

The Half-Hearted Rise: Voter Turnout in the 2000 Election

**Steven Finkel and Paul Freedman
Department of Government and Foreign Affairs
University of Virginia**

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Introduction

In 1992, an independent Texas millionaire named H. Ross Perot shocked the political world by winning 19 percent of the presidential popular vote – more than any other third-party candidate since Teddy Roosevelt ran as the Progressive (Bull Moose) Party nominee in 1912. But Perot’s impressive performance was only one of the surprises in the election of 1992. The other – and arguably more significant – development was the sudden reversal of a decades-long decline in voter turnout. Since 1960, when 63 percent of the voting age population made its way to the polls, turnout had declined in every presidential election but one, and by 1988 had reached a post-war low of 50 percent (see Figure 1).

In 1992, however, this trend changed dramatically, as voter turnout increased by more than five percentage points, to 55.1 percent. In one year, almost half of the 3-decade decline had been erased. What could account for such a steep and sudden rise? Certainly Perot’s presence on the ballot had something to do with it, but subsequent analysis has shown that the Perot factor could not explain all of the unexpected increase (Nichols and Beck 1995). Was 1992, then, the beginning of a new era of higher voter turnout?

This question appeared to be answered in 1996, when turnout fell below 50 percent for the first time since 1924. Hopes that the 1992 increase could be sustained and built upon were dashed. “In the absence of an interesting, competitive race and without a credible alternative to the major-party offerings,” wrote Nichols, Kimball, and Beck, “turnout fell to 49 percent...over 8 million fewer votes were cast in 1996 than in 1992,” (1999 pp.23-24). “Short of a dramatic reversal in the momentum of public cynicism,” the authors concluded, “there is little reason to expect voter turnout to increase in the foreseeable future.” (p.44).

Voter turnout, in short, was seen as having reached a new plateau: In any given election, about half of eligible voters would find their way to the polls, the rest would stay home. It came as little surprise to many, therefore, that voter turnout in the 2000 election came in right around 50 percent. By

the end of election day, just about half of the voting age population had cast a ballot. According to Federal Election Commission (FEC) statistics, the election of 2000 saw presidential turnout of 51.3 percent, an increase of 2 points over 1996, but still almost 4 points below 1992 levels. This apparent increase, however, is overstated. The FEC 2000 turnout estimate is based on early (July, 2000) Census Bureau projections of the voting age population. In this chapter we use actual 2000 Census data for the voting-age population in each state.¹ Doing so results in a national turnout rate of 50.4 percent, slightly lower – but we believe more accurate – than the FEC figure. In either case, the era of low voter turnout would appear to still be with us. And according to much of the conventional wisdom (Nichols, Kimball and Beck 1999), there is little reason to be optimistic about future trends.

The story, however, is more complex. The real story of the 2000 election, we argue, is that conditions were in place for a far greater increase in turnout that was actually realized. Registration laws were less restrictive than in the past, party and campaign mobilization increased sharply, and a number of long-term attitudinal and demographic factors conducive to higher levels of turnout, such as political efficacy, civic duty, and education levels in the electorate increased substantially. In addition, the overwhelming majority of the electorate perceived the race between Al Gore and George W. Bush to be close. In short, there was ample reason to suspect a significant rise in turnout over 1996 levels, perhaps recouping the entire slide from the 55 percent level of 1992. And to the extent that these structural and long-term attitudinal conditions remain in place, the future outlook for voter turnout is also potentially bright.

Why, then, was there such a tepid increase in turnout in the 2000 election, given these favorable conditions? The fault, we argue, lies primarily with the candidates themselves. Quite simply, the electorate was faced with a choice between two major party candidates who failed to inspire either enthusiastic support or passionate opposition. Despite the frenetic pace of campaign advertising and

¹ Our source for state-level VAP data (the denominator in the turnout estimate) is the Census 2000 Summary File 1 (SF 1) 100-Percent Data, Tables P5 and P12. Our source for state-level number of votes cast for president (the numerator) is the Federal Election Commission report, Federal Elections 2000 (<http://www.fec.gov/pubrec/fe2000/tcontents.htm>).

mobilization efforts in one of the closest presidential elections in United States history, voters responded in decidedly lukewarm fashion towards the major party standard bearers themselves. Candidates Bush and Gore failed to engage the electorate, neither providing voters with positive reasons to turn out on their behalf, nor compelling reasons to turn out in opposition to their respective candidacies. As we will show, even the strongest partisans failed to rally behind their standard-bearers in 2000 to the extent that they had in previous years. Compared with Bill Clinton, George H.W. Bush, and Ross Perot in 1992 – and even with Clinton and Bob Dole in 1996 – Al Gore and George W. Bush failed to inspire the passion necessary to bring people to the polls. The rise in turnout in 2000, consequently, was only half-hearted.

We begin this chapter with a descriptive look at turnout at both the state and national levels in 2000. We then examine the correlates of voting in 2000, drawing on National Election Studies data for an individual-level portrait of turnout, with attention to changes from 1996 to 2000. Next, we estimate a more fully specified turnout model, drawing on pooled 1992, 1996 and 2000 National Election Studies data to estimate the effect of various factors in a multivariate context. We use these estimates to decompose the changes in turnout between 2000 and the two preceding presidential elections. The results illustrate both the unrealized potential for increased turnout in the 2000 election, and reinforce our optimism about the prospects for voter participation in the future.

U.S. Voter Turnout in Context

Electoral participation in the United States is notoriously low, especially when compared with other Western industrialized democracies (Powell 1986; Franklin 1999). During the 1990s, when turnout in the U.S. hovered at just above 50 percent of the voting-age population, more than three quarters of the electorate on average turned out in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Norway, Germany, and Spain. Turnout was even higher in nations such as Austria, Denmark, Iceland, Italy, New Zealand, Sweden, and Turkey (not to mention both Liechtenstein *and* Luxembourg), where it averaged in the mid- to high 80s. And in Australia and Belgium (as well as Indonesia and Singapore) turnout in the 1990s averaged higher than 90 percent of the voting-age population (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral

Assistance, 2001). Explanations for this cross-national variance – and the United States’ poor performance in particular – have included the demobilizing nature of the party and electoral systems, electoral laws (while voter registration is automatic in some nations, for example, the United States has a patchwork of relatively onerous registration requirements), and the sheer number of elections held in the United States (Brody 1978, Powell 1986, Jackman 1987).

But if turnout in America is substantially lower than in other industrialized democracies, it has also experienced a decline over time. As we have already noted, the United States has seen a steady drop in voter turnout for much of the last forty years. In fact, turnout in the 1996 presidential election was the lowest since 1924. The story prior to 1960, however, is less clear. Voter turnout in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – as measured in terms of the voting-age population – was even more dismal than it was today, rarely rising above a third of the VAP. But of course, for much of this period there were large portions of the voting-age population that were, by virtue of gender, race, or place of birth, ineligible to cast a ballot. When one includes only the legally voting *eligible* population, estimates of turnout are considerably higher, often reaching as high as 80 percent or more of the eligible electorate through the 1880s. By the early twentieth century, however, voting levels began to taper off, falling to between 60 and 65 percent of the eligible electorate (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 1999, p.67).

For elections since 1920, when the Census Bureau began to release regular estimates of the voting-age population, turnout estimates are easier to calculate. Following the entrance of women into the electorate, turnout in the 1920s averaged in the mid 40-percent range. Turnout rose (with some ebbs and flows) over the next several decades, reaching a twentieth-century high in 1960, when 62.8 percent of the voting-age population went to the polls. Since then, the fall-off in turnout has been substantial and, until 1992, generally consistent from election to election (see Figure 1).

These declines are particularly vexing, given that rising levels of education and less restrictive voter registration procedures – two factors shown to be closely related to turnout – would have led one to expect an *increase* in turnout over time (Brody 1978, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Explanations for the secular decline in voter turnout are myriad. Declining turnout has been attributed to a decline in voter

mobilization by candidates and parties (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993); to increases in residential mobility (Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass 1987); to an electorate disengaged and demobilized by the negative tone of political campaigns (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; cf. Finkel and Geer 1998, Freedman and Goldstein 1999); to a rise in cynicism and distrust (Miller and Shanks 1996, Teixeira 1992); and to a decline in partisan attachments (Wattenberg 1998).

There is, in sum, no shortage of explanations for why voter turnout had been on the decline up until 1992. How, though, to account for the strange fluctuations in voter turnout over the past three presidential elections? In the analysis that follows, we show that many of the key variables implicated in these alternative explanations can also help illuminate recent patterns in turnout. We focus both on changes in the aggregate levels of these variables, as well as their changing *effects*, in order to arrive at a more complete understanding of voter turnout over the last three presidential elections.

2000 Turnout at the State Level

Half of all voting-age Americans stayed home on election day in 2000, as voter turnout measured in terms of voting aged population was 50.4 percent.² This figure masks a great deal of state-level variation. Eighteen states and the District of Columbia, for example, saw turnout rates of less than 50 percent, and in 7 of these less than 45 percent of the voting-age population turned out (see Table 1). States with the lowest rates of turnout included Texas, Nevada, Arizona, and Hawaii, all of which had rates between 40 and 43 percent. In contrast, 33 states saw turnout rates of 50 percent or more as a share of VAP, and eight (Iowa, Montana, New Hampshire, Vermont, Wisconsin, Alaska, Maine, and Minnesota) had rates of at least 60 percent (see Map 1).

² Of course, the voting-age population is itself only a rough estimate of the *eligible* electorate. Many people included in Census Bureau voting-age population figures are not in fact eligible to cast a ballot. Non-citizens, felons (in many states) and ex-felons (in some states), are all ineligible, as are individuals deemed mentally “incompetent.” To the extent that the voting-age population overstates the denominator of the turnout equation, it will systematically *understate* actual turnout. McDonald and Popkin argue that the universe of eligible voters has grown smaller relative to the VAP over time, leading to the erroneous conclusion that turnout has declined to a greater extent than it has since 1972 (McDonald and Popkin 2001). They develop an alternative measure of the adjusted voting eligible population, or VEP. We show below that using either VAP or VEP in state-level analyses leads to the same substantive conclusions regarding the nature and degree of changing turnout between the 1996 and 2000 elections.

At the state level, turnout in 2000 was more robust than it had been four years earlier. In 1996, only 25 states saw turnout rates greater than 50 percent, and only four could boast of rates as high as 60 percent. From 1996 to 2000, turnout declined in thirteen states, including eight which saw a drop of at least a percentage point (see Map 2). By contrast, turnout increased in 2000 in 37 states and the District of Columbia. (Turnout remained constant only in Indiana, at 48.8 percent.) Turnout rose by a percentage point or more in 28 states, including thirteen which saw increases of at least three points. These included the presidential battleground states of Michigan (a 3.2-point increase), Pennsylvania (3.5 points), and Wisconsin (a 7.6-point rise).

States in which turnout declined in 2000 had generally seen above-average turnout in 1996, such as Maine, where turnout declined from 72 to 67 percent of the voting age population, South Dakota (61 to 57 percent), and Idaho (57 to 54). In all, only four of the thirteen states in which turnout declined saw 2000 turnout of less than fifty percent. With a few exceptions (notably Arkansas, which saw a decline of about one point), these were also states in which the presidential race was not expected to be close.³

What explains this variation in state-level turnout? The legal and political context that voters confront as election day approaches obviously varies from state to state, and these differences can have important implications for turnout. First and foremost, states differ in the registration requirements they impose on prospective voters. A handful of states currently provide for election-day registration (and one, North Dakota, has no registration requirements at all). By contrast thirty-two states and the District of Columbia require citizens to register at least three weeks before election day; in sixteen of these states, voters must be registered a full month in advance (Federal Election Commission 2001). Voter turnout is strongly related to these registration requirements (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, Rosenstone and

³ What difference does it make if one examines 2000 turnout using the McDonald-Popkin voting-eligible population measure? Following McDonald (2001), we estimated state-level VEP turnout, adjusting VAP estimates with Census data on non-citizens and Department of Justice data on each state's prison, parole, and probation populations. The result is a VEP measure of turnout that is highly correlated ($r=.96$) with the traditional VAP measure. As shown in Table 1, average VEP state-level turnout is 55.1 percent, an increase of 1.3 points over 1996 VEP turnout. By comparison, traditional VAP turnout increased by 1.4 points, from 49.1 percent to 50.4 percent in 2000. Nine of the ten states with the lowest VAP turnout are also among the ten lowest VEP turnout states, and eight of the top-ten highest VAP turnout states are also among the top ten VEP states. In short, it matters little whether one measures 2000 turnout using VAP or VEP when it comes to making comparisons among states.

Hansen 1993.) In 2000, as the length of the pre-election day registration deadline increased, turnout declined significantly ($r=-.66$). As Figure 2 illustrates, mean VAP turnout among states with election-day (or no) registration was .62, falling to .56 for states in which voters must be registered 10-20 days in advance, and leveling off at around .50 in states with deadlines greater than three weeks before election day. And as is clear from Figure 2, the relationship between turnout and registration law is almost exactly the same regardless of whether one uses the VAP or the VEP measure. The legal requirements in a given state, then, have a clear impact on state-level turnout.

As we have suggested, the competitive environment of the presidential race in a state also should affect the likelihood that citizens will turn out to vote. We measured state-level competitiveness in several ways: First, we found that turnout in 2000 was positively related to the closeness of the presidential election, measured both by the final popular vote margin and by the last pre-election poll in the state prior to November 7. As the presidential race got closer (by either measure), turnout rose slightly. Second, turnout at the state level was positively related to the presence of a governor's race and the competitiveness of a state's senate race; more competitive senate races seem to have been associated with slightly higher turnout. All of these relationships, however, were modest, and none reached statistical significance.

