

## Notes and Comments

### *The Political Implications of Higher Turnout*

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Rich Americans, far more likely to vote than their poorer fellow citizens, also differ in how they vote and what policies they favour. These undisputed facts lead to the widespread belief ‘that if everybody in this country voted, the Democrats would be in for the next 100 years.’<sup>1</sup> The gist of this conclusion, which seems to follow ineluctably from our opening sentence, is accepted by almost everyone except a few empirical political scientists. Their analyses of survey data show that no objectively achieved increase in turnout – including compulsory voting – would be a boon to progressive causes or Democratic candidates. Simply put, voters’ preferences differ minimally from those of all citizens; outcomes would not change if everyone voted.

This conclusion assumes that non-voters’ preferences would not shift if they were to vote. In his presidential address to the American Political Science Association, Arend Lijphart challenged this assumption with an explanation that would reconcile research findings and conventional wisdom about the likely consequences of higher turnout:

Nonvoters who are asked their opinions on policy and partisan preferences in surveys are typically citizens who have not given these questions much thought, who have not been politically mobilized, and who, in terms of social class, have not developed class consciousness. It is highly likely that, if they were mobilized to vote, their votes would be quite different from their responses in opinion polls.<sup>2</sup>

Because ‘who votes, and who doesn’t, has important consequences for who gets elected and for the content of public policies,’<sup>3</sup> Lijphart advocated compulsory voting as a cure for class inequality in turnout.

Lijphart’s argument has the great merit of being formulated in testable propositions.

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<sup>1</sup> John Kenneth Galbraith, Interview in *California Monthly*, February 1986, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Arend Lijphart, ‘Unequal Participation: Democracy’s Unresolved Dilemma’, *American Political Science Review*, 91 (1997), 1–14, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Lijphart, ‘Unequal Participation,’ p. 4.

We conduct such tests with data from the American National Election Studies and find very modest support for his hypotheses. Then we show that the absence of a consequential link between outcomes and turnout can be explained by answering a hitherto neglected question: who does not vote? As a prologue to our data analysis we review the literature on the political consequences of higher turnout, beginning with empirical studies and proceeding to speculative denials.

#### TURNOUT AND OUTCOMES

One research genre directly explores whether, in past elections, Democrats fared better when aggregate turnout was higher. The pioneer in this school, James DeNardo, found that sometimes high turnout helped Democratic candidates and sometimes it did not.<sup>4</sup> This conclusion was affirmed in a later exchange with critics and then repeated in a study of gubernatorial and senatorial elections.<sup>5</sup>

These articles have limited relevance to our topic. For one thing, they consider turnout varying only between the upper and lower bounds of recent experience, without reference to any contemplated changes in registration procedures. Hence this genre can illuminate neither the 'disenfranchisement of large sectors of the working class'<sup>6</sup> nor the differential consequences of proposed changes in registration laws. Moreover, 'higher turnout' is an imprecise term; the issue is how that turnout might be brought about, i.e., what scenario one envisions about future change.

The least modest scenario assumes that everyone would vote and compares respondents who voted to an entire survey sample. Until now this comparison served only heuristic purposes, to suggest the political consequences of unstated measures to raise turnout and to show the upper bounds of such effects. It gains significance with Lijphart's proposal to make voting compulsory. The earliest estimate of universal turnout showed that if everyone had voted in 1972, the proportion of Democrats would have been unchanged, while the representation of Independents would have increased nearly 4 percentage points at the expense of Republicans.<sup>7</sup> This trifling difference was the largest political gap between voters and the entire sample. On a range of issues, 'voters are virtually a carbon copy of the citizen population. Those most likely to be underrepresented are people who lack opinions.'<sup>8</sup> Other scholars reported similar

<sup>4</sup> James DeNardo, 'Turnout and the Vote: The Joke's on the Democrats,' *American Political Science Review*, 74 (1980), pp. 406–20.

<sup>5</sup> James DeNardo, 'Rejoinder to Tucker and Vedlitz,' *American Political Science Review*, 80 (1986), 1298–304; Harvey J. Tucker and Arnold Vedlitz, 'Does Heavy Turnout Help Democrats in Presidential Elections?' *American Political Science Review*, 80 (1986), 1291–8; Jack H. Nagel and John F. McNulty, 'Partisan Effects of Voter Turnout in Senatorial and Gubernatorial Elections,' *American Political Science Review*, 90 (1996), 780–93.

<sup>6</sup> Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Why Americans Don't Vote* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond E. Wolfinger and Steven J. Rosenstone, *Who Votes?* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1980), 109–14.

<sup>8</sup> Wolfinger and Rosenstone, *Who Votes?* p. 109.

findings for elections since 1972.<sup>9</sup> Universal turnout would have produced bigger margins for Republican candidates in 1984 and 1988.<sup>10</sup>

#### REBUTTALS

The most common rebuttal to empirical findings suggesting that outcomes seldom depend on turnout speculates that some people would come to have different views about candidates and issues if they were to switch from abstaining to voting:

But the opinions elicited by surveys reflect the underdevelopment of political attitudes resulting from the historic exclusion of low-income groups from active electoral participation. In other words, what survey data cannot reveal is the dynamic dimension of politics. Political attitudes would inevitably change over time if the allegiance of voters from the bottom became the object of partisan competition, for then politicians would be prodded to identify and articulate the grievances and aspirations of lower-income voters in order to win their support, thus helping to give form and voice to a distinctive class politics.<sup>11</sup>

One reason to expect such change is found in claims that ‘we don’t vote because we are ignored by the two-party system’ whose candidates ‘are unlikely to run on tickets that address our concerns’.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, so the argument goes, with universal turnout, the campaign’s content (its ‘dynamics’) would change as politicians addressed issues of interest to previously inert citizens. This expectation can be evaluated by comparing the priorities of contemporary voters and non-voters, which we do in our data analysis.

