



CIRCLE

The Center for Information & Research on
Civic Learning & Engagement

Youth Voter Turnout has Declined, by Any Measure

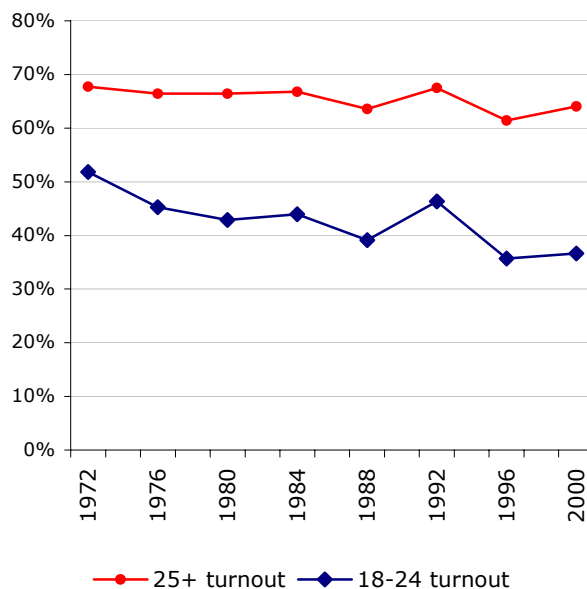
By Peter Levine and Mark Hugo Lopez¹
September 2002

Measuring young people's voting raises difficult issues, and there is not a single clearly correct turnout figure for youth in any given year. However, the electoral participation of Americans under the age of 25 has declined since 1972, when 18-to-21-year-olds were first permitted to vote. The size of the decline in presidential-election years is between 13 and 15 percentage points (depending on the method of calculation). This is a significant drop, greater than the decline among older Americans.

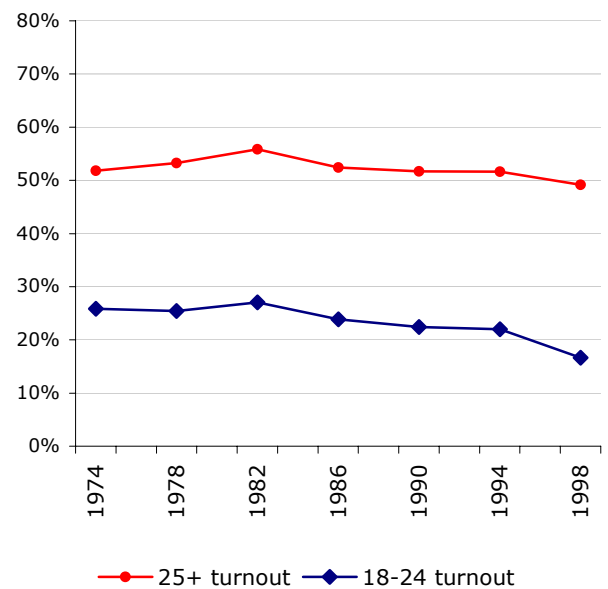
The Standard Measure

The simplest and most common measure of turnout is the number of voters divided by the number of adult residents. Measured this way, overall turnout in presidential elections has declined since 1972—although only by about 4 percentage points, according to CIRCLE's method of analyzing Census Bureau data.² The decline among 18-25-year-olds has been steeper: fifteen

