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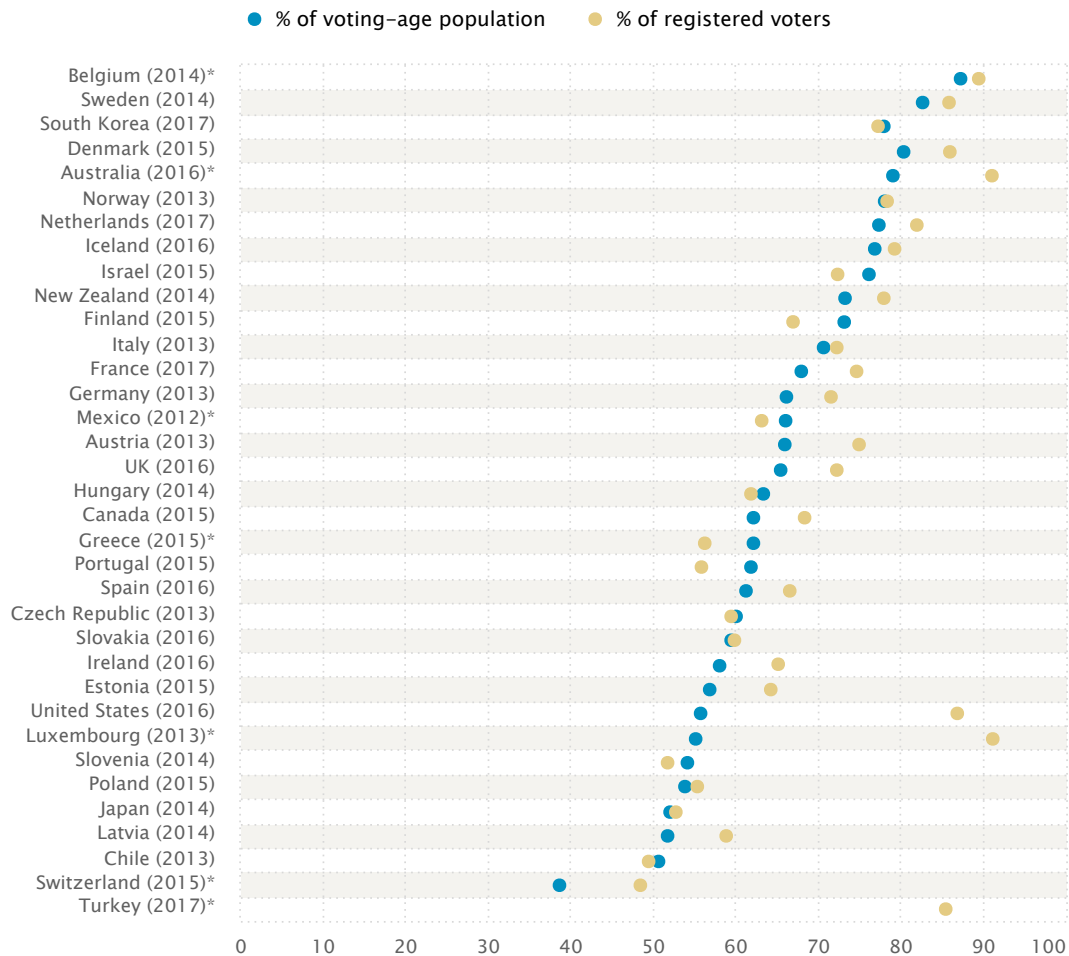
U.S. trails most developed countries in voter turnout

BY DREW DESILVER ([HTTP://WWW.PEWRESEARCH.ORG/AUTHOR/DDESILVER/](http://www.pewresearch.org/author/ddesilver/))

By international standards, U.S. voter turnout is low

Chart Data Share Embed

Votes cast in most recent national election as a ...



Note: Voting-age population (VAP) turnout is derived from estimates of each country's VAP by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. Registered-voter (RV) turnout derived from each country's reported registration data. Because of methodology differences, in some countries estimated VAP is lower than reported RV. Current voting-age population estimate for Turkey unavailable.

*National law makes voting compulsory. In addition, one Swiss canton has compulsory voting.

Source: Pew Research Center calculations based on data from International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, European Election Database, United States Election Project, Office of the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives and various national election authorities.

