Voting Behavior and Intensity

Demographics

Demography is the study of the characteristics of the human population, such as age, race, and gender. Political scientists use demography to identify and study specific target groups to determine who shows up at the polls versus who does not. In addition, these demographic groups enable political scientists to study voting trends, or what causes people to vote a particular way. Their studies not only yield statistics that can be used to forecast voter turnout in subsequent elections, but they also yield answers to why some demographic groups are more likely to vote than others.

Political scientists typically study people based on the following demographics: age, gender, race, education, and socio-economic status. Age is an important factor to study because voting behaviors differ between younger and older people. By studying the ages of voters, political scientists have learned that people under the age of 25 have a very low rate of voter turnout. Possible reasons for low turnout among this age group are that they have high mobility and probably are not registered to vote. Other possibilities are that they do not feel affected by the vote, and they do not yet feel a strong social obligation to vote.

In contrast, members of the “baby boomer” generation vote in a huge block and will most likely continue to do so in the next several elections. Having grown up during periods of political and social unrest, these people vote because they feel a strong sense of civic duty. Eligible voters over age 75 also tend to have a strong sense of civic duty, but demographic studies have shown that physical limitations and lack of transportation can affect their turnout at the polls.

Gender is a focus of study because historically more men than women have voted in elections. However, that trend has been changing gradually over the past several decades. With the passage of the 19th Amendment, post-World War II changes in women’s social roles, and more women in the workforce, an increasing number of women have been going to the polls. Today, women participate more actively than ever, and in the 2000 presidential election, they even voted at a slightly higher rate than men.

Political scientists also look at race in relation to voting. They have found that whites in general vote at the highest level of all racial groups. They have also found that African Americans are more likely to vote if the policy agenda is salient—that it includes issues they consider important in their daily lives. Other racial groups, such as Hispanics, have the lowest turnout in elections. However, Cuban-Americans have a much higher voter turnout than other Latino voters. Immigrants come to the United States from numerous countries. In general, the newer these immigrants are to the U.S., the less likely they are to vote.

Education also yields insight into a person’s voting habits. Surveys indicate that the higher a person’s education, the more likely that person will participate in politics, whether as a voter or a candidate. Conversely, the lower one’s education, the more likely that person will feel disenfranchised. For example, high school dropouts show one of the lowest voting rates.

Finally, political scientists examine how people’s socio-economic status influences voting behavior. Their findings indicate that upper-income people have strong voting records. In general, the wealthier a person is, the more likely he or she will vote. Based on this, it follows that the unemployed and low-paid service workers vote at a lower rate than unionized blue-collar workers.

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