Although few speculations about the future can be tested empirically, several observations occur to us. One is the historical parallel to the ‘hidden Republican voter’, the once-popular conviction that mid-century Republicans lost elections because their ‘me-too’ centrist presidential candidates offered true conservatives no reason to vote.<sup>13</sup> A second observation is our belief that non-voters’ ‘grievances and aspirations’ offer ample opportunity for exploitation by political figures whom leftists would deplore. For example, in 1968 the segregationist candidate George Wallace was preferred by almost twice as many non-voters as voters,<sup>14</sup> which leads us to doubt whether underprivileged

<sup>9</sup> Ruy Teixeira, *The Disappearing American Voter* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution), pp. 87–97; Paul R. Abramson, John H. Aldrich and David W. Rohde, *Change and Continuity in the 1996 Elections* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1998), 86–89; Steven Earl Bennett and David Resnick, ‘The Implications of Nonvoting for Democracy in the United States’, *American Journal of Political Science*, 34 (1989), 771–802, p. 795. One scholar has suggested that such studies are flawed because they rely on respondents’ claims about voting (see Walter Dean Burnham, *The Current Crisis in American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 170). But much of this research relies on inspection of respondents’ voting records. Our own analysis of such data from the 1988 American National Election Study, the last NES to verify respondents’ reports of registration and turnout, shows that voters preferred Bush to Dukakis by 52 to 47 per cent, not very different from the 51 to 47 per cent verdict of all respondents.

<sup>10</sup> William Schneider, ‘The November 6 Vote for President: What Did It Mean?’ in Austin Ranney, ed., *The American Elections of 1984* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985); ‘Who were the voters and nonvoters?’ *New York Times*, 21 November 1988, A8.

<sup>11</sup> Piven and Cloward, *Why Americans Don’t Vote*, pp. 20–1.

<sup>12</sup> Laurel Rosen, ‘Why generations X, Y and Zero don’t vote’, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 25 October 1998, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Philip E. Converse, Aage R. Clausen and Warren E. Miller, ‘Electoral Myth and Reality: The 1964 Election,’ *American Political Science Review*, 59 (1965), 321–36. Such beliefs have their counterparts on the left. A claim that ‘90 or so million Americans’ would stay home in 1988 ‘as an indictment of the Democratic Party’s intelligence and courage’ was titled ‘Democrats shun their hidden electorate’ (Hodding Carter III, *Wall Street Journal*, 7 January 1988, p. 19).

<sup>14</sup> John R. Petrocik, ‘Voter Turnout and Electoral Preference: The Anomalous Reagan Elections’, in Kay Lehman Schlozman, ed., *Elections in America* (Boston, Mass.: Allen & Unwin, 1987), pp. 239–59, at p. 250.

people today would be interested only in politically correct scapegoats. If more people voted, 'class politics' might not be the only result; Republicans would not limit themselves to reiterating conservative economic doctrine. The more plausible scenario would be greater emphasis on issues that distract voters of all sorts from attention to economic concerns: flag burning, term limits, school prayer, gun control, gays in the military, gays generally, abortion, immigration, racial preferences, furloughs for felons, school vouchers, and the National Endowment for the Arts.<sup>15</sup> For example, during the 1998 election campaign Republicans seemed to be going out of their way to attack homosexuals; 'Senator Trent Lott of Mississippi, the majority leader, has compared homosexuality to kleptomania, and Republican leaders in the House have been citing the Bible in an effort to prove that homosexuals are sinners.'<sup>16</sup>

#### HOW REPRESENTATIVE ARE VOTERS?

We revisit differences between voters and all citizens for three reasons: (1) in order to demonstrate a method of making this comparison that takes account of disparities between aggregate turnout figures and turnout estimates from surveys. Our method is more sensitive to differences between voters and non-voters and therefore is less likely to show that voters are a microcosm of the entire citizen population;<sup>17</sup> (2) to see if voters' issue priorities resemble those of the entire sample; (3) in response to a suspicion that findings about the representativeness of voters in the 1970s might be outdated by political realities in the 1990s.<sup>18</sup>

Voting in the general election was reported by 76.1 per cent of respondents in the 1992 National Election Studies and 71.8 per cent in the 1996 NES. This is far above the most commonly-used figure, which we will call the 'official turnout': the number of votes cast for presidential candidates divided by the Census Bureau's estimate of the voting-age population in November. Official turnout was 55.1 per cent in 1992 and 48.9 per cent in 1996.<sup>19</sup> Part of the discrepancy between the NES and official estimates reflects the different bases of the percentages. The NES sample is limited to citizens; the voting-age population includes non-citizens. Removing non-citizens from the base increases the official turnout to 58.3 per cent for 1992 and 52.6 per cent for 1996.<sup>20</sup>

The NES estimates are still almost 20 per cent higher than these adjusted

<sup>15</sup> On a visit to the Berkeley campus in 1996, former Speaker Thomas Foley said that when he campaigned in union halls in his district he found few members interested in discussing wages, working hours, workplace safety or collective bargaining. Their great fear was gun control and they warmed up to Foley when he mentioned that he was endorsed by the National Rifle Association. In 1994 he was defeated for re-election when the NRA endorsed his opponent.