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About 55.7% of the U.S. voting-age population cast ballots in the 2016 presidential election, according to newly released Census Bureau figures (<https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-580.html>) – a slight uptick compared with 2012, but less than the record year of 2008 and well below turnout levels typical in most other developed democracies.

The bureau estimates that there were 245.5 million Americans ages 18 and older in November 2016, about 157.6 million of whom reported being registered to vote. (While political scientists typically define turnout as votes cast divided by the number of *eligible* voters, in practice turnout calculations usually are based on the estimated voting-age population, or VAP, since eligibility is affected by many hard-to-measure factors such as citizenship, imprisonment, residency rules and other legal barriers.)

Just over 137.5 million people told the census they voted last year, somewhat higher than the actual number of votes tallied (136.8 million, according to figures compiled by the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives (<http://history.house.gov/Institution/Election-Statistics/Election-Statistics/>), though that figure includes more than 170,000 blank, spoiled or otherwise null ballots). That sort of overstatement has long been noted by researchers (http://www.jstor.org/stable/40660537?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents); the comparisons and charts in this analysis use the House Clerk's figure.

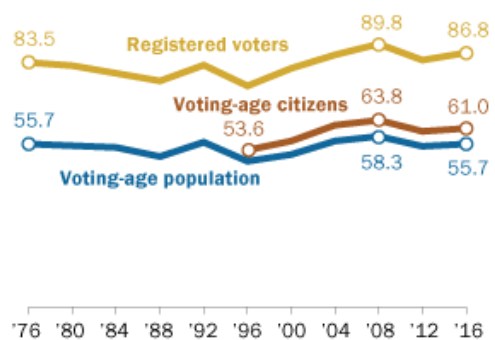
(http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/15/u-s-voter-turnout-trails-most-developed-countries/ft_17-05-11_oecd_turnout_us-1/) The 55.7% VAP turnout in last year's election puts the U.S. behind most of its peers in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (<http://www.oecd.org/>), most of whose members are highly developed, democratic states. Looking at the most recent nationwide election in each of the 35 OECD member nations, the U.S. placed 28th.

The highest turnout rates among OECD nations were in Belgium (87.2%), Sweden (82.6%) and Denmark (80.3%). Turnout in last month's Turkish constitutional referendum likely was in that range too, but we don't have a current estimate for Turkey's voting-age population. On the other hand, Switzerland consistently has the lowest turnout in the OECD: In the 2015 Swiss legislative elections, less than 39% of the voting-age population cast ballots.

The relatively high turnout rates in Belgium and Turkey may be due in part to the fact they are among the 24 nations around the world (and six in the OECD) with some form of compulsory voting, according to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (http://www.oldsite.idea.int/vt/compulsory_voting.cfm), or IDEA. (One canton in Switzerland, also an OECD member nation, has compulsory voting.) While compulsory-voting laws (<http://qz.com/746737/there-is-a-way-democracies-can-create-better-informed-voters-but-youre-not-going-to-like-it/>) aren't always strictly enforced, their presence or absence can have dramatic impacts on turnout. In Chile, for example, turnout plunged after the country moved from compulsory to voluntary voting in 2012 and began automatically enrolling eligible citizens. Even though essentially all voting-age citizens were registered for Chile's 2013 elections, turnout in the presidential race plunged to 42%, versus 87% in 2010 when the compulsory-voting law was still in place. (However, turnout on a VAP basis has been declining since the return of democracy in 1989.)

Turnout in U.S. presidential elections

Votes cast as a share of ...



Source: Census Bureau (population estimates), House Clerk's office and Pew Research Center (vote totals).

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Chile's situation points to yet another complicating factor when comparing turnout rates across countries: the distinction between who's eligible to vote and who's actually registered. In many countries, the government takes the lead in getting people's names on the rolls – whether by registering them automatically once they become eligible (as in, for example, Sweden or Germany) or by aggressively seeking out and registering eligible voters (as in the UK and Australia). As a result, turnout looks pretty similar regardless of whether you're looking at voting-age population or registered voters. (One exception is South Korea, where reported voter registration for last week's presidential election

(<http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21721868-governing-country-will-be-harder-moon-jae-easily-wins-south-koreas-presidential-election>) was higher than IDEA's voting-age population estimate. Using registered voters as the base, turnout was 77.2%, the highest level in two decades.)

