

ARTICLES

WHO VOTES? WHO VOTED? THE 2008 AMERICAN ELECTIONS: CONTEXTS FOR JUDGING PARTICIPATION AND PARTISANSHIP

DON DEBATS

ABSTRACT Who ever wins the keys to the White House and whichever party ends up in control of the US Congress, turnout in the 2008 elections will inform cross-national judgments of the vitality of contemporary American politics. The 2008 elections will also provide a further vantage point in the debate over the historical trajectory of American political participation. This article is intended to assist those twin assessments by developing a contemporary comparative context into which information from the 2008 elections might be nested as well as bringing to bear on the historical question new information emerging from a series of micro-studies of the world of politics in nineteenth century America. New approaches produce higher estimates of voter participation in contemporary America and lower rates in the nineteenth century; nevertheless important differences in turnout and also partisanship separate the past and present of US politics.

Comparing US Political Participation

Making sense of the level of participation in US politics from an Australian perspective is complicated by the fact, that while Australia stands as virtually the only exemplar of meaningful compulsion in both registration and voting, the US is one of the few mass democracies in which registration is entirely the responsibility of the citizen and voting is voluntary.¹ The norm in western democracies lies precisely between these poles: compulsory or state assisted registration but voluntary voting.² Perhaps in time these two outlier nations will adopt that norm, although compulsory voting comes under only surprisingly scattered attack in Australia and the US moves only glacially toward a more universal registration system.³

This means that participation in the 2008 elections will be computed differently in the US (percentage of the age eligible) from almost every other nation (percentage of the registered). The US Census Bureau, which has assumed the task of calculating the national turnout rate, *could* report US participation in terms of the turnout of that 72 percent of citizens of voting age who indicate in surveys that they are registered to vote.⁴ Given that registered citizens define the eligible electorate, there would be a great

deal of logic to using this group as the basis for calculating turnout. Were the Bureau to calculate turnout this way, we would expect an announcement that the participation rate in the 2008 election was about the same or maybe a little higher than in the 2004 contest – around 86 percent (of registered citizens).⁵

But this has not been the American tradition. Instead the Census Bureau measures turnout as a percentage of the resident age eligible population, thus including as potential voters many who in fact cannot vote -- non-citizens, those denied the suffrage as a result of felony conviction and those judged mentally incompetent.⁶ The US Constitution gives almost complete control of electoral matters to states which ensures that registration systems and rates of registration vary widely, ranging from the highs of Minnesota and Maine (82 and 81 percent of age eligible resident populations) to the lows of Hawaii and California (53 and 54 percent).⁷ Given the hundred year effort of the southern states of the US to disenfranchise African-Americans, the Bureau's reluctance to measure political participation on a state-based metric is perhaps understandable. More importantly, the US rate of registration, being entirely voluntary, is low by international standards. Voting age population is at least a consistent measure, and one controlled by the Bureau. Thus, shortly after the 2008 election, the Bureau will announce the participation rate as perhaps a little higher than in 2004, perhaps around 56 percent (of the age eligible population).

On the other hand Australia, and almost every other nation, calculates their participation rate in terms of the percentage of the turnout of the registered population. Since aliens cannot register, they are excluded from the calculation of participation. Thus we can anticipate media reports on the 2008 election again juxtaposing the “abysmal” turnout rates in the US compared with other nations, with no acknowledgement that these turnout rates are calculated in totally different ways. If the 2004 election results are repeated, this faux comparison will feature a robust turnout of 94 percent in Australia, contrasted with a paltry 56 percent in the US.⁸

A two step corrective is possible. First it is useful to note that participation of registered voters in the US is not so dissimilar from that in Australia: 86 percent of voluntarily registered voters in the US voluntarily voted in 2004 as opposed to 94 percent of compulsorily registered voters who compulsorily voted in Australia in the election of that same year.⁹ But of course a much larger percentage of the age eligible population in Australia is registered – about 86 percent – as against the 66 percent in the US.¹⁰ A more meaningful comparison, then, might be the participation rate of the age eligible in the two nations. Table 1 below summarizes these different measures of participation in the 2004 elections held in Australia and the US.

Table 1:
Turnout Rates and Registration Rates:
Australia and the United States, 2004 Elections
By Percent¹¹

	Percentage of Age Eligible Population Who Vote	Percent of Age Eligible Population Registered	Percent of Those Registered Who Vote
Australia	80.8	85.6	94.3
United States	55.5	65.9	86.1

In Australia about 81 percent of the age eligible population voted in 2004 compared with 56 percent of the age eligible in the US who voted in the presidential election that same year. This is still a sizeable gap but the measure is consistent and better informed -- and a third lower -- than the frequently employed diagonal in the table, which produces the 94 to 56 differential.

Of course an Australian-US comparison of political participation, given compulsory registration and compulsory voting in the former, remains a strange juxtaposition. Canada, on the other hand, uses the standard form of effectively compulsory registration combined with the world norm of voluntary voting and, as another New World settler society, provides a particularly relevant comparison. While Elections Canada presents Canadian turnout in terms of the percentage of the registered who vote, many Canadian researchers re-calibrate turnout in terms of the voting age population to facilitate comparison with the US. Richard Johnson uses this metric and shows a declining gap between American and Canadian turnout over the last several elections.¹²

As Table 2 shows, using the voting age population as the basis of turnout calculations halves the perceived difference in the turnout rate between Canada and the US. Indeed, data from the elections held in both nations in 2004 show that the turnout of the age eligible voters in the US exceeded (just) turnout of Canadian age eligible voters. Moreover, the participation rate of registered voters in the US exceeded that of Canadian registered voters in every year.¹³

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Table 2
Rates of Participation in National General Elections, Canada and the US, 1988-2004,
Calculated in Terms of Registered and Voting Age Populations
By Percent¹⁴

Canadian Election	1988	1993	1997	2000	2004
US Election	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004
Canada: Turnout of Registered Population	75	71	67	61	60.5
Canada: Turnout of Voting Age Population	68	64	57	55	54.8
US: Turnout of Voting Age Population	50	55	49	50	55.6
US: Turnout of Registered Population	76	81	74	78	84.2

While the relatively low percentage of the US population registered again militates against a comparison built on registration data, it may well be that when the participation rate in the 2008 US election is compared with turnout in the most recent (2006) Canadian election, that the cross-over on the more meaningful measure of age eligible participation will be confirmed.¹⁵ At the very least, the Canadian example shows the importance of using comparable measures when comparing turnout rates between nations.

