The Return of the Voter: Voter Turnout in the 2008 Presidential Election

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Abstract

The presidential turnout rate for those eligible to vote was 61.6% in 2008, which marks the third consecutive increase in presidential turnout rates since the modern low point of 51.7% in 1996. Turnout is no longer declining – if it ever was – and has reverted to the 'high' levels experienced during the 1950s and 1960s. This challenges many theories posited to explain turnout declines. I explore election trends among the states in hopes to provide clues as to why civic engagement has been restored.

KEYWORDS: 2008 presidential election, voter turnout

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In the 2008 presidential election, approximately 131.3 million persons cast a vote for president, which is 61.6% of those eligible to vote. This represents a 1.5 percentage-point increase from the 60.1% turnout rate in 2004 and a nearly 10 percentage-point increase from the modern low of 51.7% in 1996. After a period of lowered levels over the past three decades, participation has reverted to the high end of the trading range in the last century, last experienced during the 1950s and 1960s when turnout rates were in the low sixty-percent level. The 2008 turnout rate is even artificially lower by comparison, due to the inclusion of eighteen-to-twenty-year-olds and the exclusion of over what a preliminary estimate judges to be between a half and three-quarters of a million mail-in ballots, rejected because voters failed to follow proper procedures.

The 2008 presidential election poses a challenge to voting scholars. The myth of declining turnout rates has been laid to rest, and participation has been increasing for three consecutive presidential elections, contrary to a large number of theories advanced to explain the myth. Unless I have missed something, membership in bowling leagues is not surging; ESPN, the Food Network, and the SciFi Channel are not broadcasting political news; political commercials remain negative; citizen trust in government remains low; income inequality is increasing; and turnout among those apathetic baby boomers and Gen-Xers is rising along with all other age categories. The 2008 election thus demands a new way of thinking about voter turnout. Where we observe turnout rate increases and declines among the states, how campaigns mobilize their voters, and the rise of early voting; these may provide some direction for future research into the resurgence of civic engagement in American elections.

**Voter Participation in the 2008 Presidential Election**

There are many correlates to voter turnout. A key relationship easily observable at the macro-level is perceived closeness of the election. There are two plausible causal mechanisms: voters may choose to vote because they believe that they have a higher chance of casting the decisive vote, or they may be stimulated to participate by elevated levels of campaigning in pivotal Electoral College states. The word *perceived* is important here, since the McCain campaign fought hard for states that Obama won decisively. In order to measure perceptions of which states were still in play near the end of the election cycle, I classify ten battleground states according to where the two campaigns held rallies for their presidential and vice-presidential candidates in the last two weeks of the election.

We again see that perceived closeness of the election matters to turnout. These ten battleground states had a combined turnout rate of 65.9%, compared to 61.9% for the remainder. (These state-level turnout rates do not factor in overseas citizens, thus the apparent discrepancy with the national turnout rate.) The effect
of battleground status can also be measured as a change from the 2004 presidential election. New entrants to the Electoral College battleground in 2008 experienced the largest turnout increases from 2004. Thus Indiana’s turnout rate rose 4.5 percentage points, from 54.8% to 59.3%; North Carolina improved 8.0 percentage points, from 57.8% to 65.8%; and Virginia increased 6.8 percentage points, from 60.6% to 67.4%. States that left the battlefield, such as Maine, Minnesota, Oregon, Washington and Wisconsin, experienced turnout declines or failed to keep pace with the national increase. Other states that remained in play essentially had the same levels of turnout.

