

SELF-REPORTED VERSUS PROXY-REPORTED VOTER TURNOUT IN THE CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY

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Abstract The Current Population Survey (CPS) Voter Supplement is a premier source of data on turnout in the United States. A little-known aspect of the survey is that for a sizable proportion of people, turnout is measured by proxy—one member of a household reports for another member—rather than self-reports of having voted. The purpose of this research note is to investigate how the use of proxy-reported turnout affects conclusions about the determinants of turnout in America. The results suggest a generally optimistic assessment. Although proxy-reported turnout is about 4 percentage points lower than self-reported turnout, the individual-level correlates of turnout and interstate turnout differences are mostly similar for the two measures.

Voting is the most common and fundamental act of political participation in a democracy. Thus, it is no surprise that scholars try to understand and explain what kinds of people in which political contexts are more likely to vote. To answer these questions, individual-level survey data are often necessary. Surveys usually rely on self reports of turnout; respondents are asked if they voted. Although respondents are assured that it is acceptable to admit not having voted (for example, “people are not able to vote because they are sick or busy or have some other reason”), inevitably many more people report having voted than possibly could have.¹ This means that self-reported turnout is a poor way to measure overall turnout rates. However, the use of self-reported turnout to analyze the correlates of voting and changes in turnout levels is much less problematic (Brady 1999; Katosh and Traugott 1981;

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1. The level of overreporting varies across surveys and over time. In National Election Studies surveys, self-reported turnout has averaged about 20 points higher than actual turnout (Bernstein, Chadha, and Montjoy 2001; Burden 2000, 2003; Martinez 2003; McDonald 2003). Overreporting in the Current Population Survey is a bit more than half that amount (Brady 1999).

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Sigelman 1982).² Therefore, many scholars continue to rely on surveys to analyze turnout.

This research note addresses a related but distinct question. Beginning with Rosenstone and Wolfinger (1978), researchers have been using the Current Population Survey (CPS) Voter Supplement to analyze turnout. Since the publication of *Who Votes?* (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), an increasing number of scholars have relied on the CPS to provide insight into a wide range of questions about the individual-level determinants of turnout, the effects of political context (for example, registration laws and concurrent elections), and the interaction between individual characteristics and political context.³ Despite its growing use, there has been virtually no scholarly comment on a potentially significant aspect of the way turnout is measured in the CPS. For about 40 percent of the CPS sample, turnout is reported by proxy—one member of a household reports for another member—rather than with self reports.⁴

The rarity with which the two turnout measures are mentioned suggests that many scholars may not be aware of this aspect of the CPS data.⁵ Yet, there may be important differences between proxy-reported and self-reported turnout that influence the inferences researchers draw about voting in the United States. On the one hand, self-reported measures are believed to exaggerate overall turnout levels, in part because people want to *appear* like “good citizens” who engage in the “socially desirable” behavior of voting, regardless of whether they actually do (Cahalan 1968).⁶ This motivation is less relevant when reporting the behavior of someone else, which implies that proxy-reported turnout may suffer less from social desirability bias than self-reported turnout. Therefore, proxy-reported turnout may produce turnout estimates that are less inflated than those based on self-reported turnout. On the other hand, because people know more about their own activities than those of others, there may be more random error in proxy-reported turnout, which

2. Silver, Anderson, and Abramson (1986) are more circumspect. But Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995, pp. 615–17) address their concerns and explain why it is unlikely that the correlates of turnout are biased very much when self reports are used.

3. A partial list of published work that relies on the CPS to analyze turnout is Brians and Grofman (1999, 2001), Highton (1997), Highton and Burris (2002); Highton and Wolfinger (1998, 2001), Jackson (2002, 2003), Leighley and Nagler (1992a, 1992b), Mitchell and Wlezien (1995), Nagler (1991, 1994), Oliver (1996), Rosenstone (1982), Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass (1987), Teixeira (1992), Timpone (2002), and Wolfinger, Highton, and Mullin (2005).

4. Census Bureau publications sometimes note, but rarely analyze, this aspect of the CPS. One example is Jennings (1990), which reports trivial differences in self-reported and proxy-reported turnout rates in the 1974 CPS, a result that is not replicated in the results reported in this research note.