Graph 1: Presidential Years



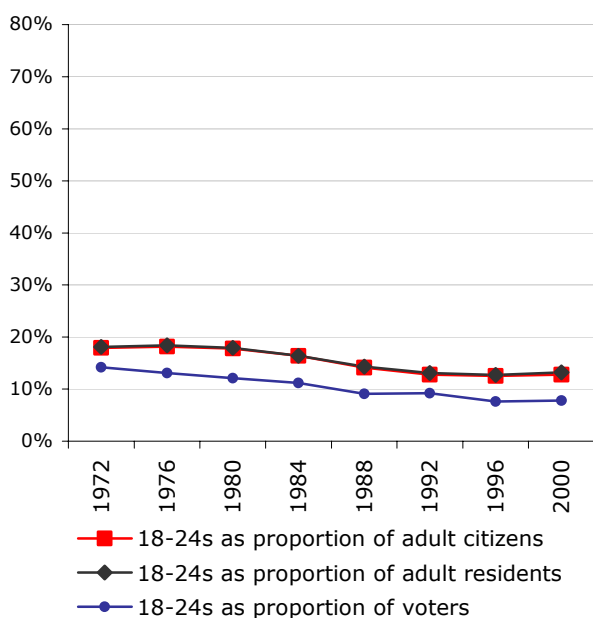
Graph 2: Alternate Years



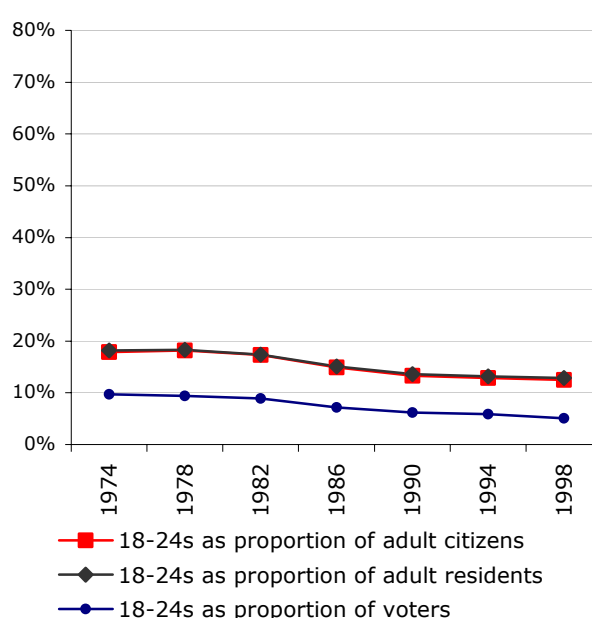
percentage points, or about one third.³ Graphs 1 and 2 contrast voters of age 25 and over (whose participation had been fairly constant), with those under 25:

The proportion of the electorate that was between the ages of 18 and 25 fell from 14.2% in 1972 to 7.8% in 2000. In the alternate year of 1998, the youth share of the electorate reached a low of 5.1%. This trend was caused by the declining proportion of young adults within the adult population, combined with their diminishing propensity to vote.

Graph 3: Youth Share of the Electorate: Presidential Years



Graph 4: Youth Share of the Electorate: Alternate Years



Complications

Estimating turnout by Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 poses several problems.

No Comparisons Before 1972

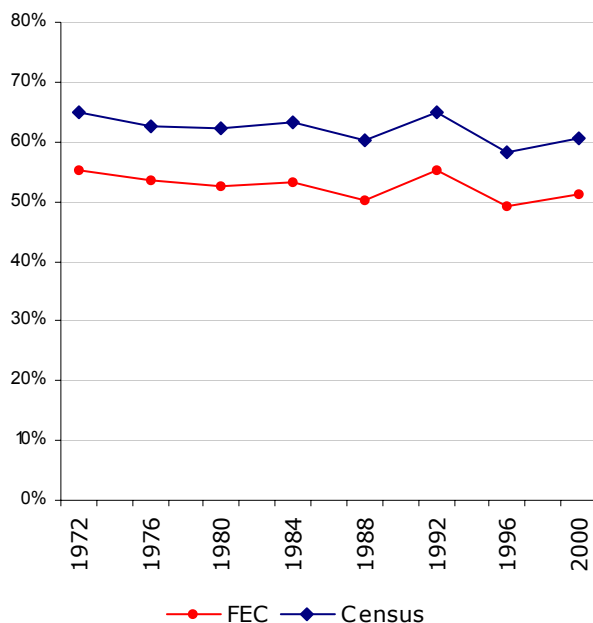
First, citizens between the ages of 18 and 21 were not permitted to vote in Federal elections until 1972. Thus we cannot compare today's youth with people born before 1951.

