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Voter Turnout in the 2010 Midterm Election

Michael P. McDonald

Abstract

I place national turnout rates in historical perspective and investigate what state turnout rates may tell us about what factors are related to higher levels of voter participation. In midterm elections compared to presidential election, voter turnout is lower among all groups, but more so for young people. I discuss the implications of younger citizens' disengagement in midterm elections in light of an increasing gap in support for the political parties' candidates among the young and the old.

KEYWORDS: voting, turnout, political participation, 2010 midterm election

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An estimated 88.7 million people cast ballots in the 2010 midterm election.¹ Expressed as a percentage of those eligible to vote, the turnout rate was 40.7%. As Figure 1 shows, participation in midterm elections has increased for four consecutive elections, rising from a low of 38.1% in 1998. While turnout rates in both presidential and midterm elections have been increasing in recent years, the 2010 rate did not exceed the 41.1% in 1994 nor the 42.0% in 1982, and was well short of the turnout rate of 47.3% in 1970.²

Voter turnout is often considered an indicator of the health of a democracy. The 2010 midterm turnout rate is on the high end of a narrow trading range experienced since 1972, but is far from historical highs for midterm elections. Here, I examine national- and state-level turnout rates to address how voter participation may be increased in the United States. I also note an emerging polarization of support among young and old persons for the candidates of the two political parties, and discuss how patterns of turnout among these age groups contributed to the Republican victory in 2010 and what this may mean for future elections.

Counting the Number of Voters

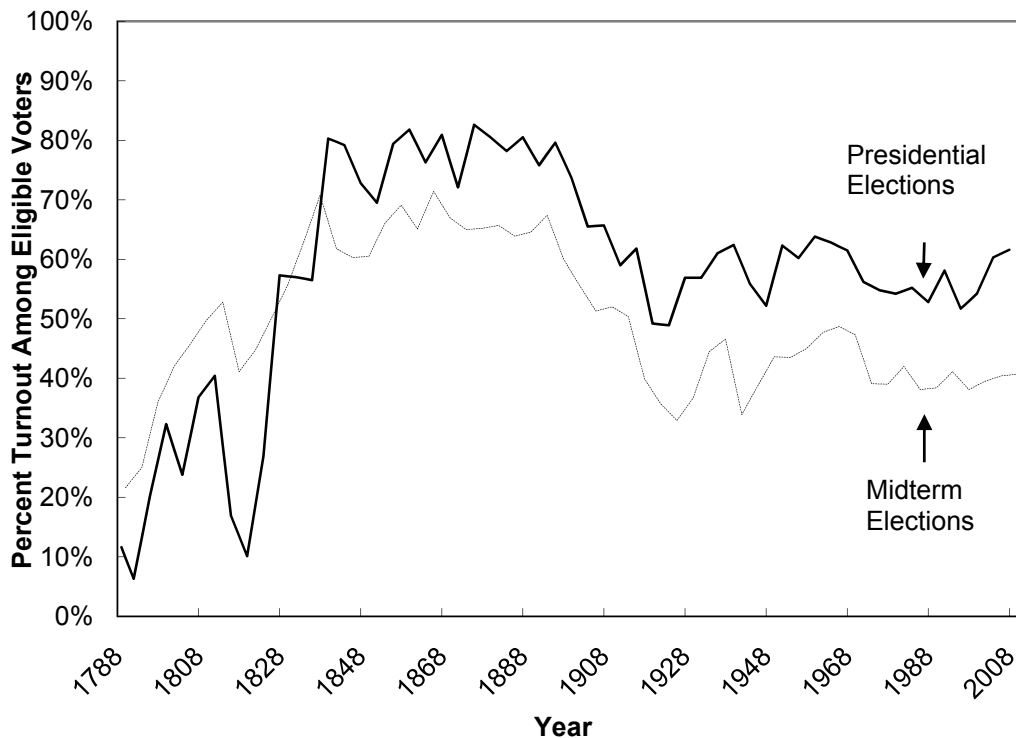
The turnout rate is expressed for the “vote for highest office,” which in a midterm election is the vote for Governor, U.S. Senate, or the sum of the U.S. House races, whichever is greatest. A preferable measure for the numerator of the turnout rate may be the total number of persons who cast a valid ballot that was counted by election officials. Yet a difficulty in working with this measure is that some states do not report total ballots counted, while fewer states historically reported this statistic. So, the vote-for-highest-office offers a consistent, comparable statistic across states and time. Still, the turnout rate expressed as a percentage of total ballots cast is a meaningful measure of all persons who successfully participated in an election. If the national vote for highest office is inflated by 1.8%, which is derived from the twenty-nine states reporting total ballots counted as of this writing (nearly all states will report eventually), then an estimated 90.7 million

¹ As of this writing, seven states have not reported their certified election results. For updated turnout statistics, see: http://elections.gmu.edu/Turnout_2010G.html (accessed Dec. 12, 2010).

