

Voting, Elections, and Campaign Finance



Democracy depends on citizen participation. Elections, political parties, interest groups, and the media are linkage institutions that connect citizens with their government.

Interest groups and social movements allow people to join together to influence politicians win seats in government and then influence policy agenda. **Interest groups** represent people who care about a particular policy or issue. **Social movements** are less organized and concentrate on broader policies such as civil rights or the rights of gun owners. The media report political information and influence policy agenda by highlighting both issues and problems. Technology has changed the way news is delivered with social media posing both opportunities and challenges for democratic participation.

A representative democracy requires people to take action, and then shape the laws and policies of the nation.. all done by ***Political Participation – the different ways in which individuals take action to shape the laws and policies of the government.***

Political participation can take many forms, such as contacting a government official, working on a campaign, or donating money either as an individual or as part of a larger group organization.

The most common form of political participation is voting yet many Americans do not vote! Demographic characteristics, including level of education, racial and ethnic identity, economic background, gender, and age, are all factors that influence whether someone will vote or not. In addition, institutional barriers such as voting registration requirements also affect voter turnout. Some states make it easier to vote than others, for example with mail-in ballots. Young adult Americans are the lowest group of voters in elections but they are still represented as many volunteer or protest or are politically active using social media.



Forms of Political Participation

Voting is not the only form of political participation. Elections are classed as a **linkage institution: channels that provide a way for individuals to communicate their preferences to policymakers, including elections, political parties, interest groups, and the media.**

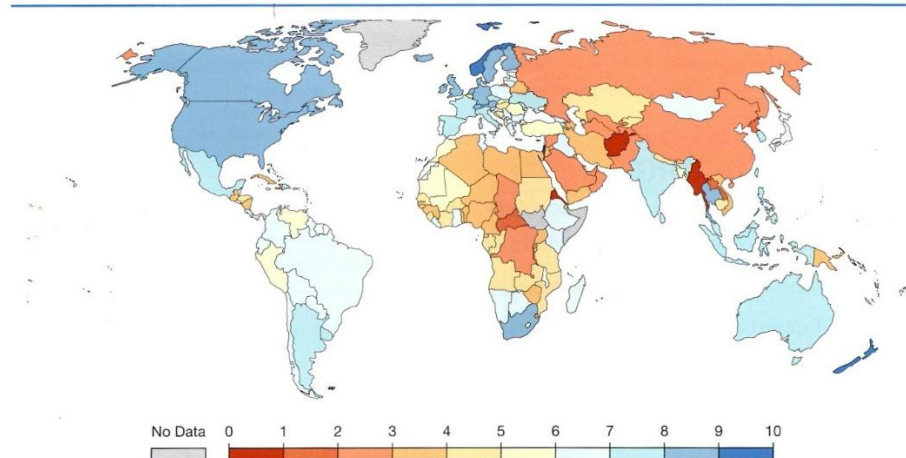
Other forms of participation include making calls, emailing, or using social media to contact officials and making their preferences known or expressing their displeasure. Other politically active people work on political campaigns or donate money.

Individuals may join together creating a **Social Movement: where people come together for a common purpose or goal of making social and political change and placing issues on the policy agenda.**

Members of social movements may participate in protests, attend political meetings, contact elected officials, or reach out to other citizens to educate them about the issues.

While Americans vote at lower rates than citizens in many other democracies, their rates of nonelectoral participation, such as joining a social movement or interest group, are equal to or higher than their counterparts in other nations.

Political Participation Index, 2022



This figure captures the extent to which citizens in each country shown can and do participate in national politics. Higher values indicate greater citizen participation.

Data from Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023.

Voting Rights and Models of Voting Behavior

Article I, Section 4, of the Constitution gives states the power to regulate the time, place, and manner of elections. After ratification, each state had a financial requirement for voting, such as owning property as it was believed these people had a greater and vested interest in the nation. This meant that most voters were white male landholders. During the George Washington election in 1789, only 6% of the population could vote. States gradually opened up this requirement and in 1856, North Carolina became the last state to end the property requirement for voting.

Five of the seventeen amendments ratified after the Bill of Rights expanded the **Franchise** or **Suffrage** (which are both words that are used to describe **the right to vote**).

The **Fifteenth Amendment** in 1870 prohibits states from discriminating against voters on the basis of race or previous condition of servitude (slavery). However, Southern states adopted methods to block this right.

Title I of the **Civil Rights Act of 1964** prevented states from disqualifying people to vote because of their race. The **Voting Rights Act of 1965** secured the rights of Black Americans by protecting their rights to register and vote.

The **Indian Citizen Act of 1924** granted Native Americans citizenship and the right to vote. The **Nineteenth Amendment** in 1920 granted women the right to vote although some states had allowed women to vote earlier.