5. Brehm (1993) is an exception. He notes the use of proxy reports in the CPS but does not investigate the implications, presumably because the focus of his project lies elsewhere. It is more common to use proxy reports in studies of “health events,” and there has been more attention devoted to understanding the implications of their use in this domain (e.g., Loftus et al. 1992, especially pp. 115–20).

6. Social desirability is one reason why self-reported turnout is higher than actual turnout. But, it is not the only one. For example, Abelson, Loftus, and Greenwald (1992, p. 152) suggest that misreporting may be “a memory problem over and above the social-desirability problem.”

could have the effect of making the correlates of turnout appear weaker than they really are.

The purpose of this research note is to analyze proxy-reported and self-reported turnout to determine whether conclusions about the causes of turnout depend on how it is measured. My analysis is based on the 1992, 1996, and 2000 Current Population Survey Voter Supplements (U.S. Department of Commerce 1997a, 1997b, 2001). I focus on (1) whether there are overall differences in turnout rates, (2) whether there are differences in the individual-level correlates of turnout, and (3) whether estimates of interstate variation in turnout depend on how turnout is measured. The results suggest a generally optimistic conclusion: although proxy-reported turnout is about 4 percentage points lower than self-reported turnout, the individual-level correlates of turnout and interstate turnout differences appear mostly similar for the two measures.

The Current Population Survey and Voter Turnout

Each month the Census Bureau conducts the Current Population Survey primarily to provide raw data on unemployment. The basic questionnaire provides very detailed demographic data; monthly supplements collect information on an additional topic, for example, on Internet use, smoking, or child care. In November of even-numbered years, the Voter Supplement asks about citizenship status, registration, and voting. The most obvious feature of the Voter Supplement is the immense sample. For each of the 1992, 1996, and 2000 elections, the CPS provides turnout data for a representative national sample of over 60,000 adult citizens. The large sample combined with its broad coverage make the CPS particularly useful for studies that require state-level data or ones that analyze subgroups.⁷ Another significant advantage of the CPS is its high response rate. For example, the completion rate for the 2000 Voter Supplement was 87 percent, which compares favorably to the aggregate response rate of 52 percent for the 2000 National Election Study (NES) (Burns et al. 2002), the other common source for analyses of turnout.⁸ A third advantage is that CPS Voter Supplement interviewing is finished by the third week in November, which may reduce response error about voting, while the NES data collection usually lasts well into December. Last, although

7. Respondents in the 2000 CPS were drawn from 754 sample areas in over 2,000 counties from the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

8. The "minimum" (American Association for Public Opinion Research [AAPOR] 2004, p. 28) response rate for the basic November 2000 CPS was 92.5 percent. For the Voter Supplement it was 87.1 percent (U.S. Department of Commerce 2001, p. 17–2). For comparison, of the 2,982 people selected for the NES survey in 2000, the NES completed pre- and post-election interviews with 1,555, for a response rate of 52.1 percent. Response rates in 2000 for both surveys are lower than in the last decades of the twentieth century: 95 percent for the CPS and 70 percent for the National Election Studies (Brehm 1993, p. 16).

Table 1. Self-Reported and Proxy-Reported Turnout, 1992–2000

	1992	1996	2000	Average
Percentage of turnout responses given by proxy	43.0	42.0	42.1	42.4
Self-reported turnout (%)	70.6	65.1	68.7	68.1
Proxy-reported turnout (%)	68.1	60.3	63.3	63.9
Difference (proxy minus self)	-2.5	-4.8	-5.4	-4.2

SOURCE.—Current Population Voting Supplements, 1992, 1996, and 2000.

the CPS appears to suffer from turnout overreporting, the magnitude of this error is less than that for other surveys (Brady 1999; Wolfinger 1994).⁹

In the Voter Supplement, turnout is ascertained with the following question: “In any election some people are not able to vote because they are sick or busy or have some other reason, and others do not want to vote. Did [you/name] vote in the election held on Tuesday, November —?” Some people answer this question for themselves. For the rest, it is answered by proxy; someone in the household answers the question for the designated individual.¹⁰ In 1992, 1996, and 2000 a little more than 40 percent of the CPS turnout reports were by proxy.

