

Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2020

Population Characteristics

Current Population Reports

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INTRODUCTION

Following each national election, the U.S. Census Bureau conducts the Current Population Survey's (CPS) November Voting and Registration Supplement. The supplement is fielded following both presidential elections when congressional seats and the presidency are decided, and midterm elections when congressional seats are the highest offices decided. The CPS has surveyed Americans eligible to vote in these elections since 1964, and estimates derived from this survey are among the most consistently reliable and publicly available estimates of the characteristics of American voters.¹

The 2020 presidential election was the highest turnout election of the twenty-first century and featured the largest increase in voters from one presidential year to the next. While many states maintained traditional voting procedures, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic led some states to expand early voting, while others automatically sent all registered voters a ballot that could be returned by mail. Collectively, these changes resulted in a large increase in voting by "nontraditional" methods (e.g., by mail or prior to Election Day). Using the 2020 CPS November Voting and Registration Supplement, this report analyzes voters, nonvoters, and voting methods by age, race and Hispanic origin, educational attainment, and

¹ "Americans eligible to vote," as used in this report, refers to citizens in the civilian population who are 18 years old or older. This does not account for voter disenfranchisement.

sex—demographic characteristics historically associated with turnout.² This report also compares the 2020 election to previous elections, starting with the 1980 election, using prior years of the CPS Voting and Registration Supplement.³ As turnout in presidential elections is consistently higher than in congressional elections, this report focuses on previous presidential elections (historical CPS voting products are available at <www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/voting-historical-time-series.html>).⁴

The "Understanding Voting" section of this report describes the CPS voting supplement in more detail and highlights key populations and terms.

² Clem Brooks and Jeff Manza, "Social Cleavages and Political Alignments: U.S. Presidential Elections, 1960 to 1992," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 62, No. 6, 1997, pp. 937-946; Kelly Dittmar, "Women Voters," *Minority Voting in the United States*, eds. Kyle L. Kreider and Thomas J. Baldino, 2015; Thom File, "Who Votes? Congressional Elections and the American Electorate: 1978-2014," *Population Characteristics*, P20-577, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2015; Thom File, "The Diversifying Electorate - Voting Rates by Race and Hispanic Origin in 2012 (and Other Recent Elections)," *Population Characteristics*, P20-568, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2013; Thom File, "Young-Adult Voting: An Analysis of Presidential Elections, 1964-2012," *Population Characteristics*, P20-573, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2014.

³ Prior to 1978, there are no readily available data that allow for the calculation of demographic breakdowns entirely consistent with later years. Prior to 1978, the CPS also did not ask about citizenship status, which is needed to calculate the citizen voting-age population.

⁴ The U.S. Census Bureau's Disclosure Review Board and Disclosure Avoidance officers reviewed this data product for unauthorized disclosure of confidential information and approved the disclosure avoidance practices applied to this release. CBDRB-FY22-POP001-0025.

The "American Voters Over Time: Presidential Elections, 1980–2020" section compares the demographics of voters in 2020 to previous elections by exploring trends in age, race and Hispanic origin, educational attainment, and sex. The "Over- and Underrepresentation Among Voters" section compares voters to the citizen voting-age population. The "2020 Voting Population by Sex" section describes voters in the 2020 election in greater detail, analyzing voter shares by sex across multiple demographic characteristics. Section 5, "Methods of Voting," details the expansion in the use of nontraditional methods of voting for the 2020 presidential election. Finally, Section 6, "Nonparticipation," explores reasons for not voting and not registering to vote, with a particular focus on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

UNDERSTANDING VOTING

The CPS is a monthly household survey collected as the primary source of labor force statistics for the civilian, noninstitutionalized U.S. population. The survey is administered to a sample of 60,000 occupied housing units in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. In certain months, different sets of supplemental questions are included with the regular labor force questions. The Voting and Registration Supplement is one such supplement, conducted in November of even-numbered years, following national elections.

The CPS Voting and Registration Supplement asks eligible respondents a series of questions about their voting and registration behavior during the latest

COMPARING CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY (CPS) VOTING ESTIMATES TO OFFICIAL REPORTS

Estimates in this report are based on responses to the November Voting and Registration Supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS), which surveys the civilian, noninstitutionalized population in the United States. Voting estimates from the CPS and other sample surveys have historically differed from those based on administrative records, such as the official reports from each state disseminated collectively by the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives and the Federal Elections Commission. In general, sample surveys like the CPS tend to yield higher voting rates than official results.¹ Potential explanations for these differences include question misreporting, problems with memory or knowledge of others' behavior, and methodological issues related to question wording, method of survey administration, and survey nonresponse bias. Despite these observed differences between CPS estimates and official tallies, the CPS remains the most comprehensive data source available for examining the social and demographic composition of American voters in federal elections, particularly when examining broad historical results.²

¹ Mary G. Powers and Richard W. Dodge, "Voter Participation in the National Election November 1964," *Current Population Reports*, P20-143, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 1965; and Matthew DeBell and Jon A. Krosnick et. al., "The Turnout Gap in Surveys: Explanations and Solutions," *Sociological Methods & Research*, May 7, 2018.

² Michael P. McDonald, "The True Electorate: A Cross-Validation of Voter Registration Files and Election Survey Demographics," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 71, Issue 4, 2007, pp. 588–602.

election.⁵ Eligible respondents are those in the citizen voting-age population, detailed further below, as determined by responses to questions about age and citizenship in the labor force portion of the survey.

If eligible to receive the supplement, respondents are first asked whether they voted in the most recent November election. Those who indicate that they voted are assumed to be registered and are then asked further questions about their method of voting. Those who indicate that they did not vote are asked questions

about their registration status and their reason for not voting. The final question of the supplement asks respondents how long they have lived at their current address.

The following population universes result from the voting supplement series of questions.⁶

Voting-age population (VAP)— Those who are 18 years old or older on Election Day. This group includes both noncitizens who are ineligible to vote and citizens of voting age. The estimated VAP in 2020 was 252.3 million.

⁵ Since the CPS allows proxy responses, "eligible respondents" include proxies for eligible respondents.

⁶ These populations include only noninstitutionalized civilians.

Citizen voting-age population (CVAP)—Those who are citizens and in the VAP. This is the pool of eligible voters (i.e., those who may register to vote and cast a ballot in a national election). Since not every eligible voter registers to vote or casts a ballot, this group includes both voters and nonvoters, and registered and unregistered citizens. This report will focus on this universe of respondents. In 2020, there were an estimated 231.6 million citizens of voting age.

Noncitizens—Those who are not U.S. citizens and therefore ineligible to vote in national elections. Respondents to the core CPS labor force survey who indicate that they are noncitizens are not asked the questions in the Voting and Registration Supplement. In 2020, there were an estimated 20.7 million noncitizens.

Nonrespondents—CPS respondents who are part of the CVAP and do not answer questions in the Voting and Registration Supplement. Nonresponse may occur for a variety of reasons, such as refusing to answer a question or not knowing the answer to a question. The weighted estimate of nonresponse to the question of whether one voted in the 2020 election was 15.7 percent of the estimated CVAP.

Voters—Those respondents who indicated that they voted in the 2020 election. These respondents are in the CVAP and registered to vote. There were an estimated 154.6 million voters in 2020.

Nonvoters—Those who are in the CVAP and indicated that they did not vote in the 2020 election. Nonvoters may be registered or not registered to vote. In 2020, there were an estimated 40.6 million nonvoters.

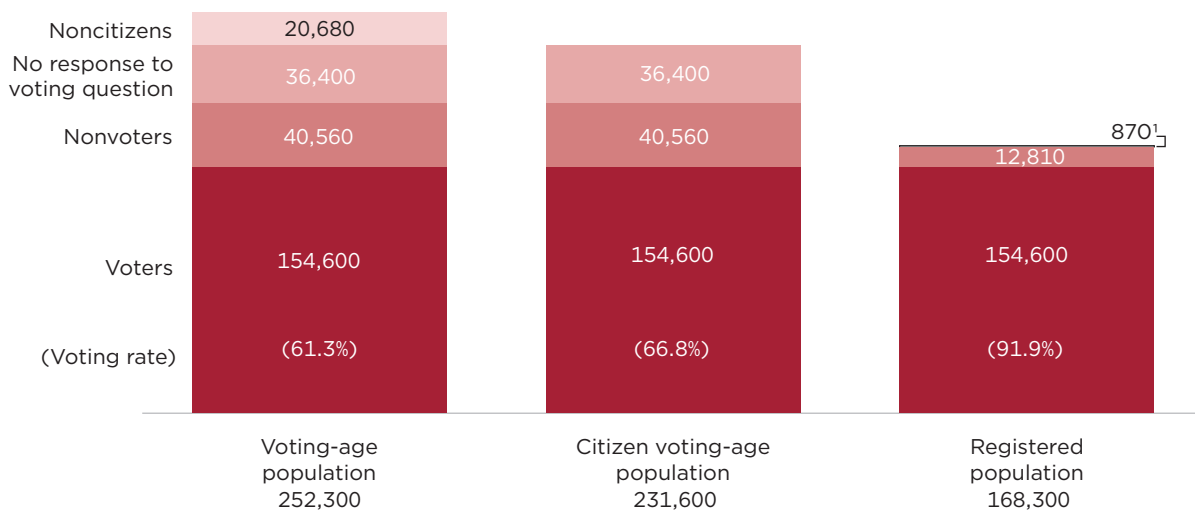
Registered—Those who are in the CVAP and registered to vote by or on Election Day. Registered respondents may or may not have voted. There were an estimated 168.3 million citizens of voting age who registered to vote in the 2020 election.

Registered nonvoters—Those who are in the CVAP and registered to vote but did not vote. An estimated 12.8 million citizens of voting age were registered to vote in the 2020 election but did not vote.⁷

Figure 1 compares the above populations. Voter turnout in the remainder of this report will refer to voters as a percentage of the CVAP.

⁷ The sum of the estimated number of voters and the estimated number of registered nonvoters does not equal the estimated number of registered due to those who indicated that they were registered to vote but did not respond to the question of whether they voted.