Historical Trends in US Participation Rates

The other comparison of popular engagement in politics sure to arise from the 2008 election will focus on the decline of US participation rates across time. Here the standard form is to present a table, beginning with high rates of participation in the nineteenth century and sliding ever downwards to the anemic present. Once again a political jeremiad is inferred: not only is the political engagement of contemporary Americans abysmal in comparative terms, but they are also to be castigated for failing to maintain the level of political interest demonstrated by their ancestors. Studies of historical trends are important, but just as we have seen with contemporary comparisons, turnout figures are more complex than they seem. Understanding what precisely were past rates of US participation is more difficult than it might seem from the rather casual way the past is invoked.

The debate about the trajectory of US political participation began in 1965 with a major article by Walter Dean Burnham in the *American Political Science Review*.¹⁶ Prior to this, discussion of past American political

participation tended to focus on the expansion of the electorate following the removal of property qualifications for voting in the 1830s, the subsequent invention of mass political parties, and the arrival of the common man in American political life. “Jacksonian Democracy” became a convenient shorthand for what came to be understood as “a golden age” of American political life.¹⁷ It was a whiggish story of expanding democracy and rising political participation.

Burnham accepted the evidence of high rates of voting in the past but emphasized the fall from those heights to dramatically lower participation rates evident in recent times. Using estimates of the eligible population from the decennial Census Bureau reports, he calculated that national turnout rates averaged 75-80 percent in the half century before 1900, with some states far higher, but then fell to figures approaching just half of the electorate by the 1920s, with many states, especially in the South, recording far lower turnout figures. Burnham reported a moderate rise in turnout in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but the extension of his calculations to the present shows another collapse in participation in recent elections.

Burnham agreed with historians that those high turnout rates of the past spoke to an enlivened politics which engaged a politically eager citizenry. The collapse in turnout, Burnham argued, was not an uncaused cause but reflected, from the early years of the twentieth century, a new system in which elites sought to insulate politics from the concerns and attention of the mass electorate. Rather like Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous essay, Burnham’s argument suggested that the conditions fostering democracy were in decline.

These were important conclusions and Burnham’s turnout figures were included in the second edition of the Bureau’s authoritative *Historical Statistics*.¹⁸ When a third edition appeared in 2006, Burnham’s data, extended to the present, remained, but now as one of two interpretations of past turnout rates.¹⁹ The rationale for the inclusion of that alternative series of turnout figures is important to understand.

Burnham’s series attracted attention in part because nineteenth century participation rates were so high, rising from slightly above 50 percent in the 1830s to near or above 80 percent for almost every presidential election from 1840 to 1896, with an average turnout across those 15 elections of 77.1 percent. By contrast the most recent 15 presidential elections (1948-2004) have produced an average turnout of only 55.5 percent and the two most recent had participation rates near 50 percent. Burnham’s calculations, even more striking because they included an effort to adjust for citizenship from 1870 onwards (when the Bureau first collected that information), have

influenced almost every textbook account of past American political participation, and the conclusion to be drawn is decidedly not whiggish.

National rates of participation are of course built on state data and the Burnham series include some remarkable turnout figures at that level, including a vote of 97.8 percent in frontier Oregon in its first presidential election in 1860. Georgia is recorded as having a turnout of 92.6 percent in 1844 and New York as having participation rates above 90 percent in eight of the 13 elections between 1840 and 1888. In 1876, Burnham calculates a turnout rate of 93.5 percent in Florida, 99.1 percent in Iowa and a stellar 101 percent in South Carolina. In 1896, just before the decline set in, Burnham scores Illinois with a turnout rate of 95.7 percent, Indiana with 95.1 percent, Michigan with 95.3 percent, Ohio with 95.5 percent and West Virginia with 93.6 percent.²⁰ Results such as these in a voluntary voting system in a largely rural nation are indeed striking, even by comparison with the turnout rates that Australia records a century later in an urban nation with both registration and voting required, and enforced, by law.

Questions about Burnham's interpretation were quick to come. Across the 1970s, Jerrold Rusk and Philip Converse engaged Burnham in spirited rejoinders.²¹ Frequently the question concerned the number of votes cast – the numerator in the equation – with a focus on the contribution of electorate fraud to inflated turnout figures. Here Burnham remained on strong ground and fraud has been largely dismissed as an explanation for the high numbers of votes in the past.²² But Converse and Rusk also focused on the institutional rules for voting, arguing that “reforms” such as the Australian ballot, registration laws and citizenship requirements contributed, like literacy requirements and the non-partisan ballots, to the decline in participation. They argued that the eligible electorate – the denominator in the turnout equation -- was reduced by the changes in the institutional rules and turnout calculations needed to reflect those changes. Burnham agreed that institutional changes were associated with a decline in participation but he saw those changes less as “reforms” than the reflection of a basic shift in the political economy and an associated effort to limit the popular voice in matters political.