<sup>16</sup> Timothy Egan, 'Uphill race despite lesbian's past success,' *New York Times*, 22 July 1998, p. A1.

<sup>17</sup> Some of the hypotheses we will test refer to differences between voters and non-voters. In this instance, however, references to differences between voters and non-voters do not accurately specify the problem. The consequences of higher turnout (no matter how achieved) are correctly estimated by contrasting voters to a hypothetically larger voting population.

<sup>18</sup> Gary C. Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections*, 4th edn (New York: Longman, 1997), pp. 87–8.

<sup>19</sup> US Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1997*, 117th edn (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1997), p. 289.

<sup>20</sup> We adjusted the 1992 estimate with the aid of a report showing that 5.4 per cent of the adult population in 1990 were non-citizens (US Bureau of the Census, *1990 Age, Nativity, and Citizenship for the United States, States, and Counties (CPH-L-114)*, Ethnic and Hispanic Branch, Population Division, 1990 Special Tabulations (Washington, DC, n.d.). For 1996 we used the 1996 Voter Supplement of the Current Population Survey, which provided an estimate that 7.1 per cent of the voting-age population were not citizens (US Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Survey: Voter Supplement File, 1996* [Computer File]. ICPSR version. Washington, DC: Bureau of the Census (producer). Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (distributor)).

official figures, which poses a problem for attempts to compare voters to all citizens. If voters and non-voters differ and non-voters are underrepresented, comparing voters to all respondents would overweight the responses of voters, at the expense of non-voters, with the size of the effect depending on the relative size of each group. Because NES samples underestimate the size of the non-voting population, they can lead to unrealistically small estimates of the effects of universal turnout. For example, in 1996, when an estimated 47 per cent of all adult citizens stayed home, non-voters accounted for just 28 per cent of the NES sample. There is a simple solution to this problem. We reweighted the NES samples to bring the proportions of voters and non-voters into line with the adjusted estimates of the official turnout.

One consideration remains. The biggest cause of the high NES turnout is respondents who reported voting but in fact did not do so. This would not be a problem if misreporting were random, but it seems to be positively related to education.<sup>21</sup> Reclassifying misreporters from voters to non-voters would make the two groups appear more similar. Lacking information to do this because verification of respondents' reports of voting was last done in the 1988 NES, we can only note that the misreporting will exaggerate estimated differences between voters and non-voters. The result is to *overestimate* any differences between self-reported voters and the entire sample. Therefore differences reported in Table 1 should be regarded as the upper limits of the effects of universal turnout.

Table 1 displays various comparisons between voters and all respondents in 1992 and 1996. It shows that our reweighting does not amend the usual conclusion for 1992 and only slightly modifies it for 1996. In other words, even when samples are adjusted to avoid underrepresenting non-voters, they remain essentially similar to voters. The differences between the two years, which we consider substantively modest, lead us to discuss each election separately.<sup>22</sup>

If everyone had voted in 1992, Bill Clinton's share of the vote would have shrunk by 1.2 percentage points, compared to a loss of 2.5 points by President George Bush. Clinton's margin over Bush would have risen from 13.7 to an even 15 points. Ross Perot would have picked up a few more votes and marginal candidates would have done marginally worse. Nearly 4 per cent of the sample had no candidate preference. Both Republicans and Democrats were just barely more numerous among voters than in the total population. The weaker representation of Independents among voters reflects their generally lower level of civic involvement.<sup>23</sup>

By and large, voters were representative of the entire sample on most of the dozen policy questions listed in Table 1. Voters were, by 5 percentage points, more conservative than the whole sample about whether 'it is important for the government to provide many more services [in areas such as health and education] even if it means an increase in spending.'<sup>24</sup> Employment preferences for blacks were more popular

<sup>21</sup> Brian D. Silver, Barbara A. Anderson and Paul R. Abramson, 'Who Overreports Voting?' *American Political Science Review*, 80 (1986), 613–24.

<sup>22</sup> To be sure, elections can be decided by small margins, but the propositions we are testing allege that the distribution of ballot choices would be significantly different if everyone voted.

<sup>23</sup> Throughout this Note we define Independents as respondents who choose this identity and deny they are closer to either party; those who initially call themselves Independents and then acknowledge closeness to a party are combined with the outright adherents of that party. Such 'leaning' Independents mostly vote for the party to which they concede being closer, while most 'pure' Independents vote for the winning presidential candidate (Bruce E. Keith *et al.*, *The Myth of the Independent Voter* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1992), chap. 3.

<sup>24</sup> We used all NES policy questions measured with the traditional seven-point scale and selected additional questions to provide a wide range of issues over which there is substantial political conflict. The wording of all

TABLE 1 *Preferences of Voters and Entire NES Sample Compared*

	1992		1996	
	Voters	Entire Sample	Voters	Entire Sample
<i>Presidential Choice (%)</i>				
Clinton	47.3	46.1	53.1	59.5
Bush	33.6	31.1	—	—
Dole	—	—	37.6	26.3
Perot	18.8	19.0	7.6	9.3
Other	0.3	0.2	1.7	1.0
No preference*	0.0	3.6	0.0	4.0
<i>Party identification (%)</i>				
Strong Democrat	20	18	22	17
Weak Democrat	17	17	18	22
Leaning Democrat	14	15	12	15
Pure Independent	9	12	6	11
Leaning Republican	12	13	11	12
Weak Republican	15	15	16	14
Strong Republican	13	11	16	10
<i>Percentage with 'liberal' preference†</i>				
Government services	35	40	29	34
Government medical insurance plan	51	51	34	43
Government guaranteed job/std. of living	29	32	23	29
Government assistance for blacks	23	23	16	19
Approach to crime reduction	—	—	27	30
Environmental regulations	—	—	52	56
Defence spending	48	46	31	32
Women's role	77	75	77	78
Abortion	64	59	57	55
Homosexuals in the armed forces	59	58	69	68
Death penalty	19	20	20	22
Hiring/promotion preferences for blacks	17	21	17	20
School prayer	13	11	12	11
Handgun control	—	—	45	47
English as official language	29	29	—	—

\*Non-voters who expressed no preference when asked for whom they would have voted, but who rated one of the three candidates higher than the other two on the candidate feeling thermometers, were coded as preferring the highest rated candidate.

