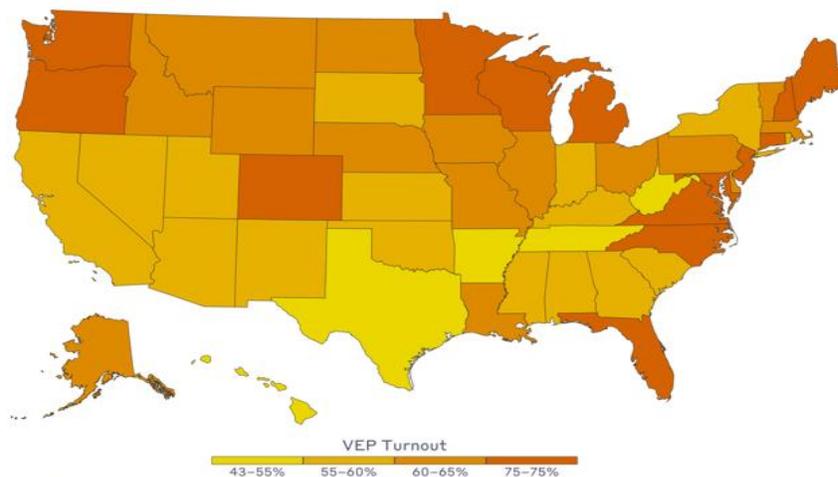


The U.S. struggles to get its citizens to vote every election day¹. Politicians and institutions spend countless hours and dollars trying to persuade the voting-eligible population (VEP) to head to the polls. But how many Americans actually vote, and has turnout changed significantly at any point in our history?

In 2016, 56% of the voting-age population voted in the U.S. (157.6 million out of 245.5 million eligible voters). The U.S. measures turnout “in the aggregate by simply counting the number who vote in an election,” yet, not every state does this². Compared to similar nations, the U.S. ranks #26 out of 32 OECD nations³ relative to voter turnout.

Voter Turnout in the 2016 Election



Note: Original data were downloaded from The United State Elections Project
<http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/voter-turnout-data>

In 2016, votes cast in the U.S. presidential election, as a percentage of registered voters, was 86.6%. Yet, only 55.7% of the voting-age population voted. The country with the highest voting rate, Belgium, has a vote cast rate of 89.37% of registered voters and 87.21% of the voting-age population.⁴ However, it is important to note that Belgium is one of 24 nations that has a form of compulsory voting, and voting is something the U.S. does not mandate.

When trying to understand the history of voter turnout, it is important to understand the contextual factors relative to each election cycle. The [United States Elections Project](#) gathers insights and statistics on voter turnout since 1776. Turnout in presidential elections has maintained an average between 50-65% of VEP since 1925, while the midterm election rates are much lower, ranging from 30-45%.

¹ King, Bridgett A. *Why Don't Americans Vote? Causes and Consequences: Causes and Consequences*. ABC-CLIO, 2016.

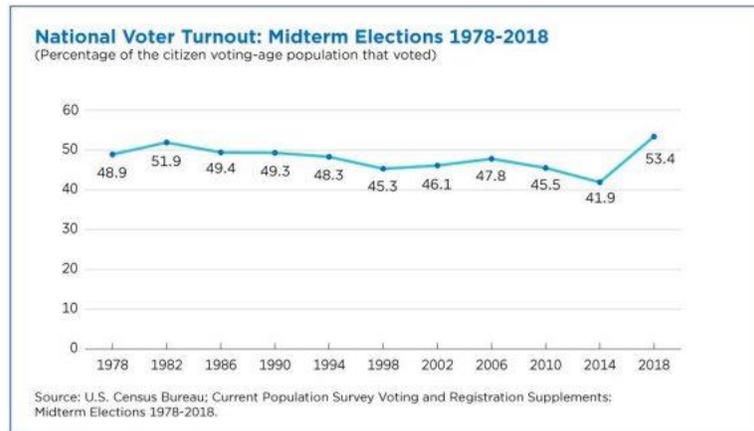
² “In 2016, four states (Mississippi, Missouri, Pennsylvania, and Texas) did not record how many people turned out to vote.” (Source: <https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/voter-turnout>). That being said, there are additional ways organizations compound turnout rates, such as by tracing votes counted to the number of registered voters in the state.

³ Source: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/21/u-s-voter-turnout-trails-most-developed-countries/>

