from 12.9 percent in 2012 to 11.9 percent in 2016.<sup>9</sup>

Educational attainment levels have also increased for American voters in recent election cycles (Figure 4). In 1980, about 60 percent of voters had a high school education or less, with 38.7 percent reporting high school completion and 21.4 percent reporting less than a high school education.<sup>10</sup> By 2016, the proportion of voters with a high school education or less had dropped to about 29.7 percent, with 24.6 percent reporting high school completion and 5.1 percent reporting less than a high school education.

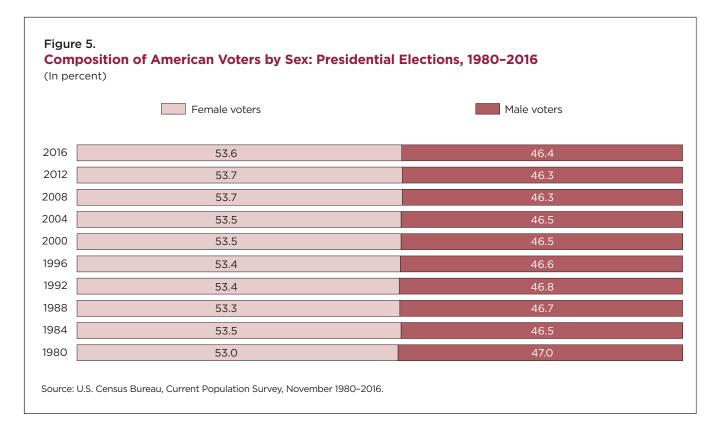
In most elections in this time series the percentage of voters with some college or an associate's degree (19.3 percent in 1980 and 30.8 percent in 2016) and at least a bachelor's degree (20.6 percent in 1980 and 39.6 percent in 2016) have increased.<sup>11</sup> Despite these relative increases in educational attainment, in 2016 a majority of American voters still did not have a college degree.

Despite these observed changes to the makeup of the American voting population with regards to age, race and Hispanic origin, and educational attainment, the composition of the voting population has remained remarkably stable over the years when it comes to the characteristic of sex. Over the course of this time series, the percentage of voters who were women increased slightly from 53.0 percent in 1980 to 53.6 percent in 2016, while the percentage of voters who were men decreased

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Between 2000 and 2004, the share of voters who were non-Hispanic Black also decreased.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> The percentage of voters with less than a high school education were not statistically different between 1980 and 1984.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> The percentage of voters with some college were not statistically different between 2008 and 2012 and between 2004 and 2016.



slightly from 47.0 percent in 1980 to 46.4 percent in 2016 (Figure 5). There were no statistically significant changes in the percentages of men and women voters between consecutive election cycles, and women comprised a larger share of voters than men by about 7 percentage points in each election, which shows how demographically stable the American voting population can be depending on the characteristic.<sup>12</sup>

# THE 2016 VOTING POPULATION

The next section of this report provides a more in-depth focus on the 2016 election. Reported voting rates are typically high among registered voters, and the presidential election of 2016 was no exception. Typically, the registered population and the voting population share similar demographic, social, and economic characteristics (Table 2). For example, in the most recent presidential election, a majority of both the registered and voting populations were female (53.2 percent of the registered population, 53.6 percent of voters), non-Hispanic White (72.4 percent of those registered, 73.3 percent

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> In 2016, women made up 52.0 percent of the citizen voting-age population, compared with 48.0 percent for men.

# Table 2. Registration and Voter Characteristics: 2016

(Numbers in thousands)