†See Appendix on the web version of this Note for question wording and definitions of 'liberal' preferences.

Sources: 1992, 1996 National Election Studies.

among the entire sample, 21 per cent of whom supported this policy, compared to 17 per cent of voters. By 3 percentage points voters were less favourable about the federal government guaranteeing a job and a good standard of living to everyone. On the other

(F'note continued)

questions and our coding of liberal responses are in the Appendix available on the web version of this Note. Respondents who did not express an opinion on any question were excluded from the base on which liberal responses for that issue were calculated. These excluded cases will be the principal topic in the following section of this Note.

hand, voters were more sympathetic to abortion rights. On all other issues, differences in either direction did not exceed 2 percentage points.

In 1996, universal turnout would have expanded Clinton's share of the vote from 53.1 to 59.5 per cent, chopped Bob Dole's vote more than 11 points, and doubled Clinton's winning margin.<sup>25</sup> Changes among other candidates were trivial and 4 per cent of the sample had no candidate preference. In contrast to 1992, Democrats were slightly less numerous among voters and Republicans somewhat less so. As always, Independents were scarcer among voters than in the general public.

The pattern of differences on issues was somewhat more pronounced in 1996. This was particularly the case on redistributive economic questions, the first three lines in the issue section of Table 1. By anywhere from 5 to 9 percentage points, voters were more conservative than the whole sample. These are, we believe, the largest such differences found in such analyses of any recent election. Smaller gaps in the same direction are apparent on several other issues. Voters were barely more liberal on just three topics: abortion, gays in the military, and school prayer.

We also compared responses to the familiar NES question about whether spending should be 'increased, decreased, or kept about the same' for each of more than a dozen federal programmes. In almost every spending category the whole sample was more generous than just the voters, but the differences were never great, averaging about 2 per cent in 1992 and 5 per cent in 1996.

These findings are incontestable evidence that on some major issues voters were more conservative than the entire adult population in 1996. We defer for the moment trying to appraise the importance of this recent tilt to the right, other than to note that the differences between voters and the entire electorate, while indisputable, are relatively slight; none is as high as 10 percentage points.<sup>26</sup> These modest differences do not suggest that universal turnout would have brought success to the Clinton health insurance plan or prevented enactment of 'welfare reform'.

To investigate whether universal turnout would expand the mainstream to include political leaders currently on the fringes, we looked at assessments of Jesse Jackson, Pat Robertson, Pat Buchanan and Louis Farrakhan. The average feeling thermometer scores for the first three are in the 40s for both voters and the entire sample. Farrakhan scored 25 with voters and 27 for the entire sample.

We also explored the possibility that universal turnout would bring about a change in policy priorities by comparing voters and the entire sample with regard to the standard NES question on 'the most important problem' facing the country. This is a question that has been ignored in previous empirical research. Roughly a third of the entire sample in 1992 and 1996 volunteered a social welfare issue as the most important problem.<sup>27</sup> In both years, voters were less likely to mention social welfare issues by only 4 percentage points. On racial, environmental, women's and explicit class issues, the

<sup>25</sup> The anomalous nature of this finding is suggested by comparing this change to those in other election years. Not only are the differences smaller in 1992, but the largest difference in candidate preference between voters and an entire survey sample for every presidential election from 1960 to 1988 is 2.6 percentage points. See Teixeira, *The Disappearing American Voter*, p. 96.

<sup>26</sup> These results are consistent with Lijphart's characterization of previous research that 'the usual finding is that there are only *small* differences instead of *no* differences'. See Lijphart, 'Unequal Participation,' p. 4, fn. Small differences, however, do not lead to the conclusion that the content of public policy would be significantly changed if everyone voted.

<sup>27</sup> We recoded the NES important problem mastercodes in the following manner: social welfare (6, 10, 13, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 91), environment (150, 151, 153, 154, 160), racial (300), women (45, 330), class/workers (401, 403, 404, 405, 433, 440, 441, 442, 451).

TABLE 2 *Prevalence of 'No Opinions' among Voters and Non-voters\**

	1992		1996	
	Voters	Non-voters	Voters	Non-voters
Government services†	13	33	12	22
Government medical insurance plan†	10	22	10	13
Government guaranteed job/ standard of living†	9	20	8	13
Government assistance for blacks†	8	14	7	13
Approach to crime reduction†	—	—	4	8
Environmental regulations†	—	—	16	31
Defence spending†	9	24	10	24
Women's role†	3	7	4	6
Abortion	1	1	1	0
Homosexuals in the armed forces	4	4	2	2
Death penalty	2	2	3	2
Hiring and promotion preferences for blacks	3	7	1	3
School prayer	0	2	0	0
Handgun control	—	—	1	1
English as official language	8	12	—	—

\*The table shows the percentages in each group who 'don't know' or 'haven't thought much about it'. See Appendix on the web version of this Note for question wording.