² A portion of the lower contemporary levels of voter turnout is due to extension of voting rights to eighteen- year-olds through adoption of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment to the United States Constitution. In 2006, according to the Current Population Survey, eighteen- to twenty-year-olds constituted 8.9% of the citizen population. Of these, only 20.8% reported voting. If these young people are removed from the voting-eligible population and those who voted are removed from the electorate, the 2010 turnout rate would have been approximately 42.6%. So, the extension of voting rights to younger voters explains some, but not all, of the lower turnout by comparison to the world pre-1972. For reports and access to CPS data, see: <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/index.html> (accessed Dec. 12, 2010).

ballots were counted in the 2010 midterm election, for a turnout rate of 41.6% among those eligible to vote. This is close to my pre-election estimate of 41.3%.³

Figure 1. United States Voter Turnout , 1789 – 2010



Source: Michael P. McDonald. 2010. “American Voter Turnout in Historical Perspective,” in *Oxford Handbook of American Elections and Political Behavior*, Jan Leighley, ed. Cambridge, UK: Oxford University Press.

The difference between the number of total ballots counted and the vote for highest office is sometimes called “residual vote.” The residual vote is a measure of election administration issues that may cause a vote to go unrecorded for the highest office, but it is not a perfect measure. Some voters may intentionally abstain from the highest office, and some persons may have their ballot disqualified and thus not counted at all. Intentional abstention is best observed in Nevada, which is the only state that offers voters the option of casting a vote for “none of these candidates,” which 2.25% of voters did in the hotly contested 2010 senatorial election – arguably between two unpopular major-party

³ See: http://elections.gmu.edu/2010_vote_forecasts.html (accessed Dec. 12, 2010).

candidates. The national residual vote measure of 1.8% in 2010 suggests that fewer votes were unintentionally lost compared with 2.3% in 2006, 2.4% in 2002, and 3.2% in 1998. This may be an indication that electoral reforms implemented in the 2002 Help America Vote Act (HAVA) – adopted in the wake of Florida’s problems in the 2000 presidential election – have indeed reduced the number of lost votes.⁴

Turnout Patterns among the States

Looking below the national turnout rate, at the states, there is substantial variation among state turnout rates.⁵ The highest turnout rate in 2010 was Minnesota’s 55.5%. The lowest turnout rate was Texas’s 32.3%.⁶ The median turnout rate falls between Nevada, with a turnout rate of 42.6%, and Idaho with a turnout rate of 43.0%. What do the states above and below the median share in common?

States above the median turnout rate tend to make it easier to vote. One electoral procedure that is consistently found to be correlated with higher turnout is Election Day registration, which permits eligible persons to register to vote on Election Day rather than prior to the election.⁷ The nine states that offer Election Day registration all have turnout rates above the median.⁸ The scholarly jury is out on the participatory effect of early voting, which I loosely define as any procedure that allows voters to cast their ballot before Election Day, be it by mail

⁴ Residual vote in the 2008 and 2004 presidential elections was equally 1.0%, compared to a 1.9% residual vote rate in 2000. This post-HAVA reduction in residual vote is consistent with the midterm election patterns. However, note that residual vote in presidential elections is lower than in midterm elections, perhaps because fewer voters intentionally abstain from the high-profile presidential election.

⁵ State turnout rates are not exactly comparable to the national turnout rate because I do not apportion an estimate of the overseas citizens among the states. I provide an estimate of the overseas citizens apportioned among the states starting in 2008. Since I make comparisons to 2006, I do not apply the state-level overseas citizen adjustment to the analysis here.

⁶ Note that Texas has not certified its elections results as of this writing. The state’s turnout rate may change when the certified results are reported, but it unlikely to change significantly. Thus, Texas is likely to have the lowest state turnout rate or near it.