Characteristic	Registered	Percent	Voted	Percent
Total	157,596	100.0	137,537	100.0
Age				
18 to 29	27,405	17.4	21,620	15.7
30 to 44	36,129	22.9	30,933	22.5
45 to 64	57,394	36.4	51,668	37.6
65 and older	36,667	23.3	33,314	24.2
Sex				
Male	73,761	46.8	63,801	46.4
Female	83,835	53.2	73,735	53.6
Race and Hispanic Origin				
Non-Hispanic, White alone	114,151	72.4	100,849	73.3
Non-Hispanic, Black alone	19,148	12.2	16,398	11.9
Non-Hispanic, Asian alone	5,602	3.6	4,894	3.6
Non-Hispanic, other race	3,428	2.2	2,713	2.0
Hispanic (any race)	15,267	9.7	12,682	9.2
Nativity Status				
Native	145,351	92.2	126,763	92.2
Naturalized	12,245	7.8	10,774	7.8
Marital Status			70 700	
Married-spouse present	87,423	55.5	79,382	57.7
Married—spouse absent	1,829	1.2	1,520	1.1
Widowed	10,456	6.6	8,938	6.5
Divorced	17,138	10.9	14,572	10.6
Separated	2,848	1.8	2,226	1.6
Never married	37,902	24.1	30,899	22.5
Employment Status				
In civilian labor force	103,341	65.6	90,329	65.7
Government workers	16,620	10.5	15,265	11.1
Private industry	76,477	48.5	66,242	48.2
Self-employed	6,328	4.0	5,742	4.2
Unemployed	3,916	2.5	3,081	2.2
Not in labor force	54,255	34.4	47,208	34.3
Duration of Residence <sup>1</sup>				
Less than 1 year	17,688	11.2	13,958	10.1
1 to 2 years	20,063	12.7	16,945	12.3
3 to 4 years	20,257	12.9	17,562	12.8
5 years or longer	97,512 2,076	61.9 1.3	87,308 1,764	63.5 1.3
Pagion				
Region Northeast	28,121	17.8	24,664	17.9
Midwest	36,200	23.0	31,661	23.0
South	58,840	37.3	50,522	23.0 36.7
West	34,435	21.9	30,690	22.3
west	54,455	21.9	30,090	22.5
Educational Attainment Less than 9th grade	2,389	1.5	1,788	1.3
9th to 12th grade, no diploma	6,906	4.4	5,202	3.8
High school graduate.	40,983	26.0	33,774	24.6
Some college or associate's degree	40,983	31.0	42,296	30.8
Bachelor's degree	37,270	23.6	34,364	25.0
Advanced degree	21,203	13.5	20,113	14.6
	21,2031	13.51	20,1131	14.0

See notes at end of table.

## Table 2. Registration and Voter Characteristics: 2016—Con.

(Numbers in thousands)

Characteristic	Registered	Percent	Voted	Percent
Veteran Status <sup>2</sup>				
Total	157,862	100.0	137,748	100.0
Veteran	16,001	10.1	14,398	10.5
Nonveteran	141,861	89.9	123,351	89.5
Annual Family Income <sup>3</sup>				
Total family members	116,333	100.0	102,840	100.0
Under \$20,000	6,929	6.0	5,263	5.1
\$20,000 to \$49,999	22,280	19.2	18,830	18.3
\$50,000 to \$99,999	34,356	29.5	30,516	29.7
\$100,000 and over	35,008	30.1	32,378	31.5
Income not reported	17,758	15.3	15,853	15.4

<sup>1</sup> Some states have durational residency requirements in order to register and to vote.

<sup>2</sup> The veterans estimates were derived using the veteran weight, which uses different procedures for construction than the person weight used to produce other turnout estimates in 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Limited to people in families.

Note: Numbers are based on weighted reports of voting behavior derived from a survey sample.

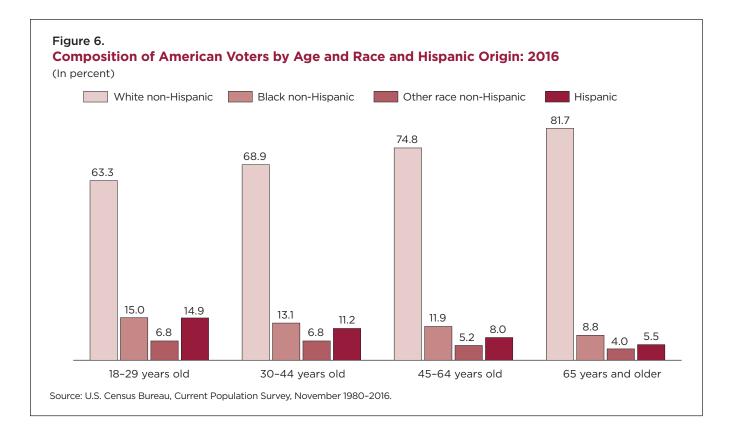
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2016.

of voters), native born (92.2 percent of both populations), married with a spouse present in the same household (55.5 percent of those registered, 57.7 percent of voters), in the civilian labor force (65.6 percent of the registered population, 65.7 percent of voters), and nonveterans (about 90 percent of both populations).<sup>13</sup> A majority of both the registered population (61.9 percent) and the voting population (63.5 percent) also reported having lived at their current place of residence for 5 years or longer.

Meanwhile, the greatest percentage of both the registered and voting populations were between the ages of 45 to 64 (36.4 percent of the registered population, 37.6 percent of voters) and residents of the Southern region (37.3 percent of the registered population, 36.7 percent of voters), while a smaller share of both populations were from families with annual incomes of \$100,000 or more (30.1 percent of the registered population, 31.5 percent of voters).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> The respective percentages of the registered population and the voting population who were female, native born, in the civilian labor force, and nonveterans were not statistically different.