†Question explicitly asks if respondent hadn't 'thought much about this.'

Sources: 1992, 1996 National Election Studies.

differences are all less than 1 percentage point, with fewer than 3 per cent of all the respondents identifying any one of these as the most important problem.

#### 'NO OPINIONS' AMONG VOTERS AND NON-VOTERS

'Nonvoters who are asked their opinions on policy ... are typically citizens who have not given these questions much thought.'<sup>28</sup> The data on attitudes towards 'government services' in Table 1 are based on responses to the following item, which is typical of many NES questions:

Some people think the government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education, in order to reduce spending. Suppose these people are at one end of the scale at point number 1. Other people feel it is important for the government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?

Opinions on the first eight issues in Table 1 were elicited with questions that included this last clause. On other questions, while this option was not explicitly offered, respondents who volunteered that they did not know were not pressed to provide an answer. It is not difficult to test Lijphart's proposition about non-attitudes simply by tabulating the proportions of voters and non-voters who declined to offer an opinion to

<sup>28</sup> Lijphart, 'Unequal Participation', p. 4.

each of the issue questions in Table 1. The results of this exercise are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2 shows the proportion of non-attitudes on a total of twenty-six issue questions asked in 1992 and/or 1996. Two conclusions are immediately apparent: While non-voters are indeed less likely than voters to say they have a preference, this is not their typical response; on every issue the vast majority of non-voters do produce an opinion. On nineteen out of twenty-six opportunities more than 80 per cent of non-voters have something to say. The average percentage of respondents without an opinion on a question about policy preferences was 5.7 for voters and 11 for non-voters. Even on topics like defence spending and environmental policy, which might be less than pressing concerns to people struggling to make ends meet, a substantial majority of non-voters expressed an opinion. Other than these two issue areas, non-voters were least willing to offer opinions on those redistributive policies that provide a safety net of sorts to the poor.

This was not the case, however, on questions about spending levels for particular programmes. Voters and non-voters alike rarely hesitated to offer their views about how much money the federal government should spend on programmes ranging from helping the homeless to supporting science and technology. Few respondents – never more than 3 per cent – professed not to know about how much to spend ‘if you had a say in making up the federal budget this year’ on any of the dozen-plus programmes mentioned.

We also compared voters and non-voters on more general partisan and ideological orientations. In both 1992 and 1996 at least 20 per cent of non-voters, compared to under 10 per cent of voters, denied any affinity for either political party. Most of these non-voters were Independents; a few, still further removed from political consciousness, were classified as non-political by the NES. Differences in ideological awareness were substantially greater. In both years at least 40 per cent of non-voters said they ‘haven’t thought much about it’ or just did not know when asked to place themselves on a seven-point ideology scale ranging from very liberal to very conservative. Less than half as many voters declined this invitation to locate themselves on the left–right ideological spectrum. To our surprise, non-voters were not much more likely to call themselves ‘moderates’.

In short, we found that non-voters typically do express policy, partisan and ideological preferences when asked. At the same time, non-voters are slightly less opinionated on these sorts of questions.

#### CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

We used various measures to test Lijphart’s assertion that non-voters ‘have not developed class consciousness’.<sup>29</sup> One NES question tells respondents that ‘There’s been some talk these days about different social classes. Most people say they belong either to the middle class or the working class. Do you ever think of yourself as belonging in one of these classes?’ Thirty-one per cent of non-voters in 1992 said they did not identify with either the working class or the middle class, which is not very different from the 26 per cent of voters who refused one of these two labels.<sup>30</sup>

Assuming that weak class consciousness is basically a workers’ infirmity, we then conducted a more detailed analysis of respondents with blue-collar occupations.<sup>31</sup> Were

<sup>29</sup> Lijphart, ‘Unequal Participation’, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> This question about subjective social class was not asked in 1996.

<sup>31</sup> Specifically, we defined those occupations coded 6–13 in the NES collapsed occupation codes as ‘blue collar’.

TABLE 3 *Class Closeness among Voters and Non-voters\**

	1992		1996	
	Voters (%)	Non-voters (%)	Voters (%)	Non-voters (%)
Class closeness – all respondents				
Working	17	27	21	29
Both	47	36	42	36
Middle	24	17	22	14
Neither	13	20	16	21
Class closeness – blue-collar respondents only				
Working	23	34	29	32
Both	48	33	40	33
Middle	14	12	15	10
Neither	16	21	16	25

\*See Appendix on the web version of this Note for question wording.

Sources: 1992, 1996 National Election Studies.

blue-collar voters more likely to identify with the working class than their non-voting counterparts? Not at all. Forty-six per cent of the former and 48 per cent of the latter said they thought of themselves as belonging to the working class.

Yet another measure of class consciousness can be derived from a question asking all respondents if they feel ‘particularly close to’ working-class people, and an identical question about the middle class. Responses to these questions by voters and non-voters are displayed in the top part of Table 3. The most common pattern was affirmative answers to both questions, given by nearly half of all voters and just over a third of non-voters. Non-voters were also a bit more likely to respond negatively to both questions and to say they felt closer to the working class. When we restricted the analysis to people with blue-collar occupations, a similar pattern emerged. Blue-collar non-voters were *more* likely to express closeness to the working class than their counterparts who went to the polls. All in all, then, we could find few signs that non-voters suffered more than other Americans from undeveloped class consciousness.

#### POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

We found solid confirmation of Lijphart’s proposition that non-voters ‘have not been politically mobilized’, which we defined as being canvassed either by telephone or in person. Respondents were asked if someone from a political party or anyone else had contacted them about the campaign or about voting for a particular candidate. In 1992, 31 per cent of voters and 10 per cent of non-voters were canvassed. The figures for 1996 were 38 per cent of voters and 14 per cent of non-voters.

We pause to take stock of the evidence for Lijphart’s propositions. Non-voters do differ from voters in the directions he predicted. They are less likely to have opinions on issues, identify with a party, express an ideological preference, be class conscious, or be stimulated by campaign activists. Yet except for the last point the differences are generally trivial.

## SIMULATING UNIVERSAL TURNOUT

How might one estimate what non-voters would do if they were to vote? We sought an empirical approach to this question that would give Lijphart's propositions the most sympathetic hearing. We began with his belief that being activated to vote includes heightened awareness that develops class consciousness and crystallizes political opinions. Hence we disregarded non-voters' stated preferences. Instead, we attributed to them the opinions of people who had already been mobilized. Of course, all voters are not identical; the question is identifying cognate voters. In view of Lijphart's concern with economic differences, we attributed to non-voters the perspectives of voters in their respective income quintile. We assigned to poor non-voters the political preferences of poor voters, rich non-voters the characteristics of rich voters, and so on.

This process required three steps in order to see what the entire sample would look like if non-voters were to have the preferences of voters with similar incomes. First, we arrayed the distribution of each variable in Table 1 for voters in each of the five income quintiles. Secondly, we attributed these opinions to non-voters in the corresponding quintile. Thirdly, the preferences of voters and non-voters were combined to produce an estimate for the entire sample, which we will call the 'simulated' population. The results of this last step are displayed in Table 4, our estimate of what American voters would be like with universal turnout.

If everyone had voted in 1992, Clinton would have gained 2.5 per cent more of the vote and Bush would have lost 1.5 per cent; Clinton's lead would have gone from 13.7 percentage points to 17.7 points. In terms of party identification, Democrats would have gained and Republicans lost about 3 per cent of the voters.<sup>32</sup> The results would have been about the same in 1996, except for a slightly larger rise in Clinton's vote share. *In the 1990s*, universal turnout would have been a slight benefit to Democratic presidential candidates.

Discussions of the consequences of higher turnout often assume or assert that public policy reflects the distribution of voters' preferences; the more liberal the opinions of those who choose leaders, the more liberal will be the measures enacted into law in Washington: 'the inclination of many politicians to give short shrift to the interests of the young, the poor, the working classes, the black and the brown, has been encouraged by the consistently poor voting records of those groups.'<sup>33</sup> Table 1 provided faint encouragement for the belief that universal turnout would have produced a somewhat more supportive constituency for liberal policies, particularly on redistributive economic issues. The data in Table 4 are a dose of cold water for that opinion. Although the simulated population is indeed more liberal than voters on half of the twenty-six comparisons of issue attitudes in Table 4, *the largest such gap is only 2 percentage points*. There is no difference at all on nine more comparisons. And voters are just barely more liberal on abortion and the role of women. To the extent that voters' issue preferences are more important than their choices of candidates, the lower part of Table 4 modifies the effect of the upper part.

<sup>32</sup> This is consistent with the finding that 'Citizens marginal to the electoral process, for example, such as chronic non-voters, give responses to the party identification item which are very unstable and which seem to move dynamically in tune with whatever party the respondent would vote for at the moment (assuming interest enough to get to the polls, which is usually absent)' (Philip E. Converse and Roy Pierce, 'Measuring Partisanship', *Political Methodology*, 11 (1985), 143-66, p. 150).

<sup>33</sup> Bob Herbert, 'Untapped power', *New York Times*, 7 October 1996, p. A10.

TABLE 4 *Preferences of Voters and the Simulated Voting Population Compared*

	1992		1996	
	Voters	Simulated population	Voters	Simulated population
<i>Presidential choice (%)</i>				
Clinton	47.3	49.8	53.1	55.6
Bush	33.6	32.1	—	—
Dole	—	—	37.6	35.1
Perot	18.8	17.8	7.6	7.5
Other	0.3	0.3	1.7	1.8
<i>Party identification (%)</i>				
Strong Democrat	20	22	22	24
Weak Democrat	17	17	18	19
Leaning Democrat	14	14	12	12
Pure Independent	9	9	6	6
Leaning Republican	12	11	11	10
Weak Republican	15	14	16	15
Strong Republican	13	12	16	15
<i>Percentage with 'liberal' preference (%)*</i>				
Government services	35	37	29	31
Government medical insurance plan	51	53	34	36
Government guaranteed job/std. of living	29	31	23	25
Government assistance for blacks	23	24	16	16
Approach to crime reduction	—	—	27	27
Environmental regulations	—	—	52	52
Defence spending	48	48	31	32
Women's role	77	76	77	76
Abortion	64	62	57	55
Homosexuals in the armed forces	59	59	69	69
Death penalty	19	21	20	22
Hiring/promotion preferences for blacks	17	18	17	19
School prayer	13	13	12	12
Handgun control	—	—	45	46
English as official language	29	29	—	—

\*See Appendix on the web version of this Note for question wording and definitions of 'liberal' preferences.

Sources: 1992, 1996 National Election Studies.

#### WHO DOES NOT VOTE?

Why is it surprising that with universal turnout voters would differ so little from those who actually go to the polls? The answer may reflect election commentary that dwells on the turnout *rates* of different economic groups, almost to the exclusion of their relative sizes and at the expense of other demographic dimensions:<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Turnout has 'a serious claim on our attention' because 'it is those who most need the vote who tend to use it least, and universal suffrage fails to provide the political counterweight to the power of property and wealth in the way that was intended by its more radical proponents' (Ivor Crewe, 'Electoral Participation', in David Butler, Howard R. Penniman and Austin Ranney, eds, *Democracy at the Polls* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1981), pp. 216–53, at p. 262.