The first question to address is whether there are differences in self-reported and proxy-reported turnout levels. Table 1 shows that there are. In all three election years, self-reported turnout was higher, by an average of 4.2 percentage points. The gap grew from 2.5 points in 1992 to 5.4 points in 2000.¹¹ In order to determine whether these differences are artifacts of differences in the types of people for whom turnout is reported by proxy, table 2 presents logit models of turnout that include the primary independent variables related to turnout (education, age, family income, and residential stability), along with race and ethnicity.¹² In every year, proxy-reported turnout remains lower. These results are consistent with the proposition that social desirability bias is a greater problem for self-reported turnout. Overall, the

9. To be sure, there are disadvantages of the CPS. The primary limitation is that it includes only demographic variables, which precludes it from being used to study the attitudinal bases of voting.

10. Field representatives attempt to interview all eligible individuals in each household that is selected for the CPS sample. However, “in the interest of timeliness and efficiency,” proxy reports for some household members are collected from a “knowledgeable adult household member” (U.S. Department of Commerce 2002, p. 7-3).

11. The null hypothesis of no differences in reported turnout rates between self reporters and proxy reporters is rejected in each of the three years. ($p < .001$). (Of course, the large sample size makes discerning statistically significant differences between the groups easy.)

12. The independent variables were coded as follows: Education—(0) less than high school, (.33) high school degree, (.67) some college, (1) college graduate; Family income—(0) lowest quintile, (.25) second quintile, (.50) third quintile, (.75) fourth quintile, (1) highest quintile; Residential stability—(0) less than one year; (.33) 1–2 years, (.67) 3–4 years, (1) 5 years or more; Age—square root of age, in years, and then rescaled on 0–1 interval; Black—(0) nonblack, (1) black; Latino—(0) non-Latino, (1) Latino; Asian—(0) non-Asian, (1) Asian.

Table 2. Logit Parameter Estimates of Reported Turnout

Variable	1992	1996	2000	Pooled
Response type (proxy = 1, self = 0)	-.15** (.02)	-.16** (.02)	-.20** (.02)	-.17** (.01)
Education	2.23** (.03)	1.99** (.03)	2.10** (.04)	2.10** (.02)
Age (square root)	1.88** (.04)	2.17** (.05)	2.14** (.05)	2.06** (.03)
Family income	.99** (.03)	.84** (.03)	.91** (.03)	.91** (.02)
Residential stability	.79** (.03)	.81** (.03)	.82** (.03)	.81** (.02)
Black	.13** (.03)	.34** (.03)	.43** (.04)	.29** (.02)
Latino	-.20** (.04)	-.04 (.04)	-.17** (.04)	-.14** (.02)
Asian	-1.08** (.07)	-.76** (.07)	-.99** (.07)	-.94** (.04)
Election year				
1992 (baseline)				—
1996				-.44** (.01)
2000				-.31** (.01)
Intercept	-1.89** (.03)	-2.33** (.04)	-2.26** (.04)	-1.90** (.02)
Number of observations	87,054	71,024	63,825	221,903
Initial log-likelihood	-53,641	-46,848	-40,795	-141,988
Final log-likelihood	-45,393	-39,851	-34,240	-119,889
Pseudo r^2	.15	.15	.16	.16

NOTE.—All variables are coded on a 0–1 interval (see footnote 12). Standard errors in parentheses.

SOURCE.—Current Population Survey Voting Supplements, 1992, 1996, and 2000.

** $p < .01$.

pooled logit coefficient of $-.17$ corresponds to turnout that is 3.5 percentage points lower among “median” respondents for whom turnout is proxy-reported rather than self-reported.¹³

13. To produce this estimate, I set the values of the independent variables to their median values (someone who is 43 years old with a high school diploma who is white with a family income in the middle quintile and five years of residential stability) and then used the logit estimates in table 2 to calculate the difference in turnout probabilities if voting is self-reported (response type = 0) rather than proxy-reported (response type = 1).