The Data Come from Self-Reports

Second, the Federal Election Commission (FEC), which keeps official statistics on the number of ballots cast, does not have any way of knowing voters' ages. (When Americans vote, we do not disclose how old we are.) Thus, polls or surveys are our only means of calculating turnout for any age group. All surveys of voting behavior produce inflated turnout estimates, since some people mistakenly—or falsely—report that they have voted. Thus it is *never possible to say with certainty how many people between the ages of 18 and 24 voted in any given year.*

However, the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) is rigorous, has a large sample, and is conducted within two weeks after each election, when people are still likely to remember whether they participated. As the following graph illustrates, the CPS generates overall turnout figures that track the trend in FEC data.⁴ The CPS numbers are always 9-10 percentage-points higher than the FEC's vote tally, but the rate of over-reporting is quite constant. This gives us some confidence that the declining trend reflected in the CPS statistics for youth turnout is accurate.

■ Graph 5: FEC/Census Comparison



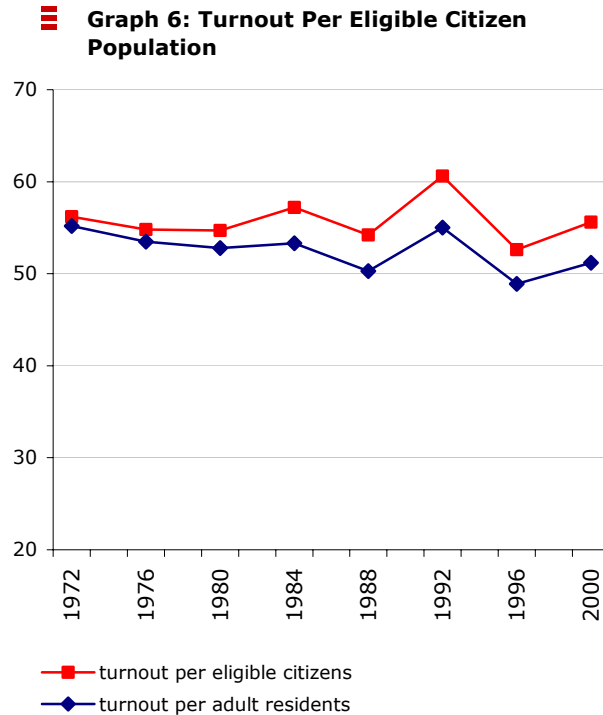
Counting the Eligible Population

A third problem involves the size of the eligible population. Both the FEC and the Census Bureau have traditionally calculated turnout by dividing the number of voters by the estimated number of *residents* over the age of 17. (This is what Graphs 1, 2, and 5 show.) But some adult residents of the United States are ineligible to vote, because they do not have US citizenship; they have committed a felony and been stripped of voting rights by state laws; they have been ruled mentally incompetent; or they have failed to meet local residency requirements. Meanwhile, some non-residents (such as U.S. government personnel posted abroad) are eligible to vote.⁵

According to Census, excluding non-citizens from turnout calculations would raise the national turnout rate in 2000 from 55 percent to 60 percent.⁶

Moreover, the percentage of ineligible residents has grown over time. Non-naturalized immigrants have quadrupled from 2 percent of the voting-age population (VAP) in 1972 to 8 percent in 2000; and ineligible felons have grown from 0.6 percent of VAP in 1985 to 1.4 percent in 2000.⁷ If eligible citizens continue to vote at constant rates, but the ineligible portion of the population grows, then turnout will *appear* to decline, but arguably there has been no *real* drop in citizens' engagement. Michael McDonald and Samuel Popkin recently argued that turnout has not declined to a statistically significant extent since 1972, because we should exclude ineligible people from the calculations.