Figure 1.
Voters Among the Total, Citizen, and Registered Voting-Age Populations: 2020
(Population aged 18 and older, in thousands)



¹ Represents those who were registered with no response to the initial voting question. Numbers and percentages may not sum to totals due to rounding.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2020.

Table 1.

Voting and Registration: Presidential Elections, 1980–2020

(Numbers in thousands)

Presidential election year	Total 18 and older	Citizens				
		Total	Registered		Voted	
			Number	90 percent C.I. (±) ¹	Number	90 percent C.I. (±) ¹
2020	252,300	231,600	168,300	167,400–169,200	154,600	153,700–155,600
2016	245,500	224,100	157,600	156,900–158,300	137,500	136,800–138,300
2012	235,200	215,100	153,200	152,500–153,800	132,900	132,400–133,600
2008	225,500	206,100	146,300	145,700–147,000	131,100	130,500–131,800
2004	215,700	197,000	142,100	141,400–142,700	125,700	125,100–126,400
2000	202,600	186,400	129,500	128,900–130,200	110,800	110,200–111,500
1996	193,700	179,900	127,700	127,000–128,300	105,000	104,400–105,700
1992	185,700	168,200	126,600	126,000–127,100	113,900	113,300–114,400
1988	178,100	164,500	118,600	118,000–119,200	102,200	101,500–102,900
1984	170,000	157,000	116,100	115,500–116,700	101,900	101,300–102,500
1980	157,100	145,400	105,000	104,700–105,300	93,070	92,690–93,440

¹ A 90 percent confidence interval (C.I.) is a measure of an estimate's variability. The larger the confidence interval in relation to the size of the estimate, the less reliable the estimate.

Note: Numbers are based on weighted reports of voting behavior derived from a survey sample. Estimates from 1980–1996 estimates may differ from those found in the 2016 voting report.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 1980–2020.

AMERICAN VOTERS OVER TIME: PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, 1980–2020

Since 2000, both the CVAP and the number of voters consistently increased between presidential elections. This trend continued in 2020, as both the CVAP and the number of voters increased from 2016 (Table 1). However, while the CVAP increased by 3.4 percent, the number of voters grew by a larger 12.4 percent, from 137.5 million voters in 2016 to 154.6 million voters in 2020. This increase of 17.1 million voters was the largest

increase between presidential elections since the inception of the CPS voting supplement.

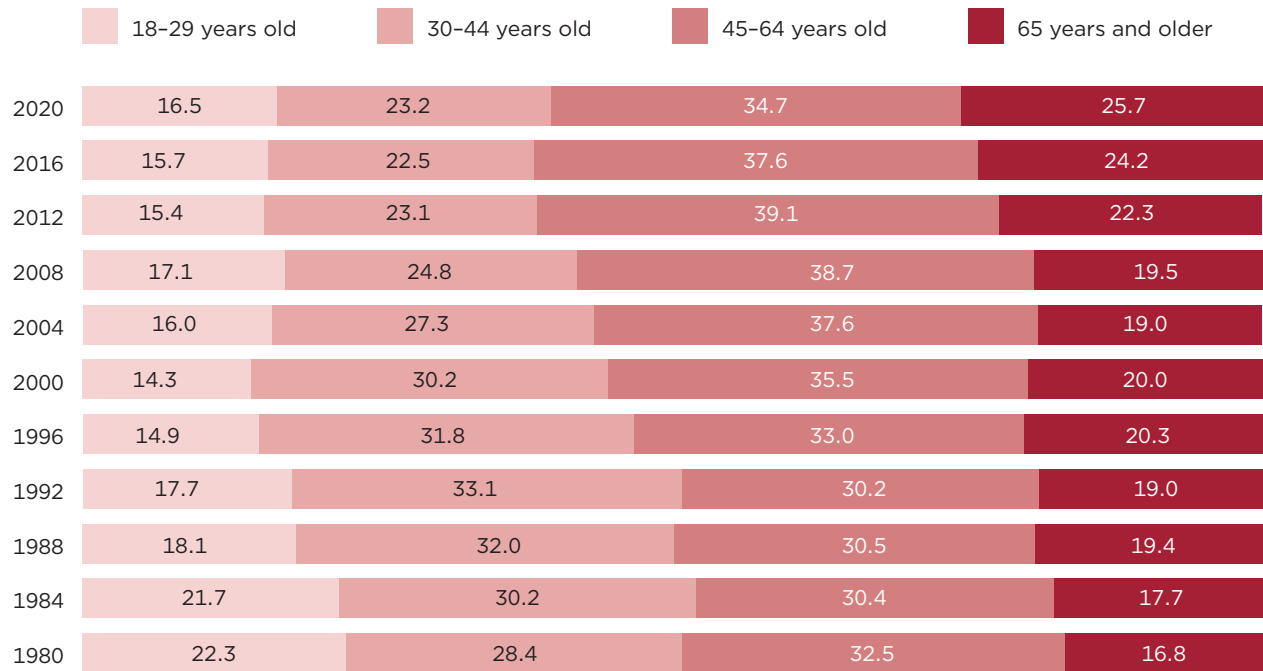
This section explores the share of voters across characteristics over time. While changes to these voter shares may represent changes in relative turnout across demographics, they may also reflect underlying demographic changes to the CVAP. The next section of this report compares recent changes in the demographic shares of voters to demographic changes in the CVAP.

The largest age group of voters was those between 45–64, constituting just over one-third of all voters in 2020 (34.7 percent) (Figure 2). This group shrank from 37.6 percent of voters in 2016 to its lowest share since 1996. The oldest age group, those 65 or older, made up 25.7 percent of 2020 voters. This is the largest voter share for those 65 and older on record in the CPS time series. The youngest age groups, those 18–29 years old and those 30–44 years old, grew to 16.5 percent and 23.2 percent, respectively.

Figure 2.

Composition of American Voters by Age: Presidential Elections, 1980–2020

(In percent)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 1980–2020.

The share of voters who were non-Hispanic White declined in most presidential elections since 1980, excluding the 1992 and 2016 elections, when there was no significant difference (Figure 3).⁸ This

⁸ Federal surveys give respondents the option of reporting more than one race. Therefore, two basic ways of defining a race group are possible. A group such as Asian may be defined as those who reported Asian and no other race (the race-alone or single-race concept) or as those who reported Asian regardless of whether they also reported another race (the race-alone-or-in-combination concept). The body of this report (text and figures) presents data using the first approach (race alone). Use of the single-race population does not imply that it is the preferred method of presenting or analyzing data. The Census Bureau uses a variety of approaches. In this report, the terms “White, non-Hispanic” and “non-Hispanic White” are used interchangeably and refer to people who are not Hispanic and who reported White and no other race. Since Hispanics may be any race, data in this report for Hispanics overlap with data for race groups. More information is available at <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps.html>.

trend continued in 2020, as the non-Hispanic White voter share declined to 71.0 percent, the lowest share recorded for this group across the entire CPS time series. The non-Hispanic Black share of voters was 11.7 percent in 2020, lower than in both 2008 and 2012, when non-Hispanic Black voters were 12.1 percent and 12.9 percent of voters, respectively. The share of 2020 voters who were Hispanic and non-Hispanic Asian was the highest on record for both groups, as Hispanics increased to over 10 percent of the voting population and non-Hispanic Asians increased to over 4 percent of the voting population.

The 2020 election featured the largest share of voters with a bachelor’s degree or higher on record in the CPS (Figure 4).

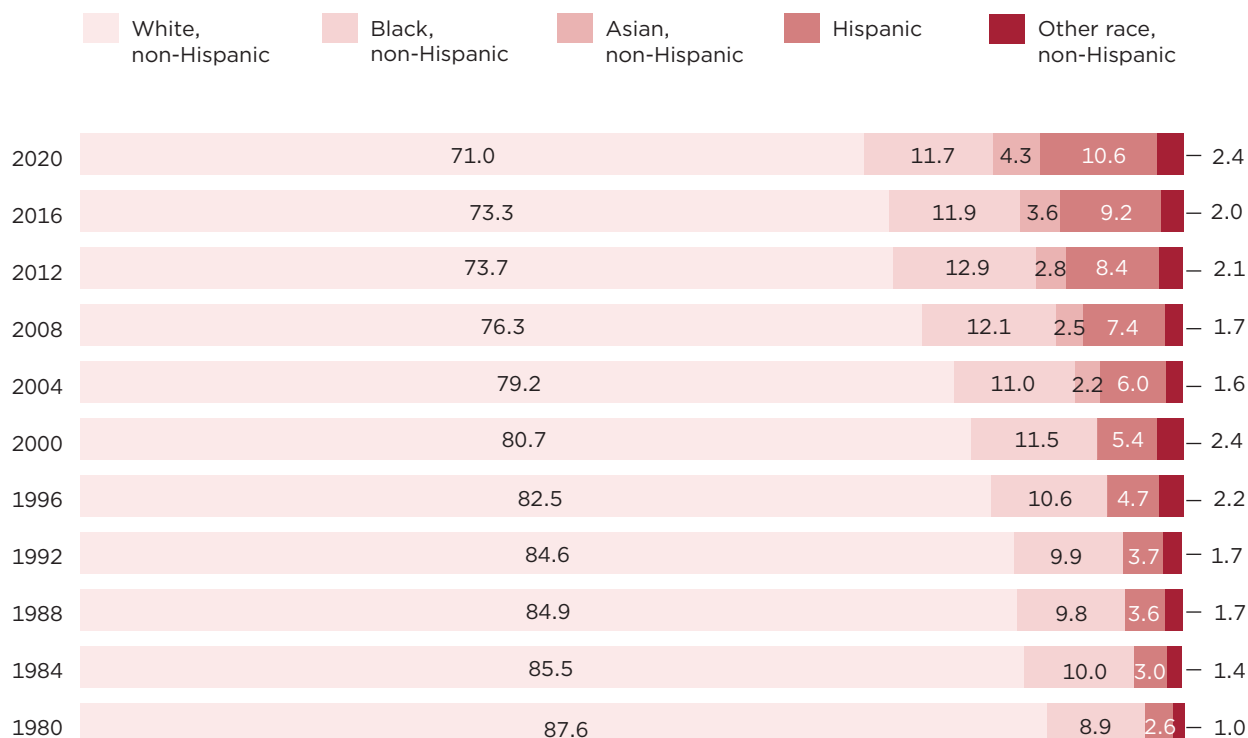
Between 1980 and 2020, this group increased from 20.6 percent to 41.5 percent of voters. During the same period, the share of voters with less than a high school diploma declined from 21.4 percent to 4.6 percent. The share of voters with a high school diploma also declined, from 38.7 percent in 1980 to 24.2 percent in 2020. The share of voters with some college or an associate’s degree declined from 30.8 percent in 2016 to 29.7 percent in 2020. This group became a greater share of voters in every election from 1980–2008, then remained near 31 percent of voters through 2016.