In the U.S., by contrast, registration is mainly an individual responsibility. And registered voters represent a much smaller share of potential voters in the U.S. than just about any other OECD country. Only about 64% of the U.S. voting-age population (and 70% of voting-age *citizens*) was registered in 2016, according to the new census report, compared with 91% in Canada (2015) and the UK (2016), 96% in Sweden (2014), and nearly 99% in Japan (2014).

As a consequence, turnout comparisons based only on registered voters may not be very meaningful. For instance, U.S. turnout last year was 86.8% of registered voters, fourth-highest among OECD countries (and highest among those without compulsory voting). But registered voters in the U.S. are a much more self-selected group, already more likely to vote because they took the trouble to register themselves.

There are even more ways to calculate turnout. Michael McDonald, a political scientist at the University of Florida who runs the United States Election Project, estimates turnout (<http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/voter-turnout-data>) as a share of the “voting-eligible population” (or VEP) by subtracting noncitizens and ineligible felons from the voting-age population and adding eligible overseas voters. Using those calculations, U.S. turnout improves somewhat, to 59.3% (<http://www.electproject.org/2016g>) of the 2016 voting-eligible population. However, McDonald doesn't calculate comparable estimates for other countries.

However measured, U.S. turnout rates have been fairly consistent over the past several decades, despite some election-to-election variation. Since 1976, voting-age turnout has remained within an 8.5-percentage-point range – from just under 50% in 1996, when Bill Clinton was re-elected, to just over 58% in 2008, when Barack Obama won the White House. However, turnout varies considerably (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/12/black-voter-turnout-fell-in-2016-even-as-a-record-number-of-americans-cast-ballots/>) among different racial, ethnic and age groups.

But in several other OECD countries, turnout has drifted lower in recent decades. Japan, for instance, has seen turnout fall from 75% in 1990 to 52% in 2014. Greece, despite having a compulsory-voting law on the books (though not enforced), has seen turnout in parliamentary elections fall from 89% in 2000 to 62% in September 2015. And in Slovenia, after a burst of enthusiasm following the country's independence from Yugoslavia in 1992 (when 85% of the voting-age population cast ballots), turnout fell rapidly – sinking to 54% in 2014, a drop of 31 percentage points in just over two decades of democracy.

In the UK, which is holding a snap election next month (<http://www.bbc.com/news/live/election-2017-39876374>), turnout has bounced up and down since the late 1970s, peaking at 75.4% of the voting-age population in 1992 and bottoming out at 57.6% in 2001, when Tony Blair won a second term as prime minister. Since that low point, turnout has risen four elections in a row, including last year's referendum on whether to remain in or leave the European Union. Nearly two-thirds of the voting-age population, and more than 72% of registered voters, cast ballots in the referendum, according to the UK's Electoral Commission (<http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/elections-and-referendums/upcoming-elections-and-referendums/eu-referendum/electorate-and-count-information>) – the highest turnout rates since 1997 and 1992, respectively.

Note: This is an updated version of a post originally published May 6, 2015 and previously updated on Aug 2, 2016.



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16 Comments



Packard Day • 2 months ago (#comment-676107)

Oh dear, is there a polite way to question the assumed wisdom of encouraging even more stupid people in this country to vote?



Anonymous • 11 months ago (#comment-671206)

I notice that for most of the countries the “voter turnout (% of eligible voters)” and the “voter turnout (% of registered voters)” are quite similar. Luxembourg and the United States of America appear to be the exceptions to the rule.

In the case of those two countries, the discrepancy would appear to be related to “low voter registration”, but, at this remove, I can’t tell.

Has anyone checked that possibility?

If it is correct, would that not indicate that the voters in Luxembourg and the United States of America simply don’t think that the elections are important to anyone. Given the size and international importance of Luxembourg, I could understand it in its case.



Dan Kloke • 11 months ago (#comment-671167)

Ironic that Australia falls to the bottom, due to mandatory registration, despite the highest participation on the list.



Reinhard Joelli • 11 months ago (#comment-671166)

In the notes section it reads that in some countries the estimated voting age pop is smaller than the estimated number of registered voters, how is that possible? All reg voters are subset of voting age pop – yes/no?