⁷ E.g., see: Benjamin Highton. 1997. “Easy Registration and Voter Turnout.” *The Journal of Politics* 59(2): 565–75; Stephen Knack. 1995. “Does ‘Motor Voter’ Work? Evidence from State-Level Data.” *The Journal of Politics* 57(3): 796–811; Michael P. McDonald. 2008. “Portable Voter Registration.” *Political Behavior* 30(4): 491–501; Glenn E. Mitchell and Christopher Wlezien. 1995. “The Impact of Legal Constraints on Voter Registration, Turnout, and the Composition of the American electorate.” *Political Behavior* 17(2): 179–202; and Staci L. Rhine. 1992. “An Analysis of the Impact of Registration Factors on Turnout in 1992.” *Political Behavior* 18(2): 171–85.

⁸ These states are Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota (no registration), Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

or in-person.⁹ Four of the five states where the number of mail ballots exceeds half of all ballots cast have turnout rates above the median.¹⁰ The two states that conduct all-mail ballot elections – Oregon and Washington – are in the top five. The higher turnout rates among these states provides further evidence in support of scholars who contend that mail balloting has greater effects in low-stimulus elections, such as a midterm election.¹¹

States above the median turnout rate tend to have better-educated populations. Numerous scholars find that persons of higher education are more likely to vote.¹² States above the median voter turnout rate had an average of 59.4% of their population attending at least some college classes, while states below the median had only 54.8%.¹³

States above the median turnout rate tend to have statewide elections with a higher degree of electoral competition. Numerous scholars find electoral competition is correlated with higher voter participation.¹⁴ The average margin of victory between the first- and second-place gubernatorial or senatorial candidate was 19.9 percentage points in those states above the median turnout rate and 23.9 percentage points for those below the median. These averages do not include the four states had no statewide gubernatorial or senatorial election, because they hold gubernatorial elections at a different time and because the Senate elections calendar skipped them in 2010. Three of these states were below the median and one was above.¹⁵

⁹I review the extensive and somewhat conflicting literature on early voting in my written testimony to the U.S. Senate Rules and Administration Committee on May 3, 2010. See: http://elections.gmu.edu/McDonald_Senate_Testimony_2010.pdf (accessed Dec. 13, 2010).

¹⁰ These states above the median state turnout rate are California, Colorado, Oregon, and Washington. Arizona was below the median.

¹¹ E.g., see: Jeffrey A. Karp and Susan A. Banducci. 2000. “Going Postal: How All-Mail Elections Influence Turnout.”

Political Behavior 22(3): 223-29; Adam J. Berinsky, Nancy Burns, and Michael W. Traugott 2001 “Who Votes by Mail? A Dynamic Model of the Individual-level Consequences of Vote-by-Mail Systems.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 65(2): 178-97; Priscilla L. Southwell and Justin Burchett. 2000. “The Effect of All-mail Elections on Voter Turnout.” *American Politics Research* 28(1): 72-79.

¹² E.g., see: Jan E. Leighley, and Jonathan Nagler. 1992. “Socioeconomic Class Bias in Turnout, 1964-1988: The Voters Remain the Same.” *The American Political Science Review* 86(3): 725–36; and Raymond E. Wolfinger and Stephen Rosenstone. 1980. *Who Votes?* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

¹³ Data is for educational attainment among persons age 25 and older drawn from the 2009 American Community Survey. See: <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/> (accessed Dec. 13, 2010).

¹⁴ For a meta-analysis, see: Andre Blais. 2000. *To Vote Or Not To Vote? The Merits and Limits of Rational Choice*. Pittsburgh: Univ. Pittsburgh Press.

¹⁵ The three states below the median were Mississippi, New Jersey, and Virginia. The state above the median was Montana, which has Election Day registration and a highly educated electorate.

The importance of a competitive election to stimulate interest in voting is evident when looking across time rather than comparing states within the 2010 election alone, as has been done up to this point. Election laws and the demographic composition of the electorate tend not to change much in a four-year period, so the primary reason for a change in a state's turnout from one midterm election to the next must normally lie in campaign dynamics. The state that experienced the largest turnout rate increase from 2006 to 2010 was Louisiana, with 9.2 percentage points. The state that experienced the largest turnout rate decline was Nebraska, with 9.3 percentage points.

