

Restoring American Civic Participation

Election
2008

By Michael P.
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Thanks in part to the League of Women Voters' hard work, voter participation among American citizens has increased for three consecutive presidential elections. Preliminary numbers indicate that in 2008 approximately 131 million Americans (61.6 percent of those eligible to vote) cast a vote for president. This represents nearly a ten percentage point improvement from the 1996 modern low of 51.7 percent. And, it continues an increasing trend from 54.7 percent in 2000 and 60.1 percent in 2004.

This election is in the upper range of participation over the past century, on par with the high levels of voter engagement in the 1950s and 1960s. But there is still room for improvement, and it is disappointing that the turnout rate did not exceed the highest rate in the last century, 63.8 percent in 1960.

Indeed, turnout was actually down from 2004 in some states, while others saw considerable increase. The shifting presidential battleground explains some of these changes, but so, too, do underlying changes in the electorate's composition. This election saw a substantial increase in voting by African Americans, while less-enthusiastic

Republicans apparently voted at lowered rates. Significant reform developments also occurred, particularly unprecedented levels of early voting and the adoption of Election Day registration by Iowa and Montana. In this light, voter participation rates deserve a closer look to see what effect, if any, these developments might have had on them.

Participation among the States

States entering the presidential battleground in 2008 experienced the largest turnout increases from their 2004 numbers. Indiana rose 4.5 percentage points (from 54.8 percent to 59.3 percent), North Carolina improved 8.0 percentage points (from 57.8 percent to 65.8 percent), and Virginia increased 6.8 percentage points (from 60.6 percent to 67.4 percent). The presidential campaigns spent considerable resources wooing voters in these states, and citizens pay more attention when they feel their vote matters in close elections. In contrast, states, such as Maine, Minnesota, Oregon, Washington and Wisconsin, which shifted off the battleground, suffered turnout declines. In states that remained on the battleground, turnout remained high, but essentially flat from 2004.

These patterns suggest that the national turnout rate would be higher if the most populous states of California, New York and Texas were battleground states. In the near term, these states are likely to remain safely blue or red, though perhaps Texas is becoming more competitive as Latinos constitute an increasing proportion of the state's electorate.

Higher turnout was also experienced by states with sizable African-American populations, confirming exit polling that showed the proportion of African Americans in the electorate increased from 11 percent in 2004 to 13 percent in 2008. Interestingly, this increasing share of the electorate was located in quiet, non-battleground states. In battleground states with substantial minority populations, increases in White turnout kept pace with African-American turnout, such that minorities in 2008 essentially constituted the same proportion of the electorate as in 2004 in states such as Florida, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Virginia. An increase in the share of the African-American vote and a corresponding increase in turnout from 2004 arose in non-battleground places such as Alabama,



the District of Columbia, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina.

Democrats were apparently enthused to vote for President-elect Obama. Most deep blue states experienced modest turnout rate increases, in line with the national increase. Besides states shifting off the battleground, the largest declines in turnout were experienced in deep red states such as Alaska, Utah and the narrow swath of states from the Appalachians to the Ozarks where Sen. McCain in 2008 surprisingly outperformed President Bush in 2004. This is consistent with many pre-election polls finding Democrats were more energized to vote than Republicans.

This enthusiasm gap may have contributed to lower Republican turnout in an indirect way. Nineteen percent of exit poll respondents reported an in-person or phone contact from the McCain campaign, while 25 percent reported an in-person or phone contact from the Bush campaign in 2004. The Obama campaign essentially kept pace with Sen. Kerry's efforts, with 26 percent of voters reporting a contact in both elections. These mobilization efforts

require large numbers of volunteers to work phone banks and canvass neighborhoods. The lowered levels of Republican contact suggest that Republicans were not as willing to volunteer as their Democratic peers; as a consequence, fewer Republicans were given a nudge out their door to the polling place. This underscores the value of the League's work in registering and informing all voters in order to connect them with the electoral system.

Election Reform

The League is also deeply involved in election reform. The 2008 election provided an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of some reforms, particularly the impact of Election Day registration and early voting on voter participation.