They believe that the upper (red) line in Graph 6 is the best measure of the turnout trend over time.⁸



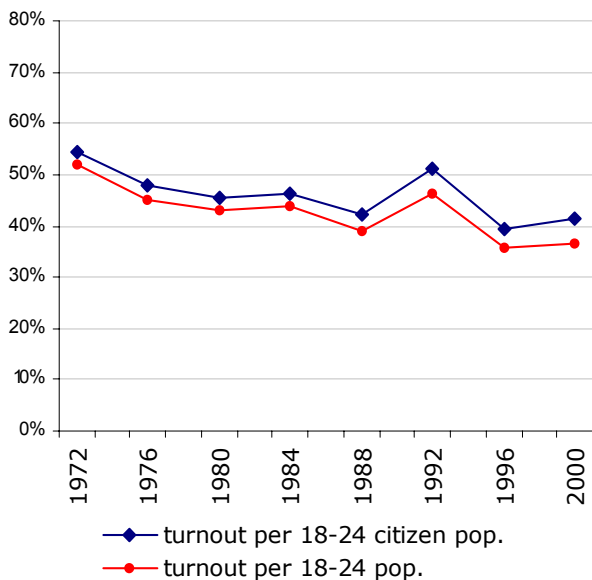
Source: McDonald and Popkin, "The Myth of the Vanishing Voter"

Some people dispute the McDonald-and-Popkin methodology. They believe that ineligible residents *should* be counted as non-voters, because a decline in votes cast per adult population (the lower line in graph 6) is a real decline in the degree of participation in our democracy. They also note that it would be constitutional to allow non-citizens and felons to vote, so we have made deliberate choices not to do so.⁹

For our purposes, this debate is somewhat beside the point. Even by the McDonald-and-Popkin standard, there has been a real decline in *youth* turnout. Whether we measure the percentage of young residents who vote, or the percentage of young citizens who vote, the decline is substantial. The blue lines in Graphs 5 and 6 adjust the raw youth turnout numbers by excluding non-citizens, as McDonald and Popkin recommend.¹⁰ Although this raises turnout figures in any given year, the downward trend remains similar.

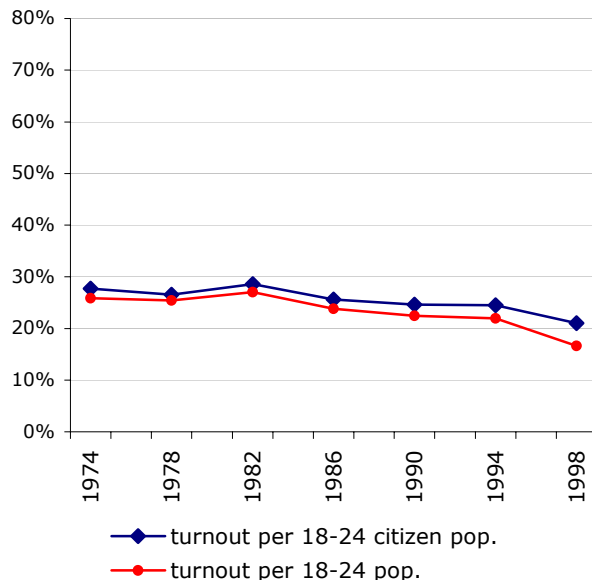
In conclusion, Graphs 1 and 2 accurately show the participation rate in American elections. But some of the decline apparent in those graphs is due to growing rates of immigration and criminal conviction—combined with laws that prevent non-citizens and felons from voting. The blue lines in graphs 7 and 8 are perhaps better indicators of motivation and competence, since they show the participation rate among young citizens.

Graph 7: Youth Turnout in Presidential Years (Two Measures)



source: Census (calculated using CIRCLE method)

Graph 8: Youth Turnout in Alternate Years (Two Measures)



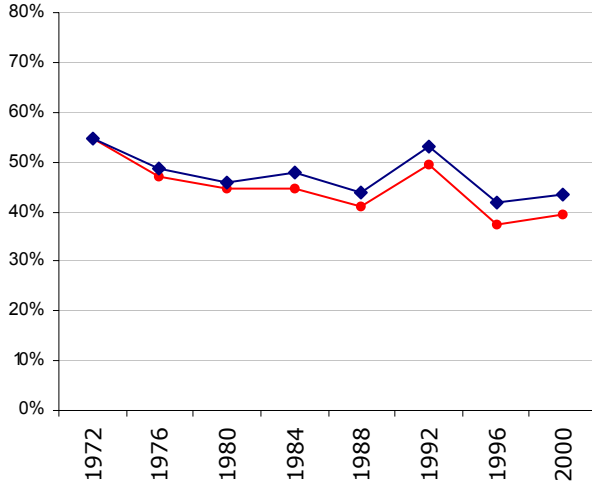
source: Census (calculated using CIRCLE method)

None of these graphs should be used to derive a precise turnout rate for young people in any given year, because our data come from surveys, which always inflate levels of participation. The only thing we know for sure is that the rate of youth participation has declined since 1972—by any reasonable measure.