In 2001 Rusk produced *A Statistical History of the American Electorate* which recalculates nineteenth century turnout figures from better data and with a keener eye to the effect of rule changes at the state level. It is Rusk's recalculation of past turnout rates that the new edition of *Historical Statistics* presents alongside Burnham's original numbers.²³ Rusk's work provides, “the only full accounting of all legal requirements [to vote], when they went into effect, and how they differed from state to state” and shows in vast detail why the assumptions used to calculate the eligible electorate in

the past need to be refined to take account of the increasing regulation of the electorate.²⁴ This is the culmination of the “legal-institutional theory of voting” that Rusk and Converse first laid out a generation ago.

Rusk’s work produces some important correctives to Burnham’s, particularly in that era referred to as the “golden age” of political participation. Table 3 shows the divergence in turnout estimates to 1868.²⁵ Rusk’s over-all corrective decreases the turnout by 7.3 percent with the greatest discrepancy being the key election of 1860. Burnham had calculated a turnout in 1860 of 81 percent, but Rusk concludes it produced a turnout of 72 percent, a decline in terms of the original estimate of 11 percent.

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Rusk is able to modify the denominator in terms of state laws which limited voting to citizens, but there is no data to provide correctives for other restrictions.²⁶ The early economic requirements for the suffrage cannot be measured because there is no census-based means of associating economic condition with eligibility. Likewise because race related restrictions on voting in place from 1870 to 1965 could not, given the 15th Amendment, be based explicitly on race or colour, Rusk has not eliminated blacks from the potential electorate, even though that was exactly the intention of the state laws.

But perhaps the most important point is that both Rusk and Burnham depend fundamentally on federal census counts of the population, which they adjust for age, race (before 1870), citizenship, and gender (before 1920) to define the eligible electorate. In some ways there is no choice: in the absence of a common electoral roll across all states, the only source from which to estimate the base population that might have voted is past US census reports. The national turnout figure is simply the additive of turnout figures calculated from federal census data for states. Thus it is striking that while Rusk’s work reduces the very high turnout figures in some states from Burnham’s figures, many others remain.²⁷ Rusk still credits Georgia as having a turnout rate of 93.2 percent of the age (and race) eligible population in 1844 (higher than Burnham calculated), a turnout in Florida of 90.8 percent in 1876 and in the election of 1896, 96.9 percent in Illinois, 97.6 percent in Indiana, 95.3 percent in Michigan, 95.1 percent in Ohio and 93.4 percent in West Virginia. A good deal of the debate over past US turnout rates now revolves about the reliability of federal census data as the base from which to measure the eligible electorate.

Exactly this question of the denominator in turnout calculations was raised in the mid-1980s by Gerald Ginsburg in a second critique of Burnham's calculations of past turnout.²⁸ Burnham always acknowledged the possibility of census under-enumeration and anticipated this weakness in his 1965 work, saying that,

*the estimated eligible population [figures]...have very significant problems. In general, the denominator estimates [eg the potential electorate] are much more precise from 1900 on than they are for years prior to that date. The reason for this lies in the changing nature of census reporting of critical components which enter the calculation.*²⁹

But Ginsburg pressed the point of the reliability of past census data as the base from which to calculate the potential electorate because he knew, some 15 years after Burnham's initial work, that the census under-enumeration problem was very real indeed.

The US manuscript census returns (preserved in the US and most other western nations, but until recently gleefully destroyed in Australia) came into their own in the 1960s as a new generation of historians turned to these records to write a new history of ordinary people – a history “from the bottom up.” But these historians quickly discovered that many individuals listed in other surviving nineteenth century records were missing from the census manuscripts. The implications of these gaps – the undercount -- for the history of American politics are important: if the census missed a significant percentage of the potential electorate then turnout figures based on census data will give higher turnout rates than was actually the case. Moreover, the higher the rate of turnout, the greater will be the impact on turnout of the same magnitude of census error.³⁰

The convergence is simple: the highest rates of perceived turnout are the most prone to substantial correction and those figures occur in the decades from 1840 to 1900, just when there is good reason to believe that census counts were least reliable. Turnout declines after 1900 as the accuracy of the census improves. Are the high rates of nineteenth century turnout then a function of census error rather than political enthusiasm?

It is hardly surprising that the early censuses are thought to be the most inaccurate.³¹ The 2000 US census missed about one percent of the population; the undercount in 1990 was about 1.8 percent, 1.2 percent in 1980, gradually rising to 5.8 percent in 1940.³² There is no doubt that the

error grows as one moves further back in time -- toward the point of highest turnout rates. The administrator of the 1870 census said that,

*the censuses of 1850, 1860 and 1870 are loaded with bad statistics. There are statistics in the census of 1870, I am sorry to say, where some of the results are false to the extent of one-half. They had to be published then, because the law called for it; but I took the liberty of branding them as untrustworthy and in some cases giving the reasons therefore at some length.*³³

Indeed the errors in the 1870 censuses for New York City and Philadelphia, the nation's two largest cities at the time, were sufficient to cause recounts.³⁴ The increasing complexity of the three censuses after 1850, all of which pre-dated the establishment of the Bureau as a professional bureaucracy, may have added to error.³⁵

Digging deeper to consider how the censuses of the nineteenth century were collected in individual towns and cities and counties, we discover that they were messy events. The census takers were usually assistant marshals or deputy sheriffs who were assigned the task with no training beyond the questionable benefit of increasingly complex instructions from the Bureau in Washington. The census takers had no incentive to be complete in their enumerations beyond local pride in growth and the remote risk of demands for a recount. The data collection process was often haphazard and "the census" in any given place was collected over many days or months, perhaps as other duties allowed. Proximity to power did not increase efficiency: the 1860 censuses for Washington County on the remote Oregon frontier and Alexandria, Virginia, just across the Potomac from Washington, both lasted just over two months. This represented an efficiency gain in Alexandria in that the 1850 census took over six months to complete. To imagine trying to produce an accurate snapshot of the population of a town of 12,000 people when the enumeration period is half a year is to understand how serious error can be part of the population figures recorded in past censuses. Census takers visited their interviewees in their homes, at their places of work, at elections, at court days, in bars and even in brothels.