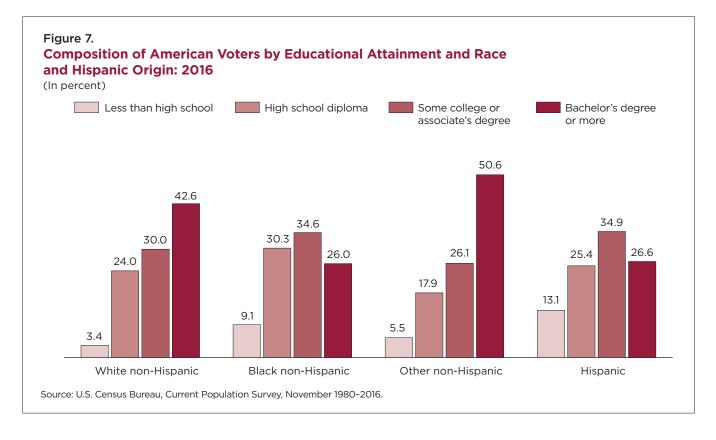
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> The percentage of those registered from families with household incomes of \$100,000 or more was not statistically different from the percentage of those registered from families with household incomes of \$50,000-\$99,999.



The next section of this report considers combinations of demographic characteristics. In 2016, White non-Hispanics made up the largest percentage of voters regardless of age, although these percentages varied across age groups (Figure 6). For example, although 81.7 percent of voters 65 years and older were non-Hispanic White, the percentage of voters aged 18 to 29 that were also non-Hispanic White was only 63.3 percent, a difference of about 18 percentage points between these youngest and oldest age

groups. For other race groups and Hispanics, the percentage of voters increased as the age group decreased, with about 37 percent of all young voters between the ages of 18 and 29 being either non-Hispanic Black (15.0 percent), Hispanic (14.9 percent) or some other race, and non-Hispanic (6.8 percent).<sup>15</sup> The composition of the voting population also varied according to educational attainment and race and Hispanic origin (Figure 7). In 2016, half of other race non-Hispanic voters (50.6 percent) and a plurality of non-Hispanic White voters (42.6 percent) had at least a bachelor's degree, while only 26.0 percent of non-Hispanic Black voters and 26.6 percent of Hispanic voters reported the same

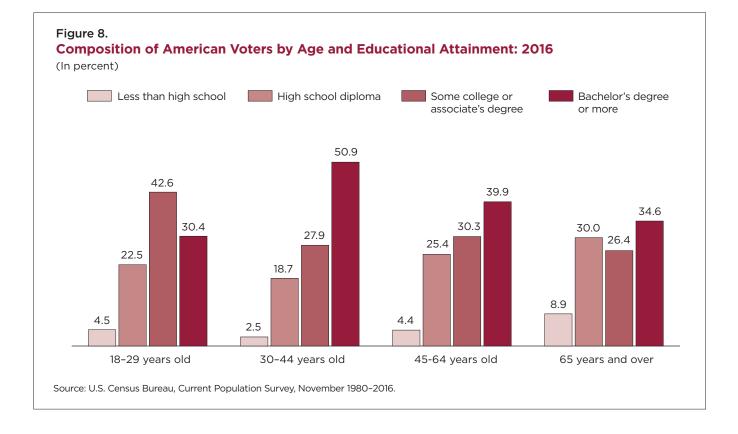
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Among voters aged 18 to 29, the percentage of voters who were non-Hispanic Black and the percentage who were Hispanic of any race were not statistically different. Among other race non-Hispanic voters, the percentage who were aged 18 to 29 and the percentage who were aged 30 to 44 were not statistically different.



level of education.<sup>16</sup> Although only 3.4 percent of non-Hispanic White voters and 5.5 percent of other race non-Hispanic voters had less than high school completion, the percentage of Hispanic voters (13.1 percent) and non-Hispanic Black voters (9.1 percent) with the same level of attainment were significantly higher.