While we cannot parse voters’ motivation from the mobilization efforts of campaigns, we know that voter mobilization efforts are more intensive in these battleground states. Exit polls found that 49% of respondents reported an in-person or phone contact by the two presidential campaigns in these ten states, compared to 25% in other states. The correlation between higher turnout and the mobilization efforts of campaigns suggests a causal relationship, confirmed by scholarly research. Green and Gerber’s (2000) path-breaking individual-level mobilization experiments demonstrate that voter contact is effective at increasing turnout among those contacted. Voter mobilization is thus among the plausible explanations for increasing voter participation levels over the past three presidential elections. During the recent resurgence of participation, campaigns have placed renewed emphasis on voter mobilization. According to the American National Election Studies, voters’ self-reported contact with campaigns in the presidential elections of 1988, 1992, and 1996 was only 24%, and subsequently increased to 38% in 2000 and to 45% in 2004.

National exit polls (the National Election Poll or NEP) indicate a slight decline in contact among voters in 2008, dropping from 36% in 2004 to 34% in 2008. The decline arose entirely from the McCain campaign. McCain Senior Advisor Greg Jenkins lamented that, “the McCain ground game wasn’t as good as (Obama’s) ground game was.” This may be overstating the issue, as Michael Beach, National Victory Director for the Republican National Committee, reported that Republicans employed a strategy to husband their comparably limited resources by contacting only low-to-moderate-propensity voters, under the assumption that high-propensity voters would take care of themselves. The wisdom of this strategy can be assessed when states report individual 2008 vote history on their voter registration files.

Deliberate or not, this mobilization disparity showed up in exit polling, where only 19% of respondents reported a contact with the McCain campaign compared to 24% for Bush, while an equal 26% reported a contact from the Obama and Kerry campaigns. (Some respondents reported contact by both Democratic and Republican campaigns). Moreover, the mobilization disparity between the campaigns was greatest in key battleground states such as Colorado.
and Virginia, where at least half of state-level respondents to exit polls reported a contact from the Obama campaign, while less than 40% reported a contact from the McCain campaign. Indeed, among the states where a contact question was asked by the NEP, the only state where more voters reported a contact from the McCain campaign than the Obama campaign was West Virginia, by a mere one percentage point.

Mobilization thus cannot be the entire turnout story in 2008, since obviously a large number of voters, even in key battleground states, did not report a contact with the presidential campaigns. Furthermore, if the exit polls are correct that overall levels of contact were down slightly from 2004, this would be at odds with a 1.5 percentage-point increase in the national turnout rate. Individual motivation to vote must thus also be a factor.

Except for a brief period during the Republican convention, pre-election polling consistently found a distinct enthusiasm gap favoring Obama. For example, The Pew Center for the People and the Press reported a fifteen percentage-point “enthusiasm advantage” for Obama among his supporters in the waning days of the election. This phenomenon apparently affected turnout rates in some Red states. Participation levels in Alaska, Arkansas, Idaho, Kentucky, South Dakota, Utah, and West Virginia declined, despite the overall national increase. In this light, the McCain loss was perhaps a self-fulfilling prophesy whereby unenthusiastic Republicans abstained from voting and from volunteering for the campaign. This dynamic should sound a cautionary note for how the Obama Administration should govern, since it is likely that Republicans will become enthusiastic again in future elections.

Democrats enthusiastically supported Obama, particularly African Americans. The exit polls found that African Americans’ share of the electorate rose from 11% in 2004 to 13% in 2008. Interestingly, this increase traces to the non-battleground states. In battleground states with large African American populations, such as Florida, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Virginia, increases in white turnout kept pace with African American turnout, such that African Americans were not a larger share of the electorate. The notable increases in the share of African American vote relative to whites occurred in places such as Alabama, California, Connecticut, Washington DC, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, and New York. I have previously found some discrepancies in the racial composition of the electorate from exit polls (McDonald 2007), so these findings should be considered preliminary until the Census Bureau’s 2008 Current Population Survey (CPS), Voter and Registration Supplement becomes available. Still, these racial patterns are consistent with higher turnout rates experienced in these non-battleground states.