Prior to 2020, the distribution of voters by sex remained stable over time (Figure 5). However, in 2020 women fell to 53.1 percent of

Figure 3.

Composition of American Voters by Race and Hispanic Origin: Presidential Elections, 1980-2020

(In percent)



Note: Other race, non-Hispanic includes non-Hispanic Asians from 1980-2000.
 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 1980-2020.

the voting population, a decrease of 0.5 percentage points from 2016.

OVER- AND UNDER-REPRESENTATION AMONG VOTERS

Table 2 shows select demographic groups as a share of voters and as a share of the CVAP, as well as the difference between these shares. This difference shows whether voters in each group are a greater or lower share of the voting

population than the CVAP. A positive number should be interpreted as a group being overrepresented in the voting population relative to the CVAP, and a negative number should be interpreted as underrepresentation in the voting population. For example, those 65 and older made up 25.7 percent of the voting population and 23.0 percent of the CVAP, so they were overrepresented by 2.7 percentage points. Conversely, those 18-29 years of age made up 16.5

percent of the voting population and 20.3 percent of the CVAP, so they were underrepresented by 3.9 percentage points.⁹ Figures 6 through 8 show the over- or underrepresentation of voters by age, race and Hispanic origin, and sex across the four previous presidential elections.

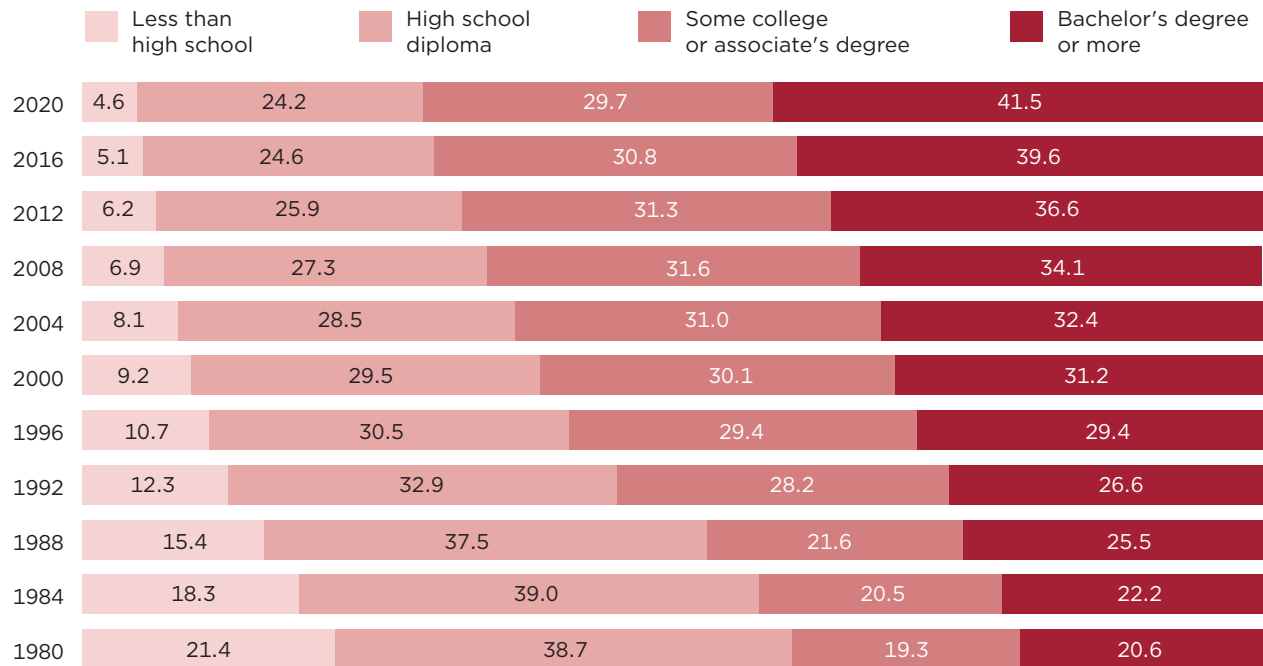
The two oldest age groups were overrepresented among voters

⁹ These shares are rounded, so their difference does not equal the rounded difference.

Figure 4.

Composition of American Voters by Educational Attainment: Presidential Elections, 1980–2020

(In percent)

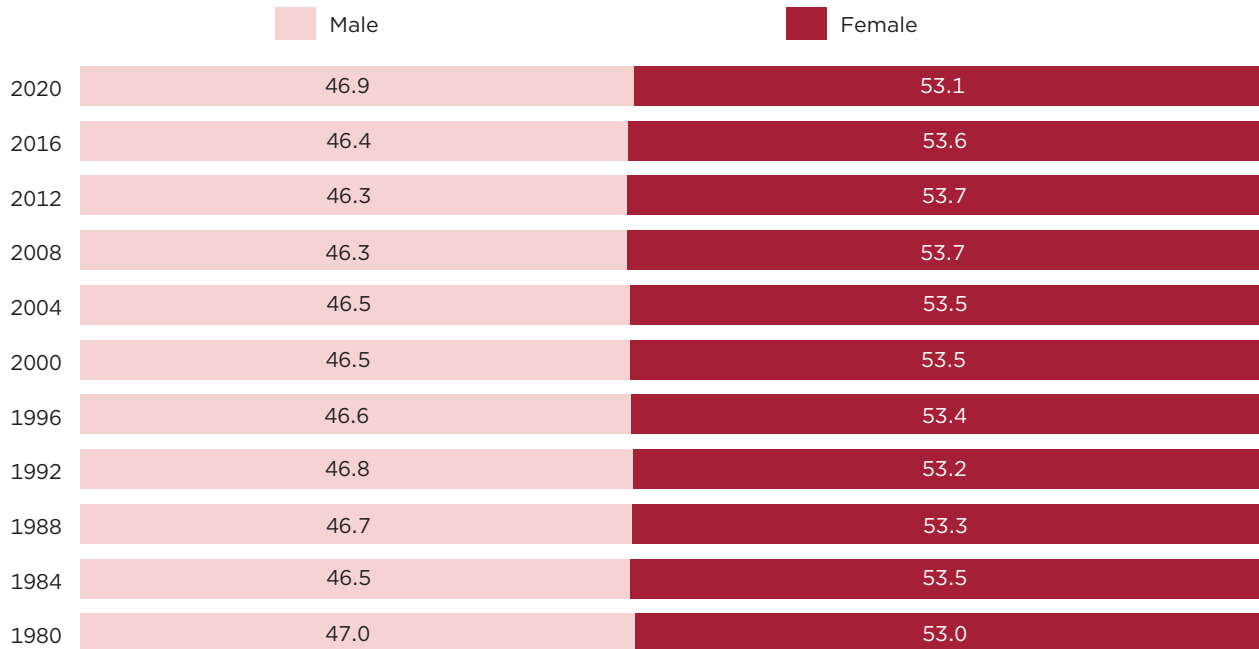


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 1980–2020.

Figure 5.

Composition of American Voters by Sex: Presidential Elections, 1980–2020

(In percent)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 1980–2020.

Table 2.

Registration and Voter Characteristics: 2020

(Numbers in thousands)

Characteristic	Citizen voting-age population		Registered		Voted		Over- or under-representation ¹
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	
Total	231,600	100.0	168,300	100.0	154,600	100.0	X
Age							
18 to 29	47,040	20.3	29,400	17.5	25,450	16.5	-3.9
30 to 44	55,630	24.0	39,790	23.6	35,810	23.2	-0.9
45 to 64	75,590	32.6	57,230	34.0	53,650	34.7	2.1
65 and older	53,330	23.0	41,890	24.9	39,720	25.7	2.7
Sex							
Male	111,500	48.1	79,340	47.1	72,470	46.9	-1.3
Female	120,100	51.9	88,970	52.9	82,150	53.1	1.3
Race and Hispanic Origin							
White, non-Hispanic	154,800	66.9	118,400	70.3	109,800	71.0	4.2
Black, non-Hispanic	28,800	12.4	19,900	11.8	18,090	11.7	-0.7
Asian, non-Hispanic	11,110	4.8	7,061	4.2	6,603	4.3	-0.5
Other race, non-Hispanic	6,229	2.7	4,235	2.5	3,648	2.4	-0.3
Hispanic (any race)	30,630	13.2	18,720	11.1	16,460	10.6	-2.6
Nativity and Citizenship Status							
Native-born	210,100	90.7	154,000	91.5	141,500	91.5	0.8
Naturalized citizens	21,510	9.3	14,270	8.5	13,080	8.5	-0.8
Marital Status							
Married, spouse present	115,900	50.1	90,730	53.9	85,810	55.5	5.4
Married, spouse absent	2,762	1.2	1,743	1.0	1,541	1.0	-0.2
Widowed	14,740	6.4	10,700	6.4	9,602	6.2	-0.2
Divorced	25,180	10.9	18,250	10.8	16,520	10.7	-0.2
Separated	3,729	1.6	2,358	1.4	1,976	1.3	-0.3
Never married	69,240	29.9	44,520	26.5	39,180	25.3	-4.6
Employment Status							
In civilian labor force	144,900	62.6	108,000	64.2	99,320	64.2	1.6
Government workers	20,130	8.7	16,640	9.9	15,840	10.2	1.6
Private industry	107,300	46.3	78,980	46.9	72,360	46.8	0.5
Self-employed	8,483	3.7	6,254	3.7	5,879	3.8	0.1
Unemployed	9,068	3.9	6,123	3.6	5,239	3.4	-0.5
Not in labor force	86,660	37.4	60,310	35.8	55,310	35.8	-1.6
Duration of Residence²							
Less than 1 year	23,300	10.1	17,690	10.5	15,320	9.9	-0.2
1 to 2 years	27,650	11.9	22,020	13.1	19,790	12.8	0.9
3 to 4 years	28,050	12.1	23,390	13.9	21,340	13.8	1.7
5 years or longer	117,500	50.7	103,000	61.2	96,110	62.2	11.4
Not reported	35,100	15.2	2,249	1.3	2,063	1.3	-13.8
Region							
Northeast	39,690	17.1	29,730	17.7	27,350	17.7	0.6
Midwest	49,870	21.5	37,440	22.2	34,210	22.1	0.6
South	88,260	38.1	62,800	37.3	57,060	36.9	-1.2
West	53,780	23.2	38,340	22.8	36,000	23.3	0.1
Educational Attainment							
Less than 9th grade	4,792	2.1	2,196	1.3	1,800	1.2	-0.9
9th to 12th grade, no diploma	12,740	5.5	6,435	3.8	5,283	3.4	-2.1
High school graduate	67,540	29.2	42,800	25.4	37,460	24.2	-4.9
Some college or associate's degree	66,050	28.5	50,180	29.8	45,960	29.7	1.2
Bachelor's degree	51,760	22.4	42,220	25.1	40,310	26.1	3.7
Advanced degree	28,710	12.4	24,470	14.5	23,820	15.4	3.0
Veteran Status³							
Total	231,700	100.0	168,400	100.0	154,700	100.0	X
Veteran	18,230	7.9	14,480	8.6	13,510	8.7	0.9
Nonveteran	213,500	92.2	153,900	91.4	141,200	91.3	-0.9