Election Day registration

An electoral reform touted to increase participation is Election Day registration, which permits eligible persons to register and vote on Election Day, thereby making voter registration easier for first-time voters and recent movers. In 2008, two states, Iowa and Mon-

tana, implemented Election Day registration for the first time in a presidential general election. While numerous studies find states with Election Day registration have high turnout rates, this benefit was not apparent in these states. Iowa, which implemented Election Day registration in 2008, experienced a slight 0.2 percentage point decline from 69.9 percent in 2004 to 69.7 percent in 2008. Montana adopted Election Day registration in 2006, yet turnout increased a modest 1.5 percentage points from 64.4 percent in 2004 to 65.9 percent in 2008. Clearly, voter registration poses a barrier since those who are not registered cannot vote. It may be most residents of these states are not yet aware of Election Day registration; hence, further monitoring of these states is warranted. Perhaps increased turnout will become more apparent in future elections.

Early voting

Many people learned about and took advantage of early voting in this past election. Preliminary statistics indicate that 30 percent or about 40 million votes were cast prior to Election Day, either through the

mail or at special in-person polling places. Early voting has been on the rise—from 4 percent in 1972, to 7 percent in 1992, to 22 percent in 2004. Mail-in balloting has steadily increased in states that permit “no excuse” absentee voting, particularly where states permit voters to sign up to always receive an absentee ballot. Oregon now runs its elections entirely by mail, as do all but King and Pierce Counties in Washington.

The most dramatic increases in early voting occurred among states that permit in-person early voting at special polling places. Three times as many Georgians and twice as many North Carolinians voted early. Some southern states reporting demographic characteristics of these early voters reveal that large numbers of African Americans voted early in 2008, a reversal from previous elections where, according to a Census Bureau survey, African Americans rarely vote early.

A point of caution: a substantial number of mail-in ballots are not figured into the number of early voters. The United States Election Assistance Commission reported in 2006 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. Given that turnout and early voting were much greater in 2008 than in 2006, perhaps as many as 500,000 to 750,000 mail-in ballots may be rejected in the 2008 election when all the numbers are finalized.

A number of states and the federal government are considering legislation to expand early voting. These rejected mail-in ballot numbers suggest that careful thought should be given to how best to implement mail balloting to reduce the number of rejected ballots. In-person early voting seems a reasonable component of such legislation. Procedural errors that might otherwise disqualify a mail ballot can be resolved in the presence of the voter and elections official.

Surprisingly, studies of early voting in previous elections have found no related turnout increases, except in low turnout

Election 2008 Demographic Details Still Being Collected and Analyzed

A number of more specific issues (gender, etc.) are still being examined by researchers, and state-specific, detailed information is still coming in as we go to press. The League will monitor and use all available information as we develop plans for coming elections, particularly in the areas of voter registration, voter information and debates.

state and local elections. This election may have been different, as early voting may have reduced pressure on polling places and thereby allowed a greater number of people to vote on Election Day. Still, there were long lines for in-person early voting and during the morning of Election Day. Some experimentation is needed to consider how we might better reduce congestion. Forsyth County, Georgia, posted wait times for in-person early voting on its Web site. On Election Day, perhaps we can develop a “fast lane” approach that permits people to sign up in advance for a specific time to vote and allows people to bypass a long check-in line. This would encourage people to sign up for typical lulls in voting during the late morning and early afternoon. Further innovation and experimentation is needed to help make the voting experience less frustrating and more pleasurable.

Where We Go from Here

“The times, they are a’ changin’.” After a period of lower voter participation from the 1970s to 1990s, turnout is again at the high end of the range for the past century. When we look back on how this has occurred, we will likely point to increased registration and mobilization efforts by campaigns and outside organizations, such as the League of Women Voters, as a key to the restoration of American civic engagement. These increased levels of participation bode well for future turnout, too. Once a person registers and navigates the electoral process the

first time, they are much more likely to vote again. Hopefully, as a consequence, civic engagement will persist for at least the near future now that we have built momentum.

The presidential election of 2008 was a good year for Democrats, and even higher levels of participation can be anticipated if Republicans become more engaged four years from now. Of course there is always the potential for decline in participation, particularly if electoral competition wanes as it often does when a popular sitting president runs for reelection as happened during Clinton’s reelection in 1996. How effectively President Obama governs and how able Republicans are in reinvigorating their party will likely be important considerations with respect to the levels of citizen engagement in the next few elections. Still, this does not diminish the efforts to improve the performance of the electoral system to buoy participation. This election raised the bars, and one would not expect turnout to plummet to the 1996 low in the near term. ■

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VOTER LINKS

- **United States Election Assistance Commission** - <http://www.eac.gov>
- **Dr. McDonald's Web site** - <http://elections.gmu.edu>
- **Early Voting Center** - <http://earlyvoting.net>
- **Electionline.org** - <http://www.electionline.org>
- **New York Times 2008 election resources** - <http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/president/map.html>