In 2016, the composition of the voting population also varied according to age and educational attainment (Figure 8). Among the three oldest age groups, individuals with at least a bachelor's degree made up the greatest share of voters. These highly educated voters made up 34.6 percent of voters aged 65 and older, while 39.9 percent of voters aged 45 to 64, and 50.9 percent of voters aged 30 to 44 had bachelor's degrees as well. The only age group where this was not true was for voters between the ages of 18 and 29, where only 30.4 percent of voters had a college degree. Among this youngest cohort of voters, 42.6 had some college education, while 22.5 had completed high school, and 4.5 percent had less than a high school education. Given that many of these younger voters are still enrolled in school, the percentage of this voting cohort reporting higher levels of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Among Hispanic voters, the percentage with a high school education and the percentage with at least a bachelor's degree was not statistically different. The percentages of non-Hispanic Black voters with some college but no degree and at least a bachelor's degree were not statistically different from the percentages of Hispanic voters with the same levels of educational attainment.



education will only increase in future elections.<sup>17</sup>

### How Voters Vote: Traditional and Alternative Methods of Voting

This section will focus on 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 only 13 states where early voting is not offered and an excuse is required to vote with an absentee ballot.<sup>18</sup> The NCSL has provided the following summary of alternative voting methods across states.

*Early Voting.* In 37 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 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 added to the list, she or he will automatically receive an absentee ballot for all future elections. **All 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 currently use all mail voting.<sup>19</sup>

The CPS first asked about early and absentee voting in 1996 and has done so in every voting supplement since.<sup>20</sup> In 2016, 19.1 percent voted in person before election day, while 21.0 percent voted by mail, meaning that in the most recent presidential election, around 40 percent of all voters

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Among voters aged 18 to 29 and voters aged 45 to 64, the percentages with less than a high school education were not statistically different.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> 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>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> In Colorado, Oregon, and Washington, all ballots are cast through the mail.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> 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.

utilized some form of alternative voting (Table 3).<sup>21</sup>

This represents about a fourfold increase in alternative voting since 1996, when only 10.5 percent of voters reported voting by alternative method. Since 2002, alternative voting has increased in a seesaw pattern, with rates tending to increase in presidential election years, decrease slightly in the following congressional election year, and then increase again in the following presidential election.<sup>22</sup>

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 in 2012, the

<sup>21</sup> The estimates presented in this section are only for individuals with valid responses to the method and timing questions.

<sup>22</sup> 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.

# Table 3. Method of Voting: 1996-2016

(In percent)

		A	Iternative voting	g
Election year	On Election		Before	
	Day <sup>1</sup>	Total	Election Day <sup>1</sup>	By mail
2016*	59.9	40.1	19.1	21.0
2014	68.9	31.2	10.3	20.9
2012*	67.2	32.8	14.3	18.5
2010	73.5	26.5	8.4	18.1
2008*	69.3	30.7	14.3	16.4
2006	80.4	19.6	5.8	13.7
2004*	79.3	20.7	7.8	12.9
2002	85.9	14.1	3.4	10.7
2000*	86.0	14.0	3.8	10.2
1998	89.2	10.8	2.4	8.4
1996*	89.5	10.5	2.7	7.8

\* Presidential election year.

<sup>1</sup> Voted in person.

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

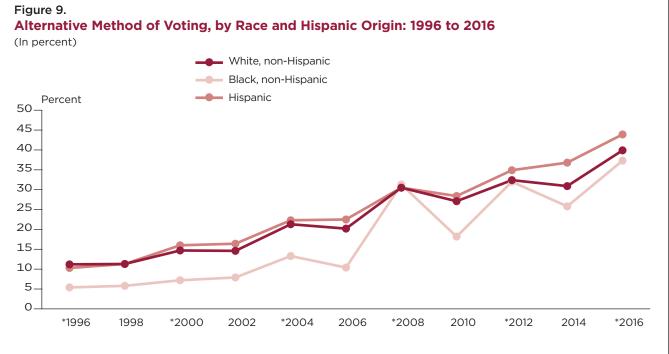
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 1996-2016.

rate once again increased (32.8 percent), before dropping off slightly again in the most recent congressional election of 2014 (31.2 percent), all before increasing once more to an all-time high

in the presidential election of 2016 (40.1 percent).<sup>23</sup>

In many years of this analysis, non-Hispanic Whites and Hispanics have reported relatively

<sup>23</sup> The 2008 rate of alternative voting is not statistically different from 2014.



\*Presidential election year.

Note: Alternative method includes those who voted early and/or by absentee ballot.

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

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 1996-2016.

comparable rates of alternative voting (Figure 9).<sup>24</sup> In 1996, for example, the rates for non-Hispanic Whites were not statistically different from Hispanics, whereas in the most recent congressional election (2014) and the two most recent presidential elections (2012 and 2016), the rates for Hispanics have been higher than for non-Hispanic Whites. Alternative voting rates for non-Hispanic Blacks have tended to lag behind those for both Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites (Figure 9).

However, exceptions were observed in the presidential elections of both 2008 and 2012, when 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.

In 2016, 43.9 percent of Hispanics reported casting ballots via alternative methods, compared with 39.9 percent of non-Hispanic White voters and 37.3 percent of non-Hispanic Black voters. It is worth noting that among all three groups these are the highest rates of alternative voting ever measured in the CPS.