TABLE 5 *Characteristics of Non-voters*

Characteristic	1992 (%)	1996 (%)
Two years or less at current address	43	43
Age 18 to 29	34	33
Less than high school	30	25
Poor*	30	27
Non-white or Latino	24	24
Two years or less at current address or age 18–29	57	55
Less than high school or poor or non-white or Latino	54	51

\*Family income less than \$12,500 in 1992 and \$15,000 in 1996. The *Statistical Abstract* (US Bureau of the Census 1997a (476) reports that in 1992 the official poverty threshold for a family of three was \$11,186, and for a family of four it was \$14,335. Figures for 1996 were not available; the respective numbers for 1995 were \$12,158 and \$15,569. Sources: 1992 and 1996 Current Population Survey Voter Supplements.

The single most important characteristic of voting in the United States is the economic bias of turnout patterns ... those at the top end of the income scale turn out in far larger numbers than those at the bottom end ... politicians are responsive to those who vote; voters determine who is elected; nonvoters do not.<sup>35</sup>

This passage embodies two ways analysts can go astray. The first is simply that most Americans are neither rich nor poor, hence it is misleading to ascertain the relationship between income and turnout by comparing the top and bottom ends of the income distribution.<sup>36</sup> The more serious error is leaping from the turnout rates of a chosen low-turnout group to a conclusion that people with that characteristic account for most non-voters. For example, 'In fact, the poor make up about three-fourths of the 'party of nonvoters'.<sup>37</sup> This mistake can be compounded by attributing a political preference to the group: 'Granted the demographics and the class composition of the "party of nonvoters", there seems little reason to doubt that these would be largely Democratic voters, had the Democratic party been interested in, or capable of, the mobilizing incentives to reach them'.<sup>38</sup>

We explain why this prediction is incorrect with a simple but unusual exercise: describing non-voters. Table 5 displays the most common demographic characteristics of non-voters. No single characteristic is shared by a majority of those who did not vote in either 1992 or 1996; the 'party of non-voters' is rather diverse. The two most common

<sup>35</sup> Thomas B. Edsall, *The New Politics of Inequality* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), p. 179.

<sup>36</sup> For evidence on this point, see Wolfinger and Rosenstone, *Who Votes?*, pp. 25–6.

<sup>37</sup> Walter Dean Burnham, *Democracy in the Making: American Government and Politics*, 2nd edn (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986), p. 3. Another estimate is that 'poor and low-income Americans ... comprise two thirds of the disenfranchised' (Jordan Moss, 'Motor Voter: From Movement to Legislation', *Social Policy*, 24 (1993), 21–31, pp. 29–30).

<sup>38</sup> Walter Dean Burnham, 'Elections as Democratic Institutions', in Kay Lehman Schlozman, ed., *Elections in America* (Boston, Mass.: Allen & Unwin, 1987), pp. 27–60, at p. 47.

demographic features of non-voters are their residential mobility and youth; in both 1992 and 1996, fully 43 per cent of non-voters had moved within two years of the election and one third were under the age of 30. Neither the residentially mobile nor young people are politically distinctive, let alone a Mother Lode of votes for Democratic candidates. In 1992, for example, 56 per cent of voters who identified with one of the political parties were Democrats, compared to 57 per cent of people who had recently moved and 58 per cent of the young. Movers and young people held only slightly more liberal policy positions than all voters in 1992.

The more commonly mentioned groups of non-voters are smaller. People without a high school diploma, the poor and minorities each comprise between 24 and 30 per cent of the non-voters.<sup>39</sup> Only when these three groups are combined does one find a majority of putatively liberal non-voters. And even in this case, they represent a bare majority, somewhat smaller than the number of non-voters who are either residentially mobile or young. Thus the notion that non-voting is concentrated among a single group or a set of related groups is incorrect.

#### CONCLUSION

Would election outcomes and the substance of public policy in the United States change dramatically if more people voted? Contrary to the expectations of many others, we have found that universal turnout would bring modest changes. Two approaches lead to this conclusion. First, when the stated preferences of non-voters are aggregated with those of voters, little change is observed. Secondly, to address the possibility that non-voters' preferences would be different if they were mobilized to vote, we attributed the preferences of voters to cognate non-voters and again aggregated the two groups. This approach provided even *smaller* estimates of change. In other words, by addressing Lijphart's critique of the first method, we found less support for the conventional wisdom that higher turnout would be a boon for the Democrats.

The explanation for the modest changes may be found in the characteristics of non-voters. To be sure, the poor, less educated and minorities are overrepresented among non-voters. But the young and the transient are even more numerous. By themselves, none of these groups constitutes even a majority of non-voters. Combined, they barely do so. What our findings have demonstrated is that the 'party of non-voters' is heterogeneous. Taken as a whole, non-voters appear well represented by those who vote.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> The data in Table 5 are from the 1992 and 1996 Current Population Survey (CPS) Voter Supplements. The CPS is better than the NES for demographic descriptions because of higher response rates and substantially larger numbers of respondents. Like the NES, the CPS turnout measure is not validated. If the nature of misreporting among CPS respondents is similar to that of the NES, then the percentages of non-voters who are less educated, poor and non-white reported in Table 5 are overestimates. Recall that misreporting in the NES is positively associated with educational attainment. As a result, properly classifying misreporters would produce a better educated group of non-voters; the percentage of less educated citizens among non-voters would fall. Because the poor and minorities tend to be less educated, their representation among non-voters would also decline.

