

Intentional Undervotes in Presidential Elections, 1972-2000

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December, 2005

GSS Topical Report No. 39

Introduction

Voting roll-off or the failure of voters to cast votes for all contests in an election has been a topic of research for a long time (Kimball and Kropf, 2005). The closeness of the 2000 presidential election and especially the difficulties that emerged in counting the presidential vote in Florida increased interest in this topic and refocused attention from roll-off for lesser or down-ballot contests to looking at unrecorded votes for President at the top of the ballot. Most studies of unrecorded voting (Bullock and Dunn, 1996; Bullock and Hood, 2002; Hansen, 2003; Kimball and Kropf, 2003 & 2005; Kimball Owens, and McAndrew, 2001; Kimball, Owens, and Keeney, 2004; Knack and Kropf, 2003; Kropf and Knack, 2004; Wattenberg, McAllister, and Salvanto, 2000) have utilized official counts and analyzed these by geographic units (e.g. states, counties, precincts) and the aggregate characteristics of these units (e.g. Census characteristics, type of voting mechanism, ballot design, voter registration data, past voting, etc.). A major limitation of these voting-count studies is that they can not study individual-level behavior in general and in particular can not distinguish intentional undervotes from unintentional undervotes. The former occurs when a voter intentionally fails to vote in a contest and the later occurs when a voter intended to cast a valid vote and probably believed that he/she had done so, but no valid vote was recorded due to an error on his/her part or a failure of the voting system.

Undervotes are defined in two different ways in the literature. Most frequently it refers to the number of people voting who did not have a vote recorded for a particular context (i.e an office or referendum issue). This could be because voters intentionally failed to vote or attempted to vote, but no valid vote was recorded. When aggregate counts are compared of people voting in the election vs. people voting for each particular contest, nothing further is known except for the total roll-off or undervotes for each contest. However, some times non-votes are distinguished as undervotes (indicating that no valid vote was recorded for the office) and overvotes (indicating that two or more votes were recorded for the same office and thus no valid single vote) (Wolter et al., 2003). This distinction can be made when individual ballots are examined.

Data

The General Social Surveys (GSSs) are full-probability, in-person surveys of adults living in households. Full technical details are available in Davis, Smith, and Marsden, 2005. The 1973-2004 GSSs contain items on voting in the most recent presidential election (VOTE72-VOTE00) and whether and for whom a vote for president was cast (PRES72-PRES00). “Didn’t vote for president” was a pre-coded, but unread, response to the question on whom one voted for president. For example, VOTE00 asked “In 2000, you remember that Gore ran on the Democratic ticket against Bush for the Republicans. Do you remember for sure whether or not you voted in that election?” Then, if one indicated voting, PRES00 asked, “Did you vote for Gore or Bush?” “Didn’t vote” was a precoded response to PRES00.

Intentional Presidential Undervoting Estimates

Most information on intentional presidential undervotes comes from surveys. The GSS

items on the 1972-2000 presidential elections found that 0.4% of the voters in these presidential elections did not vote for president. Knack and Kropf (2003) in their analysis of the 1980-2000 National Election Studies (NES) found that 0.7% said “no” to questions asking voters in the presidential elections of those year, “How about the election for President? Did you vote for a candidate for President?” Knack and Kropf (2003) also examined the 1992 Voter News Service (VNS) exit poll. In response to “In today’s election for President, did you just vote for: Bill Clinton/George Bush/Ross Perot/Other/Didn’t vote for President,” they found that 0.2% said they didn’t vote for president and another 0.5% left the item blank. Based on advice from VNS staffers that “many undervoters likely skipped the presidential vote question because they thought it was not applicable to them,” they combined these two categories together and found “up to 0.77% intentionally undervoted” in the 1992 VNS.

The GSS item probably undercounts intentional undervotes because a) the item does not explicitly offer that as an option and b) the mentioning of the presidential candidates in the lead and follow-up question serves as prompts that would tend to lead some presidential undervoters to misreport voting for a presidential candidate. The NES and VNS items probably get more reliable measures of undervoting because it is an explicit option. Greater accuracy may also occur on the VNS since recall is over just a few minutes rather than over several weeks for the NES and several months to several years on the GSS. However, an analysis of undervoting by elapsed time on the GSS showed no clear decline in reported levels over time. A similar result comes from the NES (Wattenberg, McAllister, and Salvanto, 2000). Finally, the assumption that all missing cases on the VNS represent undervotes is too extreme. Not answering could easily also reflect a desire not disclose ones vote, an inadvertent omission, literacy problems, and other causes.