Footnotes available at end of table.

Table 2.

Registration and Voter Characteristics: 2020—Con.

(Numbers in thousands)

Characteristic	Citizen voting-age population		Registered		Voted		Over- or under-representation ¹
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	
Annual Family Income⁴							
Total family members	164,900	100.0	122,200	100.0	113,100	100.0	X
Under \$20,000	8,167	5.0	4,905	4.0	4,016	3.6	-1.4
\$20,000 to \$49,999	27,240	16.5	19,380	15.9	17,110	15.1	-1.4
\$50,000 to \$99,999	42,522	25.8	34,180	28.0	31,580	27.9	2.1
\$100,000 and over	49,290	29.9	42,700	35.0	40,820	36.1	6.2
Income not reported	37,660	22.8	20,990	17.2	19,530	17.3	-3.6

X Not applicable.

¹ Over- and underrepresentation is calculated as the difference between each demographic group's voter share and citizen voting-age population share. A demographic is overrepresented among voters if the difference is positive and underrepresented among voters if the difference is negative.

² Some states have durational residency requirements in order to register and to vote.

³ The veterans estimates were derived using the veteran weight, which uses different procedures for construction than the person weight used to produce other turnout estimates in 2020.

⁴ Limited to people in families.

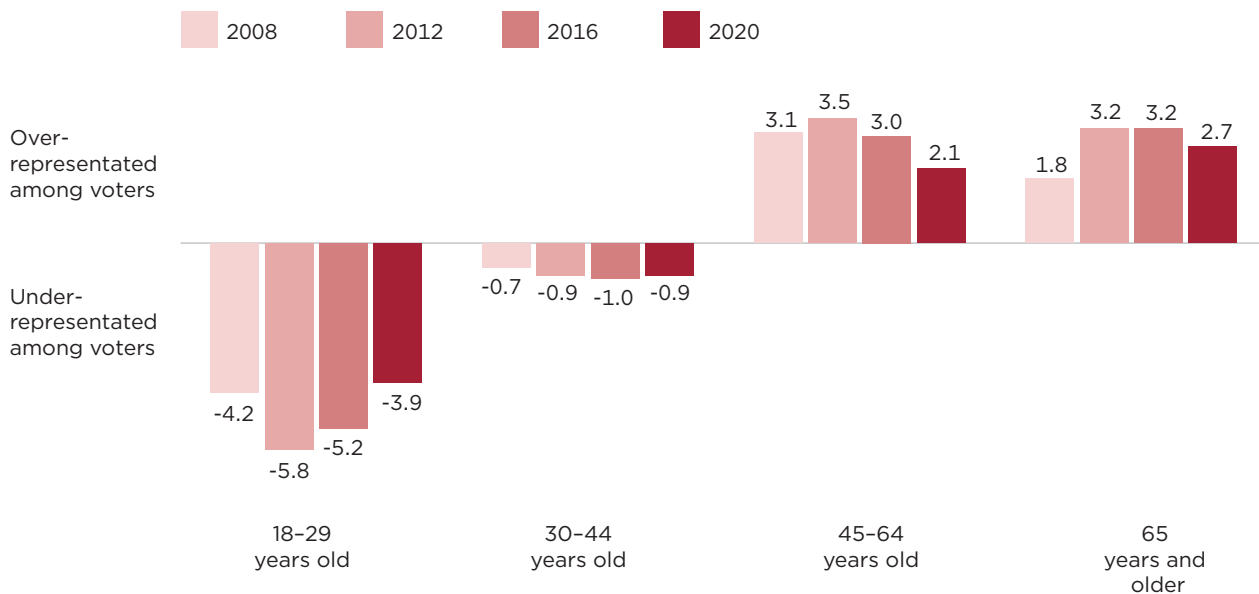
Note: Numbers are based on weighted reports of voting behavior derived from a survey sample. Numbers and percentages may not sum to totals due to rounding.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2020.

Figure 6.

Difference Between Voter Share and Citizen Voting-Age Population (CVAP) Share by Age: Presidential Elections, 2008–2020

(Percentage-point difference between voter share and CVAP share)

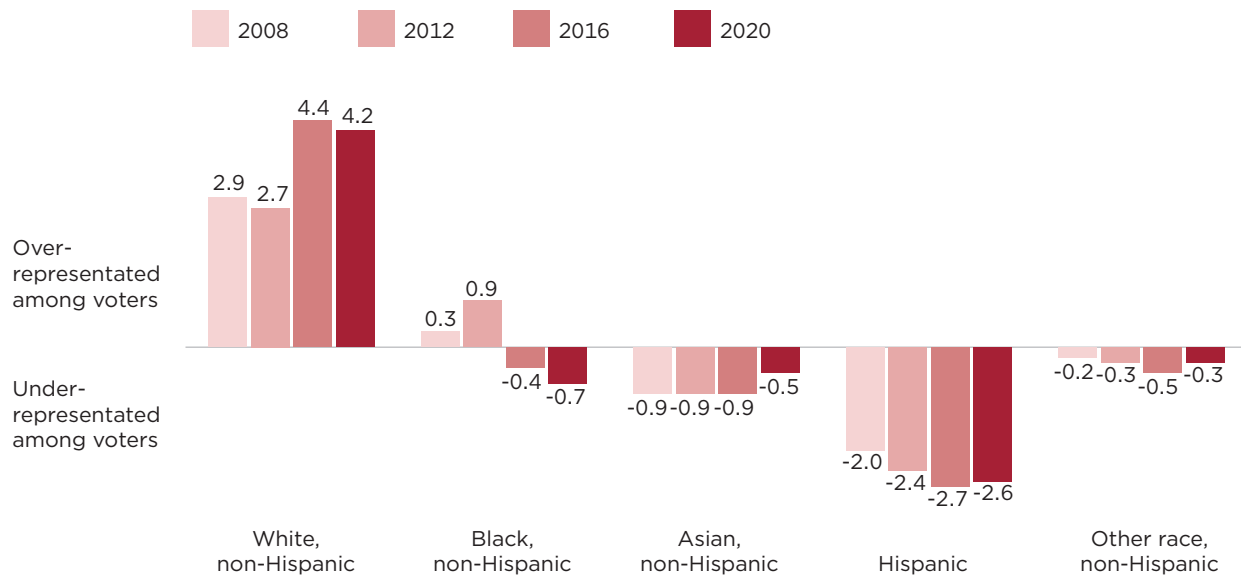


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2008–2020.

Figure 7.

Difference Between Voter Share and Citizen Voting-Age Population (CVAP) Share by Race and Hispanic Origin: Presidential Elections, 2008-2020

(Percentage-point difference between voter share and CVAP share)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2008-2020.

in 2020, while the two youngest groups were underrepresented (Figure 6). As mentioned above, those 18-29 years old were underrepresented among voters and those 65 years and older were overrepresented. Those 30-44 years old were underrepresented among voters by 0.9 percentage points, relative to their share of the CVAP. In contrast, those 45-64 years old were overrepresented among voters by 2.1 percentage points, relative to their share of the CVAP. Both the overrepresentation of those 45-64 and those 65 and older and the underrepresentation of those 18-29 declined from the 2016 election, as the age distribution of the

voting population shifted closer to the age distribution of the CVAP. Indeed, along with 2008, the 2020 election was the closest 18- to 29-year-olds have come to representing the same share of voters as they represent of the CVAP.¹⁰

Figure 7 shows the difference between voter and CVAP share by race and Hispanic origin. In the 2020 election, the non-Hispanic White voter share was 4.2 percentage points greater than the non-Hispanic White CVAP share. All other race and Hispanic origin groups were underrepresented in

¹⁰ The 2008 underrepresentation of 18- to 29-year-olds was not statistically different from the 2020 underrepresentation.

the voting population.¹¹ The overrepresentation of non-Hispanic White voters was higher in the last two presidential elections than in both 2008 and 2012.¹² Non-Hispanic Blacks were underrepresented among voters in 2020 and 2016, contrasting with their overrepresentation in the 2012 presidential election.¹³

¹¹ The non-Hispanic Asian underrepresentation was not statistically different from the non-Hispanic Black underrepresentation and the non-Hispanic other race underrepresentation.