### WHY NONVOTERS DON'T VOTE

In recent election cycles, the Census Bureau has asked about nonparticipation among the citizen voting-age population in two different ways. Since 2000, respondents who reported not voting, but who also indicated that they were registered to vote at the time of the election, have been asked a question about why they chose not to vote. Since 2004, respondents who reported not voting, and who also indicated that they were not registered to vote, have been asked a question about why they chose not to register. With both nonparticipation questions, respondents can only pick one main reason.

In 2016, among the estimated 18.9 million registered nonvoters in America, the most common reason for not voting was dislike of the candidates or campaign issues (4.7 million registered nonvoters), followed by not being interested in the election (2.9 million), being too busy or having a conflicting schedule (2.7 million), and having an illness or disability (2.2 million) (Table 4).<sup>25</sup>

Table 4 also shows results across race and Hispanic origin groups, age groups, and by varying levels of educational attainment. Among registered nonvoters, a plurality of most demographic groups in the table reported disliking the candidates or campaign issues as the main reason for not voting, although variability did exist within groups.<sup>26</sup> For example, about 26 percent of non-Hispanic

<sup>26</sup> Among non-Hispanic Blacks, non-Hispanic Asians, other race non-Hispanics, and those with less than a high school education, disliking the candidates or campaign issues did not represent a plurality of registered nonvoters. Additionally, the percentage of nonvoting, non-Hispanic Asians who disliked the candidates or campaign issues was not statistically different from the percentage who were too busy. Likewise, among nonvoters with less than a high school education, the percentage who disliked the candidates or campaign issues was not statistically different from the percentage had a permanent illness or disability. Whites, other race non-Hispanics, and Hispanics did not vote for this reason, compared with only 18.8 percent of non-Hispanic Blacks.<sup>27</sup>

Among different age groups, the percentage of registered nonvoters who were too busy or had a conflicting schedule was higher among younger nonvoters than older nonvoters, with 18.4 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds and 19.5 percent of 30- to 44-year-olds being too busy, compared with only 12.4 percent of 45- to 64-year-olds and 2.8 percent of those 65 years and older.<sup>28</sup> The results were generally reversed with regards to having an illness or disability, with 2.9 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds and 5.5 percent of 30- to 44-year-olds not voting because of an illness or disability, compared with 12.7 percent of 45- to 64-year-olds and 33.9 percent of those 65 years and older.29

Among most levels of educational attainment, a plurality of registered nonvoters reported dislike of the candidates or campaign issues as the main reason for not voting, including 23.1 percent of those with less than a high school education, 24.0 percent of high school graduates, 26.1 percent of those with some college or an associate's degree, and 24.9 percent of college graduates.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Among the age groups of those 18 to 29 and 30 to 44, the percentages who were too busy were not statistically different.

<sup>29</sup> The percentages of 45- to 64-yearolds who did note vote due to illness or disability were not significantly different from the 45- to 64-year-olds that did not vote due to being too busy.

<sup>30</sup> None of the estimates in this sentence are statistically different.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> In 1996, 1998, and 2010, the rates of alternative voting for non-Hispanic Whites and Hispanics were not statistically different.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> The total number of nonvoters who were not interested in the election was not statistically different from those who were too busy. Also, the estimate of having an illness was not statistically different than the estimate for other reasons.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> The percentage of non-Hispanic Blacks who disliked the candidates or campaign issues was statistically different from the percentage of non-Hispanic Whites and Hispanics. The percentages that disliked the candidates or campaign issues for all other races and Hispanics were not significantly different from one another.

# Table 4.

# Reasons for Not Registering and Voting, by Selected Characteristics: 2016

(Numbers in thousands and percent)