We examined the competitiveness of the presidential race in another way, however, and found more substantial (and statistically significant) effects. We looked at the resources invested by the campaigns and parties, using the total number of general-election television advertisements aired in each state's top media markets. These data, compiled by the Campaign Media Analysis Group's ad tracking system (Freedman and Goldstein 1999; Goldstein and Freedman 2002, 2002a), provide comprehensive information on every advertisement aired in the nation's top-75 media markets (home to approximately than 80 percent of the U.S. population), throughout the 2000 election. We aggregated these ad data to the state level, to produce a measure of general campaign activity in each state.⁴

⁴ Such a measure will, of course, be an imperfect one. We obviously leave out a wide range of campaign activity such as candidate visits, radio advertising, direct mail and phone calls. Moreover, we have constructed a relatively

Not surprisingly, the number of general election ads broadcast in a state is closely correlated with other measures of competition. In Texas, where a Mason-Dixon poll a week before the election showed Governor Bush with a 34-point advantage over Vice-President Gore, the four largest media markets saw a grand total of 13 general election advertisements. Similarly, in New York, where Gore led by 14 points in the final week according to a Zogby poll, only 81 ads were broadcast. In stark contrast, in Pennsylvania's markets there were close to 29,000 spots broadcast, Ohio saw 28,000, and Florida was home to more than 36,000 general-election ads. Needless to say, the presidential race in these states was significantly more competitive than in New York or Texas.

Among those jurisdictions with at least one top-75 media market, there is a modest but clear relationship between the number of ads broadcast and state-level turnout ($r=.21$). As Figure 3 illustrates, VAP turnout hovers at around 50 percent in those states that saw relatively small numbers of general election ads, climbing to 53 percent in states in which between 5,000 and 10,000 spots were broadcast, and to 56 percent in states whose media markets saw the highest levels of campaign advertising.⁵ Moreover, the effects of campaign advertising remain even when registration law is controlled for in multivariate analysis.

In sum, whether measured in terms of the voting-age population or the voting-eligible population, turnout at the state-level can be understood as a function of the specific legal and electoral conditions facing citizens on election day. Both of these factors changed between 1996 and 2000 in ways that would lead one to expect higher levels of turnout: Seven states had election-day registration in 2000, up from five in 1996, and between 1996 and 2000 registration deadlines grew more liberal in 8 states but more strict in only four (and only slightly so in those states). In all, the average number of days before election day a voter needed to be registered by declined by almost half a day between 1996 and 2000. At the same

blunt indicator of competition – aggregate number of ads broadcast – rather than indicating the relative intensity of advertising by the two campaigns. However, in 2000 the campaigns were rather evenly matched in their targeting (Goldstein and Freedman 2002). Finally, our measure will inevitably miss activity in states that do not have media markets which rank in the top-75.

⁵ Once again, the same pattern is evident – albeit with slightly higher levels of turnout – if one uses the VEP measure rather than voting-age turnout.

time, the volume of presidential election advertising increased significantly during this period, from 166,028 to 245,165 spots aired (Goldstein and Freedman 2002).

In short, at the state level the pieces were in place for a substantial rise in turnout in 2000: increased mobilization and campaign activity, a high degree of competition at the presidential level, and the increased ease of voter registration all should have contributed to a significant increase. The puzzle, then, remains: Why did turnout in the aggregate fail to increase more dramatically? To answer this question requires moving beyond state-level characteristics to the individual-level attributes and political attitudes.

Understanding Turnout at the Individual-Level

We first provide a bivariate portrait of voter turnout in 2000, with attention to changes from 1996. We then estimate a multivariate model, which we use to illuminate changes in turnout from 1992 to 2000. To examine the individual-level correlates of turnout, we turn to the National Election Studies (NES). Self-reported turnout in the 2000 NES, as in the past, exceeded estimates of actual turnout by a considerable amount.⁶ Among all post-election respondents, 72.1 percent reported having voted on election day, compared with 50.4 percent of the voting-age population. This compares to reported turnout of 71.8 in 1996 and 76.6 in 1992.⁷ There were, however, two significant changes in the 2000 NES. First, the turnout question itself was changed to include additional response categories in an effort to provide more accurate (i.e., lower) reports of turnout. Unfortunately, since all respondents got the new version of the turnout question, it is impossible to gauge fully the impact of this shift. Second, there was a

⁶ The challenges in using survey data to estimate voter turnout are well known. Factors such as respondent misreporting, sampling biases, and even the stimulating effect of participating in a pre-election wave lead even high-quality surveys like the NES consistently to overestimate aggregate turnout (Anderson and Silver 1986, Belli et. al. 1999, Brehm 1993, Burden 2000, Freedman and Goldstein 1996, Katosh and Traugott 1981, Silver et. al. 1986, Traugott and Katosh 1979). As Burden (2000) has demonstrated, the disparity between the NES and official turnout figures for presidential elections has grown dramatically over the last four decades, from 11 points in 1952 to 24 points in 1996, a trend that Burden attributes to declining response rates and attendant response bias.

⁷ These figures are based on data weighted by the appropriate full-sample post-election weight for each year: v923008 (1992) v960005b (1996), and v000002a (2000). Analyses that use unweighted data or that use a different weight variable will report different levels of turnout. In particular, some analysts will choose a weight designed to make comparisons to pre-1992 data, a weight variable that would be inappropriate for our purposes. As a result, our figures may differ slightly from those appearing in other reports.

significant change in interview mode: for the first time, more than 40 percent of all pre-election respondents were interviewed by phone, rather than face-to-face. Fortunately, these changes do not significantly affect the substantive conclusions we draw below (see Appendix for a more complete discussion).

Correlates of Voter Turnout at the Individual Level

Consistent with volumes of past research, turnout rises with the socio-economic, attitudinal, and political resources that make voting less costly and more rewarding to citizens. (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 1999; Nichols and Beck 1995; Nichols, Kimball, and Beck 1999; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). We consider these sets of variables in turn.

Socio-economic and Demographic Factors As Figures 4 and 5 illustrate, turnout increases sharply with education and income. Both in 1996 and 2000, the probability of voting among people with less than a high-school education was only .49, rising to more than .90 among those with advanced degrees (Figure 4). A slightly less pronounced but still significant pattern is evident for income. Mean turnout among those with the lowest family incomes was .56, rising to .87 in 1996 and .86 in 2000 among those with the highest incomes (Figure 5). Other demographic variables are strongly related to turnout as well: People approaching retirement were more than 31 points more likely to vote than the youngest age cohort (34 points in 1996).⁸ It's worth noting that young people (18-24) were more likely to vote in 2000 than in 1996 (52 percent vs. 47.6 percent; see Figure 6).

Additionally people who are married were 17 percentage points more likely to report having cast a ballot than those who were not (21 points in 1996); people who own their own homes were 25 points more likely to vote than those who rent (21 points in 1996), and women were 4.7 percentage points less likely to vote than men in 2000, a more pronounced gender gap than in 1996, when they were only 2.4

⁸ The relationship between age and reported turnout is curvilinear in 2000: turnout peaks at 83.6 percent among people in the 55-64 age group and falls to 79.5 and 79.8 among people in the 65-74 and the 74+ groups, respectively. In 1996 there is no decline among the oldest citizens, but turnout flattens out at around 84 percent after age 65.

points less likely to vote (in 1992, the gap was a mere 0.8 points). By contrast, bivariate racial differences in turnout rates essentially disappeared in 2000: African Americans had been 8.8 less likely to vote than non-blacks in 1996 (6.9 points in 1992), but were only 0.2 points less likely in 2000.

Social Engagement and Mobilization Citizens who are more integrated into workplace or social networks are more likely to vote, partly because they are more likely to be contacted by political elites seeking to mobilize electoral participation (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993), and partly because of the skills and other resources they acquire through such social interaction. Union members, for example, are often prime targets for mobilization activity, and members of union households are indeed more likely to vote than people in households in which there are no union members (although the difference in 2000 – 5.3 points – is less than half as large as the 11.5-point difference in 1996, see Figure 7). Similarly, people who regularly attend church – where they are likely to encounter like-minded neighbors, join groups, and hear calls to political as well as spiritual action – are more likely to vote than those who never attend (Figure 8). Turnout among those who attend church or temple on a weekly basis was 82.3 percent in 2000, 23 points higher than among those who never attend religious services (the gap was 25.6 points in 1996).

And of course, citizens who report having been contacted directly and asked to vote by a party or campaign are far more likely to vote than those who have not been mobilized. As Figure 9 illustrates, those who were contacted in 2000 were 28.8 points more likely to vote than those who were not mobilized by a campaign or party, up slightly from the 23-point gap in 1996.⁹

Civic Duty, Trust, and Efficacy Attitudes and perceptions of the political system and the citizen's place in it constitute another set of important factors affecting voting behavior. Citizens with a more pronounced sense of civic duty – measured in the NES (somewhat inadequately) by their willingness to serve on a jury – are far more likely to vote than those with a less developed sense of civic

⁹ Interestingly, mobilization was effective in 2000 not because mobilized citizens were more likely to vote than their counterparts in earlier elections, but because unmobilized citizens were *less* likely to vote than they had been in the past. Only 61.8 percent of uncontacted citizens voted in 2000, vs. 65.6 percent in 1996 (and 72.5 percent in 1992). Party and campaign contact, in effect, had to work harder in order to lift citizens up from this lower baseline.

responsibility (Figure 10). Respondents who say they would be “happy to do it” if selected for jury duty were more than 19 points more likely to vote in 2000 than those who say they’d “rather not serve” (79.8 percent vs. 60.7 percent). Similarly, citizens with a greater sense of political efficacy are more likely to vote. A strong sense of internal efficacy – strongly disagreeing with the statement, “sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on” – increased turnout by a full 34.4 percentage points compared with respondents who possess a weaker sense of personal political competence (Figure 11). This gap increased from only 22.2 points in 1996, due to the fact that people with the lowest level of internal efficacy were 10 points less likely to turnout in 2000 than in 1996 (54.7 vs. 64.6); a pattern consistent with the behavior of unmobilized respondents we reported earlier.

The effects of external political efficacy – the sense that the political system is responsive to the opinions and interests of people like the respondent – mirror those of internal efficacy. External efficacy is measured by agreement with two statements: “People like me don't have any say about what the government does,” and “I don't think public officials care much what people like me think.” Again, respondents with the highest sense of efficacy were substantially – 38 points – more likely to vote in 2000 than were those scoring lowest on the scale (Figure 12). And once again, this gap increased from 22 points in 1996 primarily because those with the lowest sense of efficacy in 2000 were 10 points less likely to vote than their counterparts in 1996.

Finally, notwithstanding the attention it receives from political scientists and popular observers of politics, political trust is relatively unrelated to voter turnout (Hetherington 1999, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). We measured trust with a standard four-item scale and found that in 1996 the effect of trust on turnout was actually slightly negative, while in 2000 the relationship was essentially flat.¹⁰

¹⁰ “How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right-- just about always, most of the time or only some of the time?” “Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?” “Do you think that people in the government waste a lot of money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don't waste very much of it?” and “Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are crooked, not very many are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked?”

Political Engagement, Information and Partisanship Citizens who are more engaged with politics generally and with a given election campaign in particular are, not surprisingly, more likely to vote than people who are less engaged, informed, and attentive. People who say they care about the election outcome were almost 40 points more likely to vote than those who don't care much (the gap in 1996 was only 30 points), and those who are "very interested" in the election were 47 points more likely to turnout than those who are "not much interested." People who follow politics closely – measured by how often they read the newspaper and watch television news – are also more likely to participate. Turnout was 19.5 points higher among people who read a newspaper almost everyday (6-7 days a week), than among those who never read the paper, and 26.5 point higher among regular television news viewers than among those who never watch the local or national news.

In part, the effects of media consumption on turnout are due to the sheer information that citizens absorb. Information about politically relevant facts is associated both with greater political engagement and higher levels of participation in political activities (Zaller 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Indeed, political information – measured by a standard battery of questions asking which office or position various political figures hold and which party controls each house of Congress – is one of the single best variables for distinguishing between voters and non-voters. In 2000, respondents were asked to identify the "job or office" held by William Rehnquist (8.9 percent correct), Trent Lott (7.1), Tony Blair (29.2), and Janet Reno (50.1), along with questions about partisan control of the House (49.9) and Senate (45.1).¹¹ Citizens who scored highest on the NES political information quiz were a full 46.5 points more likely to vote than those who were unable to answer a single question correctly (see Figure 13). In 1996 the disparity was even more pronounced: highly informed citizens were a full 59 points more likely to vote than the uninformed.

¹¹ In 1996 respondents were asked to identify the "job or office" held by William Rehnquist, Boris Yeltsin, Tom Foley, and Newt Gingrich, and about partisan control of the House and Senate. We ignore a 2000 experimental manipulation in which some respondents were asked to guess if they initially said they did not know, and others were not asked to guess. The results of this experiment have little effect on the findings.

Political scientists have noted for more than forty years that turnout is closely tied to strength of partisanship (Campbell et. al., 1960). Strong partisans – regardless of whether they are Democrats or Republicans – are more likely to vote than are weaker partisans, and independents are least likely to vote at all. In 1996, strong partisans were 47 points more likely to vote than pure independents (88.7 vs. 41.3, see Figure 14). In 2000, the effects of partisanship were still strong, but somewhat less pronounced. Strong partisans in 2000 were only 38 points more likely to vote than independents, primarily because the latter group was somewhat more likely to vote in 2000 than in 1996 (47.8 vs. 41.3 percent). We shall return to this finding when we discuss the results of our multivariate analysis.