In addition, one state, Nevada, includes the category “None of these candidates” for the presidential contest. In 1996 1.2% selected this explicit undervote option and in 2000 it was 0.5-0.6% (Kimball, Owens, and Keeney, 2004; Kimball, Owens, and McAndrew, 2001; Knack and Kropf, 2003). Given the legitimizing explicitness of this option, one would expect it to generate more intentional undervotes than in the other 49 states where one has to void a straight-party vote (in those states offering this option) and skip over the presidential section on the ballot for an intentional undervote.

Characteristics of Intentional Presidential Undervoters

Tables 1 and 2 examine the correlates of intentional, presidential undervoting. First, none of the basic demographics (gender, age, and marital status) are related. Second, race, but not Hispanic ethnicity, is associated. Whites and Blacks do not differ in intentional undervoting, but others on race (Asians, American Indians, some Hispanics, etc.) have three-times the undervoting rate (1.3% vs. 0.4%). Third, region of the country, but not community type, is correlated. The individual regional differences are mostly small and do not follow any clear pattern. Fourth, socio-economic status (labor force status, income, and education) has no relationship. Fifth, two other cognitive variables related to level of education (vocabulary score and interviewer’s assessment of respondent’s understanding of questions) are not associated. Sixth, respondent cooperativeness was related to reporting income, but not to interviewer ratings of respondent

cooperation. Those who refused to reported their household income are twice as likely to report undervoting than those giving income. Seventh, place of residence at age 16 is associated and country of birth has a borderline relationship. For both variables foreigners are twice as likely to undervote as US residents are. Looking at race and foreign residence together shows that others on race who are foreign born or who grew up outside the US have the highest undervoting rates(respectively 2.1% and 2.4%). Eighth, information about the news and holding opinion on governmental spending policies are unrelated with undervoting. Ninth, confidence in the executive and legislative branches of the federal government are not associated with undervoting. Tenth, political orientation, but not membership in political groups, is correlated with undervoting. Undervoting is greatest among independents with no partisan leanings (1.1%) and next highest among those identifying with third parties (0.8%). Strength of partisanship does not seem to matter. Likewise, in a relationship of borderline statistical significance, the moderates have marginally higher undervoting (0.6%) and those with more extreme ideological positions have the lowest undervoting (0.2-.0.3%). Knack and Kropf (2003) argue that “political alienation...the lack of a candidate who represents their interests” may explain their greater undervoting by independents. Alternatively, ambivalence may be the explanation. Most independents with no partisan leaning are equally poised between the major parties and nothing may tip them towards one major, presidential candidate over the other. This equipositioning may lead to indecision and intentionally not voting for president.

Summary

National estimates are that about 1.8% to 2% of voters in presidential elections have no recorded vote. A substantial fraction of that total, about one-quarter to one-third, represents intentional undervotes. They would make an even larger share of unrecorded votes that involved the absence of any vote rather than negating overvotes. For example, in the 2000 presidential election in Florida overvotes were 1.9% of the total votes and undervotes were 1.0% (Wolter et al., 2003).

The limited research to date on intentional undervoting from the NES (Wattenberg, McAllister, and Salvanto, 2000), the VNS (Knack and Kropf, 2003), and the GSS (here), concur that undervoting is greater among independents and least among partisans. This is also supported by the GSS analysis of political ideology. The GSS also finds that third-party adherents are less likely to vote and this result is backed by the aggregate-level finding that undervoting was greater in 2000 in states where Nader was not on the ballot (Kimball, Owens, and McAllister, 2001; Kimball, Owens, and Keeney, 2004). It is also consistent with aggregate-level results that show less presidential undervoting when more candidates are on the ballot (Knack and Kropf, 2003; Kropf and Knack, 2004). The studies also indicate that while there are no differences between Whites and Blacks and between Hispanics and non-Hispanics, but that members of other races are less likely to vote. GSS analysis further indicates that this is at least in part due to members of this racial group not being born and/or raised in United States. People in this group may both find candidates of their own ethno-racial group non-existent in presidential contests and rare in other top-level contests and be less familiar with the American political system.

But the studies disagree on other points. The VNS analysis showed more intentional

undervoting among older voters and those with lower incomes, but the NES and GSS studies found no relationship with age or income. The NES study of congressional, intentional undervoting found that lack of involvement and interest in the congressional races were related to more undervoting, but none of the measures of general political interest or information on the GSS were associated with presidential undervoting. The VNS study did not examine such variables.