How many people were missed, and by how much, therefore, are the estimates of the potential electorate in error? Peter Knights, one of those pioneering social historians of the 1960s, thought that the census missed eight to ten percent of the population of ante-bellum Boston; Richard Steckel thought that undercounts in the antebellum years might run to 10-15 percent of all households.³⁶ Ginsburg himself estimated that nineteenth century censuses, "missed at least ten out of every 100 people."³⁷ Under-

enumeration no doubt also varied by race, ethnicity, sex, occupation, and age. Elizabeth Pleck estimated black under-representation at nearly one-third in Boston in the post Civil War era.³⁸ While the group most likely to be correctly counted in the census was adult males, the nineteenth century's eligible electorate, there were inevitably errors here too.

Burnham was robust in his defense of his data when responding to Ginsburg, but he conceded that there remained, "the very real and always potentially serious problem" of census undercounts. As Burnham noted, "the integrity of any estimate based on them stands or falls on their [the censuses'] completeness."³⁹ Nevertheless he remained confident in his data and argued that the undercount of the white population in the US everywhere except the far west frontier, the under-developed South and the few very large cities was unlikely to exceed five percent. But, he added, "that number can be no more than a guess in the present or probable future state of our knowledge."⁴⁰

In this spirit, Burnham noted in his rejoinder to Ginsburg that, as time passed, more information on the accuracy of census data would emerge:

[a]lmost as certainly, there is a good deal more material out there in fugitive sources than has ever been identified, much less pulled together for a fully comprehensive retrieval of turnout-denominator material. Doing so would be the logical next step in addressing the multitudinous problems of population estimation before the Civil War.⁴¹

This is precisely the effort that Paul Bourke and I embarked upon many years ago for Washington County, Oregon and which I have continued in a series of poll book studies across nineteenth century North America.⁴² This work involves assembling the surprising number of individual level social inventories that survive from those times, beginning with the manuscript census schedules but including as well as tax lists, city directories and poll lists. Individual level information from these various sources for whole counties, villages and cities is then linked -- a difficult and time consuming task but one which results in a much more complete accounting of the resident population in that place. These social inventories were compiled for different purposes: census records to satisfy a federal government requirement, tax lists to provide a revenue base for the community, and poll lists to provide a record of men who voted. Consequently they catch most securely different elements of the population. When joined together, they can also tell us who was present in a community but missed by the census taker. With careful decision rules in place, new and improved estimates of the potential electorate are then possible.⁴³

Four case studies developed in this way in the years of highest political participation are discussed below: a frontier county, a commercial city, an industrial city, and a long settled rural county – four representations covering a good deal of the demographic range of nineteenth century America.⁴⁴ No one case is a perfect test of the under-enumeration of the past electorate, but all suggest the problem is significant. There is no claim here that the findings on the census undercount of the potential electorate emerging from these four case studies are representative or “generalizable.” But to set out these examples, and the corrective that emerges from them, may encourage more work of this type and may set us on the pathway toward more accurate estimates of past political participation, exactly as Burnham anticipated.

Turnout on the Frontier⁴⁵

Paul Bourke’s and my work on Washington County rested on 12 complete social inventories (including the 1860 census) conducted in the years between 1855 and 1860. These records enabled us to enumerate, with a good deal of accuracy, the adult white male population on the ground in this classic frontier community and to calculate new turnout rates for several elections including the 1860 presidential contest. As noted, Burnham gives the turnout rate for Oregon as 98 percent whereas Rusk suggests 87 percent. Washington County is an interesting case because, according to census data, it had the highest turnout (86 percent) of any of Oregon’s 19 counties in the 1860 election. But our work showed that the 1860 census missed 132 of the County’s 876 adult white males, including at least 42 men who voted in the 1860 presidential election. This is an undercount of 15 percent even though the census, taken by Sheriff Wesley Mulkey, was completed only 91 days before the election.⁴⁶ This suggests that the true turnout in Washington County in the 1860 election was 73 percent, not the 86 percent that reliance on the census alone would suggest – a downward revision of 15 percent.

Turnout in a Commercial City⁴⁷

In the case of Alexandria, a long established commercial city, the focus is the general election of May 26, 1859. With secession tensions in the air, voters chose a member of Congress, a governor and various state officials. The tax list for the city was completed a month after the election and the 1860 census fourteen months later. There was limited overlap among these three records and only 921 adult white males appeared on all three. The 1860 census did not include 256 men who voted in the gubernatorial election, 18 percent of the total turnout.⁴⁸ Another 251 men, who did not vote but are identified on the 1859 tax list, are also missing from the census. Both voting and tax paying are associated with persistence and it is likely that a great many of these 507 men were still present in Alexandria in 1860 when the census was taken, suggesting again a high census undercount.⁴⁹

Who was present in Alexandria in 1859 and could have voted? That group certainly included those who voted in the 1859 election (1407), those who did not vote but were on the city's tax lists for that year (708), and probably includes another 83 who didn't vote, weren't on the tax list, but were church members, a feature of the town's life which we also know.⁵⁰ The census of 1860 identifies 2186 white men aged 22 or older in Alexandria in 1860 and we know that 1671 were present the previous year, leaving 515 whose presence we do not know with certainty. But of those, 69 were on the 1850 census and so were likely there in 1859 too. This suggests an electorate of 2267 plus some part of the 446 in the 1860 census and not yet located on a record for 1859 or earlier.