Perceived Closeness Perceptions of closeness mattered for voter turnout in 2000. Recognizing that a given vote contributes a bit more to the outcome in a close election than in a landslide, political scientists have long argued that turnout should be higher in close races. Indeed, we reported earlier that this was the case with state-level turnout in 2000. In recent years, however, individual-level perceptions of a close presidential election were at best only modestly related to turnout; in 1996 respondents who the Clinton-Dole race as a close one were actually *less* likely to vote than those who saw a less evenly-matched contest (Nichols, Kimball and Beck 1999). This changed dramatically in 2000: people who saw the race as close were 24 points more likely to turnout than those who did not perceive a close race (Figure 15). In part this was because citizens who saw a close race were five points more likely to vote in 2000 than their counterparts in 1996; but the bulk of the effect was that those voters who saw the race as not being close were more than 20 points less likely to vote than in 1996 (52 vs. 73.3). This shift may in part be due to the fact that the presidential election in 2000 was objectively and unambiguously a close one, unlike that of 1996. Consequently, citizens who failed to perceive a close race may likely have been less informed, less engaged, and in general less likely to vote for other reasons. Alternatively, perceptions of closeness may have mattered more in 2000, even controlling for citizen competence and political sophistication. We will explore these possibilities in the next section.

Candidate Assessments Finally, we explored the impact on turnout of citizens' assessments of the major-party candidates themselves. Past research has shown that the extent of cognitive as well as

emotional engagement with a candidate can affect the probability of turnout (Marcus and MacKuen 1993). We looked at candidate assessments in two ways: First, we measured the net difference between pre-election feeling thermometer ratings of the candidates. Our hypothesis is that turnout will rise as this difference increases, as citizens will be more motivated to vote when they favor one of the candidates by a wide margin. Conversely, they will be less motivated when they are indifferent between the candidates, either because they find them equally satisfactory or equally abhorrent (Weisberg and Grofman 1981). This is indeed the case. Turnout among respondents who saw little or no difference between Bush and Gore (a net difference of ten degrees or less on the 100-degree feeling thermometer) was 60.3 percent, rising to 84.7 percent among respondents who strongly favored one candidate over the other (a net difference of 55 degrees or more, see Figure 16). A similar pattern is evident for ratings of Clinton and Gore in 1996, and Clinton and the elder Bush in 1992. Relative candidate favorability ratings are thus strongly related to turnout: A more intense affective commitment to one of the candidates translates into a higher probability of voting.

A similar relationship is evident when looking at the number of reasons respondents are able to give for liking or disliking the candidates. As in past years, NES asked respondents first whether there was anything in particular that they liked about each of the candidates in 2000. Up to five mentions were accepted for each candidate, including everything from past experience and leadership ability, to physical appearance and other personal qualities. Respondents were then asked whether there were reasons to dislike each of the candidates. Again, up to five responses – ranging from comments about the candidate’s character to criticisms of his policy positions – were accepted.

As Figures 17 and 18 illustrate, both likes and dislikes are strongly related to voter turnout. Among respondents who are not able to offer a single reason to support either candidate, turnout is only 53.3 percent, rising to 77.2 percent for those who mention between 1 and 5 reasons, and 84.8 for people mentioning 6 or more. Turnout rises just as sharply with the ability to articulate reasons for *not* liking a candidate. Only half (50.2) of those who are unable to offer a single reason for disliking either candidate turnout to vote, increasing dramatically to 81.1 percent for those who offer 1 to 5 reasons, and 84.3

percent of people able to articulate six or more reasons. Thus, although turnout rises in both cases with the number of mentions, sharp jumps are evident between people who are unable to offer a single positive or negative mention and those who can articulate at least one reason to support or oppose a candidate.

These differences are due to respondents' level of cognitive and affective engagement with the candidates. Those who are more engaged are, presumably, more highly motivated to cast a ballot either for or against one of the candidates. At the same time, it is possible – indeed likely – that some of the difference we observe may be spurious. That is, the impact of candidate assessments may be a function of the *other* differences between people who can offer few reasons to like or dislike the candidates and those who can offer many. To disentangle these effects – and to subject all of the preceding bivariate relationships to a more rigorous test – we turn now to a multivariate analysis, examining the impact of each variable in our turnout model while holding constant all of the others. Such an analysis will enable us to estimate the impact of each variable on voter turnout in 2000 more precisely, and also allow us to understand the change (and more to the point, the *lack* of change) in turnout between 1996 and 2000. Why, ultimately, did we see such a half-hearted rise?

Explaining the Half-Hearted Rise: Multivariate Perspectives

We conduct all of these analyses by pooling the National Election Studies from 2000, 1996, as well as 1992 into a single data set. This allows us to estimate a common “pooled” effect of each independent variable on turnout, as well as separate effects within each of the three elections. The inclusion of 1992 in the analyses here also allows us to examine the longer-term changes in the levels and the effects of key variables on the turnout decision, as well as to draw important comparisons between the 1992 and 2000 elections, both contests which witnessed a rise in turnout over the previous election. Under the assumption that the effects of each independent variable remain constant over time, we first assess the impact of the changing *levels* of each factor on changes in turnout. Then, we relax this assumption and see how the changing *effects* of the independent variables between 1992 and 2000 also contributed to changes in turnout in those years. As we will show, most of the changes can be attributed

to changing *levels* of important independent variables, in particular, party contact, perceived closeness of the contest, and the individuals' likes and dislikes of the major party candidates. Several variables, however, show differences in what can be called "salience," i.e., different causal *effects* of the variable over time (Kaufmann and Petrocik 1999), and we will show that these changes – notably in the effects of party identification – have also played important roles in the changes in turnout across the three elections.

Finally, we will argue that the trends in many of these processes auger well for increased turnout in the near future. Given increased mobilization efforts, more supportive long-term attitudinal dispositions such as efficacy and civic duty, and the increasing effects of some of these factors on turnout, voter participation in U.S. presidential elections is very likely to be on an upward trajectory.

Explaining the Individual Vote Decision

Table 2 displays logistic regression estimates, their associated standard errors and significance levels for each independent variable in the pooled mode,¹ predicting turnout for the 1992-2000 period (see Table 2). We present only the variables that were statistically significant at the .10 level; this criterion eliminated contextual variables such as the presence of a gubernatorial or senate race in the respondent's state and attitudinal variables such as political trust. The relatively weak bivariate relationships discussed earlier between these factors and turnout were completely eliminated once other variables were taken into account. The remaining variables explain approximately 45 percent of the "variance" in the turnout decision, and the model results in correct predictions of turnout in 82.1 percent of all cases across the three elections, a significant improvement over the 75 percent one would predict on the basis of reported turnout in the three elections combined).

We present the "change in probability" associated with having a "high" or a "low" value of each variable in the final column, which gives an indication of the relative influence of each factor in the turnout decision. We set the baseline turnout probability to be .75 and calculate the change in turnout probability based on having "high" or "low" values of each variable. For categorical variables such as party contact, marital status, home ownership, and perceived closeness of the race, a "low" value is 0 and

a “high” value is 1. For variables that have more than two categories, we set the “low” and high” values to their minimum and maximum possible level: for example, we compare individuals with less than a high school education to individuals with education beyond the college degree; individuals in states with election day registration to individuals in states that require registration 1 month (31 days) before the election; political independents to strong partisans, and individuals with no dislikes of the major-party candidates to those who express 10 dislikes. It should be noted that all of these calculations yield the maximum possible change in turnout for individuals at a given prior probability of voting; the actual changes in turnout attributed to many of the variables will be smaller, as there are, for example, very few individuals who record 10 dislikes of the candidates. Nevertheless, these calculations provide the most useful indication of the potential impact of each variable on the individual’s probability of voting.

As can be seen, registration laws, party and campaign mobilization, and a series of variables related to long-term political attitudes, short-term campaign perceptions, and socio-demographic factors are all significantly related to the individual’s likelihood of voting. Other things being equal, individuals who live in states with Election Day registration are 6 percentage points more likely to vote than individuals who live in states that require registration one month in advance. Mobilization efforts show striking effects on turnout as well, with individuals who were contacted by parties or campaigns being 14 percentage points more likely to vote than individuals who were not, even after all other variables have been controlled for. This difference is one of the strongest effects in the table, and shows clearly that one critical reason why people participate in the electoral process is because they were asked (see Rosenstone and Hansen 1993).

Among long-term political orientations, political information¹² and strength of partisanship stand out as particularly important for the turnout decision; individuals who possess the highest levels of political knowledge in a given year are 17 percentage points more likely to vote than individuals who

¹² Because different questions with different degrees of difficulty were used in each election year to gauge the respondent’s level of information, it is impossible to compare the actual values across election years. Consequently we subtracted the average number of correct responses in that year from each respondent’s value, creating a normed index for each year with an average value of zero. Individuals with positive values are higher than the average respondent in that year, while individuals with negative values are below the sample’s average.

possess the absolute lowest amount of political information.¹³ Strong partisans are 12 percentage points more likely to vote than are independents. Other long-standing political variables are also significant, as individuals with higher levels of civic duty, beliefs in the responsiveness of the political system (“external efficacy”), and those most attentive to newspaper coverage of politics are all approximately 7-9 percentage points more likely to vote than individuals with lower levels of these orientations and predispositions.

Several short-term campaign variables also exert significant influences on the turnout decision. Individuals who care “very much” about the outcome of the election are 12 percentage points more likely to vote than individuals who only care “a little,” other things being equal. And assessments of the major-party candidates also have a significant impact, even in this multivariate model. As discussed earlier, turnout rises with both liking and disliking the major-party candidates. Now it is clear that candidate likes and dislikes do not matter equally: disliking the candidates exerts nearly twice as large an effect on turnout as does liking them. Individuals, for example, who mention 10 things they *dislike* about the major candidates are 14 percentage points more likely to vote than individuals who do not mention any dislikes; the corresponding difference is only 8 percentage points for mentioning 10 things that an individual *likes*.¹⁴

Beyond likes and dislikes, the difference in respondents’ affect for the candidates, as measured by the net difference in feeling thermometer ratings, is also relevant for turnout even when other variables have been controlled for. Individuals who rate the two candidates equally on the thermometer scale are 10 percentage points less likely to vote than individuals who rate one candidate at the highest end of the scale and other candidate at the lowest end.

¹³Very few individuals, however, are at the absolute highest or lowest levels of knowledge. Changing knowledge by one standard deviation relative to the mean level of knowledge in a given election yields a change in turnout probability of 7 percentage points.

¹⁴The corresponding figures for a more typical individual who mentions 5 things they dislike about the major party candidates is a .08 change in vote probability compared to a person with 0 dislikes, and a .04 difference between individuals who mention 5 things they like compared to 0 mentions.

As we have suggested, all of these short-term variables relate to the extent that individuals are *engaged* with the campaign and the major candidates. The more that individuals care about the outcome, perceive the virtues and flaws of the major party candidates, and like one candidate significantly more than the other, the more likely they are to vote in a given election. In contrast to these variables, the last short-term campaign perception we considered, whether the election outcome is likely to be close or not, shows much weaker effects in the multivariate model. Individuals who think that the election is likely to be close are only 3 percentage points more likely to vote than individuals who believe otherwise. However, despite this relatively small impact, we show below that these perceptions have much more explanatory power in accounting for changes in turnout *across* elections: Large shifts in the proportion of the electorate who thought that the 2000 election was close help account for the increase in turnout over 1996.

Among the socio-demographic factors, education exerts the greatest impact on the likelihood of voting, followed by the length of time the individual has lived in the community, age, and church attendance. The relationship between two of the demographic factors, race and gender, is reversed in the multivariate tests from what was seen earlier in the bivariate findings: controlling for all other variables in the model, women and African-Americans are somewhat *more* likely to vote than men and white respondents. The effects of other demographic factors are in the expected direction, as wealthier individuals, and individuals who are married, own homes, belong to unions, and live outside of the South are more likely to vote than individuals without these characteristics.

Explaining Changes in Voter Turnout Between the 1992, 1996, and 2000 Elections

A. “Level” Effects

The model presented in Table 2 shows the effects of each of the independent variables on the individual’s decision to vote or abstain in a given election. With this information, we may easily explain the overall changes in turnout from one election to another by examining how the electorate as a whole may have moved in or out of “high turnout” categories over time. That is, if the electorate has become

more efficacious, more highly educated, or cared more about the outcome of the election in 2000 than in 1996, then turnout would have increased as a result. Conversely, if the electorate attended church less often, read fewer newspapers, or was contacted less frequently by political parties, then we would have expected turnout to decline. In fact, given the model of Table 2, each independent variable that exhibits *any* change over time will contribute to an increase or decrease in turnout, and the size of that impact will depend on the strength of the relationship between that independent variable and turnout as well as the magnitude of the overall change in the variable from one election to the next. Factors that are strongly related to turnout *and* whose overall levels change substantially over time will produce larger changes in overall turnout than factors that have weak relationship and whose overall levels remain relatively constant.

The mathematical calculations to determine the actual impact of each variable on overall change are relatively straightforward, involving the product of the effect of the variable in a multiple regression model and the change in the average value of the variable from one election to the next.¹⁵ Intuitively, these calculations provide an estimate of how turnout changed from the previous election compared to what it would have been if the levels of a particular independent variable had not changed at all; that is, how turnout in 2000 (or 1996) differed from what it would have been if each independent variable had remained at its 1996 (or 1992) level.