Trends for Specific Populations

Young Woman Have Become More Likely to Vote than Young Men

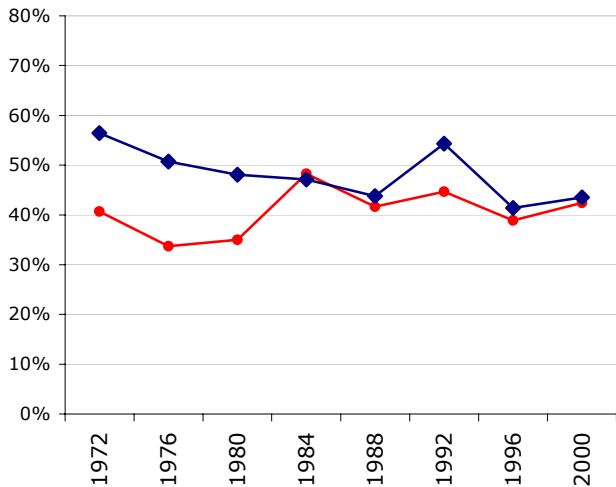
Graph 9: A Growing Gender Gap



—●— 18-24 Turnout, Men —◆— 18-24 Turnout, Women
 source: Census (calculated using CIRCLE method)

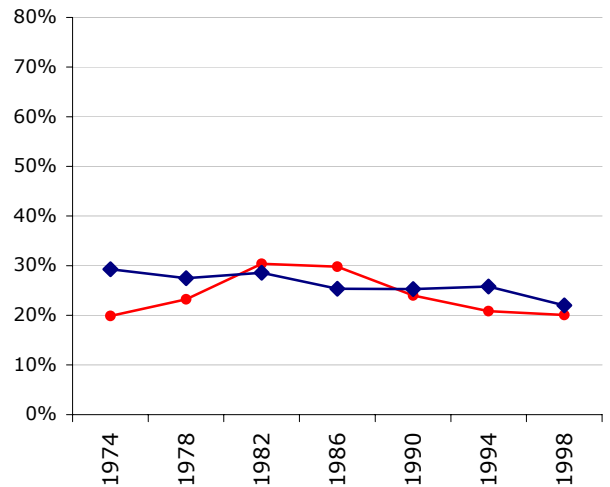
Participation of Young African Americans Increased Until 1984

Graph 10: Turnout of African Americans Rose in Presidential Years



—●— 18-24 Turnout, African American —◆— 18-24 Turnout, White
 source: Census (calculated using CIRCLE method)

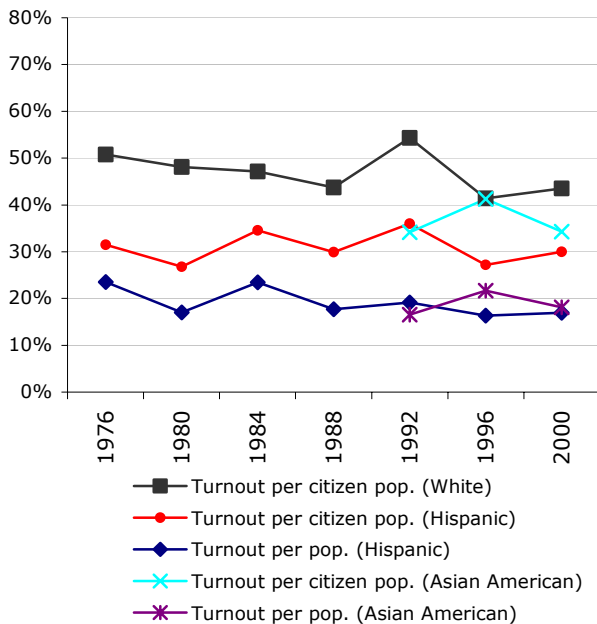
Graph 11: Turnout of African Americans Rose in Alternate Years, then Fell Off