The overall increase in the national turnout rate masks a complex dynamic among the states. States that lost their battleground status, along with some safe
Republican states, experienced turnout declines. These declines were more than offset by increases in states entering the battleground, by safe Democratic states, and by safe Republican states with large African American populations. A fascinating consequence of how these increases and decreases were distributed across the country is that turnout rates became more uniform, with the standard deviation decreasing from 6.3 percentage points in 2004 to 5.7 percentage points in 2008. Understanding these dynamics, particularly the psychological mechanism that generates enthusiasm by voters to cast their ballot for a candidate, may help us better understand why turnout has surged and ebbed over the past century and why it has now increased for three consecutive presidential elections.

**Election Reform Efforts**

Those who are motivated or mobilized to vote must still overcome voting barriers before they can cast their ballot, such as voter registration and opportunity costs. The 2008 presidential election saw states lowering these barriers through innovations in Election Day registration and early voting. We can assess the impact of these changes in election administration on turnout rates in at least a preliminary way.

Election Day registration is touted as increasing voter turnout by aligning registration with the act of voting, thereby reducing the burden of voter registration for first-time voters and recent movers. Scholars have found a positive relationship between Election Day registration and voter turnout (e.g., Highton 1997; McDonald 2008; Mitchell and Wlezien 1995; Rhine 1996). Iowa and Montana implemented Election Day registration in 2008 for the first time in a presidential general election, yet preliminary evidence suggests that turnout did not increase as a result. Iowa, which implemented Election Day registration in 2008, experienced a slight decline from 69.9% in 2004 to 69.8% in 2008. Montana adopted Election Day registration in 2006, and experienced a modest increase from 64.4% in 2004 to 66.1% in 2008. It may be that most residents of these states are not aware yet of Election Day registration, so perhaps increased turnout will manifest itself in the future. It is also possible this simple bivariate analysis is insufficient to reveal the effect. Thus, further examination of these states is warranted.

A more profound change in voting revealed itself in the unprecedented number of people who cast their ballot prior to Election Day. Preliminarily, about 40 million, or 30% of all votes, were cast prior to Election Day in the 2008 presidential election. Early voting has been steadily increasing over time, as more states adopt early voting policies and more voters take advantage of them, rising from 4% in 1972, to 7% in 1992, to 20% in 2004, according to the CPS. The Associated Press reports that at least half of all votes were cast prior to Election Day.
Day in Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas and Washington.

Early voting laws vary across the states, but essentially come in two forms: by-mail or in-person. Many voters living primarily in western states cast their ballot by mail, either because elections are entirely run by mail – as in Oregon as a whole or in counties and precincts of other western states – or because a state allows ‘no excuse’ absentee balloting and permits voters to sign up to always receive their ballot through the mail. Early voting in these states has been on a steady rise as more people sign up for permanent absentee ballot status and as more localities convert to all-mail elections.

The other form of early voting permits persons to vote in-person at a special polling place. Typically these polling places are located in central election administration offices. However, some states permit localities to open satellite locations in high traffic areas, such as shopping malls. These satellite polling locations are utilized in states with ‘no excuse’ absentee voting as well as traditional excuse-required absentee voting, creating classification headaches for those who study early voting. In another innovation, a state’s registration deadline in some instances may overlap with the early voting period, effectively permitting Election Day registration for early in-person voters within a limited window, as occurred and was litigated in Ohio. In 2008, North Carolina carried this policy further by permitting any eligible voter to register and vote in-person, but only during the early voting period ending the Saturday before the election.

States that permit early in-person voting, primarily eastern states, experienced the most dramatic increases in early voting. Three times as many Georgians and twice as many North Carolinians voted prior to Election Day in 2008 compared to 2004. Some southern states reporting demographic characteristics of these early voters reveal that large numbers of African Americans voted early in-person, which is a reversal from previous elections where, according to the CPS, African Americans infrequently voted early.