In Table 3 we show the impact of each independent variable on the changes in turnout between 1996 and 2000, and then between 1992 and 1996 (see Table 3). The variables are listed in descending order of their effect on turnout changes between 1996 and 2000, with variables having the largest positive effects on overall turnout change followed in order by those with smaller positive effects, and finally by variables that had negative effects on overall turnout change between the two elections. These figures

¹⁵ Strictly speaking, these kinds of calculations are exact only in the context of a linear regression model, not the non-linear logistic specification of Table 2. Consequently we re-estimated the effects of these variables through ordinary least squares regression in order to obtain the estimates shown in Table 3. All variables that were statistically significant in the logistic regression of Table 2 were also significant in the OLS estimation.

readily explain why turnout increased only slightly in 2000, following the large drop between 1992 and 1996.

As can be seen from the figures in the fifth column, the 2000 election possessed many characteristics that led to increased voter participation. Indeed, these are precisely the factors that led to the puzzle posed at the outset of the chapter of why turnout in 2000 did not increase more dramatically. As noted earlier, the competitive nature of the 2000 election was more or less accurately perceived by the electorate, a much greater proportion of which saw the contest as “very close.” Despite the relatively weak influence of perceptions of closeness on turnout noted in the previous section, this factor by itself contributed nearly 9/10 of a percentage point rise in turnout over 1996. The increased efforts of parties and campaigns in mobilizing the electorate in 2000 compared to 1996 had a similarly large effect on turnout: over one-third of the electorate received some form of party or campaign contact, an increase from the 27 percent level of 1996, and this change contributed just over 8/10 of a percentage-point increase in turnout. These two factors – mobilization contact and perceived electoral closeness – were by far the largest influences on turnout change from the 1996 to 2000 period.

Several other features of the 2000 election context also produced a more participatory electorate. The long-term increase in the electorate’s education level continued to have a positive effect on voter turnout, as did the long-term decline in state-level restrictions governing registration. Taken together, these two factors produced another .5 percentage-point rise in turnout over 1996. Perhaps the most surprising feature of the 2000 election context, though, was the beginning of a reversal of the decades-long decline in political orientations such as external efficacy and civic duty. Both of these variables showed modest increases over their 1996 level, and taken together these changes produced an additional half-point increase in turnout.

The 2000 election, then, was perceived as more competitive, featured more party and campaign mobilization, less restrictive registration laws, and a more educated electorate with more favorable views concerning the political system and the individual’s responsibilities for civic participation. Based on

these changes alone, turnout in the 2000 election would have risen nearly 2 3/4 percentage points over 1996.

Why, then, did actual turnout rise only marginally from its 1996 level? The answer can be found on the negative side of the ledger in Table 3, by examining the factors that led turnout to decline over time. One factor was a decline in the overall strength of partisanship in the electorate since 1996, which, as was seen earlier, produced a somewhat larger proportion of pure independents in 2000 than four years earlier. Although there was also slightly higher proportion of strong partisans, overall partisanship declined in the electorate and this contributed to a 4/10 of a percentage point decrease in turnout.

The largest negative influences on turnout, however, were factors related to the candidates themselves. The electorate, as we noted earlier, was essentially unengaged with either major-party candidate compared to both 1996 and 1992. While individuals mentioned on average 2.54 things they disliked about Bill Clinton and Bob Dole in 1996, they averaged only just over 2 dislikes in 2000, and this diminished inventory of dislikes led to nearly 6/10 of a percentage-point decrease in turnout. Similarly, the electorate mentioned fewer things they *liked* about the candidates than in 1996, yielding an additional .14-point decrease in turnout. Americans also rated the candidates more similarly on the feeling thermometer scale in 2000 than in 1996 (yielding a quarter-point drop in turnout), and they cared less about the outcome of the election (leading to an additional .25 percentage point decline in turnout). In short, voters appeared to be relatively indifferent towards the candidates and toward the electoral outcome compared to the previous election, and these aspects of voter disengagement together produced a nearly 1 and 1/4 percentage-point decline in turnout in the 2000 election.

We may conclude, therefore, that the favorable electoral context for turnout was almost completely negated by the electorate's indifference towards the major party candidates. The electorate was "satisfied" with the choices offered, rated them reasonably highly on the thermometer scales, but they were not emotionally involved with either man; the total number of likes and dislikes mentioned in 2000 concerning the candidates, in fact, was the lowest number since at least the 1964 election (Hughes and Conway 1997). Our explanation thus far is that a disengaged electorate responded only half-heartedly to

the furious mobilization efforts made by the parties and campaigns in the closest election in modern American history.

Understanding 1996 vs. 1992

The same kind of calculations provide important insights into changes in voter turnout between 1992 and 1996, and thus how changes in the electorate over the past decade have resulted in changes in voter participation. In an election that witnessed a more than 4.5 percentage point decrease in turnout, the only significant *mobilizing* element of the 1996 contest was the increase in party and campaign contact over the 1992 election. This increase contributed to a .51-point increase in turnout between 1992 and 1996, which, when coupled with the contribution of increased contact from 1996 to 2000, indicates that party mobilization has led to a total increase of approximately 1 and 1/3 percentage points since the 1992 election. Less restrictive registration laws contributed only .09 percentage points to the increase between 1992 and 1996, or just under 1/3 of a percentage point increase in total since 1992.

For nearly all other important variables, however, levels declined between 1992 and 1996. The long-term orientations of civic duty and external efficacy were lower in 1996 than 4 years earlier, as was newspaper reading and the perceived closeness of the contest; taken together, these factors led to a drop of just over 2 percentage points in turnout by 1996. Moreover, the electorate's level of engagement with Bill Clinton and George Bush in 1992 was significantly higher than its reaction to Clinton and Dole four years later: The mean number of candidate likes and dislikes was about 1 mention more in 1992 than in 1996, contributing to a .84- point decline in turnout in 1996 as well. In fact, the total number of likes and dislikes mentioned in 1992 was the highest since the 1964 election (Hughes and Conway 1999), and these calculations do not capture the additional engagement provided by the third party candidate Ross Perot.

In many ways, then, the election of 2000 differed markedly from 1992, though each witnessed a rise in turnout from the previous contest. The increased participation seen in the election of 1992 appears in retrospect to have been almost completely a candidate-driven phenomenon. Likes and dislikes of the major party candidates were at their peak levels in the past 30 years, while party mobilization efforts in

fact declined somewhat since 1988, and long-term political orientations such as efficacy, civic duty and strength of party identification were all in decline as well (Hughes and Conway 1999). By contrast, the election of 2000 saw intensive (and successful) efforts at party mobilization, increases in long-term participatory attitudes such as efficacy and civic duty, while at the same time featuring major-party candidates who failed to capture the imagination, attention or affection of the electorate.. The result is that – notwithstanding 2000’s half-hearted rise in turnout – the critical facilitative mobilization and attitudinal conditions are in place for larger increases in turnout in the future. Given more engaging and inspiring candidates who are able to forge more intense emotional bonds with the electorate than was the case in 2000, we believe there is strong reason to expect higher turnout in the future.

B. “Salience” Effects

As discussed above, changes in voter turnout between 1992, 1996 and 2000 may have been produced either by changing levels of important independent variables, by changes in the effects of these variables on the individual turnout decision, or by some combination of the two. For example, the proportion of individuals who cared about the outcome of the 1996 and 2000 may have been nearly identical, but the *effect* of caring about the outcome may have changed over time. If the effect of this variable increased between 1996 and 2000, then turnout would also have increased as well, with the magnitude of the increase being larger as more individuals cared about the election outcome (i.e., as the mean of the variable increased).¹⁶ We call this kind of an effect on overall turnout levels a “salience” effect, that is, an effect produced by the different regression weights associated with independent variables over time (see Kaufman and Petrocik 1999 for a similar approach).

In the analyses reported thus far, we assumed constant salience for each independent variable between 1992 and 2000 and estimated the impact of changing levels of each variable on overall changes in turnout, given a common or pooled regression coefficient. In order to assess the extent to which

¹⁶ That is, an increase in the regression coefficient for “caring about the outcome” between 1996 and 2000 will have a greater positive effect on change in turnout if 90 percent of the electorate in both years cares about the outcome than if 10 percent of the electorate cares.

salience, or the magnitude of the regression coefficients, changed over time, we estimated the turnout model separately for each election year, and conducted tests to determine if any differences between coefficients for 1996 and 2000, and then between 1992 and 1996, were statistically significant (that is, were unlikely to have been the result of random sampling error.)

We found that the effects of the explanatory variables in our pooled model were relatively stable. Out of 24 independent variables in our model, we found differences on 11 in *either* of the two election years, though many of these differences were of relatively small substantive magnitude. Thus most independent variables had generally similar effects on turnout across the three elections. However, to the extent that salience differences did exist for these 11 variables, then differences in turnout rates between individuals who were “high” and “low” on the variable in one election were not the same as the turnout difference between “high” and “low” respondents in another contest. We show the differences in turnout rates for the three elections for the 11 variables where *any* salience effects were found in Table 4 below (see Table 4).

The table shows the differences in estimated turnout rates between “high” and “low” respondents (using the same approach employed earlier), holding all other variables at their average value in the respective election. For example, the difference in turnout in 1992 and 1996 between individuals who thought the election would be “very close” and those who thought it would be not close was only .02 and .01 respectively; in the 2000 contest this figure rose to .07. Thus part of the explanation for the increase in turnout between 1996 and 2000 was not only that more individuals thought the election would be close, but also that perceived closeness *mattered* more for the vote decision in 2000 than in the previous election (consistent with the bivariate findings we reported earlier). Similarly, the salience of long-term dispositions such as civic duty and external efficacy also increased in 2000, with differences between high and low turnout groups increasing to over 9 and 12 percent in 2000 compared to 6 and 7 percent in the previous election.

Among demographic variables, striking differences between the 2000 election and the two previous contests are evident in the vote propensities for union members and African-Americans.

Individuals who were union members (or who lived in a household with a union member) participated at about a 6 percent higher rate than non-members in both 1992 and 1996; this difference was completely wiped out in the 2000 election. For African-Americans, the pattern is completely reversed; what was a 4-5 percent higher probability of voting in 1992 and 1996, holding all other variables constant, grew to nearly a 10 point gap in 2000. Perhaps fittingly in the closely contested election of 2000, these two processes cancelled one another out in terms of their effect on the outcome; increased turnout among an intensely Democratic yet relatively small portion of the electorate (African-Americans) was counterbalanced by *decreased* turnout among a moderately Democratic though somewhat larger bloc of voters (union households).

By far the largest difference in salience across the three elections, however, is seen for party identification. Other things being equal, strong partisans had turnout rates that were 23 percentage points higher in 1996 than pure independents; this difference was 8 percentage points in 1992 and only 6 percentage points in the 2000 contest. (These differences reflect a logistic regression coefficient in 1996 for party identification on turnout that is over twice as large as its value in 1992, and over three times its value in 2000.) Thus the 1996 electorate was the most *partisan* in its composition of any of the three contests, while differences between partisan groups in terms of turnout rates were more muted in the 1992 and 2000 contests.

A closer examination of this effect reveals several important additional findings. We generated an equation predicting voter turnout with all of the variables from Table 2, while separating the ‘strength of party identification’ variable into its seven constituent parts: Strong Democrats, Strong Republicans, Weak Democrats, Weak Republicans, Independents who lean Democratic, Independents who lean Republican, and Pure Independents. We then estimated the probability of voting in each election for each of these groups, holding all other variables at their mean level. We show the results of this estimation in Figure 19 below (see Figure 19).

The figure demonstrates significant differences between these groups that are both theoretically and electorally important. First, it can be seen that strong partisans in 2000 were about 8 points *less likely*

to vote than in the two other contests. Strong Democrats were equally likely to vote in 1992 and 1996, while turnout among strong Republicans increased somewhat in support of Bob Dole compared to the Bush candidacy four years earlier. Interestingly, the decline in turnout among strong Democrats and strong Republicans between 1996 and 2000 was almost identical, as neither partisan group was as engaged with their candidate as they were four years before. Moreover, the decline in turnout among strong partisans – who comprise over 30 percent of the electorate and whose numbers *increased* somewhat in 2000 – played a significant role in keeping turnout from rising more sharply. Had turnout rates among strong partisans been at their 1996 levels, we would have seen an additional 2.5 percentage point increase in turnout in 2000 (i.e., an 8 percent higher turnout rate among 30 percent of the electorate). This relative lack of partisan interest, then, fits well into our overall description of the 2000 contest as reflecting an electorate that was not emotionally engaged with the major party candidates.

At the same time, independents turned out at significantly *lower* rates in 1996 than in either of the other two years, (an estimated difference of 14-18 percentage points). Nichols *et al.* (1999, 38) attribute the relatively higher rates of turnout among independents (and younger voters) in 1992 compared to 1996 to the Perot candidacy, which attracted substantial support from both groups of voters. This is a plausible hypothesis, though we must search elsewhere to account for the increases in turnout among independents in 2000 compared to 1996. We suspect that the forces that shaped independent turnout in 2000 were strongly related to party mobilization efforts and the competitive context of the 2000 contest.

Independents who were contacted by the parties or campaigns in 2000 were 10 percentage points more likely to vote than independents who were contacted by the parties or campaigns in 1996, while the difference was only 4 percentage points among Independents who were not personally contacted. This means that parties and campaigns obtained greater turnout “yields” in 2000 than four years earlier.¹⁷

¹⁷ It is also the case that “yield” differentials helps explain the disengagement of strong partisans in 2000: strong partisans who were contacted in 2000 were as likely to vote in 2000 as either of the other two election years, while strong partisans who were *not* contacted were 8 percentage points less likely to turn out than in either 1992 or 1996. Thus mobilization efforts compensated to some degree for the relative lack of engagement in 2000 with the major candidates among even strong partisans, and compensated for the “normal” lack of engagement with the candidates found in 2000 among Independents as well.