Tables 1 and 2 show that estimated turnout is higher when people report for themselves. Table 3 reveals that this tendency is evident across many demographic groups. There is some variation, but for all 21 groups listed in the table, self-reported turnout is higher than proxy-reported turnout.

The next question to consider is whether the demographic correlates of turnout appear different based on how turnout is measured. To investigate this issue, table 4 reports turnout estimates based on a logit model that allows the effect of every independent variable to differ (interact) by the method of measuring turnout (self-reported versus proxy-reported). The first two columns of table 4 report the logit parameter estimates for each of the turnout measures. The third column reports the difference in the magnitude of the estimated effects of each of the independent variables.

Table 3. Self-Reported versus Proxy-Reported Turnout

Variable	Self-Reported (%)	Proxy-Reported (%)	Difference (Proxy minus Self)
Education			
Less than high school	47.8	40.3	-7.5
High school degree	61.7	57.5	-4.2
Some college	72.6	69.7	-2.9
College graduate	85.7	85.0	-0.7
Family Income (quintile)			
1st (lowest)	52.0	43.1	-8.9
2nd	63.5	54.4	-9.1
3rd	68.2	61.1	-7.1
4th	76.3	68.9	-7.4
5th (highest)	83.9	77.5	-6.4
Residential Stability			
Less than one year	48.5	44.9	-3.6
1-2 years	60.0	56.7	-3.3
3-4 years	67.4	62.4	-5.0
5 years or more	76.4	70.5	-5.9
Age			
18-29	48.2	47.9	-0.3
30-49	67.7	66.6	-1.1
50-69	77.3	76.5	-0.8
Over 69	75.9	69.3	-6.6
Race/Ethnicity			
White, non-Latino	69.8	66.2	-3.6
Black	65.1	59.0	-6.1
Latino	53.5	48.0	-5.5
Asian	55.7	50.3	-5.4

SOURCE.—Current Population Survey Voting Supplements, 1992, 1996, and 2000.

Table 4. Logit Parameter Estimates of Self-Reported and Proxy-Reported Turnout

Variable	Self-Reported	Proxy-Reported	Difference
Education	2.07** (.03)	2.16** (.03)	.09* (.04)
Age (square root)	2.10** (.04)	2.00** (.04)	-.10* (.05)
Family income	.96** (.02)	.84** (.03)	-.12** (.04)
Residential stability	.82** (.02)	.78** (.02)	-.05 (.03)
Black	.37** (.03)	.19** (.03)	-.19** (.04)
Latino	-.08** (.03)	-.20** (.04)	-.11* (.05)
Asian	-.91** (.06)	-.97** (.06)	-.06 (.08)
Election year			
1992 (baseline)	—	—	—
1996	-.42** (.02)	-.46** (.02)	-.04 (.03)
2000	-.28** (.02)	-.35** (.02)	-.08** (.03)
Intercept	-1.97** (.03)	-1.98** (.03)	-.01 (.04)

NOTE.—Number of observations = 221,903; Initial log-likelihood = -141,988; Final log-likelihood = -119,852; Pseudo r^2 = .16. All variables are coded on a 0–1 interval (see footnote 12). Standard errors in parentheses.

SOURCE.—Current Population Survey Voting Supplements, 1992, 1996, and 2000.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

In general, the correlates of turnout appear similar for the two turnout measures. If there is more random measurement error in proxy-reported turnout, then it is minimal. The estimated effect of education is only modestly larger with proxy turnout reports, while the effects of age, income, and residential stability all appear somewhat smaller. Asian turnout, compared to that of whites, also appears mostly unaffected by the way turnout is reported. In substantive terms, the pairs of coefficients produce comparable effect estimates. The estimated effect of education (going from its lowest to highest values) is 34.7 percentage points for self-reported turnout and 38.1 points for proxy-reported turnout. Similar effects are apparent for age (38.9