Not factored into these early voting statistics are a substantial number of ballots – particularly mail-in ballots – that were rejected for various procedural reasons. In 2006, the United States Election Assistance Commission reported in the 2006 Election Day Survey that at least 380,000 mail-in ballots were rejected because a voter failed to follow procedures, such as properly signing the ballot or envelope or properly sealing the envelope. Since turnout and early voting were much greater in 2008 than in 2006, perhaps as many as 500,000 to 750,000 mail-in ballots were rejected in the 2008 election. Given that early voting was less prevalent in the past, these numbers of rejected ballots are such that they are beginning to distort comparisons of modern and historical turnout rates.

Scholarly research to date, perhaps surprisingly, finds that early voting only shifts voter timing but does not increase turnout, though there is anecdotal
evidence it is related to higher turnout in lower profile state and local elections. Yet, early voting has been on the rise along with presidential turnout rates, so more investigation is warranted. These preliminary studies classify both mail-in and in-person forms of early voting under one label and it may be that the two are substantively different from one another. These studies do not control for rejected ballots, and it is of interest to note that North Carolina reports 7.4% of the state’s 246,000 mail-in ballots were rejected, while only 0.1% of the 2.4 million in-person ballots were rejected in 2008. It may be, too, that early voting in 2008 was unusual in that, in this high turnout election, more early voters meant shorter wait times for persons voting on Election Day.

Another aspect of election administration that is increasingly attracting litigation and claims of fraud is voter registration itself. In the third presidential debate, McCain alleged that ACORN, a community-based organization that has notoriously conducted shoddy voter registration drives, “is now on the verge of maybe perpetrating one of the greatest frauds in voter history in this country, maybe destroying the fabric of democracy.” To combat alleged vote fraud, or perhaps more accurately registration fraud, Republicans threatened to challenge the eligibility of hundreds of thousands of voters whose voter registration information did not match information in other databases, such as the Post Office change of address or the Social Security Administration database. The New York Times reported that states were apparently misusing the social security database to purge or deny voter registrations in violation of the National Voter Registration Act. Other states adopted “exact match” policies to deny registration to otherwise eligible voters whose name and birth date did not exactly match information in another agency’s database, such as the Department of Motor Vehicles.

The trouble with database matching is that it generates false positives when two matched people are not the same person and false negatives when persons are not properly matched across databases. Persons familiar with the statistical puzzle known as the Birthday Problem will be aware that in a large population the number of people who have exactly the same name and birth date occurs with surprisingly high frequency. (I calculate this expected value using a simulation approach, see McDonald and Levitt 2008.) Previously, I have pointed out that there are thousands of obvious birth-date errors on voter registration files, such that if the dates are to be believed people are traveling from the future to change the course of history or are over a thousand years old (McDonald 2007). During this election, I analyzed obvious address errors on the Florida voter registration file to warn of the danger of conducting a presidential primary revote in the state and found 189,186 addresses missing an apartment number and 1,708 addresses without a valid zip code. All the more troubling is how these errors occur with higher frequency among African Americans. In an analysis I conducted in Michigan, I tracked name changes over the course of three months
in 2008. Here, I found that 1,919 first names were changed, often through what appeared to be misspellings and corrections of common name variations. For the last name, I found 16,933 changes, most often for what appeared to be women changing their last name.

There is a virtue in keeping voter registration lists accurate and up-to-date so that election officials can properly prepare to run an election. If database matching is to be used to administer voter registration rolls, occurrence of a match or a lack of a match should not be sufficient evidence in itself to deny a person their right to vote. Better matching protocols need to be developed. Although it is difficult to know how many potential voters were denied the opportunity to cast a ballot, continued usage of poor database matching procedures has the potential to disenfranchise many eligible voters, thereby depressing turnout rates.

Conclusion

Voter turnout increased for the third consecutive presidential election. Two trends over the past three presidential elections stand out as fruitful avenues for future study: voter mobilization and early voting. The former has been found to be related to increased turnout in experiments, but studies of the latter have not found correlations with turnout, though I believe further investigation is warranted. With turnout rates now in the low sixty-percent range for two consecutive presidential elections, on par with the “high” turnout rates of the 1960s, scholars need to redevelop theories to explain how civic engagement has revitalized. Some clues may lie in states where turnout rates actually decreased in 2008, and may thus provide a better understanding of what makes a citizen enthusiastic about voting.