The **Twenty-sixth Amendment**, ratified in 1971, lowered the voting age from 21 to 18, which expanded the number of people now eligible to vote. Originally, the Constitution stated that senators were elected by state legislatures. This was changed by the **Seventeenth Amendment** in 1913, now being by popular vote. The **Twenty-fourth Amendment** in 1964 prohibits the federal government from charging a **poll tax**, a previous method to deter the poor from voting. Obtaining the right to vote is an important first step in democratic participation. The second step is exercising that right!

How Citizens Make Voting Decisions

Elections are a signal to elected officials; they signify the voters' preferences and priorities. Citizens may vote out an incumbent or elect a newcomer who is the challenger.

Voting based on a person's best interest is called Rational Choice Voting. Under this model, voters choose candidates with the purpose of achieving their goals. Under the Rational Choice theory, candidates in democratic systems try to maximize their chance of winning and parties adopt the policies that are the most popular with the voters.

Retrospective Voting happens when voters decide whether a candidate should be reelected based in their recent past performance. Several interest groups, such as the NRA and the Human Rights Campaign, issue "congressional scorecards" on issues relevant to their interests to help their members keep up with the voting records of officials in Congress.

Prospective Voting means casting a ballot based on predictions of how a party or candidate will perform in the future. An excellent example of this was Trump's "Make America Great Again" campaign.

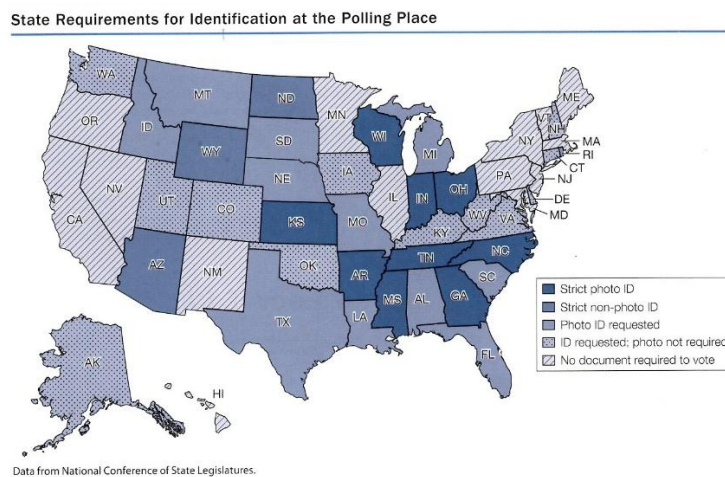
Some voters simply cast their ballots for one particular party which is called **Straight Ticket Voting – voting for all of the candidates on the ballot from one party.** It can also be called "voting along party lines" or "across the board" on the ballot.

When people identify with a specific party they generally agree with most of the positions supported by that party. A voter may not know much about every candidate running for office at the local, state, or national level but they have a party label which simplifies their election process.

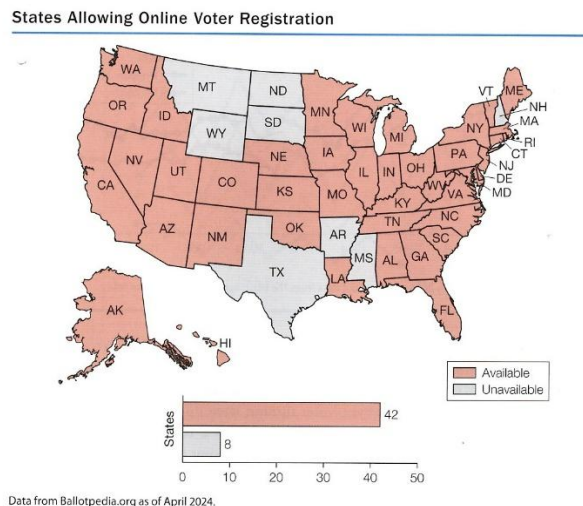
3 Key Voting Decision-Making Factors		
Party Affiliation	Personal Attributes	Issue Voting
Voter uses shortcut on voting for a candidate based upon their shared party identification.	Voter considers the candidate's personal characteristics— including personality, background, and experiences.	Voter considers the positions of a candidate and votes for candidate with views closest to their own.

To register to vote in any state, Americans show identification, proof of state residency or both. Those who favor making voter identification laws stricter argue that these laws are necessary to prevent fraud. Those who want to make voter registration easier argue that requirements result in negative effects and a loss of desire to vote. For example, even in states that allow same-day registration, residency requirements prohibit poorer citizens, including the homeless, who may lack documentation like utility bills that can prove state residency.

As of November 2023, ten states have strict photo identification requirements for casting a ballot, and twenty-five states require individuals to show a valid photo ID when voting. College students may also be put off to vote because states vary whether an individual can use a college ID as proof of residency when registering to vote.