There were 1389 votes cast in Alexandria for governor and if we used only census information, as Burnham and Rusk do, and extrapolate back to 1859 we would have an electorate in Alexandria of 2203 adult white males and a turnout of 63 percent. Using the more precise data above we see that the electorate ranged between 2267 and 2713 and turnout between 61 percent and 51 percent, with a heavy presumption to the lower figure.

Turnout in an Industrial City

Newport, Kentucky, across the Ohio from Cincinnati, was an emerging industrial city with deep roots in heavy industry, especially iron and steel production. The election under study here is the March 2, 1874 contest for local government, the third tier of American politics and a particularly important level of politics in Newport that year. The depression that followed the financial panic of 1873 brought to Ohio Valley steel towns such as Newport an unprecedented level of labour unrest and concomitant demands on local authorities to use their police power to uphold owner control over labour. The election came just two days after a violent clash of striking iron workers and armed strike-breakers in which an innocent bystander was killed.⁵¹

Interpolating between the census years of 1870 and 1880 for Newport yields an age eligible electorate in 1874 of 3746.⁵² Our additional inventories for Newport include the 1874 poll list of those who actually did vote, the tax list of 1874 which indicated whether adult men met citizenship and residency requirements, an 1874 city directory that included surprising levels of information on those at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and, for those who appear on any of the foregoing, additional information from the 1870 census on dependent members of their families. Given Kentucky's citizenship and residence requirements and the fact that half of all Newport's adults were foreign born, we have not included in the eligible electorate the 1037 adult males listed in the city directory but who are not on the tax list, the census or the poll lists.⁵³ There were 2266 voters in the

1874 election. Another 1730 adult males on the 1874 tax list as eligible voters did not vote and there were another 628 males older than 17 on the 1870 census who were in the 1874 city directory and very likely met residence and citizenship requirements who also failed to vote. These figures suggest a minimum total electorate of 4624.⁵⁴ Again we can calculate two turnout rates – one based on the census alone and one from our more extensive data sources: the latter suggests a turnout of 49 percent rather than the 60 percent which would result from using census data alone.

Turnout in the Rural South

Todd County, Kentucky was a plantation county on the Kentucky-Tennessee line and in 1870 newly freed blacks made up 39 percent of the population recorded in the census. When a special election was called for the Third Congressional district on April 25, 1870, just 80 days after the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, the black men of Todd were suddenly an important part of the electorate.⁵⁵ They surged to the polls and cast 36 percent of the votes in the election.⁵⁶

Again we have extensive records from which to reconstruct the population of the County, including the 1870 census conducted between June 1 and October 1, the 1870 tax books compiled on June 8 and the poll books from the special election in April and the regular election in November of 1870. The census gives an adult male population of 2819, but 252 men who voted in the April election and 63 who voted in November do not appear on the census rolls.⁵⁷ Another 329 adult men listed on the 1870 tax list are also missing from the census. Together, these additional social inventories suggest that the Todd County census takers missed 19 percent of the eligible voters. Blacks and whites were not treated equally in this respect either: the undercount of adult white males was 14 percent, but among black men the rate was 25 percent.

There were 2043 votes cast in the April election and 1238 in November. Census data on its own suggests a turnout of 72 percent in April and 44 percent in November. But the ancillary data available from the poll books and the tax lists suggests that the turnout in those two elections was 59 percent and 36 percent. These are again significant differences, revising turnout down 18 percent.

Table 4 summarizes the census undercount in these four case studies and the effect on turnout. Burnham estimated that the census missed only five percent of the entire population of the US – except for that “under-developed South” and the “far frontier.” Washington County was certainly on the far frontier and Todd County was certainly “under-developed” but whether that is a designation to be applied to Alexandria and Newport is

less clear. In any event, these four case studies show undercounts three to four times the level Burnham suggested.

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There is a consistency here across election types and demographic range. These studies suggest that reliance on census data alone, as both Burnham and Rusk do, considerably overstates turnout.

It is possible to replicate studies of this sort in many other locales, as Burnham suggested all those years ago. If that work confirms the findings in the studies reported here, we should be prepared to lower Rusk's recalculation of US turnout in the nineteenth century (Table 3) by as much as another 18 percent.⁵⁸ Even if we were to consider that the census undercount of the eligible electorate consisted only of those who voted but who were not in the census held in the year of the election (or close to it) and that the census takers did not miss a single other eligible voter, we would have a revision of 5 percent in Washington County, 10 percent in the Todd County, and 10 percent in Alexandria. Averaged out, these four case studies would suggest a 9 percent decrease as the minimum required revision to Rusk's figures.

Politics: Then and Now

If a broad pattern of findings similar to those reported here did emerge, there would be a case to decrease Rusk's estimates of turnout in the mid nineteenth century by 9 to 18 percent. This would alter our sense of the trajectory of American voter participation, greatly reducing the disjunction between the "golden age" of American politics and the more modest levels of participation in recent times. Turnout in the mid-nineteenth century would look more like that in the years between the end of WWII and 1972, before 18-20 year olds first exercised their right not to vote and turnout rates plummeted. But this view -- that the past and present of American politics could thus be seen as coterminous -- would miss two points.

First, even with recalculations of the magnitude suggested here, nineteenth century voter participation would remain higher, albeit less strikingly so, than in modern times. Rusk's work reduces Burnham's estimate of average turnout in elections between 1828 and 1900 from 74 percent to 71 percent. If we split the difference between the minimum and maximum reductions suggested by the case studies discussed here, we would have a suggested downward revision of nineteenth century participation rates from Rusk's figures of 13.5 percent -- a figure not so far from the social historians' estimates of the census miss rate. This would yield an average turnout in the nineteen presidential elections from 1828 to 1900 of 61.6 percent with

turnout in seven of those elections above 65 percent and two above 70 percent.