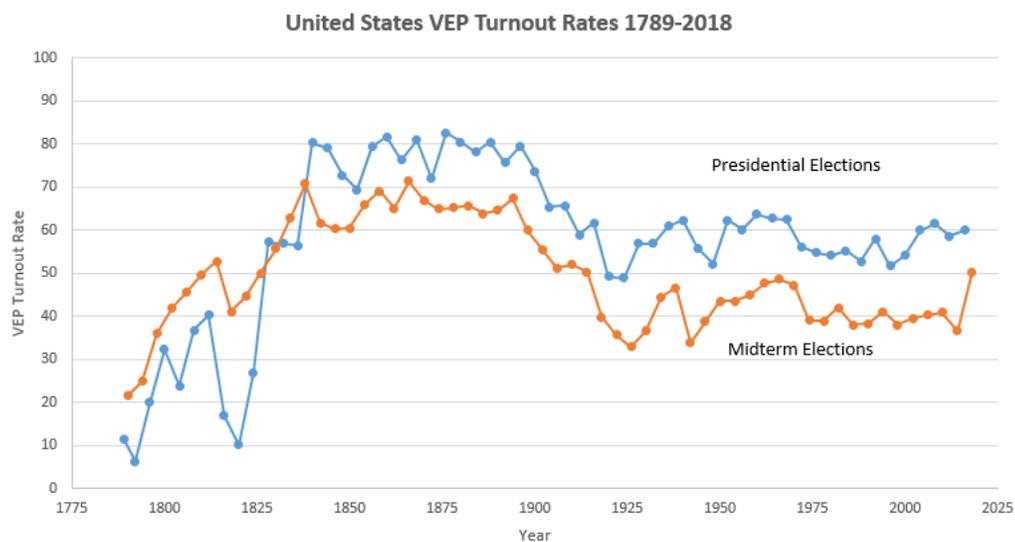
⁴ Source: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/21/u-s-voter-turnout-trails-most-developed-countries/>

Voter Turnout | Brief Report | September 2020

Midterm election turnout has been declining at a very slow rate since 1978. However, in 2018 there was a spike to 53.4% VEP turnout, as highlighted in the following graphic, as a result of increased voter turnout from the 18-29 year old population.



Professor Michael McDonald of the Elections Project states that, “Historical turnout rates are calculated from data of dubious accuracy and are at times incomplete when statistics on a class of disfranchised population -- such as white male property owners who meet a religious test -- must be estimated. However, these historical turnout rates are regarded as the most accurate available.”⁵



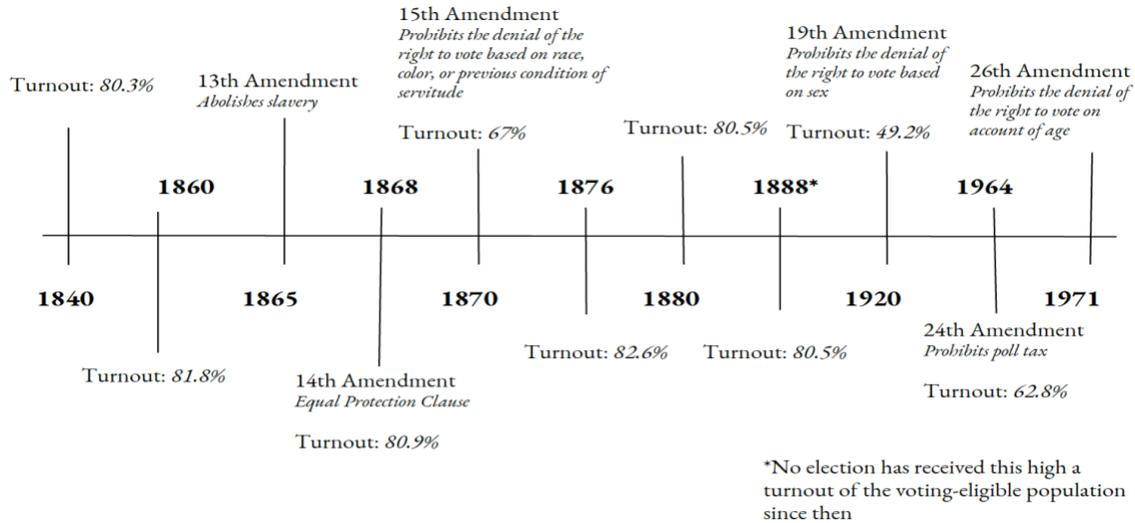
Source: <http://www.electproject.org/national-1789-present>

⁵ Source: <http://www.electproject.org/national-1789-present>



Voter Turnout | Brief Report | September 2020

It might come as a surprise that there does not appear to be a correlation between increased voting rights legislation and voter turnout in the U.S., as demonstrated in the graphic below from TransTechSol. During 1868 and 1920 (the adoption of the 14th and 19th amendments, respectively), the total number of eligible voters increased dramatically and, as a result, both Black Americans and women were able to turnout in numbers similar to white men. Yet, based on turnout rates, this does not seem to have happened.



These insights might suggest that higher voter turnout could be the result of specific candidates, economic climate, or other social factors. Research indicates that demographics do tend to have an influence on the rate of groups that vote. The [Election Lab at MIT](https://electionlab.mit.edu) studies this influence and notes that “a long history of political science research has shown the following demographic factors are associated with higher levels of voter turnout: more education, higher income, older age, and being married,” as seen in the graphic below.