As of 2023, forty-one states and the District of Columbia had online voter registration. It does require effort to make the process secure and free from fraud but it does promise an increasing turnout.



Millions of Americans are excluded from voting by felony disenfranchisement laws, which prevent people convicted of a felony from voting. These laws vary by state. Some states allow all citizens of age the right to vote, regardless of felony convictions. Other states allow convicted felons to vote once they are released from prison or complete their sentence. In other states, people with certain felony convictions are barred from voting, even after they have served their sentence or have been released from jail.

Timing is another factor that may reduce voter turnout. National presidential and congressional elections are held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday of November. Each state sets the poll hours when citizens can vote, typically starting at 6 a.m. or 7 a.m. and closing at 7.00 p.m. or 8.00 a.m. or for example, New York closes at 9.00 p.m.

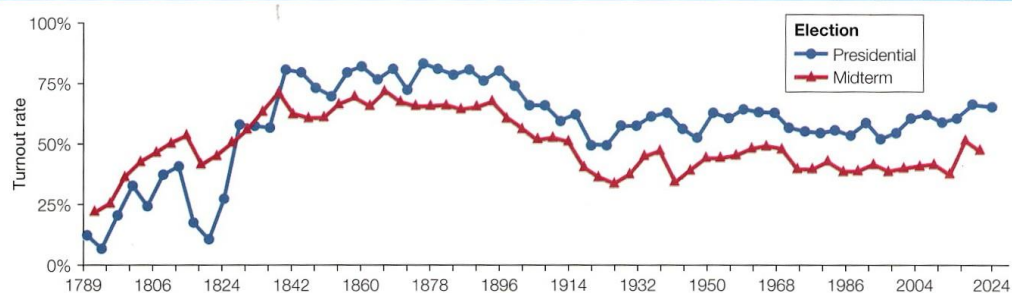
This scheduling may be discouraging as it is difficult for working Americans to get to their polling station on what is normally a workday. Some reformers have proposed that national elections be held on weekends or that Election Day be declared a national holiday.

In 2020, forty-seven states allowed citizens to vote early. Most states offer **absentee voting** for people who cannot be in the state at the time of an election. Some states have **mail-in voting**, where citizens can vote by mail rather than going to the polls.

Factors that Shape Electoral Participation

Although voting rights have increased there is still a large part of the American population that do not vote. In the 2016 election, only about 58% of eligible voters showed up to vote, placing the United States near the bottom of democratic nations based on **voter turnout**. (*Voter turnout is the number of eligible voters who participate in an election as a percentage of the total number of eligible voters*). However, turnout for the 2020 presidential election was the highest seen in the twenty-first century, where 66.8% of those eligible voted.

Comparing Voter Turnout in Presidential and Midterm Election Years



Created by the UF Election Lab (election.lab.ufl.edu)
Data through the 2022 election from U.S. Elections Project. Preliminary 2024 voter turnout data from *The Washington Post* and *Foreign Policy*.

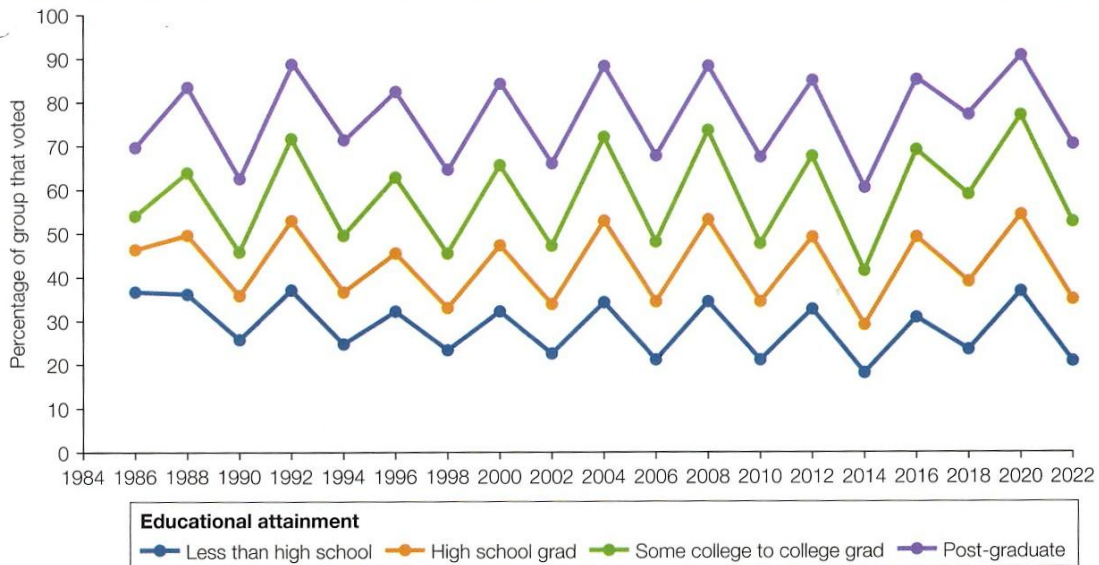
As shown in the previous chart, turnout in **midterm elections** (congressional elections that take place two years before and after a presidential election) is typically lower in turnout compared to presidential elections. Of note is that due to higher rates of political participation, there has been a slight increase of turnout in midterm elections.