¹² The overrepresentation of non-Hispanic White voters was not statistically different between 2020 and 2016. The overrepresentation of these voters was also not statistically different between 2012 and 2008.

¹³ The difference between the non-Hispanic Black voter share and CVAP share was not statistically significant in 2008.

The underrepresentation of non-Hispanic Asian voters was smaller in magnitude in 2020 than in 2016. Despite continued growth in voter share (Figure 3), Hispanics remained underrepresented among voters in 2020 as their share of the CVAP also grew from 2016.¹⁴

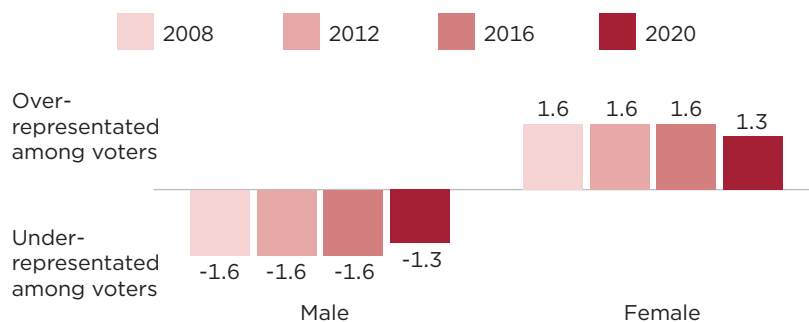
The voting population continued to be more educated than the CVAP in 2020 (Table 2). Those with less than a high school diploma were underrepresented by 3.0 percentage points among voters relative to the CVAP, and those with a high school diploma were underrepresented by 4.9 percentage points among voters relative to the CVAP. In contrast, those with some college or an associate's degree were overrepresented by 1.2 percentage points among voters, and those with a bachelor's degree or more were overrepresented by 6.7 percentage points among voters.

Women continued to be overrepresented among voters relative to the CVAP (Figure 8). However, they were only 1.3 percentage points more of the voting population than the CVAP in 2020, compared to 1.6 percentage points more in 2016.

¹⁴ Growth in the Hispanic voter share and Hispanic CVAP share from 2016 to 2020 did not statistically differ, and Hispanic underrepresentation in 2020 was not statistically different from 2016.

Figure 8.
Difference Between Voter Share and Citizen Voting-Age Population (CVAP) Share by Sex: Presidential Elections, 2008-2020

(Percentage-point difference between voter share and CVAP share)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2008-2020.

THE 2020 VOTING POPULATION BY SEX

As detailed in the previous sections, voter share by sex has remained consistent over time (Figure 5), with women overrepresented among voters (Figure 8).¹⁵ However, the share of voters who were women varied across race and Hispanic origin, age, and educational attainment. This section explores voter shares by sex across other demographic characteristics.

Women were a higher share of voters for every race and Hispanic

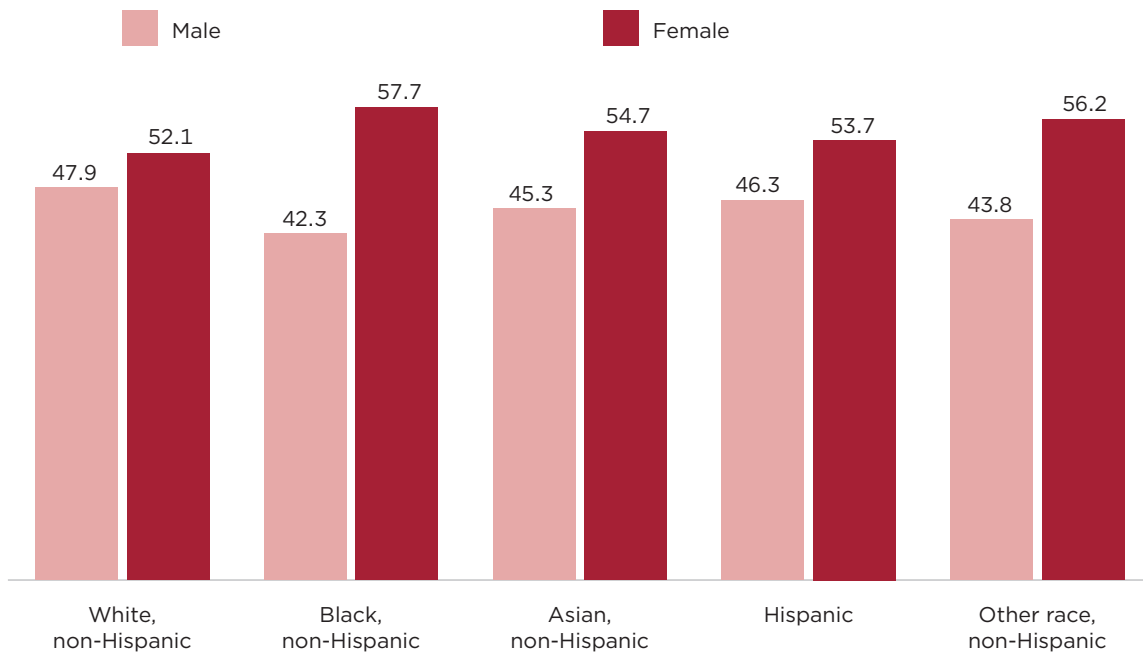
origin group (Figure 9).¹⁶ The difference between female and male voter share was highest for non-Hispanic Black voters, of whom 57.7 percent of voters were women.¹⁷ Women constituted 52.1 percent of non-Hispanic White voters, the group with the smallest voter share difference across sex.

Women were a larger share of voters than men in all age brackets in 2020 (Figure 10). The share of voters who were women was largest in the 65-and-older age bracket (54.4 percent), an age bracket that is disproportionately female.

¹⁶ The non-Hispanic Black and non-Hispanic other race female voter shares were not statistically different.

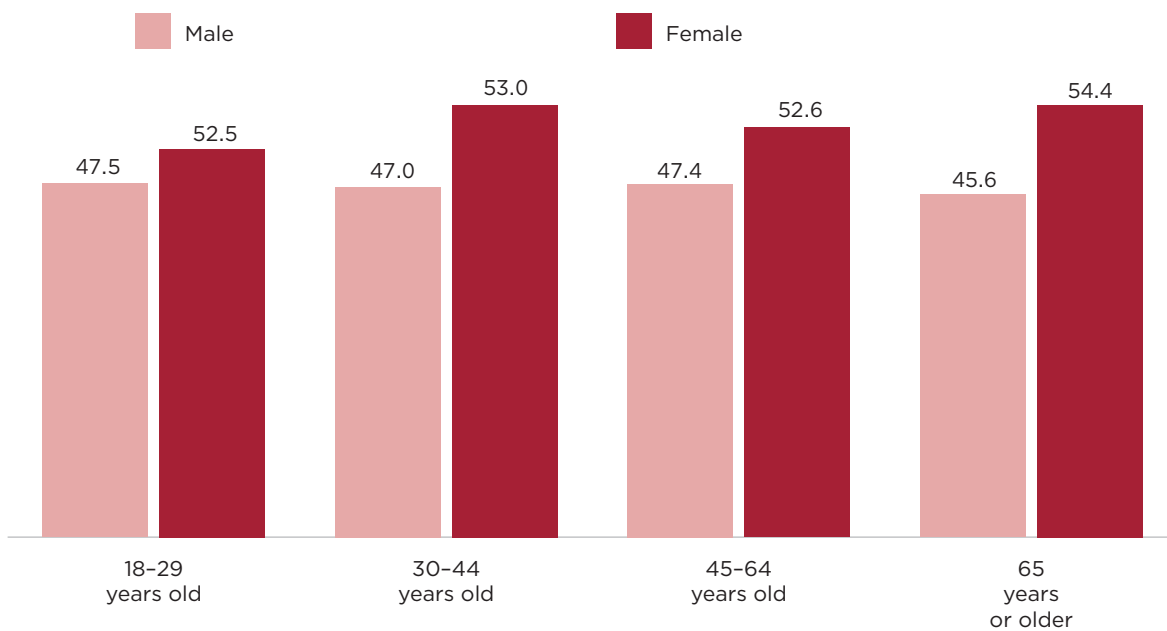
¹⁷ The non-Hispanic Asian female voter share was not statistically different from the Hispanic and the non-Hispanic other race female voter shares.

Figure 9.
Composition of American Voters by Race and Hispanic Origin and Sex: 2020
(In percent)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2020.

Figure 10.
Composition of American Voters by Age and Sex: 2020
(In percent)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2020.

The share of voters who were women was lowest among those with a high school diploma or less (Figure 11). Women were 49.9 percent of those with less than a high school diploma and 50.9 percent of those with a high school diploma.¹⁸ In contrast, women were 54.1 percent of both voters with some college or an associate's degree and voters with a bachelor's degree or higher.¹⁹

METHODS OF VOTING

Policies in place in many states allowed eligible voters to cast ballots before Election Day, either during an early voting period, by voting with an absentee ballot (i.e., by mail), or both. The CPS has asked about "nontraditional" voting methods in every voting supplement beginning in 1996.²⁰ Figure 12 displays methods of voting used by voters in presidential elections dating back to 2004. For the first time on record, a majority (69.4 percent) of voters cast ballots by a nontraditional method in the 2020 presidential election. This represents a dramatic increase in nontraditional voting since 2004, when only 20.7 percent of voters reported voting by a nontraditional method, and over the prior presidential election in 2016, when 40.1 percent of voters cast ballots by a nontraditional method. In each presidential election since 2004, the rate of nontraditional voting has

¹⁸ The shares of voters with less than a high school diploma and voters with a high school diploma who were women were not statistically different.

¹⁹ The shares of voters with some college or an associate's degree and voters with a bachelor's degree or higher who were women were not statistically different.

²⁰ Between 1996 and 2002, the CPS asked a single question about timing and method of voting. From 2004 onward, the CPS has asked two questions, one about voting in person or by mail and another about voting early or on Election Day.