Moreover, as noted earlier, independents in 2000 were slightly more likely to be contacted in the first place than they were in 1996 or 2000.

Beyond mobilization, independents who perceived the 2000 election as “very close” were 17 percentage points more likely to vote than independents who perceived the 1996 election as “very close.” This difference was reversed among Independents who perceived the elections as “not close,” with such individuals being 14 percentage points *more* likely to vote in 1996.

Thus independents appear to have responded more strongly to mobilization efforts and the competitive context of the 2000 election than they did four years earlier. To this extent, since the number of independents in the electorate increased between 1996 and 2000, turnout would have declined even further if they had voted at the same rate. The 14-percentage point increase in turnout among 13 percent of the electorate led to an approximately 1.8 percentage point increase in overall turnout. This was not enough to offset the decline in turnout attributable to the decrease among strong partisans, but prevented further declines on the basis of increased independence in the American electorate.

Conclusion

In sum, the changes in turnout across contexts that we have uncovered appear to have been due primarily to changes in the proportions of the electorate that were in “high turnout” categories in the given election years (Table 3). In 2000, more citizens were contacted, more citizens thought the election would be close, more citizens believed in the responsiveness of the system and the duty of the individual to take part in political life, and these changes were nearly, though not totally offset by an increase in political independence and a sharp decrease in the affective engagement of the electorate with the candidates over time. These signs from 2000 indicate that, given the intensely competitive partisan balance and the slowing of the dealigning trend in the American electorate (Bartels 2000), it is altogether likely that voter turnout could be on a distinctly upward trajectory, especially if future elections feature more compelling Presidential candidates.

A significant additional part of the turnout story of these three elections is the difference in the relative *saliency* of key variables over time. Certain demographic groups such as African-Americans were more likely to vote in 2000 than in previous years, while groups such as union members, married people, and older individuals lost the edge in turnout that they had shown four (and eight) years before. The effect of long-term attitudinal factors such as civic duty and external efficacy increased in 2000 as well, and such changes also appear to augur well for future levels of turnout in Presidential elections.

Finally, we found that turnout rates appear to change dramatically for different partisan groups over time, in ways that reflected the appeal of the candidates as well as the mobilization and competitive aspects of the respective campaigns. Turnout changes, then, are a function not only of long-term attitudinal and demographic shifts in the electorate and short-term reactions to the candidates, but also a function of the interaction between the electorate and the parties and campaigns that attempt to mobilize them to turn out and support a given candidate. Party and campaign contact yields voters more successfully in some contexts than others, which is perhaps another important way that campaigns “matter” in the individual vote decision and the overall outcome of U.S. Presidential elections.

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Appendix

Notes on Question Wording and Mode in the 2000 National Election Study

Voter turnout as measured in the 2000 National Election Study is not strictly comparable to prior studies for two reasons. First, there was a change in question wording. As in the past, respondents were presented with the following statement:

In talking to people about elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they weren't registered, they were sick, or they just didn't have time.

In past studies, there was a simple dichotomous follow-up: *How about you--did you vote in the elections this November?* In 2000, however, respondents were presented with an expanded set of response categories, and were asked to select the statement that best described them:

- *I did not vote (in the election this November);*
- *I thought about voting this time - but didn't;*
- *I usually vote, but didn't this time;*
- *I am sure I voted.*

This expanded choice was an effort to reduce erroneous over-reports of turnout. According to the NES, “some people may remember having voted sometime in the past but confuse the source of that memory, accidentally misassigning it to the most recent election, when it actually derives from a prior election. We are therefore implementing a new item, with expanded response categories” (NES 2000 Codebook Introduction).

There is, of course, no way to gauge the impact of this new question wording on reported turnout in 2000, and no alternative to using the new question. Interestingly, a special NES study conducted in 1994 used these response categories (as part of a more elaborate wording experiment involving turnout and church attendance), and found no significant differences between the experimental and new versions (Belli et. al., 1994).

The second major change in the 2000 National Election Study was an increased reliance on telephone interviewing. Of the 1807 pre-election study respondents, 56 percent (1006) were interviewed face-to-face and 44 percent (801) were interviewed by phone. In the post-election study, approximately 20 percent of respondents originally interviewed in-person were contacted by phone.

What is the impact of interview mode on reported turnout? Although some studies have found few or no significant difference between in-person and telephone reports (Rosenstone et. al. 1993), telephone interviews have also been found to increase reports of socially desirable attitudes and behaviors, including reports of voting in past and the current year's elections (Krosnick and Green 1999, Groves 1979, Groves and Kahn 1979, Wessel et. al. 2000). Such is certainly the case in 2000. Reported turnout is contingent on mode, with telephone interviewing leading to higher levels. Respondents interviewed by telephone in both pre- and post-election waves were 6.4 points more likely to have reported voting than respondents interviewed in-person in both waves (76.1 percent vs. 69.7 percent); and respondents interviewed face-to-face in the first wave and by phone in the second reported intermediate levels of turnout (71.6 percent).

Table A1: Turnout by Interview Mode

<i>Pre-/Post Mode</i>	<i>Reported Turnout</i>
Face-to-Face / Face-to-Face	69.7
Face-to-Face / Phone	71.6
Phone / Phone	76.1

Chi-square: 11.611 p<.003

Phi: .086 p<.003

We estimated a version of the multivariate model we report in this paper with an indicator for interview mode. The direct effect of having a post-election telephone interview (as opposed to a face-to-face interview) was approximately a 2.5-point increase in reported turnout. Importantly, this increase was relatively uniform: Including a series of interaction terms revealed no significant differences in mode effect by education, race, gender, partisanship, or most attitudinal attributes. There were, however, a handful of exceptions: The impact on reported turnout of being interviewed by telephone was somewhat greater among the least informed respondents, those with a low sense of civic duty, those who did not see the election as a close one, those who perceived few differences between the candidates (indicated by feeling thermometer ratings), and to a lesser extent, those with lower levels of income. For this reason, the overall impact of these variables was *lower* for subjects interviewed by phone, consistent with the findings of Wessel, et. al. (2000).

We had another, related concern about the effects of interview mode: that beyond turnout, respondents interviewed by telephone would report significantly higher levels of other socially desirable attitudes. In fact, this tended not to be the case. Although a number of variables in our model saw slightly higher values among phone respondents, caring about the outcome of the race was the only variable related to turnout that was significantly higher. Among post-election respondents interviewed by phone, 79.7 percent reported caring a great deal about the outcome of the race, versus 72.3 percent of those interviewed in person.

We take these findings as suggesting, first, that there are interesting and important mode effects in the 2000 NES that bear closer examination; and second, that these effects are neither of a nature nor a sufficient degree that they threaten the substantive story about turnout in 2000 that we have presented here.

Table 1
1996 and 2000 Turnout by State

	<i>Voting Age Population (VAP)</i>			<i>Voting Eligible Population (VEP)</i>		
	<i>1996</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>change</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>change</i>
Alabama	47.7	50.1	2.5	49.3	51.8	2.4
Alaska	56.9	65.5	8.6	59.0	68.7	9.8
Arizona	44.7	40.7	-4.0	52.6	46.4	-6.2
Arkansas	47.2	46.3	-1.0	48.6	51.0	2.5
California	43.9	44.5	0.6	56.3	54.1	-2.2
Colorado	52.8	54.4	1.6	55.2	58.3	3.1
Conn.	56.2	56.9	0.7	61.7	62.9	1.1
Delaware	49.4	55.6	6.2	53.0	60.8	7.9
D.C.	44.0	44.2	0.2	48.0	48.3	0.3
Florida	48.0	48.3	0.3	55.3	56.8	1.5
Georgia	42.4	43.2	0.7	45.2	47.6	2.4
Hawaii	40.5	40.2	-0.3	44.8	43.9	-0.9
Idaho	57.1	54.2	-2.8	59.1	56.8	-2.3
Illinois	49.3	51.7	2.4	52.6	55.9	3.3
Indiana	48.8	48.8	0.0	49.6	49.7	0.1
Iowa	57.7	60.0	2.3	60.2	63.8	3.6
Kansas	56.1	54.3	-1.8	57.6	55.6	-1.9
Kentucky	47.4	50.7	3.3	48.1	52.6	4.5
Louisiana	57.0	54.3	-2.6	58.3	55.6	-2.7
Maine	71.9	66.9	-5.0	65.7	68.3	2.6
Maryland	46.6	51.3	4.7	50.5	56.3	5.8
Massachusetts	55.0	55.7	0.8	59.4	60.4	1.0
Michigan	54.4	57.6	3.2	56.5	59.9	3.5
Minnesota	64.1	67.1	3.1	67.9	71.5	3.5
Mississippi	45.4	48.0	2.6	46.4	50.1	3.7
Missouri	54.0	56.6	2.6	55.6	58.7	3.1
Montana	62.1	61.1	-0.9	63.0	61.9	-1.0
Nebraska	55.9	55.3	-0.7	58.4	57.5	-0.9
Nevada	38.3	41.0	2.7	43.6	45.9	2.3
New Hampshire	57.3	61.4	4.1	58.3	64.4	6.1
New Jersey	51.0	50.4	-0.6	58.5	57.2	-1.3
New Mexico	45.4	45.7	0.2	49.4	49.0	-0.5
New York	47.5	47.8	0.3	54.2	54.5	0.3

North Carolina	45.6	47.8	2.3	48.1	51.4	3.2
North Dakota	56.0	59.9	3.9	56.4	60.6	4.3
Ohio	54.3	55.5	1.2	55.5	56.7	1.2
Oklahoma	49.5	48.2	-1.2	51.4	50.4	-1.0
Oregon	57.1	59.6	2.4	59.8	64.7	5.0
Pennsylvania	49.0	52.5	3.5	50.4	54.2	3.8
Rhode Island	52.0	51.1	-0.9	57.1	55.6	-1.5
South Carolina	41.6	46.1	4.5	42.8	47.6	4.9
South Dakota	60.5	57.3	-3.3	61.3	58.1	-3.1
Tennessee	46.9	48.4	1.4	48.1	50.4	2.3
Texas	41.3	42.8	1.5	48.7	47.7	-1.0
Utah	49.9	50.9	1.0	52.3	54.4	2.1
Vermont	58.1	63.8	5.7	59.0	66.7	7.7
Virginia	47.5	51.3	3.8	49.9	54.4	4.5
Washington	54.8	56.8	2.0	58.9	62.4	3.5
West Virginia	44.9	46.1	1.2	45.6	46.8	1.3
Wisconsin	57.4	65.0	7.6	60.9	68.5	7.6
Wyoming	59.4	59.8	0.4	60.8	61.3	0.5
U.S. Total:	49.1	50.4	1.3	53.7	55.1	1.4

Table 2
Logistic Regression Model Predicting Reported Turnout, 1992-2000

Independent Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	Significance	Maximum Change in Probability
Registration Closing Date	-.0096	.0053	.0721	.06
Party or Campaign Contact	1.0270	.1220	.0000	.14
<i>Long-Term Dispositions</i>				
Strength of Partisanship	.8392	.1350	.0000	.12
Political Information	.2160	.0319	.0000	.17
Civic Duty	.5297	.0846	.0000	.09
External Efficacy	.1641	.0396	.0000	.09
Newspaper Reading	.0655	.0153	.0000	.08
<i>Short-Term Attitudes</i>				
Care about Outcome	.7757	.0961	.0000	.12
Perceived Closeness of Race	.1859	.0963	.0535	.03
Net Candidate Thermometer Difference	.0064	.0018	.0005	.10
Candidate Likes	.0482	.0250	.0539	.08
Candidate Dislikes	.1000	.0247	.0001	.14
<i>Socio-Demographic Attributes</i>				
Length of Time in Community (Log)	.1911	.0423	.0000	.13
Married	.2611	.0900	.0037	.05
Home Owner	.3931	.0953	.0000	.07
Union Member	.3055	.1208	.0115	.05
African-American	.5041	.1308	.0001	.08
Male	-.2764	.0865	.0014	-.06
South	-.3370	.0918	.0002	-.07
Age	.0098	.0029	.0006	.11
Education	.3090	.0355	.0000	.16
Income	.2575	.1351	.0566	.05
Church Attendance	.5969	.1117	.0000	.09
1992 Dummy Variable	.2002	.1034	.0528	
2000 Dummy Variable	.0305	.1087	.7793	
Constant	-4.2011	.3064	.0000	
Number of Cases	4808			
Chi-Squared	1674.32 (25 df)	P<.00001		
Pseudo R-squared	.45			
Percent Correctly Classified	82.1			
Percent Reported Turnout	75.0			

Table 3
The Effects of Changes in Levels of Independent Variables
on Changing Turnout, 1992-2000

Independent Variable	1992 Level	1996 Level	2000 Level	Impact on Change, 96-00	Impact on Change, 92-96
Perceived Closeness	82%	54%	86%	.86	-.75
Party/Campaign Contact	21%	27%	36%	.82	.51
Education (1-7 scale)	3.93	3.91	4.00	.32	-.08
Civic Duty	63%	56%	61%	.30	-.50
External Efficacy (0-5 scale)	3.10	2.72	2.84	.23	-.72
South	30%	36%	31%	.22	-.28
Registration Closing Date (days)	25.47	24.74	23.34	.18	.09
Newspaper Reading (days)	3.79	3.27	3.40	.08	-.32
Age (years)	44.08	44.68	45.06	.06	.10
Male	48%	45%	44%	.03	.12
Income (0-1 scale)	.57	.53	.54	.02	-.15
Black	12%	12%	12%	.02	-.04
Political Information (normed, mean 0)	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
Time in Community (log)	2.69	2.66	2.64	-.03	-.07
Home Owner	69%	69%	68%	-.04	.01
Married	62%	61%	58%	-.08	-.05
Church Attendance (0-1 scale)	.46	.46	.45	-.10	.02
Candidate Likes (number)	2.77	2.48	2.26	-.14	-.19
Union Member	18%	19%	16%	-.15	.07
Net Thermometer Diff.	34.75	36.96	33.28	-.23	.14
Care About Outcome	78%	79%	77%	-.28	.22
Strength of Partisanship (0-1 scale)	.60	.63	.59	-.40	.36
Candidate Dislikes (number)	3.06	2.54	2.09	-.58	-.65
Total Predicted Change				1.09	-2.18
Actual Turnout Change (Reported)	.776	.729	.734	.49	-4.64

Note: cell entries are percentages with the relevant characteristics, unless otherwise noted.