The Decision to Vote – or Not to Vote

Voter turnout in the United States also varies among **demographic characteristics**, including economic status, education, age, race, ethnicity, and gender. A key factor in voter turnout is an individual’s **socioeconomic status (SES)** which is measured by an individual’s wealth, income, occupation, and educational attainment. Americans with a higher SES vote at higher rates than those people with a lower SES.

The most important contributor to a person’s SES is educational attainment. Educated professionals are also more likely to associate with interest groups.

Voter Turnout by Education



Note: Voter turnout data for the 2024 election not available at the time of publication.

Data from U.S. Elections Project.

Education also plays an important role in shaping how people think of themselves as political actors and potential voters. In the 2024 election, 62% of voters who never attended college voted for Donald Trump, up from 54% in 2020. In 2020, 61% of voters with advanced degrees voted for Biden and 62% supported Harris in 2024.

The intellectual resources and skills that higher levels of education produce also increase an individual's sense of **Political Efficacy: an individual's belief that their participation in the political process will make a difference.**

Members of labor unions often make more money than nonunion workers, giving them a higher SES. Labor unions call attention to political issues, and voter turnout among union members is higher than the turnout for nonunion workers.

Participation and Age, Race/Ethnicity, and Gender

Voting-eligible young adult Americans vote at lower rates than members of older generations. Like income and education, age is connected to many other factors.

In the 2024 presidential election, 42% of 18-to-29 year olds supported Trump, an increase of 26% from four years earlier.

Among voters aged 65 years and older, support for Trump declined from 52% to 49% from 2020 to 2024.

Voter turnout is also influenced by racial and ethnic identity, which is often connected to SES. In recent years, the turnout rates between white and Black voters has narrowed and the turnout rate of Hispanic American citizens is lower than that of Americans with other racial and ethnic identities.

In the 2024 presidential election, Trump made gains among Black men and Hispanic voters. As a group, Hispanic Americans are younger, and vote in fewer numbers than their older counterparts. As eligible Hispanic voters grow older, and grow in numbers, the political landscape may shift.

Before the presidential election of 1980, voting-eligible men voted at higher rates than voter-eligible women, but since then, women have voted at a slightly higher rate. For example, in the 2022 midterm election, 53% of women and 51.3% of men cast ballots.

Candidate Characteristics and Voter Turnout

The demographic characteristics of the candidates may impact voter turnout. The turnout among Black voters steadily increased from 1996 to 2012, when it reached a high point. The high level of voter turnout among Black voters in the 2008 and 2012 elections is sometimes called the "**Obama effect.**" This trend in increasing turnout stalled in 2016, when Black voter turnout decreased. However, turnout among Black voters increased to 62.6% in 2020.

In 2024, Kamala Harris became the first woman of Black and South Asian heritage to become a major party's presidential candidate. In the 2024 presidential election, women favored Harris by 10 percentage points.

A 2023 Pew research survey asked about the importance of certain candidate traits in earning their support at the polls. Sixty-Six percent said it was extremely or very important that a candidate share their political views. A minority response (22%) was that it was extremely or very important that a candidate live in a community like theirs, share religious values (18%), come from a similar income background (15%), share their racial and ethnic background (10%), or share their gender (7%).

Besides demographic characteristics, voters may consider a candidate's image in making voting decisions. Social media is an inexpensive way to reach voters. Candidates can use social media to talk about the issues, talk about their sports teams, pets, and places to dine out. Although it is more expensive, candidates can also use social media to pay for advertising to send targeted messages to specific voters, a strategy called **microtargeting**.

Candidates often hire consultants to give them advice about what to wear, how to style their hair, what tone of voice to use, and how to use body language to project self-confidence.

Voting decisions are complicated. It can be difficult to measure the degree to which demographic and other characteristics of candidates influence decisions about how to vote.

Political Mobilization – the efforts by political parties to encourage their members to vote can be decisive in an election. The **GOTV** efforts (“get out the vote”) maybe direct, through recruiting, sponsoring meetings, requesting contributions, or by indirect methods such as building social networks. These issues are all part of **Partisan Attachment** and can greatly influence turnout.

When combined together, institutional factors, demographics, candidate characteristics, and partisan attachment influence voter turnout. Candidates and parties pay attention to these factors in targeting specific groups of voters and encouraging them to show up at the polls.