Calibrating turnout in contemporary America, as this article suggested at the outset, is also a process of choosing among conflicting estimates, though again there is a trend in the scholarship. As we have seen, the US Census Bureau continues to include aliens and others ineligible to vote in its calculation of the voting age population, depressing the turnout figure. Rusk uses state restrictions to better estimate the eligible electorate and his turnout figures exceed the Bureau's for every election since WWII with an upward revision of three percentage points for each election since 1984. Michael McDonald and Samuel Popkin have worked to further improve the accuracy of turnout figures for recent elections by focusing on the percentage of aliens and those ineligible through criminal convictions in the voting age population, producing turnout figures for the eligible population above Rusk's for the period since 1984.⁵⁹ The Bureau, Rusk and McDonald/Popkin give estimates of turnout in the 1992 presidential election of 55.2, 58.6 and 60.6 percent respectively. Considering all elections since WWII, these three approaches produce average turnouts of 55.5, 57.8 and 58.2 percent.⁶⁰

Notwithstanding the clear convergence between participation estimates from the present (which are rising) and those from the past (which are falling), a gap persists and it is clear that turnout in the modern period remains below that of the nineteenth century. There have been 15 presidential elections since 1948: none of the methodologies considered here have identified a single contest with a turnout above 70 percent and only Rusk finds a single contest with a turnout above 65 percent.⁶¹

This then is perhaps the best benchmark with which to judge the 2008 contest: for the gap between the past and the present to be closed, contemporary turnout figures must increase from their present mid 50s to figures consistently above 60 percent and some soaring to 70 percent.

But even if that were to happen, a second and more fundamental point would remain: Burnham's understanding of the past was precisely right in the broader sense of insisting that this past was a different country. As Burnham said,

The whole system worked differently than it does now. Politicians had every incentive and opportunity to get out the vote, and they found a receptive audience among the wider public. When members of that overwhelmingly partisan public went to the polls under the non-corrupt,

*non-coerced conditions that were the norm, nothing stood in their path to the ballot box.*⁶²

This was a fundamentally partisan electorate, mobilized by the mass-based political parties which were invented in response to universal white male suffrage. When Paul Bourke and I re-constituted the electorate of Washington County we found that only about seven percent of voters changed party between pairs of elections – even in the midst of one of the great re-alignments of American politics -- while between any two consecutive elections about twice that percentage entered the electorate and about twice that percentage left it.⁶³ Further studies of the world of the poll books, which alone can reveal these shifts, confirm this rough calculus.⁶⁴ If this is generally true, these results suggest that elections in nineteenth century America were fundamentally about the mobilization of voters by party for contests that were highly competitive. Voters didn't change; they entered or they left the electorate: mobilized or demoralized.

Perhaps even more importantly, we found that almost every man who remained in Washington County for the half decade of our study voted at least once; the mobilization of voters was nearly complete.

Understood thus, the American media's lament for today's "hyper partisanship" is inexplicable not just in terms of understanding the powerful role of party in nations with parliamentary systems, of which the American media seem remarkably unaware, but also in respect of the United States' own experience with a powerful and competitive party system, just possibly the central dynamic of nineteenth century American politics and its still striking rates of political participation.

Almost every change in the law regulating American politics since the nineteenth century, including the introduction of the Australian ballot, was designed to disrupt the sway of party. Reformers saw strong party politics, which helped created and uphold high turnout, as little more than the mobilization of mindless armies for tribal warfare. That perception was an important source of the reform movement which weakened party and transformed political participation.

It is important to understand the fundamental differences that demarcate American participation and partisanship from other nations' and to recognize the trajectories within American politics in precisely these same areas. It is always interesting to glorify the past, as do many accounts of that "golden age" of nineteenth century politics: it is even better to understand that past and what made it a different world.

ENDNOTES

¹ See International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance:
http://www.idea.int/vt/compulsory_voting.cfm

² Rafael L. Pinto and Maria Gratschew, *Voter Turnout Since 1945: A Global Report*, Stockholm: International Institution for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2002, esp. 'Registration', Figure 1, p. 31. Over thirty nations make voter registration compulsory.

³ See for example, the debate over the effectiveness of state-based "motor voter" registration systems which allowed or facilitated voter registration as drivers were renewing their driving licenses. This culminated in the 1993 National Voter Registration Act. See Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), pp 314-5 and Craig Brains and Bernard Grofman, 'Election Day Registration's Effect on U.S. Voter Turnout', *Social Science Quarterly*, 82, March, 2001, pp. 170-83.

⁴ See US Census Bureau *Current Population Reports*.

⁵ Kelly Holder, 'Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2004', US Census Bureau, *Current Population Reports* (March, 2006), p. 2 for total registered citizens (142,070,000) and *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2007* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 2007), Tables 407, p. 257 for total votes cast in the 2004 presidential election (122,377,000). The estimated voting age population in the US in 2004 was 220,377,000. The Bureau's survey reports that 65.9 percent of the age eligible said they were registered to vote: 145,228,000.

⁶ On the other hand, the Census count fails to include US citizens living abroad.

⁷ US Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2007*, Table 406, p. 257. Of course those rates of registration can change dramatically in states with high immigrant populations when citizenship is taken into account. In California, fully 19 percent of adults are aliens and ineligible to vote; 69 percent of those who are eligible are registered, not so far from the national average.

⁸ The Australian Electoral Commission reports an enrolled population for the 2004 election of 13,098,461 and 12,354,983 votes cast for House of Representatives. Australian Electoral Commission, *Electoral Pocketbook: 2004 Federal Election Results*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2005, pp. 63, 66, 117. For a classic statement of the erroneous comparison of the turnout of registered voters in Australia with age eligible voters in the US, see Marian Sawyer, 'Preface', in Marian Sawyer (ed.), *Elections: Full Free & Fair* Sydney: Federation Press, 2001), p. vii.

⁹ See notes 5 and 8.