Table 4
Differences in Effects of Independent Variables on Turnout, 1996-2000

Independent Variable	Difference Between Turnout of High and Low Groups, 1992	Difference Between Turnout of High and Low Groups, 1996	Difference Between Turnout of High and Low Groups, 2000
Perceived Closeness of Race	.02	.01	.07
Strength of Partisanship	.08	.23	.06
Civic Duty	.07	.06	.09
External Efficacy	.07	.07	.12
Net Thermometer Difference	.09	.04	.09
Length of Time in Community	.15	.09	.11
Union Member	.05	.06	-.02
Married	.02	.08	.02
African-American	.05	.04	.09
Age	.07	.15	.06
Education	.26	.24	.24

Figure 1
Turnout in Presidential Elections 1960-2000

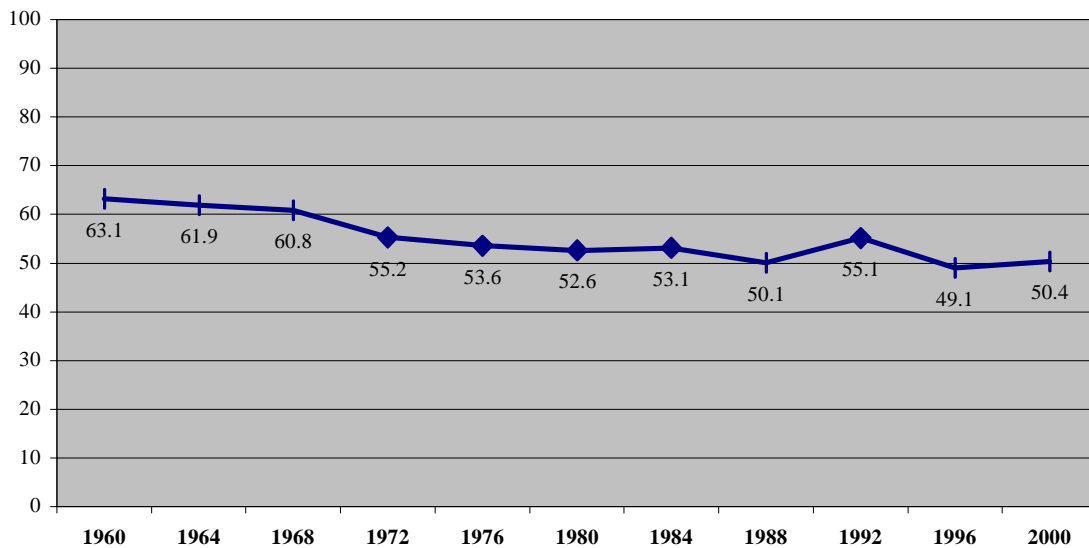


Figure 2

Registration Laws and State-Level Turnout

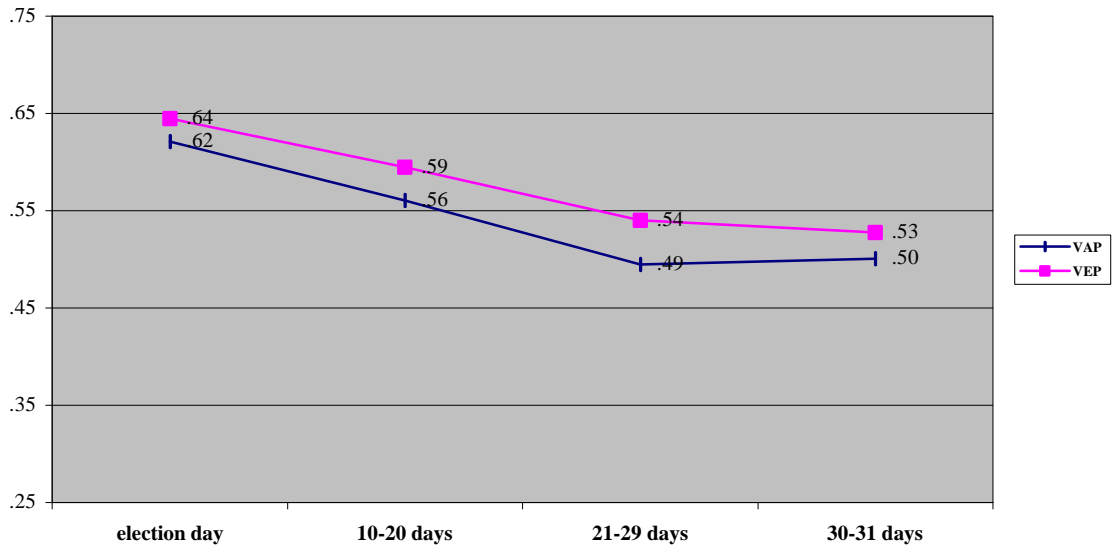


