



# Data Gaps in National Voter Registration and Voter Participation Reporting

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The 2020 United States presidential election saw unprecedented voter turnout despite the global pandemic that threw many of the standard practices for voting into disarray. Researchers, policy analysts, and elected officials have all put forward theories as to how this feat was accomplished, from energetic voter turnout campaigns to state laws easing the absentee balloting process. Due to the decentralized election system in the United States, there are limited sources of comprehensive data available on voter registration and voter turnout for all 50 states and the District of Columbia that are available to investigate questions about voter participation. Of those datasets that do exist, one of the most commonly cited is the Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau.

This issue brief aims to draw attention to the need for more comprehensive and standardized voter data at both the national and state levels. Furthermore, this brief notes that while quantitative data on voter participation is useful for general trend-casting, local officials must supplement these numbers with qualitative insights gleaned from a range of conversations with residents and community leaders, particularly among historically underrepresented groups.

## List of Initialisms

AVR	Automatic Voter Registration
CPS	Current Population Survey
EAC	Election Assistance Commission
EAVS	Election Administration and Voting Survey
FEC	Federal Elections Commission

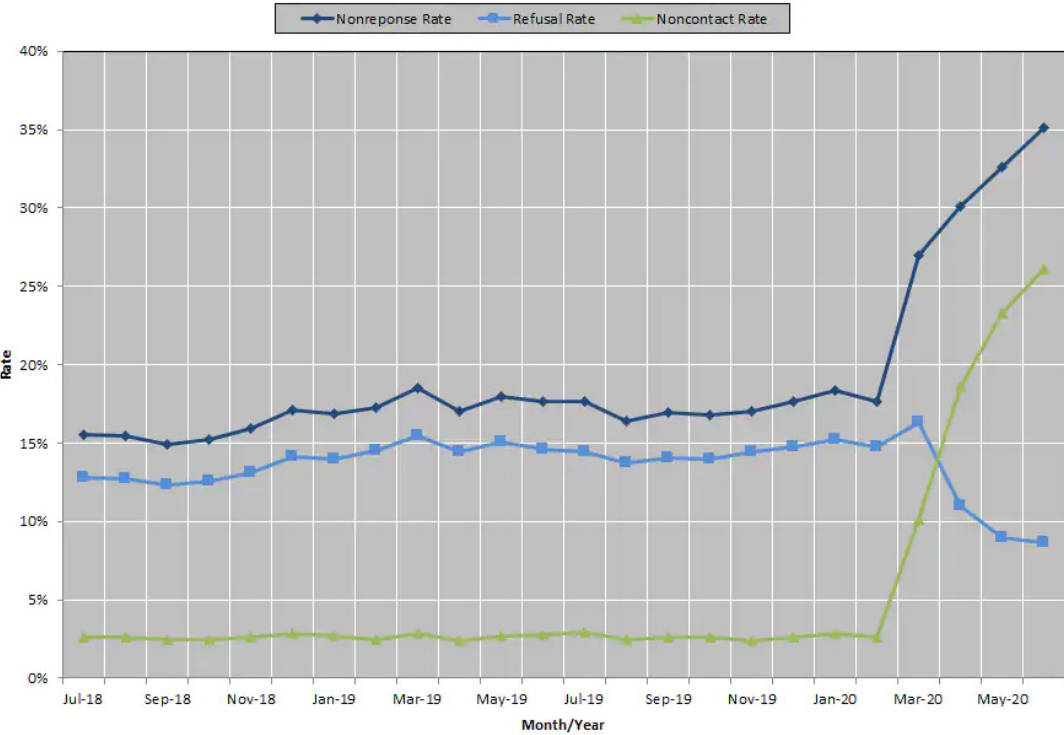
# About CPS and Voting Data

## Current Population Survey (CPS)

The Current Population Survey (CPS) is administered by the U.S. Census Bureau and samples households across all 50 states and the District of Columbia on a monthly basis and is intended to capture characteristics of the labor market. Every two years—in November, following federal elections—the CPS asks supplementary questions about voting and voter registration. The voting-focused supplement asks household respondents if they are registered to vote and whether they voted in the November general election. Interviewees who are not asked these questions or do not answer them are coded as “non-responses” and counted against those who answered “yes” or “no.”

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Census Bureau had to contend with increased numbers of non-responses<sup>1</sup>, as full in-person interviewing may have been curtailed. The impact of the pandemic can also be seen in the following chart from the Census Bureau, which shows a steep spike in non-response after February 2020. In order to counteract the effect of low response rates, the Census Bureau applies different adjustments to their statistical model based on geography and demographics.

**Figure 1: CPS Nonresponse Rates, July 2018–June 2020<sup>2</sup>**



## State-Level Records

Secretaries of State and Boards of Elections publish certified election results based on reporting from local election administrations, disaggregated by county or city, depending on the entity administering elections. Following each general election, the Election Assistance Commission (EAC) conducts the Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS)<sup>3</sup> for all 50 states plus the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, the Northern Mariana Islands, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. This survey contains data on voter turnout, including total votes cast and number of registered voters per state, provided by statewide election authorities.\*

# Comparing CPS and Secretary of State Administrative Data

According to state-level records, all states saw an increase in total votes from 2016 to 2020; all but three (Arkansas, Indiana, and West Virginia) also saw an increase in voter registration over the course of these years. Based on the CPS data<sup>4,5</sup> and taking the survey estimate margins of error into account, 31 states showed an increase in total votes and 20 states showed an increase in voter registration. The remaining states' estimates have inconclusive results that cannot be directly compared (see maps below). This situation of inconclusive data can arise due to a variety of reasons, including low survey coverage and responses, survey methodology, or flaws in the survey responses themselves.