					Percent d	Percent distribution of reasons for not voting and registering	of reasor	is for no	t voting	and regis	stering			
			Race al	Race and Hispanic origin	ic origin			Age	e		Edu	ucational	Educational attainment	t
Characteristic		White	Black	Asian	Other					65	Less		Some college	Bach-
	Total	alone, non- Hispanic	alone, non- Hispanic	alone, non- Hispanic	race, non- Hispanic	Hispanic (any race)	18-29 years	30-44 years	45-64 years	years and older	than high school	ыви school diploma	or asso- ciate's degree	elor s degree or more
Registered, nonvoters	18,933	12,633	2,534	683	679	2,403	5,324	4,964	5,420	3,225	2,214	6,852	6,154	3,712
Reasons for Not Voting <sup>1</sup>													_	
Did not like candidates of campaign issues	4,689	26.0	18.8	21.2	25.8			25.2	27.5	23.1	23.1	24.0	26.1	24.9
Not interested	2,920	14.3	18.2	17.8	19.5			17.7	15.1	10.3	13.8	17.4	15.4	12.7
Too busy, conflicting schedule	2,708	13.9	14.0	16.9 6 E	14.0			19.5	12.4	2.8	10.3	13.1	16.7	14.9 0.6
Other reason	2,200	10.2	12.7	13.2	7.0 16.1			11.4	10.6	11.5	13.7 12.9	10.5	11.6	0.0 10.4
Out of town	1,497	8.3	6.8	10.6	3.8			6.7	7.8	5.1	3.8	6.5	7.8	13.2
Registration problems	831	4.4	3.8	3.4	3.9			5.3	2.6	2.9	3.0	4.0	4.5	5.7
Forgot to vote	565	2.7	0.0 0.0	2.9	3.2 1 F			2.1 2.1	, м 4. о	2.1	4.4	3.0	2.6	2.8 7 8
Transportation problems	906 492	2.7	2.0 4.7	1.0	0.1 4.1			1.8	2.5	5.1	1.0 2.7	2.9	2.1	1.0
Inconvenient polling place Bad weather conditions	404	2.0	2.2	0.0	3.0	3.2	2.2	2.3	2.5	1.1	1.6	2.3	1.8	2.6
Not registered	32,622	19,210	3,487	2,364	1,166	6,394	10,717	8,399	9,063	4,443	6,944	13,520	8,198	3,960
Reasons for Not Registering <sup>2</sup> Not interested in the election/not involved in politice	ן ב הבה	ע ע ד	ם אר א	ם אר א	9 2 2 2 2		0 17	Z 17	0 2 7		907		L C L	ע מ
Other	5,364	17.6	16.4	12.1	26.8	12.8	14.8	16.7	16.8	19.1	14.7	16.4	17.5	17.6
t registra	Z 07Z	0 0 1	12 0		1 2 1			7 1 1	7 0	۲ ب	Ω α	0 01	с л 1	16.7
	2,2,5	2.4	11.0		100			00	000	4.0	10.7	0.04	10	201 9
Permanent illness or disability	1,602	5.4	6.4		4.7	3.9	2.8	3.3	5.0	12.8	7.9	5.3	2.7	3.0
Don't know or refused	1,474	4.0	6.1	5.3	4.1			4.4	3.7	3.6	4.6	4.6	4.6	4.0
Did not know where or how to														
	1,067	2.7	3.1	4.0	3.2	4.1	4.1	2.7	3.1	2.5	3.1	3.6	2.8	3.2
My vote would not make a difference	1 521	с К	C 7	7 7	C 7	7	C V	с С	Г U	2 V	1 1	76	0 7	6 0
Did not meet residency	н, СС Ч	2	1 T	1	1 t					Ì	ł	) F		2
requirements	866	2.2	1.9	5.2	3.6	3.4	2.9	7 00 7 01	1.5	2.2	1.7	2.2	3.3	4.8
DITTICULTY WITH ENGLISH	055	0.0	T.1	7.0T	0.4	5.0		T.4		4.0	4.2	C'T	0.8	T./
- - - -														

Z Represents zero or rounds to zero. <sup>1</sup> Only individuals who reported being registered and also reported not voting were asked the question about reason for not voting. <sup>2</sup> Includes only those respondents who answered "no" to the question, "Were you registered in the election of November 2016?" Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2016.

In 2016 the most common reason for not registering was disinterest in the election or not being involved in politics (13.6 million nonregistered individuals), followed by not meeting registration deadlines (3.9 million), not being eligible to vote (2.4 million)<sup>31</sup>, and having a permanent illness or disability (1.6 million).<sup>32</sup>

Across most demographics, a plurality of the nonregistered population reported not being interested in the election or involved in politics as the main reason, including 45.5 percent of non-Hispanic Whites, about 37 percent of Hispanics, non-Hispanic Blacks, and non-Hispanic Asians, and 33.6 percent of other race non-Hispanics.<sup>33, 34</sup> There was also

<sup>32</sup> About 5.4 million of those not registered indicated an "other reason" than the response options offered on the supplement. The estimate of those of who did not register because of an illness or disability was not significantly different than those who said they did not know or refused to answer the question, and those who said that their vote would not make a difference.

<sup>33</sup> The percentage of other race non-Hispanics who said they were not interested in the election or involved in politics was not significantly different from those who selected an "other" reason than those offered in the supplement.