¹⁰ Australia 2004: 15,298,917 population 18 and over. See Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Estimated Resident Population by Single Year of Age*, 3201.0 Table 9.

¹¹ Sources: see notes 5, 8 and 10.

¹² Richard Johnson, J. Scott Matthews, and Amanda J. Bittner, 'Turnout and the Party System in Canada: Spatial Perceptions and the Competitive Base', paper presented at the Canadian Political Sciences Association Annual Meeting, 2005, London, Ontario.

¹³ Calculated from percentage reported registered in Current Population Surveys and Census Bureau estimates of voting age population. The later figures include an undisclosed number of aliens who are ineligible to vote. See *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2007*, Tables 385, 405, pp. 241, 256; *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2002*, Tables 370, 393, pp. 235, 253; *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2000*, Tables 477, 479, pp. 290-1.

¹⁴ Source: See Elections Canada: <http://www.nodice.ca/elections/canada/voterturnout.php> for all Canadian turnout rates of registered voters, 1988-2004. See the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance: <http://www.idea.int/vt/> for voting age population turnout, 1988-2000. Elections Canada has revised the turnout figure of registered voters in the 2000 election to 64 percent. For the 2004 rates for the US see US Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2007*, Washington: US Government Printing Office, 2007,

Table 407, p. 257. IDEA has not yet published the voting age turnout rate for Canada in 2004. Richard Johnson has, however, calculated the voting age turnout rate for the 2004 election which he has kindly supplied and is included in Table 2. See http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?_ob=ArticleURL&_udi=B6V9P-4PXNH7K-1&_user=10&_rdoc=1&_fmt=&_orig=search&_sort=d&view=c&_acct=C000050221&_version=1&_urlVersion=0&_userid=10&md5=4b152ae650f63237f939f1f98d61cd72

¹⁵ Canada changed its voter registration process in 1997 to replace the previous door-to-door canvassing for each election with a centralized and permanent National Register of Electors. The new system was in place for the 2000 election and requires voters who move or enter the electorate to register by ticking a box on forms which are part of the Canadian citizenship application, the Canadian federal income tax returns, and Canada Post change of address packs to agree that information on their age, sex, and address can be forwarded to Elections Canada for inclusion in the National Register of Electors. Some commentators argue that this change in the enrollment process has led to a decline in turnout in Canadian elections. See Jerome H. Black, "From Enrolment to the National Register of Electors: An Account and An Evaluation," *Choices*, 9, August, 2003. It is important to note, as Table 2 indicates, that the decline in Canadian voting turnout, whether measured in terms of the age eligible or the registered, began well before the 2000 election. Richard Johnson, J. Scott Matthews, and Amanda Bittner, 'Turnout and the Party System in Canada, 1988-2004', *Electoral Studies*, 26, 2007, pp.735-45 emphasize changes in party competition as the source for the decline in turnout, but Johnson also believes (personal communication) that the new registration system depresses turnout.

¹⁶ Walter Dean Burnham, 'The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe', *American Political Science Review*, 59, 1965, pp. 7-28. Burnham's article was based upon years of work on voting data. See Walter Dean Burnham, *Presidential Ballots, 1836-1892*, Baltimore: 1955 and Walter Dean Burnham and Svend Petersen, *A Statistical History of the American Presidential Elections*, New York: 1963.

¹⁷ There is a vast literature here. For a compelling example, see Richard P. McCormick, 'New Perspectives on Jacksonian Politics', *American Historical Review*, 65 (1960), pp. 288-301.

¹⁸ US Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States from Colonial Times to 1970*, Washington, US Government Printing Office, 1975, Part 2, pp. 1067-69, 1071-2. The Bureau produced a less ambitious series in 1960 but did not include any figures on US voting participation. The Bureau has included turnout figures in publications since 1965, including the annual *Statistical Abstract* publication.

¹⁹ Susan B. Carter, Scott Sigmund Gartner, Michael R Haines, Alan L. Olmstead, Richard Sutch, and Gavin Wright (eds.), *Historical Statistics of the United States, Millennial Edition*, Vol. 5, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp 165-8.

²⁰ Carter et. al., *Historical Statistics*, Volume 5, p. 165-7.

²¹ Philip E. Converse, 'Change in the American Electorate', in Angus Campbell and Philip Converse (eds.), *The Human Meaning of Change*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1972, pp. 263-337; Philip E. Converse, 'Comment on Burnham's 'Theory and Voting Research,' ' *American Political Science Review*, 68 (1974), pp. 1024-7; Jerrold G. Rusk, 'The Effect of the Australian Ballot Reform on Split Ticket Voting, 1876-1908', *American Political Science Review*, 64 (1970), pp. 1220-38; Jerrold G. Rusk, 'Communications the Editor', *American Political Science Review*, 65 (1971), pp. 1152-7; Jerrold G. Rusk, 'Comment: The American Electoral Universe: Speculation and Evidence', *American Political Science Review*, 68 (1974), pp. 1028-49; Walter Dean Burnham, 'Communications to the Editor', *American Political Science Review*, 65 (1971), pp. 1149-52; Walter Dean Burnham, 'Theory and Voting Research: Some Reflections on Converse's "Change in the American Electorate"', *American Political Science Review*, 68 (1974), pp. 1002-23. Walter Dean Burnham, 'Rejoinder to "Comments by Philip Converse"', *American Political Science Review*, 68 (1974), pp. 1050-7.

²² There is not universal agreement on this point. See Jerrold G. Rusk, *A Statistical History of the American Electorate* (Washington: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2001), p. 45.

²³ Carter et. al, *Historical Statistics*, Volume 5, pp 169-70.

²⁴ Rusk, *A Statistical History*, p. 13.