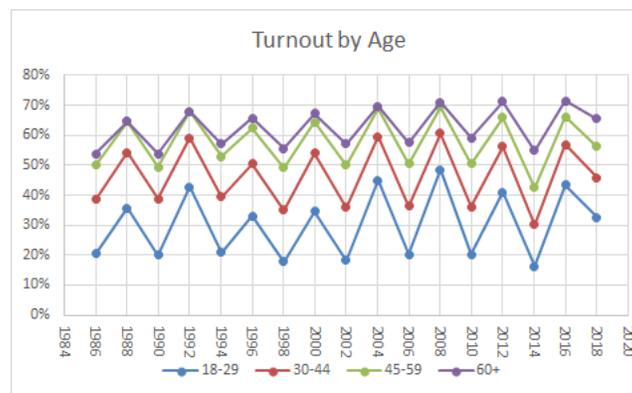
VOTER TURNOUT	
EDUCATION	
High School Grad or less	44%
More than high school	77%
INCOME	
Family income less than \$50,000	50%
Family income more than \$50,000	69%
AGE	
18-30	44%
31-60	62%
60+	72%
MARITAL STATUS	
Married	69%
Not married	51%
SEX	
Men	58%
Women	63%
RACE/ETHNICITY	
White	65%
Black	60%
Hispanic	45%
Asian-American	47%
All others	46%

Source: <https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/voter-turnout>

Voter Turnout | Brief Report | September 2020

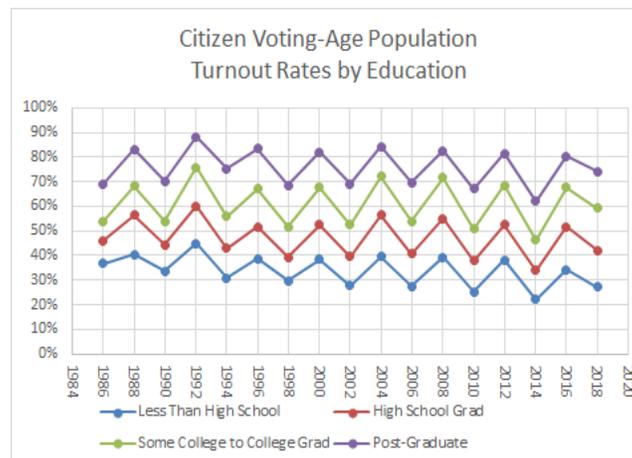
The following graphics highlight demographic shifts over time. From these trends, it is apparent that an individual is more likely to vote if they are more educated, older, wealthier, married, and white or black. The largest discrepancies in voting turnout seem to be by age.

Voter turnout is highest among those 60 years of age and older. This trend has been continuous for the last 40 years. However, across all age groups, participation increases in presidential election years and dips for midterm elections. A major priority for candidates and states is increasing the turnout rates of 18-29 year olds. This age group has participated in higher rates in not only the past two years, but also in any midterm election, across the past four decades.



Source: <https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/voter-turnout>

Voter turnout is consistently correlated relative to education levels. The higher the level of education, the more likely a person is to participate in voting.



Source: <https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/voter-turnout>



Voter Turnout | Brief Report | September 2020

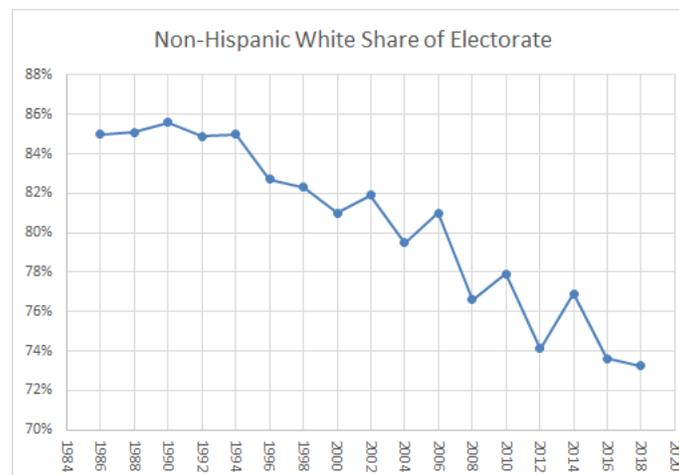
Since 1996, voter turnout by race has been increasing significantly across both Black and White Americans. Yet, since 2004, Black Americans have voted at higher rates than White Americans. This graphic is an amplified and truncated scale that highlights the slight difference (less than 5%) but higher turnout of Black Americans compared to White Americans in 2008 and 2012.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey (CPS)

Source: <https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/voter-turnout>

Non-Hispanic Whites as a demographic have declined their share of the electorate since 1984 by about 10%. This does not necessarily mean non-Hispanic Whites have been voting less, but rather minorities and other people of color have increased their participation in voting.



Source: <https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/voter-turnout>

Voter turnout in the United States continues to be influenced by social, political, and economic pressures. Some argue that “particular election reforms such as Election Day registration, vote-by-mail, early voting, photo ID, etc.,”⁶ may have an effect on voter turnout. With voting-by-mail becoming a controversial topic in the 2020 elections, it will be fascinating to see if this factor affects voter turnout as well. *If you are interested in learning further about election compliance, connect with the compliance experts at TransTechSol.com.*

⁶ <https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/voter-turnout>