Thanks. Reinhard



chris Christophj • 1 year ago (#comment-668525)

More people here are informed on the criminal activity of the us government and its subsidiaries



Liana Palko • 1 year ago (#comment-665276)

The voting stats on Canada are incorrect. I don’t know how Per Research went about getting their numbers but they are wrong. 61.1% of eligible Canadians (we don’t distinguish between ‘registered’ and ‘eligible’ Canadians because we have automatic voter registration) voted in our 2011 federal election. The turnout for the 2015 election was even higher – the final number has not been tallied yet but at least 68% of the eligible population voted. In fact, our lowest voter turnout in a federal election since Confederation (1867) was 58.8% in 2004, 4 percentage points higher than what you claim our turnout was in 2011. This chart is inaccurate [elections.ca/content.aspx?sectio...](http://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=ele&dir=turn&document=index&lang=e#ftn2) (<http://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=ele&dir=turn&document=index&lang=e#ftn2>)



Liana Palko • 1 year ago (#comment-665277)

Edit – the lowest voter turnout was in 2008, not 2004.



Frederik Beran • 2 years ago (#comment-652673)

What explains the differences in voter turnout? The article mentions one reason: compulsory voting. Are there others? I suggest one might be the difference in electoral systems, eg proportional representation vs first-past-the-post. With the latter, used in the UK and Canada, there are many “safe” ridings in which one’s vote does not make any difference in the outcome and there is little incentive to vote.

It would be interesting to study the differences in more detail, not only by comparing country by country but also between elections in a particular country.



Kochevnik • 2 years ago (#comment-652655)

The reasons behind the low US voting age percentage of active voters: 1.) a relatively significant amount of immigrants; 2.) most states having restrictions on felons voting (some states prohibit voting from prison, but other states – mostly in the South – prohibit a non-trivial portion of their citizens from voting with a criminal record, period); 3.) The US expecting the citizen to do most of the legwork to be registered to vote, unlike other countries.

Still, the graph here is only showing a US presidential election, which is a national high – midterm Congressional elections have far, far lower turnouts (2014 was the lowest turnout since WW2), and state and local elections are even worse. And presidential turnouts may be “consistent” (although a 9 point variation between 1996 and 2012 sounds huge to me), but they’re down significantly on turnouts in the 50s and 60s.



Fredric L. Rice • 2 years ago (#comment-652650)

That’s because we don’t vote in the United States and most people don’t fall for the Oligarchy’s propaganda and rhetoric to the contrary. Your vote does not matter, only corporate money’s vote matters, and overwhelmingly Americans refuse to play pretend.

When you vote you are guilty of the war crimes, atrocities, and treason that corporate-owned puppet politicians commit around the world and within the United States. If you vote you have blood on your hands, YOU are responsible for the atrocities and treason.

That’s why most people don’t vote. If you vote you are part of the problem, you are legitimizing your own oppression and justifying the corporate Oligarchy’s excesses against you.



D • 2 years ago (#comment-661059)

While looking for material for my college essay on voter turnout, I couldn’t help but notice this little gem. Fredric, I don’t know when you were given the mic to speak for all Americans, but let me assure you that your opinions on this subject are most certainly in the minority and rank in the top ten of the dumbest things I’ve read on the internet. While you are speaking out against the big bad oligarchy, take time to thank them for the computer you went out and purchased so that you can spread your BS. You are an example of why there is still a need for an electoral college in this country.



Anonymous • 2 years ago (#comment-662401)

Haha, I’m in the same boat actually and I find it funny that these people still exist. I hope you get a good grade on your essay my man.



chris Christophj • 1 year ago (#comment-668526)

Actually Frederick is right you apparently only gain your info from official propaganda and not on in the girls research



Robert Dunn • 1 year ago (#comment-665722)

Voting is part of the problem? You couldn’t be more wrong. The problem is that NOT ENOUGH people vote. Besides that, there is not enough engagement in politics on the part of the American public. These factors have contributed to the oligarchy we have today and Sanders’ campaign is aiming to fix that by at least waking people up to the reality.



chris Christophj • 1 year ago (#comment-668529)

If rule of law existed and free fair elections without the paid media things would be different. That will never happen as it would interfere with the oligarchy slave operation



Thomas R • 2 years ago (#comment-652616)

This is kind of a historic pattern. I have a National Geographic from the 1960s with the US and Switzerland having some of the lowest voter participation. In a way the US might look less “bad” than I’d expect and in some respects about the same or better than Canada.