—●— 18-24 Turnout, African American —◆— 18-24 Turnout, White
 source: Census (calculated using CIRCLE method)

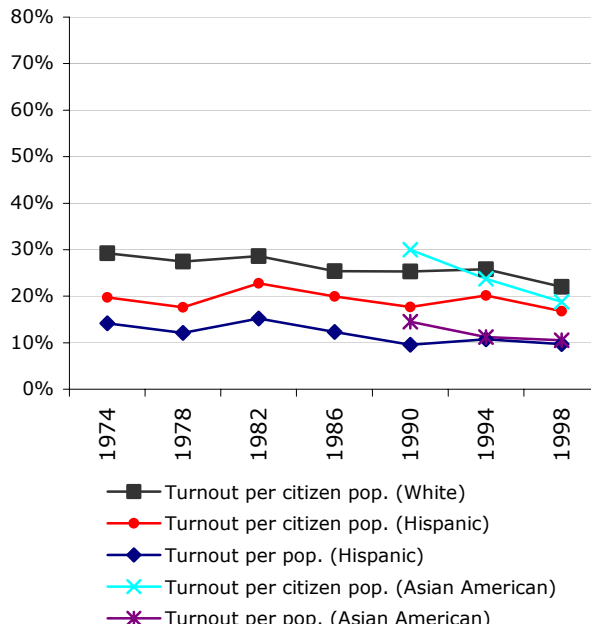
Turnout of Young Hispanics and Asian Americans¹¹ has Declined Slightly

Graph 12: Turnout is Down Among Hispanics, but unchanged among Asian Americans (Presidential Years)



source: Census (calculated using CIRCLE method)

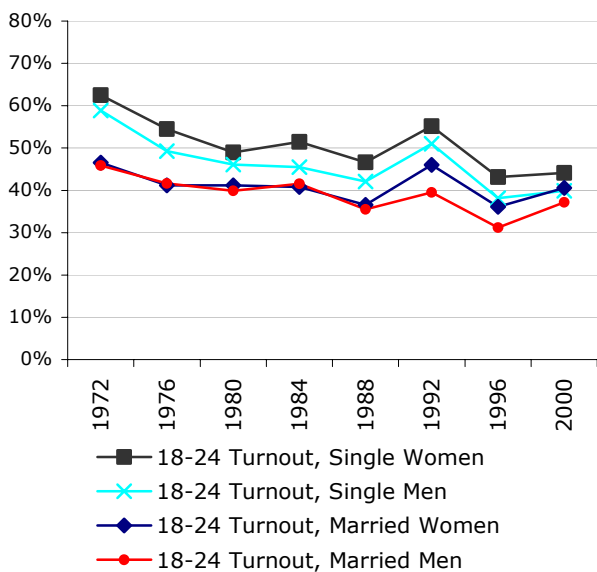
Graph 13: Turnout is Down Among Hispanics and Asian Americans (Alternate Years)



source: Census (calculated using CIRCLE method)

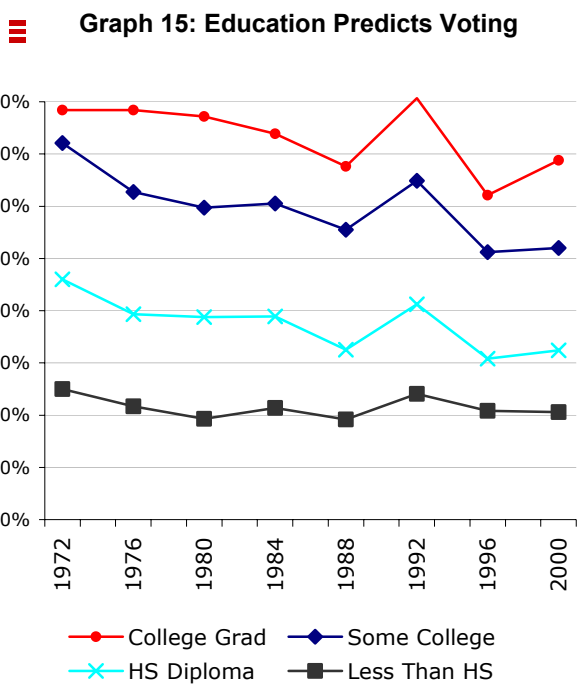
Single Young People Are More Likely to Vote than Married Young People¹²