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\* Slight discrepancies exist between the EAVS figures and those presented in the Federal Election Commission's (FEC) 2016 and 2020 reports of total votes cast. The FEC report, like the EAVS, relies on records provided by state authorities. This research team has no explanation for this but notes that the discrepancies tend to be much smaller than those between state-certified results and the Census Bureau's CPS-reported results. Likewise, state records are not uniformly consistent with EAVS figures. These discrepancies likely arise from differing record keeping methodologies and differing publication dates that may or may not reflect minor adjustments to official tallies.



# What Do These Results Mean?

Based on these comparisons, the conclusion is that CPS survey data is not an accurate reflection of voter registration or turnout. **This should not be interpreted as an assertion that CPS data is fraudulent or invalid.** Rather, these findings suggest a need for the Census Bureau to improve its methodology and expand its survey coverage for voter registration and voter turnout data as well as further study of survey response accuracy on these topics. This is an opportunity for standardization in collection and reporting of voter participation data across state agencies as well as the U.S. Census Bureau.

We suggest that one possible reason for flaws in the registration data collected by the CPS is that voters may have incorrect assumptions of their registration status. Respondents may erroneously believe that they are registered when, in fact, they have been removed from registration rolls or had their registration rejected. Conversely, respondents may not realize that they were automatically registered when interacting with a government agency such as the Department of Motor Vehicles or a public assistance agency; in fact, one-third of Americans live in a state with automatic voter registration (AVR) policies.<sup>6</sup> Beyond this, there is well-documented evidence that surveys reliant on self-reported turnout rates routinely overestimate actual turnout rates;<sup>7</sup> social scientists continue to debate whether this is due to intentional misreporting or issues with methodology.<sup>8</sup>

We encourage further research on this subject as there could be myriad factors impacting the accuracy of self-reported registration data that we cannot claim to intuit. Furthermore, the accuracy of self-reported voter turnout may be similarly impacted; according to the EAC, 1% of ballots are rejected in a given federal election<sup>9</sup> and voters may not be aware that their ballot was thrown out. Nonetheless, these factors are unlikely to fully explain the inconsistencies between survey and administrative data.

# Impacts for Local Leaders

Many voter participation initiatives and analyses rely on CPS data, particularly for registration statistics. CPS data can be disaggregated by a variety of demographic factors, such as age, race, and gender, which gives greater insight into voting patterns. Some state data contain limited demographic breakdowns; for example, Pennsylvania includes age demographic breakdowns of voter registration methods, but does not disaggregate by county. Rhode Island's Secretary of State website offers an interactive report of voter turnout by age that can be broken down by jurisdiction, but does not offer such a breakdown for voting methods.

A lack of standardized, descriptive, and complete data means that local leaders cannot rely on CPS data alone to reflect race-based and age-based inequities in voting behavior, stymieing efforts to achieve equitable access to democratic participation. Furthermore, as states implement new laws around voting, leaders cannot rely on data alone to assess the impacts of such laws, including whether they may violate the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

**Efforts made at the local level to gauge and address COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy can serve as a model for cities to better understand and respond to challenges around community engagement on voting and voter registration.**

In order to gauge the civic health of their communities, local officials must use quantitative data sources like the CPS and Secretaries of State voter statistics as a compass while also looking to qualitative data gleaned from discussions with residents and community leaders. Hearing directly from constituents about obstacles they face in registering to vote and casting a ballot, types of support they need, and their motivations to vote can yield information that datasets alone cannot. These quantitative and qualitative insights in combination can aid local leaders to consider new projects or policies aimed at increasing comprehensive and equitable voter participation, from registration to turnout.

Local leaders must also bear in mind the potential impacts of unreliable data on their community members' ability to trust election officials and election results. With respect to the Census Bureau's CPS figures, it bears repeating that our conclusions are only that the Bureau's survey estimates do not accurately reflect actual levels of voter registration or turnout when compared with state administrative data; however, the rise of disinformation and misinformation and a general lack of understanding of survey methodology raise the prospect of flawed data being misinterpreted as inaccurate and used as evidence of so-called fraud. With high turnover rates among local election officials and an increase in partisan-based recruitment for those positions, staff may lack the technical expertise to parse this data and draw relevant conclusions. In writing this brief, one of our chief concerns was ensuring that our conclusions are clear: we do not question the legitimacy of this data. It is imperative that our analysis and conclusions are not misinterpreted or used as fuel to further erode trust in election data. The reasons for and implications of the Current Population Survey's supplementary data on voting and voter registration requires further study and consideration of ways to improve the quality of the data. Beyond this, there is a continued need for more accessible and standardized data from state-level administrative records. Inconsistencies between file formats, labelling, and organization make it significantly more cumbersome for researchers to use this data; likewise, data security standards are necessary to ensure that local officials and the public are able to access legitimate data, draw informed conclusions, and potentially develop programming that supports increased voter participation.

## Acknowledgments

This brief was co-authored by Zuhayr Ahmed, Senior Data Specialist, and Dana Watters, Program Manager, Cities Vote, with support from David Park, Director, Data and Business Analytics and Osama Mohamed, Data Specialist, Data and Business Analytics.

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