

- 1. Mark your confusion.**
- 2. Show evidence of a close reading.**
- 3. Write a 1+ page reflection.**

## **More than 90 Million People Have Already Voted. Here's How that Compares with Past Elections.**

Source: Grace Hauck, *USA Today*, October 30, 2020

With three days until Election Day, more than 90 million people have already voted – about two thirds of the total votes counted in the 2016 general election– and elections experts predict historic rates of turnout this cycle.

More than 257 million people in the U.S. are 18 or older, and nearly 240 million citizens are eligible to vote this year, according to Michael McDonald, a professor at the University of Florida who runs the U.S. Elections Project. Eligible voters include people living overseas but not non-citizens or people convicted of a felony, depending on state law.

It's possible that more than 150 million people may turn out this year, in total, according to McDonald. That would mean an eligible voter turnout rate of more than 62%.

So, how would that compare to eligible voter turnout rates for past presidential elections?

All presidential elections in the last 50 years, ranked by highest eligible voter turnout rate

- 2008:** Barack Obama v John McCain (61.65%)
- 2016:** Donald Trump v Hillary Clinton (60.1%)
- 2004:** George W. Bush v John Kerry (60.1%)
- 2012:** Barack Obama v Mitt Romney (58.6%)
- 1992:** Bill Clinton v George W. H. Bush (58.1%)
- 1972:** Richard Nixon v George McGovern (56.2%)
- 1984:** Ronald Reagan v Walter Mondale (55.2%)
- 1976:** Jimmy Carter v Gerald Ford (54.8%)
- 1980:** Ronald Reagan v Jimmy Carter (54.2%)
- 2000:** George W. Bush v Al Gore (54.2%)
- 1988:** George H. W. Bush v Michael Dukakis (52.8%)
- 1996:** Bill Clinton v Bob Dole (51.7%)

### **How rates of eligible voter turnout have fluctuated over the decades**

The U.S. saw the lowest rates of eligible voter turnout at the end of the 18th century and beginning of the 19th century. Just 6.31% of eligible voters turned out in 1792. The elections of 1820, 1789 and 1816 also saw rates below 20%.

But trends changed in the mid-19th century, when the U.S. began to see "astronomical" turnout, said Barry Burden, a political science professor and director of the Elections Research Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"The high numbers are partly reflective that suffrage was restricted to mainly white, male property owners," Barry said. "It was also a time of great party polarization. That drew out voters because it seemed as though something was really at stake, and that turns out to be an important driver of turnout generally throughout history."

The U.S. saw the highest eligible voter turnout rate, 82.6%, in 1876, when Republican Rutherford Hayes defeated Democrat Samuel Tilden. In 1860, when Abraham Lincoln defeated John Breckinridge, John Bell and Stephen Douglas, 81.8% of eligible voters turned out. The elections of 1868, 1880, 1888 and 1840 also saw rates above 80%.

"Importantly, after the Civil War and the passage of the 13th, 14th, 15th Amendments, we saw very high turnout of freed slaves," said Bernard Fraga, an associate professor of political science at Emory University who studies minority voter turnout. "Despite efforts of suppressing the vote of freed men, you still saw a tremendous amount of turnout."

But those rates fell with the end of Reconstruction, as federal officials withdrew from Southern states and Jim Crow laws barred newly enfranchised Black voters. Progressive Era reforms – including the creation of the secret ballot and voter registration laws – "ironically had the effect of decreasing turnout," Barry said. By 1920, rates fell to less than 50%.

Turnout rates continued to fluctuate throughout the mid-20th century as women gained the right to vote, Congress passed the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the national voting age became 18 (the voting age had been 21 in most states).

Turnout among those eligible to vote began to decline in 1972 and was in the low 50% range throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The lowest mark in recent history was 1996 with 51.7% of the voter-eligible population participating.

"The United States makes it relatively difficult to vote compared to other democracies, and we've had relatively low turnout," Fraga said, referencing turnout among the voting age population.

While registered voters in the U.S. turn out at a comparatively high rate, turnout among the voting age population is low partly because non-citizens – and people convicted of a felony, depending on the state – cannot vote.

The U.S. placed 26th out of 32 for turnout rates among the voting age population among countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, according to a 2018 Pew Research Center study.

### **2008: Highest voter turnout in last 50 years**

The turnout rate started to rise in 2004 and, in 2008, the U.S. saw the highest rate of eligible voter turnout in a presidential election in the last 50 years: 61.65%. The 2016 election also saw turnout about 60%, and the 2018 midterm election drew the highest midterm turnout since 1914.

"It was record turnout for a midterm in a century," Barry said. "In the modern era, it was the highest voter turnout, period, and I would expect 2020 to be a continuation of that, with high engagement from people on both sides of the aisle."

If voters on Election Day turn out as expected, McDonald believes the U.S. could have the highest percentage of eligible voters actually vote since 1908. That year, Republican William Howard Taft defeated Democrat William Jennings Bryan with 65.7% of the voting-eligible population participating.

Fraga said he is curious to see which groups of voters are accounting for the expected increased turnout.

"A big question for 2020 is whether high turnout will still result in the over-representation of older, white voters relative to their share of the population ... or whether turnout will be representative," Fraga said. "Will we see more equal rates of voter turnout across groups?"

### **Possible Response Questions:**

- What are your thoughts about voter turnout? Explain.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a "move" made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.