METHODS OF VOTING: STATE-LEVEL RULES

The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) has provided the following summary of permanent policies in place regarding voting methods across states as of the 2020 presidential election.¹ Many states also enacted temporary provisions that either added or expanded access to "nontraditional" methods of voting in advance of the 2020 presidential election in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Election Day Only—There were seven states in which permanent policies as of 2020 only permitted "traditional" methods of voting—that is, early voting was not offered, and an excuse was required to vote with an absentee ballot. These states were Alabama, Connecticut, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, New Hampshire, and South Carolina.

Early In-Person Voting—In 42 states and the District of Columbia, permanent policies as of 2020 allowed any qualified voter to cast a ballot in person during a designated period prior to Election Day.² No excuse or justification was required.

Absentee Voting—All states had a process to mail an absentee ballot to certain voters who requested one. The voter could return the ballot by mail or in person. In 34 states and the District of Columbia, permanent policies as of 2020 permitted any qualified voter to vote absentee without offering an excuse. States that required an excuse typically included illness or disability as a justification, and some states enacted temporary provisions that specifically listed COVID-19 as a justification for requesting an absentee ballot in advance of the 2020 election. Additionally, some states offered a permanent absentee ballot list: once voters asked to be added to the list, they would automatically receive an absentee ballot for all future elections.

All-Mail Voting—In some states, a ballot was automatically mailed to every eligible voter—no request or application was necessary. Permanent policies in Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah, and Washington sanctioned all-mail voting in all national elections as of 2020. A number of additional states sent all registered voters a ballot by mail for the 2020 election in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.³

¹ For more information on the NCSL and their summary of early voting for states, refer to <www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/absentee-and-early-voting.aspx>.

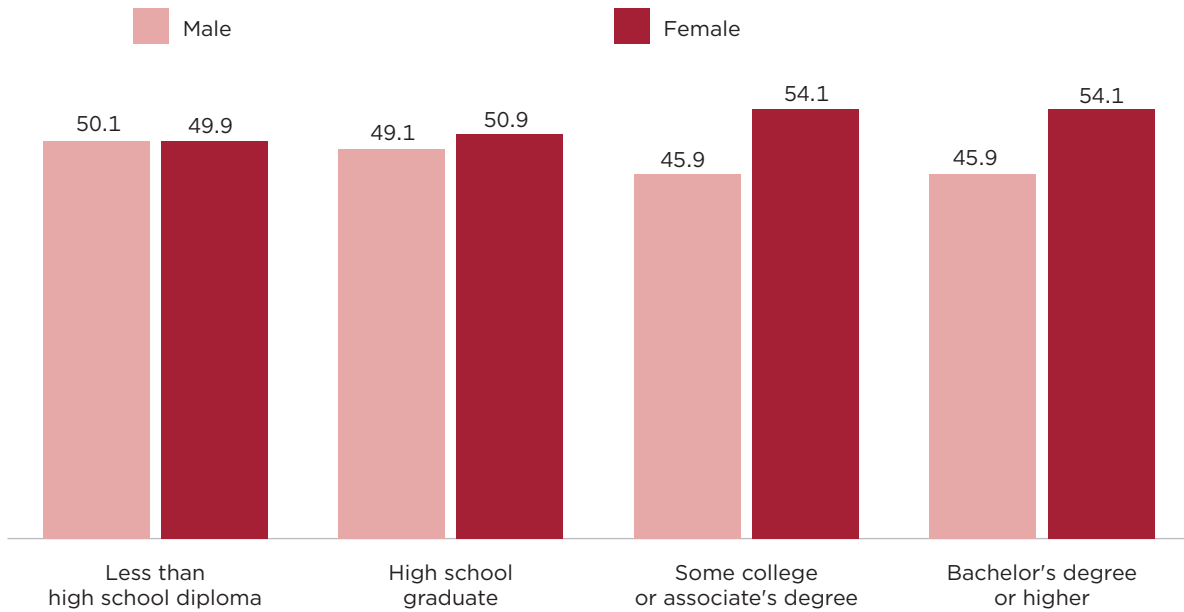
² In Oregon, a state with all-mail voting, early in-person voting was not allowed except under a very narrow set of circumstances.

³ These additional states were California, Montana, Nevada, New Jersey, and Vermont. All registered voters in the District of Columbia also received a ballot in the mail.

Figure 11.

Composition of American Voters by Educational Attainment and Sex: 2020

(In percent)

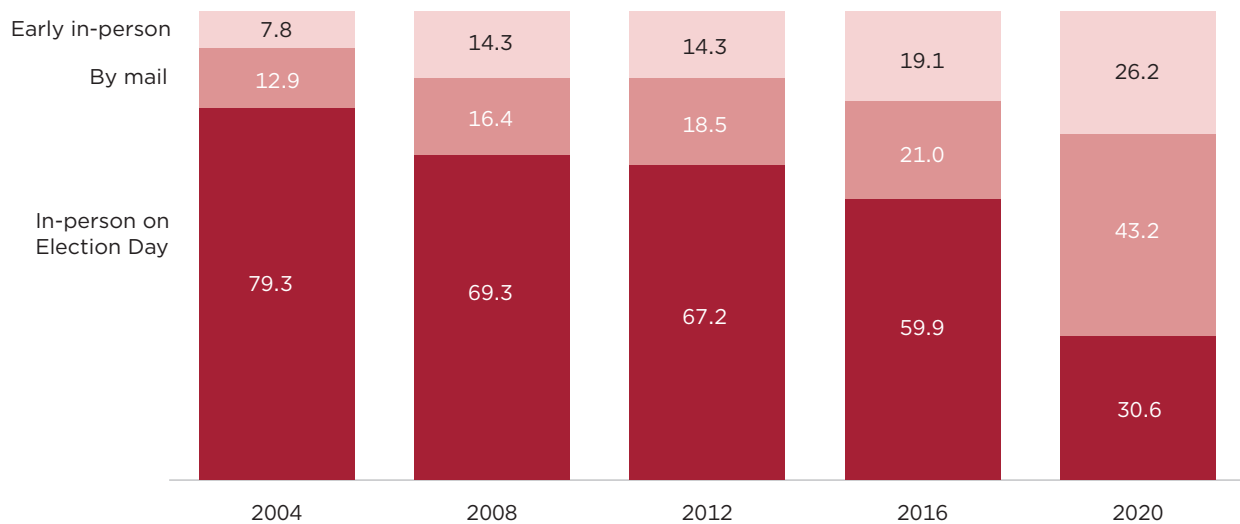


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2020.

Figure 12.

Method of Voting: Presidential Elections, 2004-2020

(In percent)



Note: The estimates presented in this section are only for individuals with valid responses to the method and timing questions.
 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2004-2020.

exceeded that of the prior presidential election.

In 2020, 26.2 percent of voters cast ballots in person before Election Day, while 43.2 percent voted by mail.²¹ This rate of voting by mail in 2020 represents a sizeable increase from 2016, when 21.0 percent of voters cast ballots by mail, a shift likely precipitated by changes in state election procedures and voter preferences in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Use of nontraditional voting methods during the 2020 presidential election also varied across demographic characteristics (Figure 13).

²¹ The estimates presented in this section are only for individuals with valid responses to the method and timing questions.

Voters 65 years and older were more likely to cast ballots non-traditionally (77.7 percent) than those in younger age groups, and those with a bachelor's degree or higher were more likely to cast ballots nontraditionally (74.5 percent) than those with lower levels of educational attainment. Non-Hispanic Asian voters (82.4 percent) cast ballots nontraditionally at a higher rate than those in other race and Hispanic origin groups.

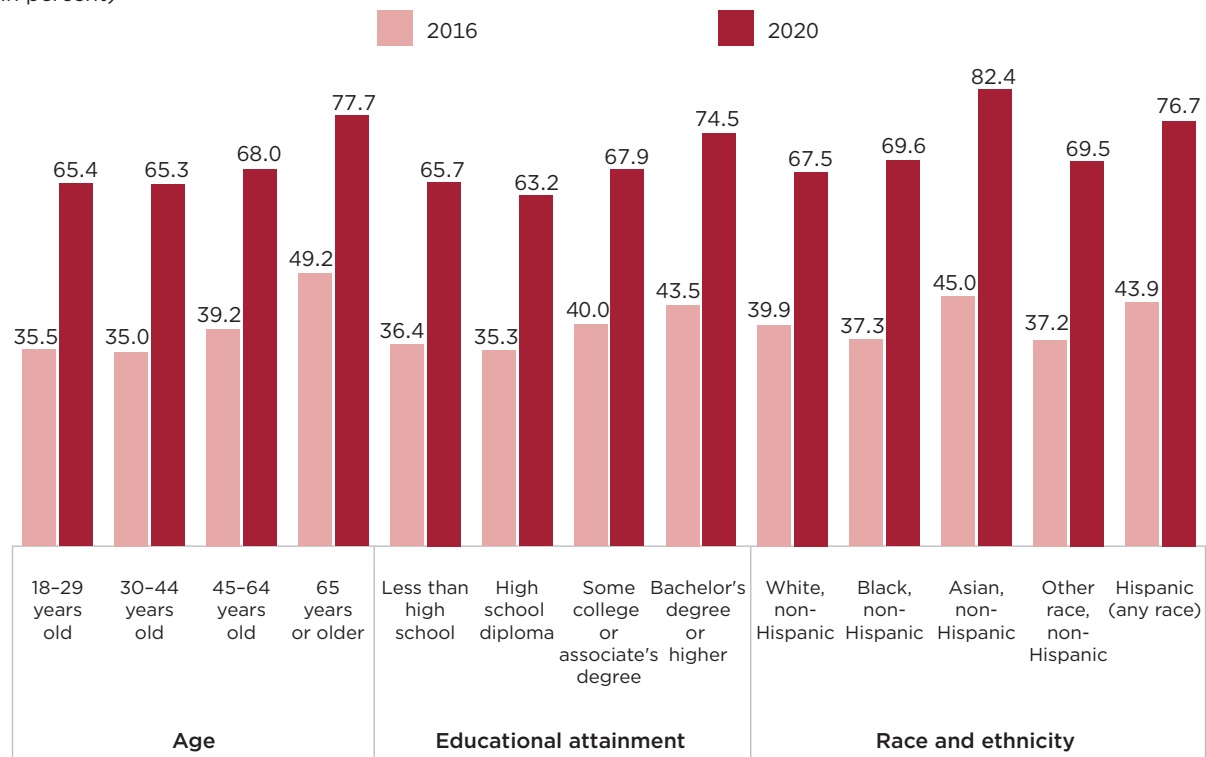
NONPARTICIPATION

The CPS asks about nonparticipation in elections among the citizen voting-age population in two different ways. Since 2000, respondents who were registered to vote at the time of the election

but reported not voting have been asked why they chose not to vote. Since 2004, respondents who reported not voting in the election and were also not registered to vote have been asked why they chose not to register. With both nonparticipation questions, respondents can pick only one main reason.