Graph 14: Single People More Likely to Vote



Source: Census (calculated using CIRCLE Method)

Young People with More Education are More Likely to Vote



Source: Census (calculated using CIRCLE method)

Data tables

Unless otherwise noted, these data are from Census Current Population Surveys, calculated using CIRCLE's method (see note 1).

	<i>Turnout per adult pop.</i>	<i>Turnout per adult pop. (FEC)</i>	<i>Turnout per pop., 25 and older</i>	<i>Turnout per adult citizen pop.</i>	<i>Turnout per 18-24 pop.</i>	<i>Turnout per 18-24 citizen pop.</i>	<i>Youth as % of Voters</i>	<i>Youth as % of pop.</i>	<i>Youth as % of citizen pop.</i>
1972	65%	55%	68%	68%	52%	55%	14%	18%	18%
1974	47%	38%	52%	50%	26%	28%	10%	18%	18%
1976	63%	54%	66%	65%	45%	48%	13%	18%	18%
1978	48%	37%	53%	50%	25%	27%	9%	18%	18%
1980	62%	53%	66%	65%	43%	45%	12%	18%	18%
1982	51%	40%	56%	53%	27%	29%	9%	17%	17%
1984	63%	53%	67%	66%	44%	46%	11%	16%	16%
1986	48%	36%	52%	51%	24%	26%	7%	15%	15%
1988	60%	50%	64%	64%	39%	42%	9%	14%	14%
1990	48%	37%	52%	51%	22%	25%	6%	14%	13%
1992	65%	55%	67%	70%	46%	51%	9%	13%	13%
1994	48%	39%	52%	52%	22%	25%	6%	13%	13%
1996	58%	49%	61%	63%	36%	40%	8%	13%	12%
1998	45%	36%	49%	49%	17%	21%	5%	13%	12%
2000	61%	51%	64%	66%	37%	42%	8%	13%	13%

	<i>18-24 Turnout, male citizens</i>	<i>18-24 Turnout, female citizens</i>	<i>18-24 Turnout, white citizens</i>	<i>18-24 Turnout, African American citizens</i>	<i>18-24 Turnout, Hispanic citizens</i>	<i>18-24 Turnout, all Hispanics</i>	<i>18-24 Turnout, Asian American Citizens</i>	<i>18-24 Turnout, all Asian American</i>
1972	55%	55%	56%	41%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
1974	29%	26%	29%	20%	20%	14%	n/a	n/a
1976	47%	49%	51%	34%	32%	23%	n/a	n/a
1978	26%	27%	27%	23%	18%	12%	n/a	n/a
1980	45%	46%	48%	35%	27%	17%	n/a	n/a
1982	29%	28%	28%	30%	23%	15%	n/a	n/a
1984	45%	48%	47%	48%	35%	23%	n/a	n/a
1986	25%	26%	25%	30%	20%	12%	n/a	n/a
1988	41%	44%	44%	42%	30%	18%	n/a	n/a
1990	25%	25%	25%	24%	18%	10%	30%	17%
1992	49%	53%	54%	45%	36%	19%	34%	15%
1994	23%	26%	26%	21%	20%	11%	24%	22%
1996	37%	42%	41%	39%	27%	16%	41%	11%
1998	20%	22%	22%	20%	17%	10%	19%	18%
2000	40%	43%	44%	42%	30%	17%	34%	11%