<sup>40</sup> Generalizing to other forms of political participation on the basis of the findings reported here clearly is unwarranted. Turnout is the least unequal form of political participation in the United States (Steven J. Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen, *Mobilisation, Participation, and Democracy in America* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), p. 237).

APPENDIX: QUESTION WORDING AND CODING

*Government services:* Some people think the government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education, in order to reduce spending. Suppose these people are at one end of the scale at point number 1. Other people feel it is important for the government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between at points 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this? 'Liberal' response defined as 5, 6 or 7.

*Government medical insurance plan:* There is much concern about the rapid rise in medical and hospital costs. Some people feel there should be a government insurance plan which would cover all medical and hospital expenses for everyone. Others feel that all medical expenses should be paid by individuals, and through private insurance plans like Blue Cross or other company plans. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this? 1. Government insurance plan; 7. Private insurance plan. 'Liberal' response defined as 1, 2 or 3.

*Guaranteed job/standard of living:* Some people feel the government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living. Others think the government should just let each person get ahead on their own. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this? 1. Government see to job and good standard of living; 7. Government let each person get ahead. 'Liberal' response defined as 1, 2 or 3.

*Government assistance for blacks:* Some people feel that the government in Washington should make every effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks. Others feel that the government should not make any special effort to help blacks because they should help themselves. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this? 1. Government should help blacks; 7. Blacks should help themselves. 'Liberal' response defined as 1, 2 or 3.

*Approach to crime reduction:* Some people say that the best way to reduce crime is to address the social problems that cause crime, like bad schools, poverty and joblessness. Other people say the best way to reduce crime is to make sure that criminals are caught, convicted and punished. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this? 1. Social problems that cause crime, like bad schools, poverty and joblessness; 7. Make sure criminals are caught, convicted and punished. 'Liberal' response defined as 1, 2 or 3.

*Environmental regulations:* Some people think we need much tougher government regulations on business in order to protect the environment. Others think that current regulations to protect the environment are already too much of a burden on business. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this? 1. Tougher regulations on business are needed to protect the environment; 7. Regulations to protect the environment already too much of a burden on business. 'Liberal' response defined as 1, 2 or 3.

*Defense spending:* Some people believe that we should spend much less money for defense. Others feel that defense spending should be greatly increased. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this? 1. Greatly decrease defense spending; 7. Greatly increase defense spending. 'Liberal' response defined as 1, 2 or 3.

*Women's role:* Recently there has been a lot of talk about women's rights. Some people feel that women should have an equal role with men in running business, industry, and government. Others feel that women's place is in the home. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this? 1. Women and men should have an equal role; 7. Women's place is in the home. 'Liberal' response defined as 1, 2 or 3.

*Abortion:* There has been some discussion about abortion during recent years. Which one of the opinions

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on this page best agrees with your view? You can just tell me the number of the opinion you choose. 1. By law, abortion should never be permitted. 2. The law should permit abortion only in case of rape, incest or when the woman's life is in danger. 3. The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman's life, but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established. 4. By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice. 'Liberal' response defined as 3 or 4.

*Homosexuals in the armed forces:* Do you think homosexuals should be allowed to serve in the United States Armed Forces or don't you think so? 1. Yes, think so; 2. Don't think so. 'Liberal' response defined as 1.

*Death penalty:* Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder? 1. Favor; 2. Depends; 3. Oppose. 'Liberal' response defined as 3.

*Hiring preferences for blacks:* Some people say that because of past discrimination, blacks should be given preference in hiring and promotion. Others say that such preference in hiring and promotion of blacks is wrong because it gives blacks advantages they haven't earned. What about your opinion – are you for or against preferential hiring and promotion of blacks? 1. For; 5. Against. 'Liberal' response defined as 1.

*School prayer:* Which of the following views comes closest to your opinion on the issue of school prayer? Just give me the number of your choice. 1. By law, prayers should not be allowed in public schools. 2. The law should allow public schools to schedule time when children can pray silently if they want to. 3. The law should allow public schools to schedule time when children, as a group, can say a general prayer not tied to a particular religious faith. 4. By law, public schools should schedule a time when all children would say a chosen Christian prayer. 'Liberal' response defined as 1.

*Handgun control:* Do you favor or oppose a ban on the sale of all handguns, except those that are issued to law enforcement officers? 1. Favor; 5. Oppose. 'Liberal' response defined as 1.

*English as official language:* Do you favor a law making English the official language of the United States, meaning government business would be conducted in English only, or do you oppose such a law? 1. Favor; 3. Neither favor nor oppose; 5. Oppose. 'Liberal' response defined as 5.

*Ideological identification:* We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a 7-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?

*Class consciousness:* There's been some talk these days about different social classes. Most people say they belong either to the middle class or the working class. Do you ever think of yourself as belonging in one of these classes?

*Class closeness:* Here is a list of groups. Please read over the list and tell me the letter of those groups you feel particularly close to – people who are most like you in their ideas and interests and feelings about things. [Both 'middle-class people' and 'working-class people' were included on the list.]

*Party mobilization:* The political parties try to talk to as many people as they can to get them to vote for their candidate. Did anyone from one of the political parties call you up or come around and talk to you about the campaign this year?

*Other mobilization:* Other than someone from the two major parties, did anyone else call you up or come around and talk to you about supporting specific candidates in this last election?