<sup>34</sup> The percentage of Hispanics, non-Hispanic Blacks, non-Hispanic Asians, and other race non-Hispanics who were not interested in the election or involved in politics were not statistically different.

variability in the distributions of those who did not register because they were not eligible, ranging from 4.8 percent of non-Hispanic Whites, 6.3 percent of other race non-Hispanics, about 11 percent of both non-Hispanic Blacks and non-Hispanic Asians, and 12.2 percent of Hispanics.35 Keep in mind that these are respondents who have identified as being citizens of voting age, so the specific nature of their reported ineligibility is not entirely clear, but could include not meeting residency requirements or felony disenfranchisement.<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile, 43.9 percent of those aged 45 to 64 were not interested in the election or involved in politics, a rate higher than all other age groups.<sup>37</sup> Although 17.2 percent of the nonregistered population between 18 and 29 years missed a registration deadline, the rate decreased with age, ranging from 11.7 percent of those aged 30 to 44, 9.7 percent of those aged

<sup>37</sup> Among groups aged 18 to 29, 30 to 44, and 65 and older, percentages for those not interested in the election or involved in politics were not statistically different. 45 to 64, and only 6.1 percent of those aged 65 and older.

Finally, the percentage of the nonregistered population not interested in the election or involved in politics was also high among high school graduates (44.0 percent).<sup>38</sup> College graduates frequently missed registration deadlines (16.7 percent), a reason that decreased alongside educational attainment, with only 8.5 percent of those with less than a high school education missing the deadline.<sup>39</sup>

In recent presidential elections, the reasons given for not voting have changed from one election to the next (Figure 10). For example, in 2000 only 8.1 percent of nonvoters did not like the candidates or campaign issues, a percentage that increased to about 13 percent in both 2008 and 2012, before increasing to about 25 percent, or a quarter of all nonvoters, in the most recent presidential election.<sup>40</sup> Across the same time series the percentage of nonvoters who were not interested in the election or

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> The supplement is only administered to respondents who indicate being 18 years or older and also U.S. citizens, either by birth or naturalization. The Census Bureau does not inquire about additional eligibility criteria, including residency requirements or felony disenfranchisement.

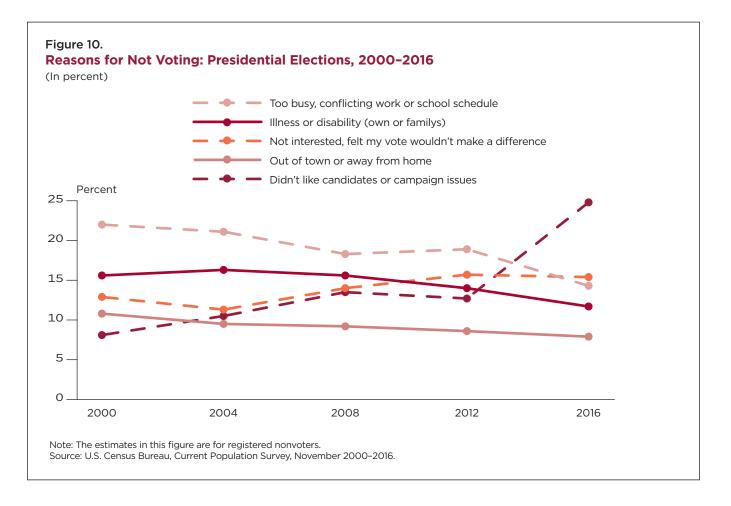
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Rates for not registering do to eligibility issues were not statistically different between non-Hispanic Whites and other race non-Hispanics, nor were they statistically different between non-Hispanic Blacks, non-Hispanic Asians, and Hispanics of any race.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Residency requirements vary by state and voting district. Felony disenfranchisement policies, or the prohibition from voting based on a previous felony criminal conviction, are not currently accounted for in the CPS and also vary by state.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Rates of not being interested in the election or not involved in politics were not statistically different between those with some college and those with both less than a high school education and those who had completed high school.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> The percentage of college graduates who were not interested in the election or involved in politics was not significantly different than those with some college but no degree.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> The percentages who disliked the candidates or campaign issues in 2008 and 2012 were not statistically different.