Figure 3

Campaign Advertising and State-Level Turnout

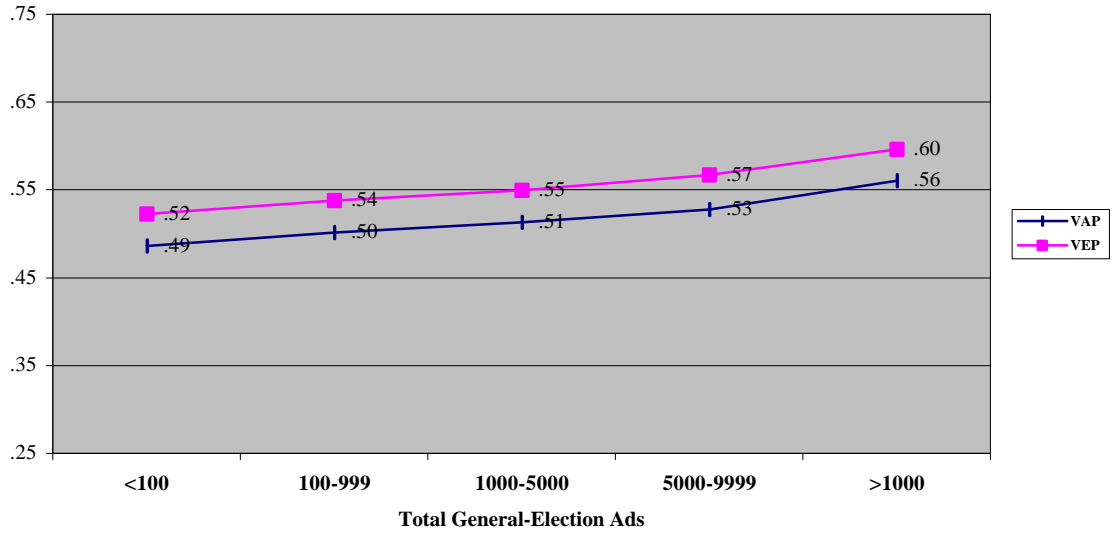


Figure 4
Education and Turnout

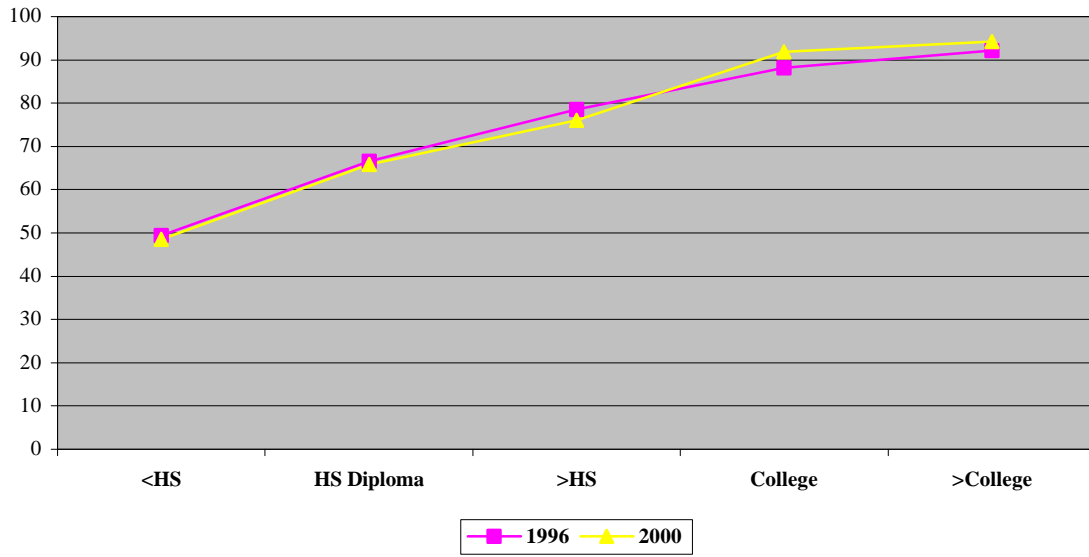


Figure 5
Income and Turnout

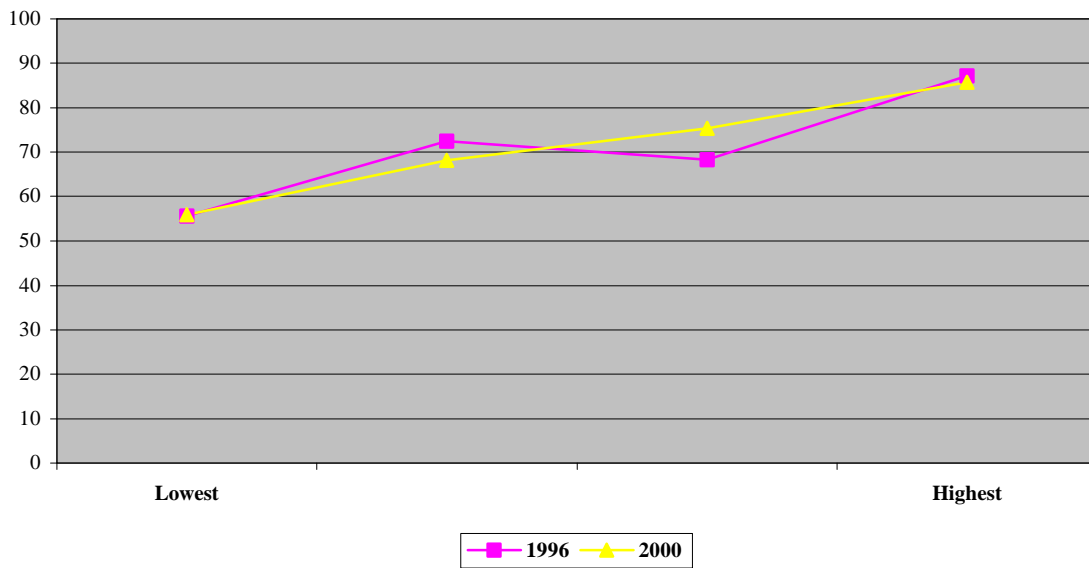


Figure 6
Age and Turnout

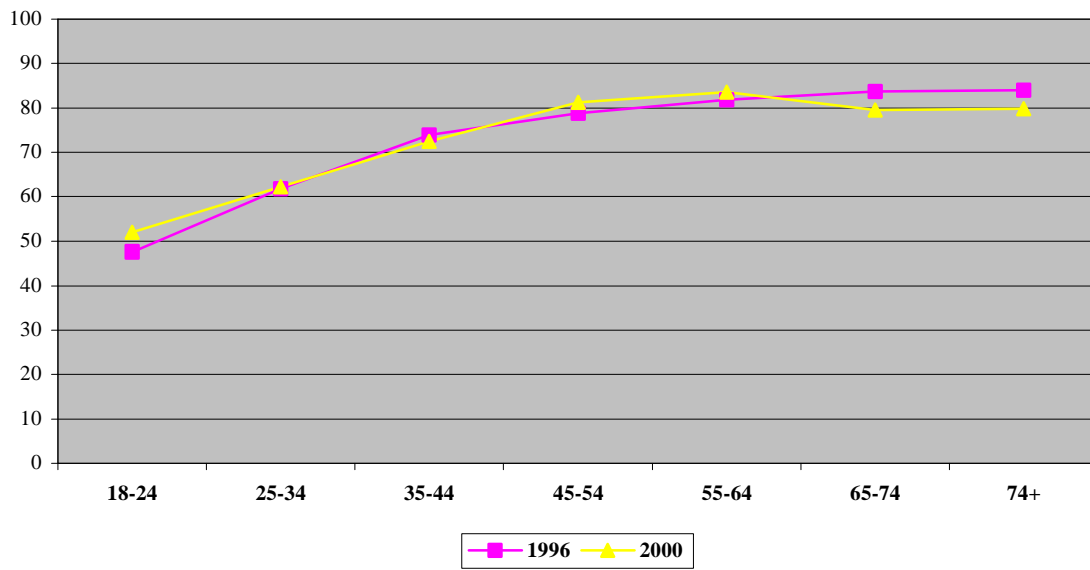


Figure 7
Union Households and Turnout

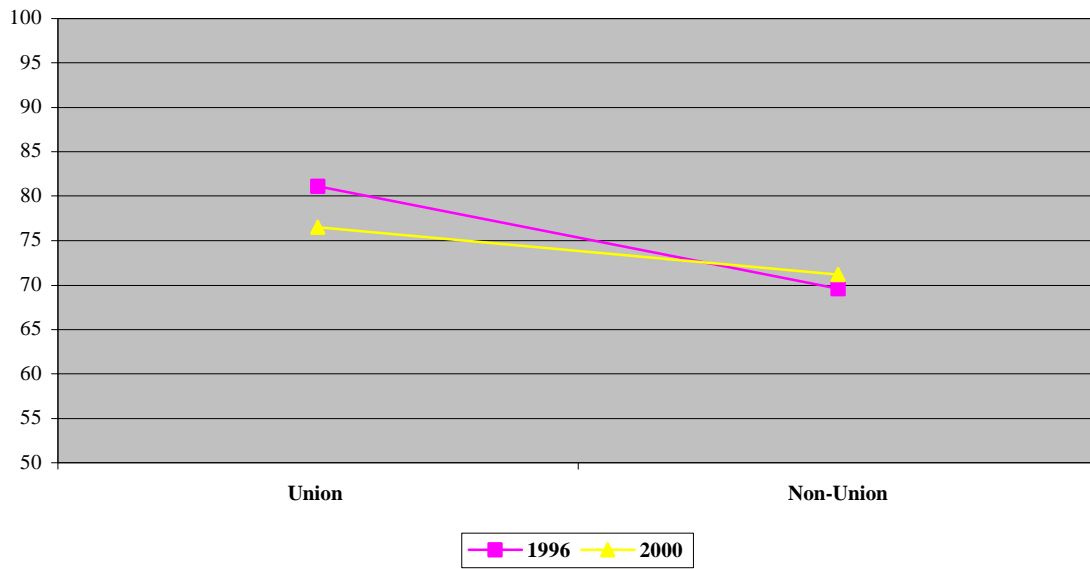


Figure 8

Church Attendance and Turnout

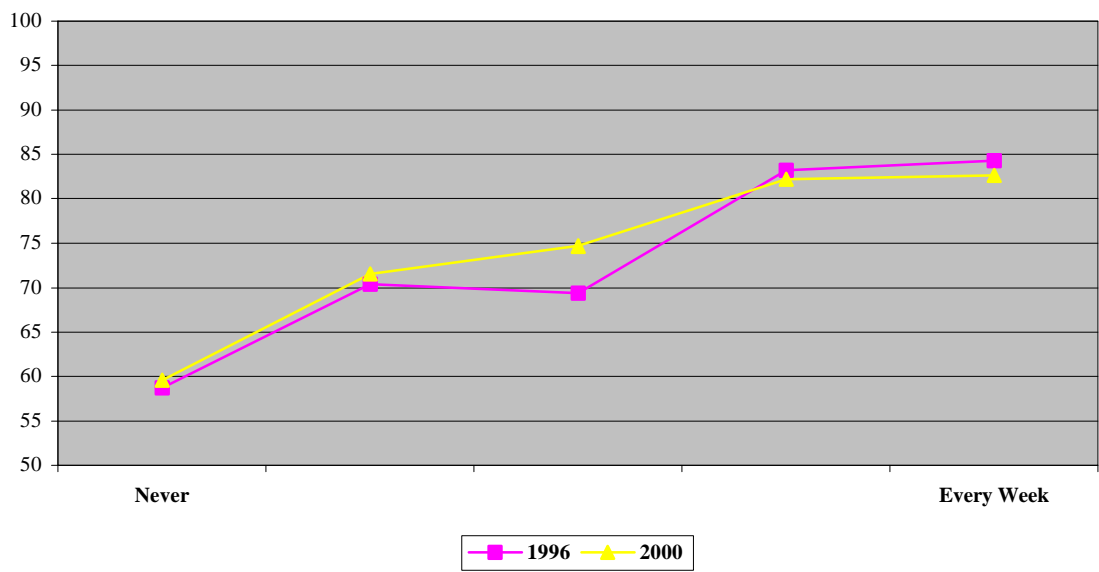


Figure 9

Mobilization and Turnout

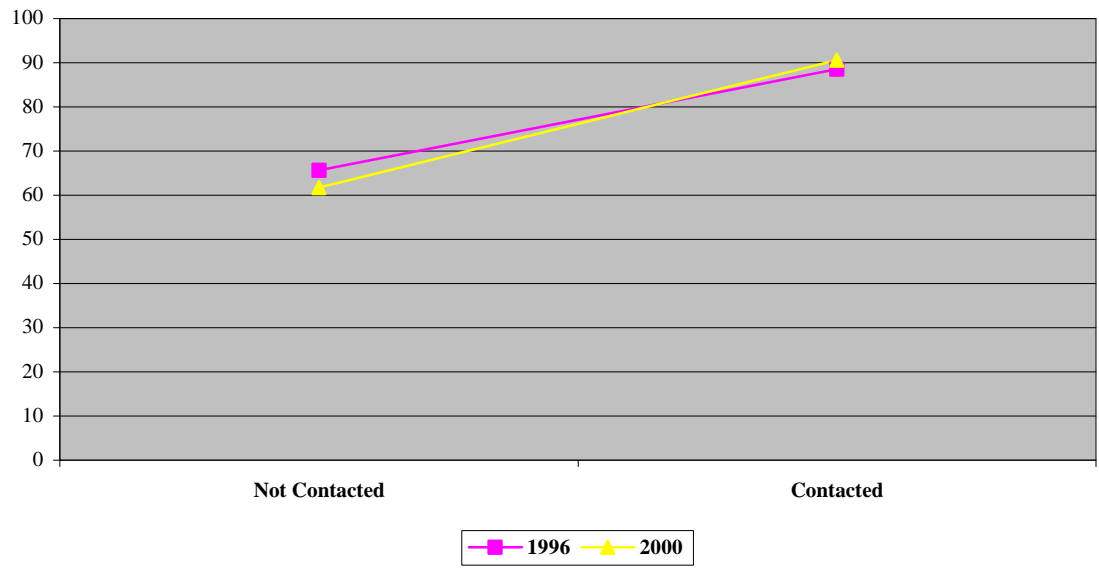


Figure 10
Civic Duty and Turnout



Figure 11
Internal Efficacy and Turnout

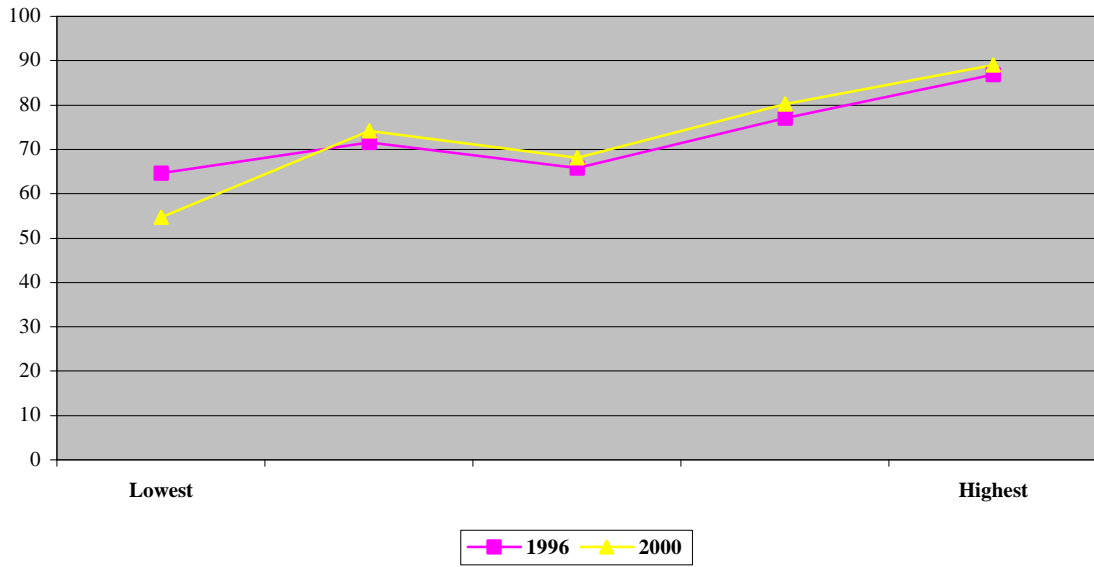


Figure 12

External Efficacy and Turnout

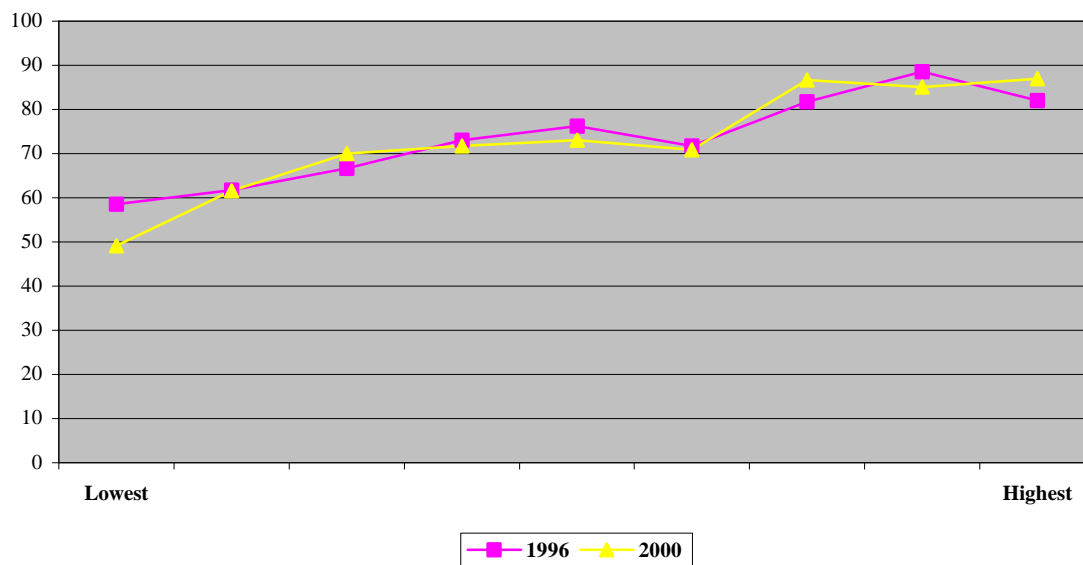