Louisiana is a state that holds gubernatorial elections in odd-numbered years and in 2006 was not scheduled to hold a U.S. Senate election. Sen. David Vitter's campaign to seek re-election in 2010 drew national attention, due to his personal scandals. Although Vitter won re-election with a comfortable 18.9 percentage point margin, the presence of an interesting statewide election on the ballot appears to have engaged voters. Similarly, the two states that had no gubernatorial or senatorial election in 2006, but held a U.S. Senate race in 2010, were Kentucky and North Carolina. These two states also experienced turnout rate increases of 2.0 and 8.4 percentage points, respectively. North Carolina's increase was the second-highest behind Louisiana.

There is also the curious case of Delaware, which experienced a turnout rate increase of 6.4 percentage points compared to 2006 – the third-highest increase among the states. Delaware held a modestly more competitive U.S. Senate election in 2010 compared to 2006, where the margin of victory was 16.6 percentage points compared to 41.5 percentage points. While the 2010 senatorial election was not particularly competitive, there was a candidate with star power, Christine O'Donnell. O'Donnell inflamed passions on both the left and the right, which suggests that there is something more to holding an interesting election than simply making it close. Voters need to see a difference between the candidates, too. They need to care about who wins and who loses. Determining how much people care can be difficult to measure systematically in elections for offices other than president, because it requires asking voters their opinions of the candidates through expensive surveys. In Delaware, voters' perceptions of differences between the candidates appear to have engaged the public.

For states that experienced turnout rate declines from 2006 to 2010, consider the four with no gubernatorial or senatorial race in 2010, but a U.S. Senate race in 2006. In three of these four states – Montana, New Jersey, and Virginia – the turnout rate declined from the 2006 midterm election by an average of 5.7 percentage points. Montana had the second-largest decline (even though the state had a turnout rate above the median). Mississippi bucked this trend due to a

Although I do not perform a multivariate analysis here, Montana is illustrative of the benefit of controlling for multiple confounding factors using statistical tools.

confluence of factors. In 2006, there was little electoral competition; Sen. Trent Lott won a landslide re-election bid as did all U.S. House winners. In 2010, however, two Democratic incumbents were unseated in hotly contested elections that apparently drew voters to the polls.¹⁶ As a result, Mississippi's turnout rate increased 7.6 percentage points.

Nebraska follows a similar pattern to these other states that experienced turnout rate declines. In 2010, Nebraska had no U.S. Senate election and an uncompetitive gubernatorial race, where incumbent Gov. Dave Heineman won by 47.8 percentage points. In 2006, there was a similarly uncompetitive governor's race, but there was a somewhat more interesting U.S. Senate election, in which Sen. Ben Nelson was re-elected by a 27.8 point margin. The House elections were uniformly more competitive in 2006, too. In that year, two of the House races were won by less than a 10-point margin, and the third was won by less than 18 points. In 2010, one race was won by slightly more than 20 points, and the other two were won by more than 40 points.

In sum, let's return to the highest and lowest 2010 turnout rates among the states. Minnesota is a state firing on all cylinders. The state has Election Day registration; it has the sixth best-educated population in terms of the percentage of persons continuing on to college; and its 2010 gubernatorial election was the closest "highest office" race in the country. Texas is sputtering along. Eligible persons wishing to vote must register thirty days prior to the election – the maximum allowed under federal law;¹⁷ its population is less educated than the national average; and the state held a 2010 gubernatorial election that was only modestly competitive. The prescription for higher levels of voter participation in the United States is thus clear. Do what Minnesota does: make it easy for people to vote, educate your citizenry, and hold interesting elections.

An Emerging Age Gap?

Younger persons are less likely to vote than older persons, particularly in midterm elections. To illustrate, consider the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) from November.¹⁸ This large survey is among of the best sources for demographic breakdowns of voting and registration. The CPS for November 2010

¹⁶ In Mississippi's District 1 the 2010 margin of victory was 14.4 percentage points compared to 31.9 in 2006; 219,093 votes were cast for U.S. House candidates in 2010 compared with 144,272 in 2006. In District 4 the 2010 margin of victory was 5.1 percentage points compared to 59.6 in 2006; 203,384 votes were cast in 2010 compared to 139,113 in 2006. Turnout also increased slightly in the state's other two congressional districts, which also experienced slightly greater electoral competition.

¹⁷ See Texas State Statutes § 13.143(a).