The individual-level, intentional voting studies do agree in failing to show some of the relationships commonly found in aggregate-level studies (Bullock and Dunn, 1996; Bullock and Hood, 2002; Hansen, 2003; Kimball and Kropf, 2003 & 2005; Kimball Owens, and McAndrew, 2001; Kimball, Owens, and Keeney, 2004; Knack and Kropf, 2003; Kropf and Knack, 2004; Wattenberg, McAllister, and Salvanto, 2000). None show greater undervoting by Blacks or the less educated. This may indicate that being Black and having less education is primarily related to unintentional undervoting. This is consistent with aggregate-level results that show that racial differences sometimes disappear with the voting system controlled for (Kropf and Knack, 2004).

Most of the explanations for intentional undervoting voting (voter fatigue, lack of interest, lack of information; see Coupe and Noury, 2004; Kimball and Kropf, 2005; Kimball, Owens, and McAndrew, 2001; Knack and Kropf, 2003; Kropf and Knack, 2004) operate better to account for the high roll-off for down-ballot contests than for presidential undervoting. The most consistently supported explanations involve greater intentional presidential undervoting by 1) Independents which probably reflects both less attachment to any of the candidates and indecision between equidistant alternatives, 2) third-party supporters who may not cast a vote simply because their party's candidate is not on the ballot, and 3) members of the smallest racial groups (not White, Black, or Hispanic) and perhaps especially those born and/or raised outside the US.

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Table 1

Correlates of Not Voting for President Among Voters

| Variables/GSS Mnemonic | Prob. |
|--|-------|
| Gender/SEX | .323 |
| Age/AGE | .338 |
| Marital Status/MARITAL | .393 |
| Race/RACE | .002 |
| Hispanic ^a | .229 |
| Region/REGION | .016 |
| Community Type/SRCBELT | .186 |
| Labor-Force Status/WRKSTAT | .275 |
| Income/REALINC | .429 |
| Education/DEGREE | .793 |
| Vocabulary Test/WORDSUM | .656 |
| Comprehension/COMPRED | .914 |
| Cooperation/COOP | .962 |
| Refused Income/INCOME...INCOM98 | .050 |
| Region at Age 16/REG16 | .045 |
| Born in USA/BORN | .063 |
| Newspaper readership/NEWS | .900 |
| Don't Knows on Spending Items ^b | .868 |
| Confidence in Congress/CONLEGIS | .228 |
| Confidence in Executive Branch/CONFED | .962 |
| Party Identification/PARTYID | .000 |
| Political Ideology/POLVIEWS | .083 |
| Member of Political Group/MEMPOLIT | .940 |
| Personal Happiness/HAPPY | .829 |
| Financial Satisfaction/SATFIN | .293 |

^aAny mention of Hispanic ancestors of ETH1, ETH2, ETH3, or ETHNIC.

^bNumber of Don't Know responses to the 15 spending priority items, NATSPAC, etc.

Table 2

% Not Voting for President

| | |
|-------------------------------|-----|
| Race | |
| White | 0.4 |
| Black | 0.4 |
| Other | 1.3 |
| Region of Residence at Age 16 | |
| Foreign | 0.8 |
| USA | 0.4 |
| Place of Birth | |
| USA | 0.4 |
| Not USA | 0.8 |
| Region | |
| New England | 0.4 |
| Mid Atlantic | 0.6 |
| South Atlantic | 0.6 |
| East North Central | 0.3 |
| West North Central | 0.5 |
| East South Central | 0.5 |
| West South Central | 0.1 |
| Mountain | 0.3 |
| Pacific | 0.6 |
| Refused Income | |
| Gave | .04 |
| Refused | .08 |
| Party Identification | |
| Strong Democrat | 0.4 |
| Democrat | 0.5 |
| Democratic Leaning | 0.4 |
| Independent | 1.1 |
| Republican Leaning | 0.3 |
| Republican | 0.3 |
| Strong Republican | 0.3 |
| Other | 0.8 |

Table 2 (continued)

% Not Voting for President

| Political Ideology | |
|----------------------|-----|
| Extreme Liberal | 0.3 |
| Liberal | 0.5 |
| Slight Liberal | 0.5 |
| Moderate | 0.6 |
| Slight Conservative | 0.4 |
| Conservative | 0.2 |
| Extreme Conservative | 0.2 |