Figure 13

Political Information and Turnout

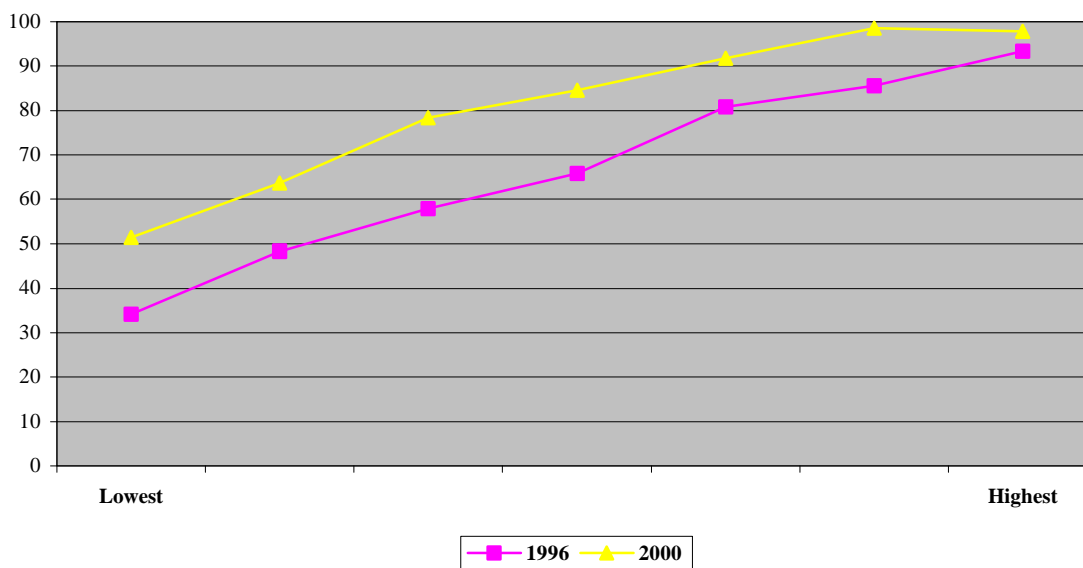


Figure 14

Strength of Partisanship and Turnout

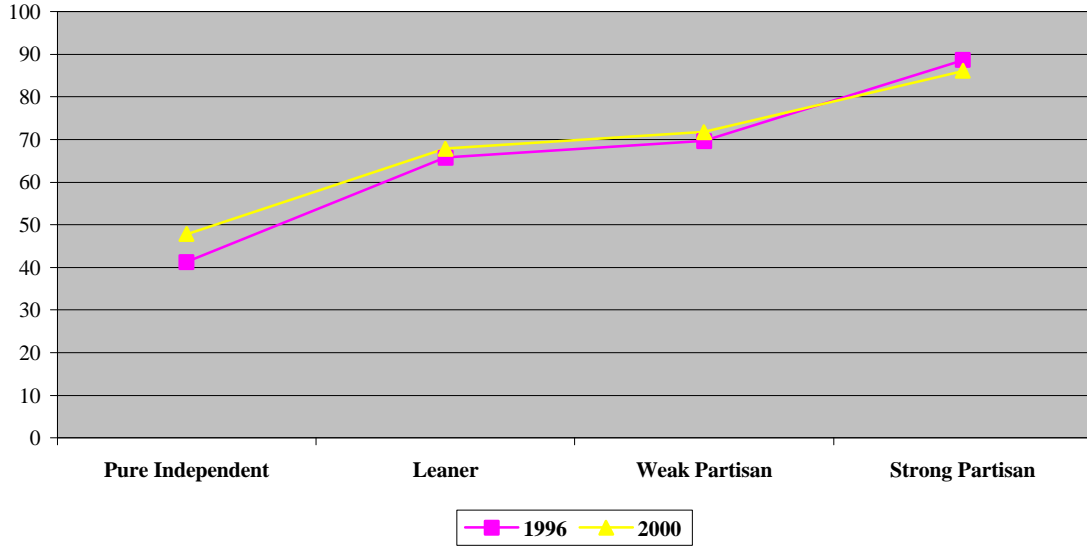


Figure 15

Perception of Close Race and Turnout

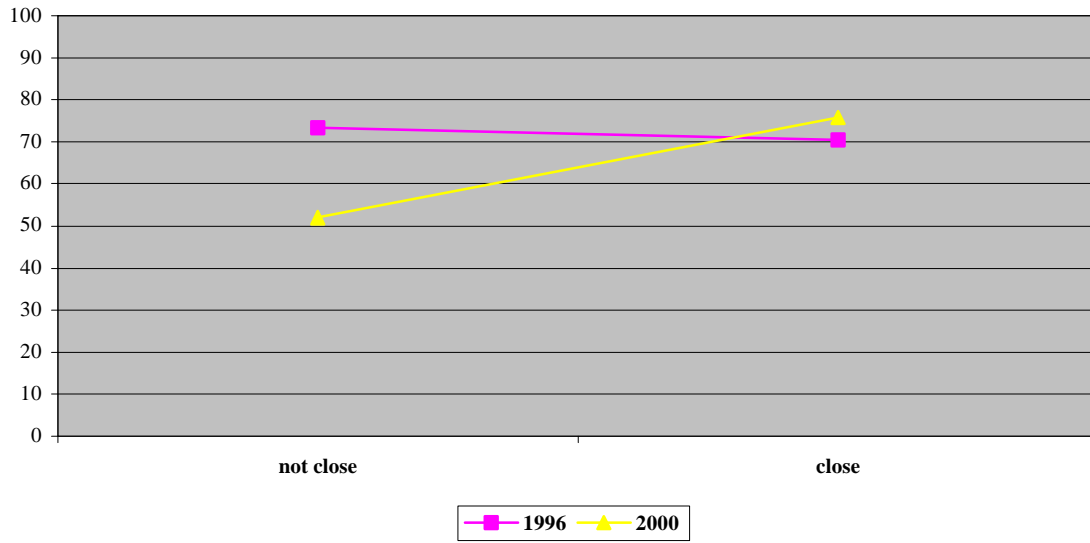


Figure 16

Net Candidate Thermometer Distance and Turnout

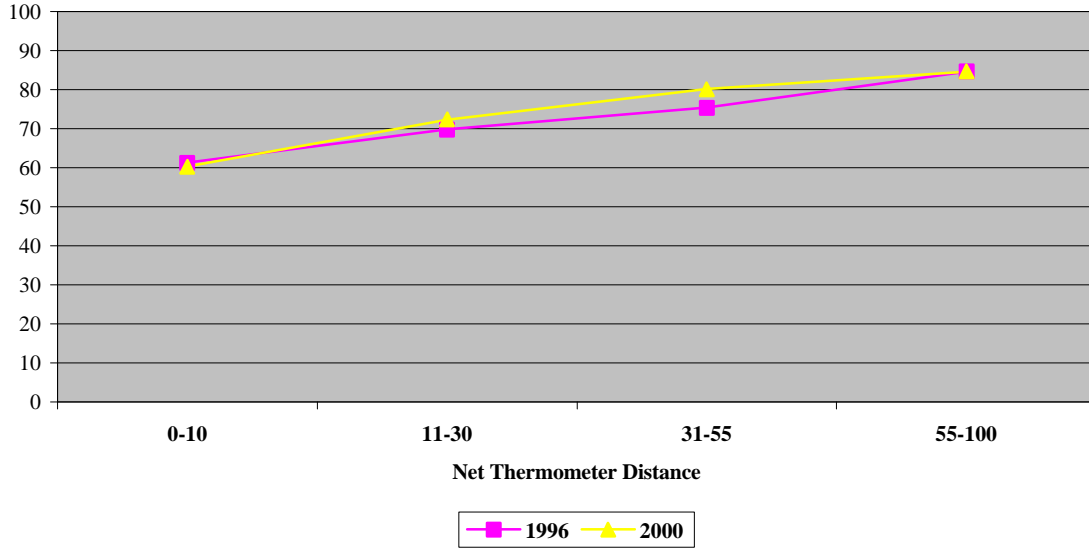


Figure 17

Candidate Likes

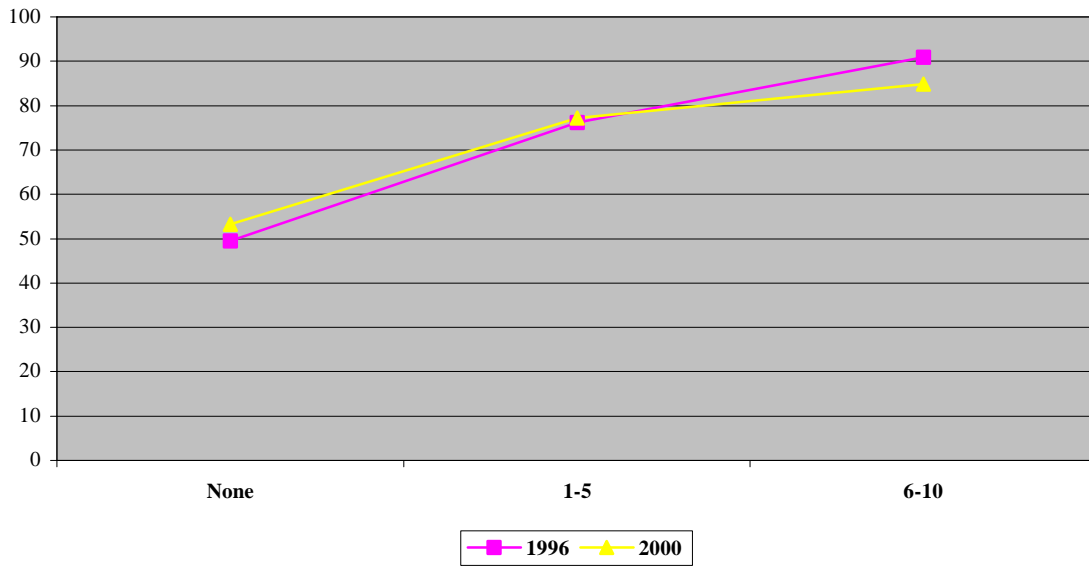


Figure 18
Candidate Dislikes

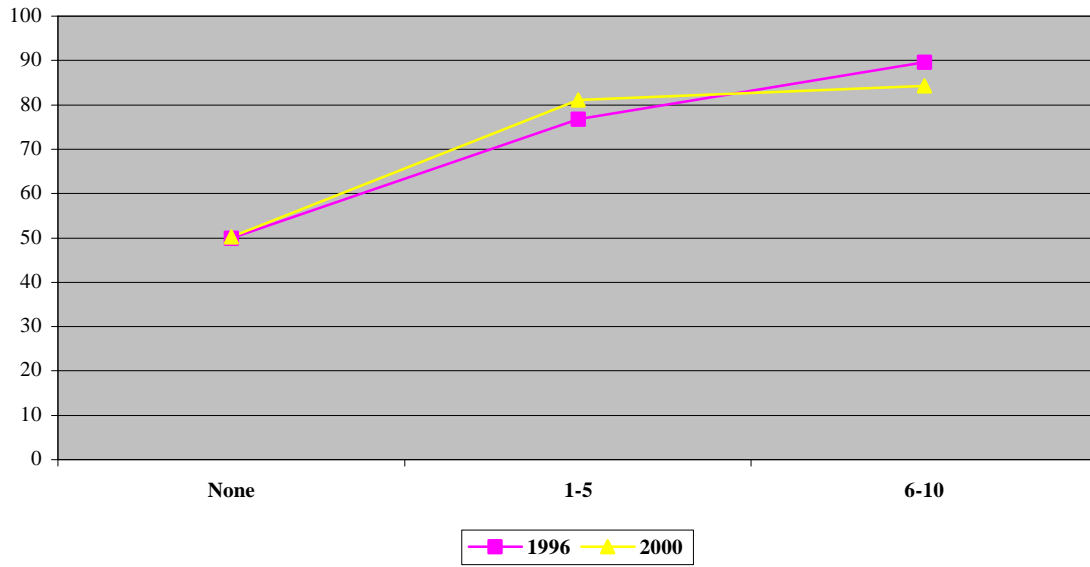
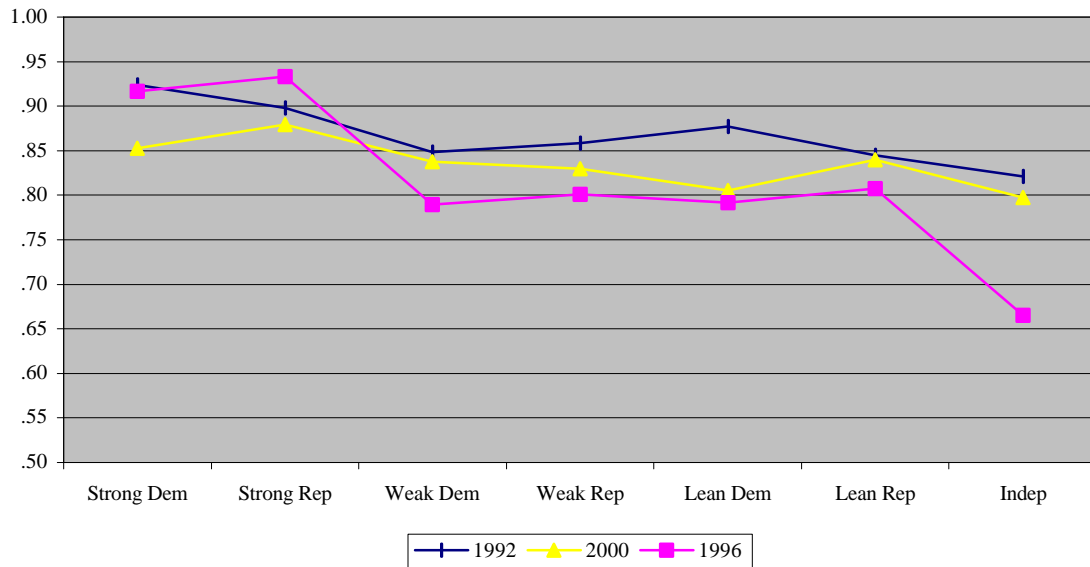
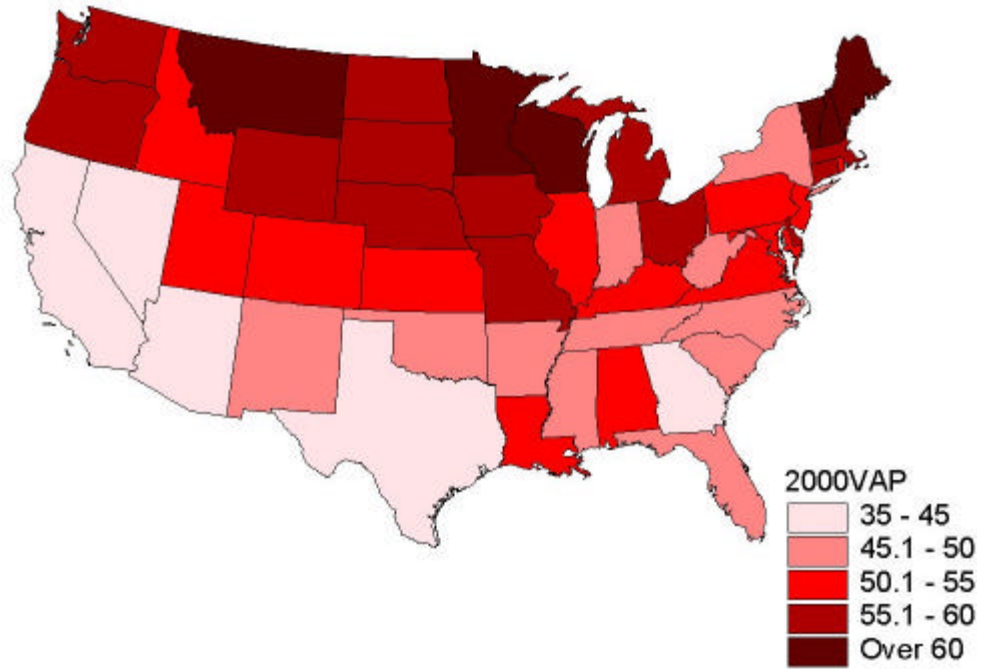


Figure 19
Estimated Turnout Probability by Party Identification, 1992-2000



Map 1: 2000 State-Level Turnout (VAP)



Map 2: 1996-2000 Change in Turnout (VAP)