Apart from turnout effects, early voting will undoubtedly be fertile ground for future academic research on voting and campaigns. Discussing the Republican’s 72-hour voter mobilization campaign that was successful in electing President Bush to a second term – so named because it launched the weekend prior to the election – McCain campaign advisor Rob Kubasko felt that, “The election was lost three weeks before Election Day… what an old, old election model that was completely obsolete.” The Obama campaign, on the other hand, simply rolled their large-scale voter registration efforts into early voting mobilization. Campaigns will need to adapt to this new environment, and early voting may have several effects worth studying. For example, Who votes early? Why do they do it? How should campaigns time their messaging and other activities in response, particularly when less well-funded local and state campaigns must make strategic decisions in the shadow of the presidential campaigns? How costly is early voting to administer? What is the most effective manner? How can the number of rejected mail-in ballots be reduced?
These questions will only rise in importance since the percentage of early votes will likely increase in the next presidential election, though it is possible a small decline will occur in 2010, consistent with previous midterm elections. States that do not currently allow no-excuse absentee voting or early in-person voting are considering adopting it. If they do not act, a unified Democratic federal government likely will. The high number of rejected mail-in ballot numbers in particular suggests that careful thought should be given to how best to implement mail balloting. In-person early voting seems a reasonable component of such legislation, since procedural errors that might otherwise disqualify a mail ballot can be resolved in the presence of the voter and election official. More study is needed to provide sound recommendations on how to move forward. I hope that the scholarly community will engage with election officials to improve the administration of elections – on early voting and other policies – so that all eligible persons who want to vote can do so.

Endnotes

1 My turnout rate estimates can be accessed at: http://elections.gmu.edu/. Two changes have been made to the turnout rate denominator, the voting-eligible population. First, I use the American Community Survey (ACS) to estimate the citizen population, whereas I previously used the Current Population Survey. The ACS is a large-scale annual survey designed to replace the census long-form, where a citizenship question was asked in past censuses. Second, I have for the first time disaggregated an estimate of the national overseas citizen population to the state level, based on two data sources. The Department of Defense reports statistics on overseas personnel deployments by state (the 2006 report is available at: http://siadapp.dmdc.osd.mil/personnel/M02/fy06/06top.htm). Internal reports from The Overseas Vote Foundation, of which I am an advisory board member, show that overseas citizens register among states to vote roughly proportional to the population size of the states. I thus apportion overseas civilians reported by the Department of State proportional to the state citizen voting-age-populations. I make these state-level overseas citizen estimates available on my website. However, in the discussion that follows, I make an adjustment to the voting-eligible population for overseas citizens at the national level only for consistency with turnout rates reported for previous elections.

2 Presidential and vice-presidential candidate visits data is obtained from CNN, available at: http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/map/candidate.visits/, Accessed Dec 7, 2008. In order to remove visits to non-battleground states, such as Obama’s trips to Illinois, I consider a state a battleground only if a candidate from both campaigns visited the state. These states are Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia.
3 On the national exit poll, 32% of voters reported a contact from the campaigns. A contact question was asked on some – though not all – state polls, including the ten identified battleground states. These reported contact rates varied between 36% in Florida to 61% in Pennsylvania. To arrive at the rate of contact in these ten states, I multiply the percentage of people reporting a contact in each state with the state turnout, sum these numbers and divide through by the sum of the turnout in the ten states. I then subtract these from similarly constructed national numbers to arrive at contact rates in the remaining states.


5 Personal communication, December 9, 2008. Michael Beach made similar comments in a conference panel entitled “Early Voting in 2008” that we both participated in on December 9, 2008, for the Pew Center on the States, “Voting in America – The Road Ahead”.


References