¹⁸ For reports and access to CPS data, see:

<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/index.html> (accessed Dec. 12, 2010).

has not been released as of this writing, but the demographic composition of the electorate has been relatively stable since 1972, so the 2006 election should provide a reasonably accurate measure of youth turnout compared to elderly turnout in 2010. For this discussion, I define “young” citizens as those in the eighteen to twenty-nine age range and “old” citizens as those age 65 and older, which also happen to be the permissible responses to the media’s age question in national exit polls, another source of information I will discuss.¹⁹

Table 1. Percent Young and Old Voters Supporting Democratic House Candidates, 1992-2010

Source: Media’s National Exit Polls

	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010
Young	55	49	55	50	51	51	56	61	65	58
Old	56	49	49	45	52	49	46	52	52	42

Simply put, young people tend not to vote at as high rates in midterm elections compared to presidential elections. According to the CPS, the turnout rate among young citizens increased from 25.4% in 2006 to 51.1% in 2008. This is consistent with the exit polls, which found young people constituted 12% of the 2006 electorate and 18% of the 2008 electorate (and 12% of the 2010 electorate). Compare the young with the old. The turnout rate among old citizens increased from 63.1% in 2006 to 70.8% in 2008. This is consistent with the exit polls, which reported old people constituted 19% of the 2006 electorate and 15% percent of the 2008 electorate (and 21% of the 2010 electorate).

Varying turnout rates among the young and old in presidential and midterm elections would not affect election outcomes if people regardless of age shared the same political preferences. As Table 1 shows, in most recent elections they have not. In 2004, a distinct age gap emerged in support for Democratic and Republican House candidates (a gap that is evident in presidential vote choice, too). Prior to that, from 1992 to 2002, the levels of support for Democratic House candidates among young voters averaged 52% compared to 50% among old voters. In 2004, 56% of young voters supported Democratic House candidates and compared to 46% among old voters. This gap persisted in 2010, where 58% of young voters supported Democratic candidates compared with 42% among old voters.

The lower turnout rate among young people was thus a contributing factor to Republican successes in winning a net 63 seats to the House of Representatives

¹⁹ An excellent source for exit polls is the New York Times, which provides several easy to use interfaces to explore the data. See: <http://elections.nytimes.com/2010/results/house/exit-polls> (accessed Dec. 13, 2010).

in 2010 compared to the Democratic victories for President, House, and Senate just two years earlier. While there is a natural tendency for a midterm electorate to favor Republicans, Democrats can be successful when they are able to shift the electorate's opinion in their direction. This explains Democratic success in capturing control of the House in the 2006 election. It is also true that young people shifted towards Republican House candidates by seven points in 2010, but they did so less than the ten percentage-point shift among old voters.

Conclusion

The 2010 election poses something of a minor puzzle to the long-term trends in American voter turnout. As Figure 1 shows, turnout in presidential and midterm elections tends to move together. While recent presidential turnout rates have reached comparable levels of participation as those experienced during the 1950s and 1960s – the high-water mark of participation in the twentieth century – midterm elections have yet to break out to this upside with equal vigor. Young voters are those with the lowest levels of participation in midterm elections, so they are a group that has some of the greatest potential to contribute to higher levels of turnout in all elections, but particularly in midterm elections where their turnout drops off the most.

Whether the age gap that has emerged since the 2004 election is a temporary aberration or new trend remains to be seen. I suspect that this age gap will not soon fade, as the 2010 gap of 16 percentage points was the largest in any exit poll conducted since 1992. If so, Democrats may be in a better position to recapture some House seats in 2012 that were lost in 2010, as young people return to the electorate. Yet they may again potentially face losses in 2014, as the tide flows against them when young people exit the electorate during the next midterm election. This see-sawing of election outcomes between presidential and midterm elections is one potential consequence of an age gap in the short term.

In the short run, the onus is upon the Democratic Party to interest young people in their political campaigns and to make it more convenient for them to vote, especially in midterm elections. There are long-term implications of this age gap, too, since scholars find that partisanship is something that is learned in early adulthood and persists throughout one's life.²⁰ In the long-run, the onus is upon the Republican Party to reach out to young people, else their party will diminish over time.

²⁰ E.g., see: Gregory B. Markus. 1983. "Dynamic Modeling of Cohort Change: The Case of Political Partisanship." *American Journal of Political Science* 27(4): 717–39 and M. Kent Jennings and Gregory B. Markus. 1984. "Partisan Orientations over the Long Haul: Results from the Three-Wave Political Socialization Panel Study." *The American Political Science Review* 78(4): 1000–18.