	<i>18-24 Turnout, Married citizens</i>	<i>18-24 Turnout, Single citizens</i>	<i>18-24 Turnout, Less Than HS</i>	<i>18-24 Turnout, HS Diploma</i>	<i>18-24 Turnout, Some College</i>	<i>18-24 Turnout, College Grad</i>
1972	46%	61%	25%	46%	72%	78%
1974	23%	31%	10%	23%	38%	47%
1976	41%	52%	22%	39%	63%	78%
1978	23%	29%	12%	22%	36%	44%
1980	41%	47%	19%	39%	60%	77%
1982	24%	31%	13%	25%	37%	48%
1984	41%	48%	21%	39%	61%	74%
1986	21%	27%	12%	21%	34%	38%
1988	36%	44%	19%	32%	56%	68%
1990	18%	26%	10%	19%	33%	38%
1992	44%	53%	24%	41%	65%	81%
1994	24%	25%	9%	18%	32%	46%
1996	34%	41%	21%	31%	51%	62%
1998	18%	19%	9%	16%	29%	32%
2000	39%	42%	21%	32%	52%	69%

Notes

¹ Deputy Director and Research Director of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, respectively. We thank Michael Olander for excellent research assistance. We also thank Deborah Both and Bill Galston for comments on previous drafts of this fact sheet. All errors in fact or interpretation are our own.

² Our figure is based on the 1972 to 2000 U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) November Supplements, completed within two weeks of each November election, which have interviewed over 50,000 individuals in each year, asking many questions about voting participation, registration, citizenship, and other background factors. While the quality of data from the CPS is generally excellent, there are survey participants who do not answer every question presented in the survey. CIRCLE excludes those individuals who did not answer the voting question from our calculations; we do not count them as non-voters, because we believe that this would understate voter turnout. Those who do count non-answers as "no's" find a lower turnout rate in each year. They also assert that overall turnout dropped by eight (not four) percentage points from 1972 to 2000.

CIRCLE calculates voter turnout as:

$$\text{Voter Turnout}_{\text{residents no missing}} = \frac{(\# \text{ of self-reported voters})}{(\# \text{ of residents over age 18 who answered the voting question}).}$$

Among U.S. citizens only, taking into account missing information, CIRCLE calculates the voter turnout measure for U.S. citizens as:

$$\text{Voter Turnout}_{\text{citizens no missing}} = \frac{(\# \text{ of self-reported voters})}{(\# \text{ of U.S. Citizens over age 18 who answered the voting question}).}$$

All data are publicly available, and all programs used to generate these data are available upon request.

³ More precisely, all these graphs show votes for the highest office on the ballot (e.g., for president, in presidential election years). Those who only voted for other offices are not counted. Including these people would raise turnout rates by 2.3-2.6 percent in any given year, according to Michael P. McDonald and Samuel Popkin, "The Myth of the Vanishing Voter," *American Political Science Review* 95(4), p. 964.

⁴ The FEC uses Census data for the denominator in these statistics: i.e., the voting age population.

⁵ Technically, we have a choice between

$$\text{Voter Turnout}_{\text{residents}} = \frac{(\# \text{ of self-reported voters})}{(\# \text{ of residents over age 18})}$$

or:

$$\text{Voter Turnout}_{\text{citizens}} = \frac{(\# \text{ of self-reported voters})}{(\# \text{ of self-reported U.S. citizens over age 18})}$$

⁶ Census, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2000*, P20-542.

⁷ McDonald and Popkin, p. 965.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 963-974. This graph does not use the CIRCLE method; it counts non-answers to the voting question as "no" answers.

⁹ Ruy Teixeira, *The Disappearing American Voter*, Washington: Brookings, 1992, p. 6, note 2.

¹⁰ Ideally, we would also exclude those young citizens who are ineligible to vote because of felony convictions, but we lack a reliable estimate of that group's size. McDonald and Popkin assume that 18-20-year olds are a constant 15% of the population that has been stripped of voting rights (p. 971). This assumption is precise enough for their purposes, but not satisfactory for an estimate of youth turnout over time.

¹¹ Figures for Asian Americans are only available from 1990 onward. Prior to 1990, a separate category for identifying oneself in the Current Population Survey as Asian American was not available.

¹² Preliminary analysis suggests that this relationship holds once we control for income.