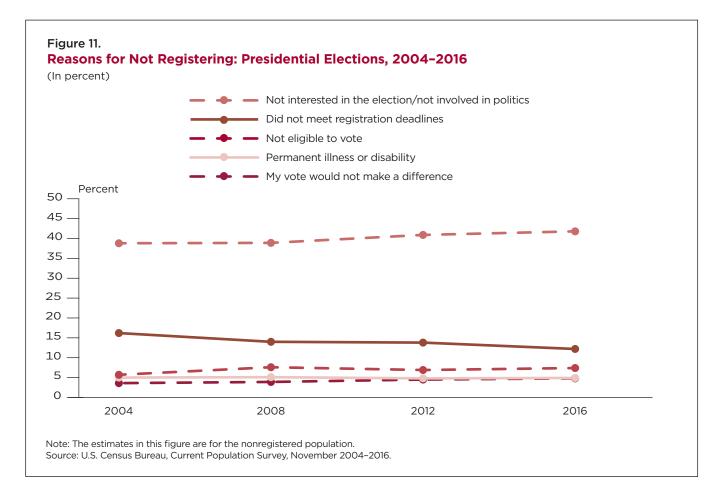


felt that their vote would not make a difference increased from 12.9 percent in 2000 to 15.4 percent in 2016, while the percentages who indicated being too busy to vote (22.0 percent in 2000, 14.3 percent in 2016), having an illness or disability (15.6 percent in 2000, 11.7 percent in 2016), or being out of town or away from home (10.8 percent in 2000, 7.9 percent in 2016) decreased across these election cycles.<sup>41</sup>

The reasons given for not registering to vote have also varied across the time series (Figure 11). In the last four presidential elections a plurality were not registered because they were not interested in the election or not involved in politics, a percentage that has increased slightly from 38.8 percent in 2004 to 41.8 in 2016.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, the second most common reason for nonregistration, not meeting registration deadlines, has decreased slightly from 16.2 percent in 2004 to 12.2 percent in 2016.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> In 2016, the percentage who did not register because they were too busy was not statistically different from those who were not interested in the election. The percentage who did not register because they were not interested in the election was not statistically different between 2000 and 2004 and between 2012 and 2016. The percentage who did not register because they were too busy was not statistically different between 2000 and 2004. The percentage who did not register because of a permanent illness or disability was not statistically different between 2000, 2004, and 2008. The percentage who did not register because they were out of town was not statistically different between 2012 and 2016.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> The percentages who were not interested in the election or not involved in politics were not statistically different between 2004 and 2008 and between 2012 and 2016.



# ACCURACY OF THE ESTIMATES

The population represented (i.e., the population universe) in the Voting and Registration Supplement to the November 2016 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 2016 supplement asked if respondents voted in the election held on Tuesday, November 8. 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 nonsampling error. 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

for a House of Representatives or Senate seat (in congressional election years).

weighting procedure on other

variables in the survey. All of these

considerations affect comparisons

Further information on the source

of the data and accuracy of the

errors and confidence intervals,

can be found at <www.census.gov

/programs-surveys/cps/technical

-documentation/complete.html>

Statistical Methods Division via

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,

those based on administrative data

national election, while the Clerk of

the U.S. House of Representatives

reports these state results in

aggregate form for the entire

country. These tallies, which are

results for a specific election, show

the number of votes counted for

select offices. In the various elec-

tions discussed in this report, the

official count of comparison is

(in presidential election years)

either the total number of votes

cast for the office of the president

or the total number of votes cast

typically viewed as the official

these estimates may differ from

Every state's board of elections tabulates the vote counts for each

or exit polls.

e-mail at <dsmd.source.and

.accuracy@census.gov>.

or by contacting the Demographic

estimates, including standard

across different surveys or data

sources.

Discrepancies occur in each election between the CPS estimates

and these official counts.43 In previous years, the disparity has varied, with official tallies typically showing lower turnout than the estimates used in these types of reports.<sup>44</sup> 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.

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 specific 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 official tallies.

Overstatement of Voting in 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 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 survevs like the American National Election Studies 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

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Information about state regulations for registration and voting can be found at the NCSL Web site. <www.ncsl.org>. or from the individual state election offices, which are typically (but not always) the state's Secretary of State.

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 <https://transition.fec.gov /pubrec/electionresults.shtm>.

citizens residing outside the United States, both civilian and military, who cast absentee ballots.<sup>45, 46</sup>

### **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/data/tables /time-series/demo/voting-and -registration/p20-580.html>.

### CONTACT

U.S. Census Bureau Customer Services Center

Toll free at 1-800-923-8282

Visit <https://ask.census.gov/>

### **Suggested Citation**

File, Thom, "Characteristics of Voters in the Presidential Election of 2016," Current Population Survey Reports, P20-582, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2015.

<sup>46</sup> The Federal Voting Assistance Program offers voting assistance for service members, their families, and overseas citizens, and also publishes estimates of overseas voting by U.S. citizens. More information on this valuable program can be found at <www.fvap.gov/>.

### **User Comments**

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

Chief, Social, Economic, and Housing Statistics Division U.S. Census Bureau Washington, DC 20233-8500

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> 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.