In 2020, an estimated 12.8 million Americans were in the CVAP and registered to vote but did not vote, a group referred to in this section as registered nonvoters (Table 3). Registered nonvoters were most likely to cite not being interested in the election as their reason for not voting (2.3 million registered nonvoters), followed by dislike of the candidates or

Figure 13.
Use of Nontraditional Voting by Selected Characteristics: 2016 and 2020
(In percent)



Note: The estimates presented in this section are only for individuals with valid responses to the method and timing questions.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2016–2020.

Table 3.

Reasons for Not Registering and Not Voting by Selected Characteristics: 2020

(Numbers in thousands)

Characteristic	Percent distribution of reasons for not voting and registering														
	Total		Race and Hispanic origin					Age			Educational attainment				
	Number	Percent	White, non-Hispanic	Black, non-Hispanic	Asian, non-Hispanic	Other race, non-Hispanic	Hispanic (any race)	18-29 years	30-44 years	45-64 years	65 years and older	Less than high school	High school diploma	Some college or associate's degree	Bachelor's degree or more
Registered nonvoters	12,810	100.0	8,056	1,699	426	534	2,097	3,594	3,773	3,364	2,079	1,503	5,036	3,901	2,371
Reasons for Not Voting¹															
Not interested	2,254	17.6	17.6	18.9	12.3	15.9	17.9	19.9	19.4	16.7	11.7	16.3	19.0	17.6	15.6
Did not like candidates or campaign issues	1,864	14.6	16.1	8.3	6.0	13.1	15.8	13.2	17.0	15.3	11.2	5.9	14.0	16.9	17.2
Other reason	1,857	14.5	14.5	16.2	15.9	14.7	12.9	15.8	13.8	14.3	14.0	14.4	14.6	14.0	15.1
Too busy, conflicting schedule	1,682	13.1	12.0	11.1	24.5	13.6	16.7	17.1	11.7	2.1	10.9	10.9	13.3	14.2	12.4
Illness or disability	1,665	13.0	13.2	14.5	12.9	16.9	10.2	4.8	6.1	15.8	35.2	24.1	13.1	10.0	10.7
Out of town	777	6.1	6.4	4.3	7.2	2.4	6.9	7.5	5.8	6.3	3.8	4.5	5.6	6.4	7.5
Registration problems	628	4.9	4.7	4.9	9.4	3.9	5.0	5.7	5.4	4.6	3.1	3.1	4.4	5.0	6.9
Concerns about the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic	553	4.3	4.3	3.0	9.6	4.1	4.5	3.6	3.1	4.1	8.1	5.5	3.9	4.0	5.0
Forgot to vote	476	3.7	3.3	4.8	0.6	7.5	4.1	4.6	3.8	3.2	2.8	3.7	3.6	4.5	2.6
Don't know or refused	408	3.2	3.4	4.3	D	4.6	1.7	3.6	3.2	3.0	2.6	2.9	3.7	2.6	3.3
Inconvenient polling place	335	2.6	2.4	3.6	D	D	3.1	2.8	3.5	D	1.8	D	2.8	D	2.9
Transportation problems	303	2.4	2.1	6.2	Z	D	D	1.9	1.7	3.0	3.3	5.8	D	2.5	0.6
Bad weather conditions	8	0.1	Z	Z	Z	Z	D	Z	Z	D	0.2	D	D	D	Z
Not registered	25,780	100.0	14,250	3,005	1,579	1,067	5,879	8,671	6,724	6,725	3,663	5,112	11,830	5,844	2,995
Reasons for Not Registering²															
Not interested in the election/not involved in politics	10,000	38.8	44.2	29.6	26.6	41.4	33.2	39.6	38.4	39.6	36.1	34.4	41.7	39.8	33.2
Other reason	4,248	16.5	18.4	15.9	11.6	12.7	14.0	14.7	16.9	16.4	20.1	17.4	14.7	17.6	19.6
Did not meet registration deadlines	2,736	10.6	9.5	14.2	11.0	8.7	11.7	14.3	9.8	8.8	6.8	9.4	9.6	13.0	11.8
Not eligible to vote	2,514	9.8	5.6	12.7	18.3	9.0	16.2	8.4	12.3	11.2	5.5	13.8	8.6	8.1	10.5
Don't know or refused	1,382	5.4	4.9	6.6	5.8	6.0	5.7	6.8	4.7	4.3	5.0	3.9	6.3	4.7	5.4
Permanent illness or disability	1,260	4.9	5.3	7.8	3.3	4.5	2.9	3.4	3.2	5.5	10.5	6.7	5.5	3.6	2.1
My vote would not make a difference	1,207	4.7	5.5	3.1	2.1	7.6	3.7	3.8	5.4	5.0	4.8	4.7	4.1	5.4	5.4
Did not know where or how to register	816	3.2	2.1	5.2	5.4	3.9	4.1	3.9	3.0	2.6	2.6	4.1	3.1	2.9	2.3
Did not meet residency requirements	724	2.8	2.0	D	5.1	2.5	4.5	3.0	3.4	2.8	1.2	1.8	2.4	3.1	5.5
Concerns about the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic	581	2.3	2.0	2.7	2.4	3.7	2.3	1.6	1.8	2.5	4.4	2.1	2.5	1.6	2.7
Difficulty with English	314	1.2	0.5	D	8.5	Z	1.7	0.4	1.1	1.4	3.0	1.7	1.4	0.2	1.5

D Suppressed for disclosure avoidance.

Z Represents zero or rounds to zero.

¹ Only individuals who reported being registered and also reported not voting were asked the question about reason for not voting.

² Includes only those respondents who answered "no" to the question, "Were you registered in the election of November 2020?"

Note: Numbers and percentages may not sum to totals due to rounding.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2020.

campaign issues (1.9 million), being too busy or having a conflicting schedule (1.7 million), and having an illness or disability (1.7 million).²² Reasons for not casting a ballot have evolved from one presidential election to the next (Figure 14). For example, in 2004, 10.5 percent of registered nonvoters did not like the candidates or campaign issues, a percentage that increased to 24.8 percent in 2016 before decreasing to 14.5

²² An additional 1.9 million registered nonvoters indicated an "other reason" than the response options offered on the supplement. The number of registered nonvoters who disliked the candidates or campaign issues, were too busy or had a conflicting schedule, had an illness or disability, and selected a reason other than the response options offered did not differ significantly.

percent in the most recent presidential election. Across the same time series, the percentage of registered nonvoters who were not interested in the election or felt that their vote would not make a difference increased from 11.3 percent in 2004 to 17.6 percent in 2020. Meanwhile, the percentage who indicated being too busy to vote decreased from 21.1 percent in 2004 to 13.1 percent in 2020.²³

Table 3 also presents reasons for not voting for the 2020 presidential election across age groups,

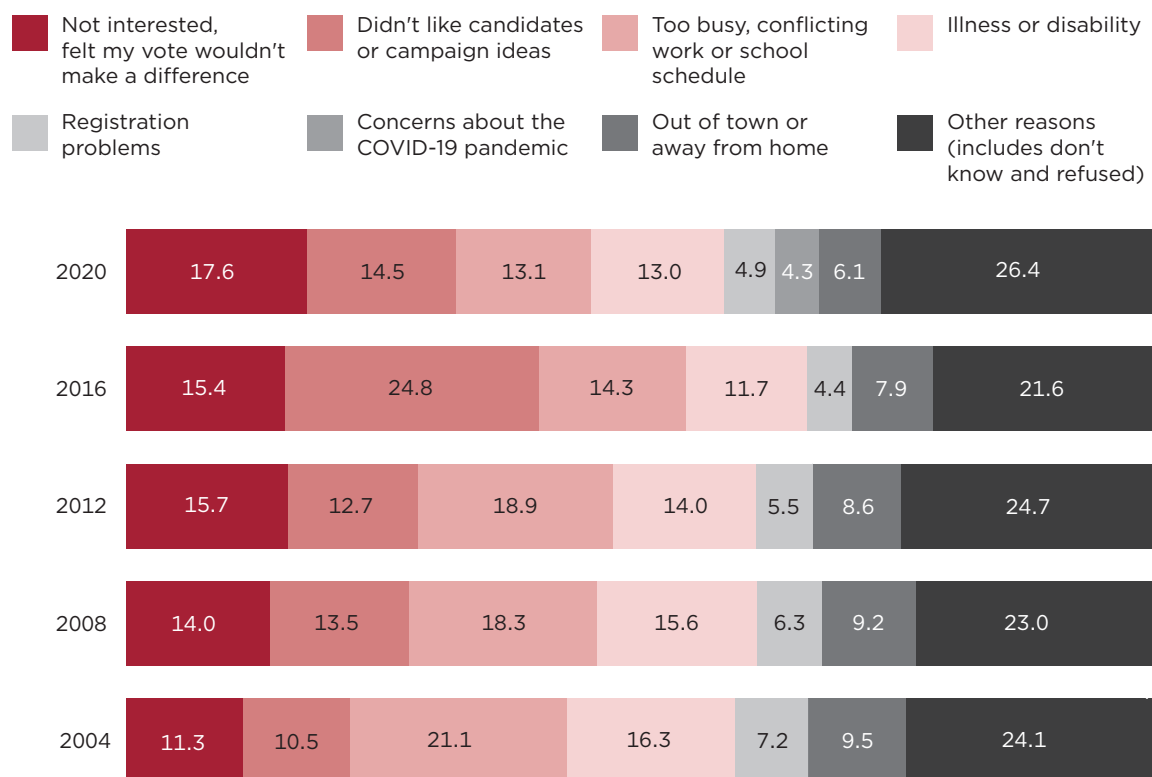
²³ The share of registered nonvoters in 2020 who disliked the candidates or campaign issues and the share of registered nonvoters in 2020 who were too busy or had a conflicting schedule did not differ significantly.

race and Hispanic origin groups, and by varying levels of educational attainment. Regarding race and Hispanic origin, a smaller percentage of non-Hispanic Black and non-Hispanic Asian registered nonvoters did not like the candidates or campaign issues (8.3 percent and 6.0 percent, respectively) than their non-Hispanic White counterparts (16.1 percent).²⁴ Turning to age, the percentage of registered nonvoters who were too busy or had a conflicting schedule was lowest among older registered nonvoters, with 2.1 percent of registered

²⁴ The share of non-Hispanic Black and non-Hispanic Asian voters who disliked the candidates or campaign issues did not differ significantly.