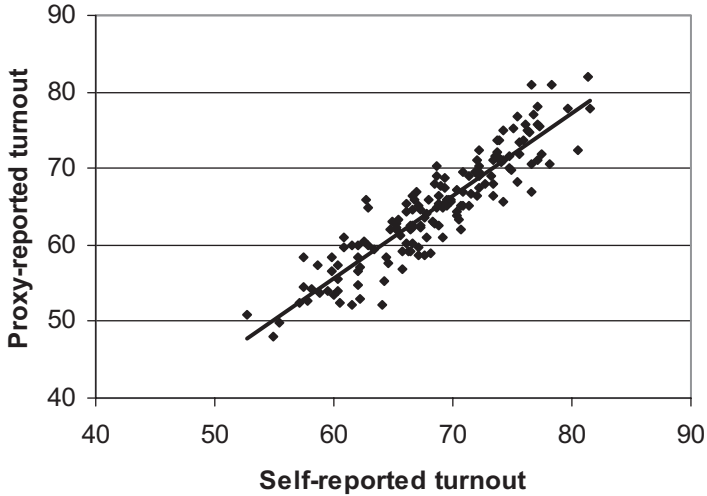


Figure 1. Self-reported and proxy-reported turnout, state-level, 1992–2000.

and 39.0), family income (19.3 and 17.7), residential stability (18.9 and 18.4), and Asians (–21.1 and –23.2).¹⁴

The largest discrepancies relate to the turnout differences between blacks, Latinos, and whites. Among self-reporters the coefficient for being black is .37, but among proxy-reporters the logit estimate is cut in half to .19. In substantive terms, this means that whereas black turnout is an estimated 6.9 percentage points higher than white turnout when self-reported turnout is used, it is an estimated 3.9 points higher with proxy-reported turnout. The gap between Latino and white turnout grows with proxy-reported turnout; the logit coefficients are –.08 and –.20 for self-reporters and proxy-reporters, respectively. Among self-reporters, Latino turnout is an estimated 1.6 points lower than that of whites. But among proxy-reporters Latinos lag whites by 4.4 percentage points.

The last aspect of self-reported and proxy-reported turnout measures to consider relates to differences across the states, which is important because some variables that influence turnout, like registration laws and concurrent (senatorial and gubernatorial) elections, are state-level phenomena. Is the pattern of interstate turnout variation influenced by the use of proxy-reported turnout? To answer this question, I aggregated the CPS turnout responses and computed state-level self-reported turnout and state-level proxy-reported turnout for each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia in each of the three election years. Figure 1 shows

14. These estimates are produced by changing the value of each variable from its lowest value (0) to its highest value (1) and setting the values of the other variables to their medians. See footnote 13.

the scatterplot, which clearly illustrates that the patterns of interstate variation in turnout are remarkably similar. Indeed, the correlation between self-reported and proxy-reported turnout at the state level is .91.¹⁵ Thus, it appears that the use of proxy-reported turnout introduces little difficulty when analyzing turnout across the states.

Conclusion

The strengths and limitations of measuring turnout with self reports have been studied and are reasonably well understood. About 58 percent of people in the Current Population Survey report turnout for themselves, and the research on self-reported turnout is obviously relevant when trying to understand and interpret results based on analyses of the CPS. That research provides little reason to question the contributions made by scholars using the CPS because of its self-reported turnout component. But turnout for about 42 percent of those in the CPS is not measured with self reports. It is reported by proxy, which suggests another potential threat to the validity of turnout findings based on the CPS. The results reported in this research note suggest that social desirability bias may be diminished with proxy-reported turnout and that little additional random error is added when proxy reports of having voted are used instead of self reports. Other than somewhat altering the relationships among race, ethnicity, and turnout, correlates of turnout appear similar, regardless of whether turnout is measured with self reports or proxy reports. And, interstate differences in turnout are barely affected. Therefore, an optimistic conclusion is warranted: the wealth of published findings based on the CPS does not depend on the fact that for many turnout is proxy-reported.

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15. Because the state-level values of proxy-reported and self-reported turnout are based on survey samples, they should be considered estimates, ones that reflect the actual levels of reported turnout and measurement error due to sampling. This means that the observed correlation is an underestimate of the true one. Estimating the true correlation between state-level self-reported and proxy-reported turnout requires correcting the observed correlation for sampling error by estimating the reliabilities of the measures (Carmines and Zeller 1979). Doing this produces an estimated correlation of 1.0.

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