Figure 14.
Reasons for Not Voting: Presidential Elections, 2004-2020

(In percent)



Note: The estimates in this figure are for registered nonvoters.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2004-2020.

nonvoters 65 years and older being too busy, compared with 16.7 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds, 17.1 percent of 30- to 44-year-olds, and 11.7 percent of 45- to 64-year-olds.²⁵ Registered nonvoters 65 years and older were also less likely to not be interested in the election (11.7 percent) than those in younger age groups (16.7 percent or higher). By contrast, registered nonvoters 65 years and older were most likely to cite an illness or disability as their reason for not voting (35.2 percent). Finally, regarding levels of educational attainment, registered nonvoters with less than a high school diploma were less likely to cite not liking the candidates or campaign issues as their reason for not voting (5.9 percent) than their counterparts with higher levels of educational attainment (14.0 percent or higher). They were also more likely to have an illness or disability that prevented them from voting (24.1 percent) than those in higher educational attainment groups (13.1 percent or less).

Meanwhile, turning to the non-registered population, an estimated 25.8 million Americans among the CVAP were not registered to vote in the 2020 election (Table 3). These individuals were most likely to be nonregistered because of a disinterest in the election or not being involved in politics (10.0 million nonregistered individuals), followed by not meeting registration deadlines (2.7 million) and not being eligible to

²⁵ The percentage of 18- to 29-year-olds and the percentage of 30- to 44-year-olds who were too busy did not differ significantly.

vote (2.5 million).²⁶ In the last five presidential elections, a plurality of the nonregistered population indicated that they were not interested in the election or not involved in politics (data not shown). The share of the non-registered population who missed registration deadlines decreased from 16.2 percent in 2004 to 10.6 percent in 2020. Meanwhile, the share of the nonregistered population who were not eligible to vote increased from 5.7 percent in 2004 to 9.8 percent in 2020.²⁷

Across race and Hispanic origin groups, a plurality of the non-registered population reported not being interested in the election or involved in politics as the reason for not registering. The non-registered population between 18 and 29 years old was more likely to have missed a registration deadline (14.3 percent) than their counterparts in older age groups (9.8 percent or less). The non-registered population 65 years and older cited a permanent illness or disability as their reason for not being registered (10.5 percent) more frequently than those in younger age groups (5.5 percent or less). Finally, with respect to levels of educational attainment, college graduates were more likely to cite not meeting residency requirements as their reason for not being registered (5.5 percent) than those

²⁶ About 4.2 million of those not registered indicated an “other reason” than the response options offered on the supplement. The number of nonregistered individuals who missed registration deadlines and the number who were not eligible to vote did not differ significantly.

²⁷ The share of nonregistered individuals who missed registration deadlines and the share who were not eligible to vote did not differ significantly.

with lower levels of educational attainment (3.1 percent or less).

EFFECT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

As discussed previously, the 2020 presidential election took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this election, 4.3 percent of registered nonvoters cited concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic as their reason for not voting. Roughly 2.0 percent of the nonregistered population cited the COVID-19 pandemic as their reason for not registering to vote. Those 65 and older were more likely to cite concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic as their reason for not voting if registered (8.1 percent) and as their reason for not being registered (4.4 percent) than those in younger age groups (4.1 percent or less and 2.5 percent or less, respectively).

CONCLUSION

Held during a global pandemic, the 2020 presidential election featured record turnout and record use of nontraditional voting. The November 2020 CPS Voting and Registration Supplement gives us a detailed look at the demographics of who voted, the methods voters used to vote, and how these measures have changed over time.

ACCURACY OF THE ESTIMATES

The population represented (i.e., the population universe) in the CPS is the civilian, noninstitutionalized population living in the United States. In the CPS Voting and Registration Supplement, this

population is further restricted to those who report that they are citizens who are 18 years of age or older and have completed the core CPS survey.

Responses to the Voting and Registration Supplement are the basis for estimates in this report. The first question asked if respondents voted in the election held on Tuesday, November 3, 2020. Respondents who did not respond to the question or answered “No” or “Do not know,” were then asked if they were registered to vote in the election.

As in all surveys, estimates from the CPS and the November supplement are subject to sampling and nonsampling error. All comparisons presented in this report have taken sampling error into account and are significant at the 90 percent confidence level.

Nonsampling error in surveys is attributable to a variety of sources, such as survey design, the respondents’ interpretation of the questions, the respondents’ willingness and ability to provide correct and accurate answers, and post-survey practices like question coding and response classification. To minimize these errors, the Census Bureau employs quality control procedures in sample selection, the wording of questions, interviewing, coding, data processing, and data analysis.

The CPS weighting procedure uses ratio estimation to adjust sample estimates to independent estimates of the national population by age, race, sex, and Hispanic origin. This weighting partially corrects for bias due to undercoverage of certain populations, but biases may still be present when people are missed

by the survey who differ from those interviewed in regard to other characteristics. We do not precisely know the effect of this weighting procedure on other variables in the survey. All of these considerations affect comparisons across different surveys or data sources.

Further information on the source of the data and accuracy of the estimates, including standard errors and confidence intervals can be found at <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/technical-documentation/complete.html> or by contacting the Demographic Statistical Methods Division via e-mail at <dsmd.source.and.accuracy@census.gov>.

The CPS estimates used in this report are an important analytic tool in election studies because they identify the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the voting population, registered population, and those who did not participate in the election. However, these estimates may differ from those based on administrative data or exit polls.

Every state’s board of elections tabulates the vote counts for each national election, while the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives reports these state results in aggregate form for the entire country.²⁸ These tallies, which are typically presented as the official results for a specific election, present the number of votes counted for select offices. In the elections discussed in this report, the official count of

²⁸ The official count of votes cast can be found on the webpage of the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives at <<https://history.house.gov/Institution/Election-Statistics/>>, or on the webpage of the Federal Election Commission at <www.fec.gov/introduction-campaign-finance/election-and-voting-information/>.

comparison is either the total number of votes cast for the office of the president (in presidential election years) or the total number of votes cast for a House of Representatives or Senate seat (in congressional election years). In each election, there are discrepancies between the CPS Voting and Registration Supplement estimates and these official counts. The discrepancy has varied in each election year, with official tallies typically presenting lower turnout than the estimates in these types of reports. Differences between the official counts and the November CPS supplement may be due to a combination of an understatement of official numbers and an overstatement of supplement estimates.

Understatement of Official Vote Tallies: Ballots are sometimes invalidated and thrown out during the vote counting process, and therefore do not appear in the official counts as reported by the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives. Official vote counts also frequently exclude mismatched, unreadable, or blank ballots. Additionally, because the total number of official votes cast is typically determined by counting votes for a specific office (such as president or U.S. representative), voters who did not vote for this specific office, but who did vote for a different office in the same election, may not be included in the official reported tally. In all of these instances, it is conceivable that individuals would be counted as voters in the CPS and not counted in official tallies.

Overstatement of Voting in the CPS Voting and Registration Supplement: Some of the error in

estimating turnout using the CPS core questions and the CPS Voting and Registration Supplement is the result of population controls and survey coverage. Respondent misreporting is also a source of error in the estimates. Previous analyses based on reinterviews presented respondents and proxy respondents are consistent in their reported answers, revealing that misunderstanding the questions does not fully account for the difference between the official counts and the survey estimates. However, studies that have matched survey responses with voting records indicate that part of the discrepancy between survey estimates and official counts is the result of respondent misreporting, particularly vote overreporting to appear to behave in a socially desirable way.²⁹

As discussed earlier, the issue of vote overreporting is not unique to the Voting and Registration

²⁹ Allyson L. Holbrook and Jon A. Krosnick, "Social Desirability Bias in Voter Turnout Reports: Tests Using the Item Count Technique," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Oxford University Press, Vol. 74, Issue 1, 2009.

Supplement. Other surveys consistently overstate voter turnout as well, including highly respected national-level surveys like the American National Election Studies and the General Social Survey. Potential reasons why respondents might incorrectly report voting in an election are myriad, including intentional misreporting, legitimate confusion over whether a vote was cast or not, and methodological issues related to question wording, method of survey administration, and specific question nonresponses.

Voting Not Captured in the CPS Voting and Registration Supplement: The CPS only covers the civilian, noninstitutionalized population residing in the United States. Therefore, the supplement does not capture voting for citizens living in institutions in the United States or voting for citizens, whether civilian or military, residing outside of the United States who cast absentee ballots.

MORE INFORMATION

Detailed table packages are available that provide demographic characteristics of the population by voting and registration status. The Census Bureau also provides a series of historical tables and graphics. Electronic versions of these products and this report are available at <www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-585.html>.

CONTACT

U.S. Census Bureau Customer Service Center

Toll free at 1-800-923-8282.

Visit <<https://ask.census.gov>>.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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