²⁵ Rusk's calculations marginally increase Burnham's measure of turnout in presidential elections from 1872-1892 by an average of 1.4 percent to 78.6 percent, leaves those from 1896 to 1952 unchanged at 60.8 percent, increases those from 1956 to 1972 by an average of 1.3 percent to 61.8 percent and increases those from 1972 through 1996 by 3.2 percent to 55.2 percent.

²⁶ The best estimates are that registration laws reduce turnout by about nine percent. See Steven Rosenstone and Raymond Wolfinger, *Who Votes?*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980, and Walter Dean Burnham, 'Those High Nineteenth-Century American Voting Turnouts: Fact or Fiction?', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 16, Spring, 1986, p. 641.

²⁷ The turnout in Oregon in 1860 Rusk calculates as 88 percent rather than 98 percent, New York has a turnout of above 90 percent in three rather than eight elections from 1840 to 1888, Iowa's turnout falls to 90 percent in 1876 and South Carolina's to a more realizable 89.4 percent rather than 99.1 percent and 101 percent respectively.

²⁸ Gerald Ginsburg, 'Computing Antebellum Turnout', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 16, Spring, 1986, pp. 579- 611.

²⁹ Walter Dean Burnham, 'Voter Participation in Presidential Elections, by State, 1824-1968', in US Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States from Colonial Times to 1970*, p.1067.

³⁰ Under-estimating the eligible voting population by 10 percent when turnout is 60 percent produces an error of 5.5 percent (60-54.5); the same estimating error when turnout is 90 percent produces an error of 8.2 percent (90-81.8).

³¹ For an earlier account of this issue see Donald A. DeBats, 'Hide and Seek: The Historian and Nineteenth-Century Social Accounting', *Social Science History* 15 (Winter, 1991), pp. 545-63.

³² Michael P. McDonald and Samuel L Popkin, 'The Myth of the Vanishing Voter', *American Political Science Review*, 95 (December, 2001), p. 965. U.S. General Accounting Office, '2000 Census: Progress Made on Design but Risks Remain', Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997.

³³ Quoted in John B. Sharpless and Ray M. Shortridge, 'Biased Underenumeration in Census Manuscripts: Methodological Implications', *Journal of Urban History*, 1, 1975, p. 411.

³⁴ Peter R. Knights, *The Plain People of Boston, 1830-1860*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 145.

³⁵ See Margo J. Anderson, *The American Census: A Social History*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

³⁶ Peter Knights, *The Plain People of Boston, 1830-1960: A Study in City Growth*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 144-7; Richard H. Steckel, 'Census Matching and Migration: A Research Strategy', *Historical Methods Newsletter*, 21 (1988), pp. 55-6.

³⁷ Ginsburg, 'Computing Antebellum Turnout', p.600.

³⁸ Elizabeth Pleck, *Black Migration and Poverty: Boston, 1865-1900*, New York: Academic Press, 1979, p. 215.

³⁹ Burnham, 'Those High Nineteenth-Century American Voting Turnouts', p. 637.

⁴⁰ Burnham, 'Those High Nineteenth-Century American Voting Turnouts', p. 639. Burnham did not specify whether he thought this was the figure for the entire population or the eligible electorate.

⁴¹ Burnham, 'Those High Nineteenth-Century American Voting Turnouts', p. 632.

⁴² Paul F. Bourke and Donald A. DeBats, *Washington County: Politics and Community in Antebellum America*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995

⁴³ Bourke and DeBats, fn 41, p.376.

⁴⁴ It is important to note state laws in respect of residency, alien voting and citizenship requirements, though we recognize that these were not always enforced. Oregon had in the 1850s and 1860s a six month state residency requirement, no local residency requirement, permitted aliens to vote, and imposed no citizenship requirement. Virginia in the 1850s and 60s and Kentucky in the 1870s had a one year city/town/county residency requirement, a two year state residency requirement, did not permit aliens to vote, and required citizenship. See Rusk, *A Statistical History of the American Electorate*, Tables 2.7 – 2.13, pp. 25-32.

⁴⁵ For earlier reports of this finding, see Bourke and DeBats, *Washington County*, p.193-5 and DeBats, 'Hide and Seek', pp. 553-6.

⁴⁶ There were 638 votes cast in the 1860 presidential election in Washington County; the poll lists for that election are incomplete but this partial list tells us that the census missed at least 7 percent of the voters.

⁴⁷ The difference in the turnout rates calculated here and in DeBats, 'Hide and Seek', reflect the considerable efforts in the interval devoted to refining the Alexandria databases.

⁴⁸ The election with the highest turnout was that for governor, with 1389 votes cast in the city. We estimate the total population of Alexandria in 1859 to have been 12,293, of whom 1192 were slaves and 1388 were free blacks. See also, Donald A. DeBats, 'A Tale of Two Cities: The Utility of Tax Records in Mapping and Understanding the Nineteenth Century American City', *Historical Methods*, 41 (Winter, 2008), forthcoming.

⁴⁹ If all 507 of these men were still present in the city in 1860, the census undercount of the electorate would be 19 percent.

⁵⁰ See fn 52.

⁵¹ See Donald A. DeBats., 'The Politics of German Americans: Three Case Studies from an Industrial Age', in Walter Helbich and Water D. Kamphoefner (eds.), *German-American Immigration and Ethnicity in Comparative Perspective*, Madison: MaxKade Institute for German-American Studies, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004, pp.171-220.

⁵² We excluded the 333 men in the US Army stationed at the Newport Barracks in 1870; the garrison was greatly reduced by 1880.

⁵³ It is very likely, however, that a good many of these men were eligible to vote, further reducing turnout of the age eligible below the 49 percent calculated here.

⁵⁴ Of the 2265 who voted in the 1874 election 848 do not appear on the census of 1870. This is again a significant gap given that all of the poll book studies show that voters were disproportionately drawn from those who were longer term residents of a community and who were the most institutionally connected to it. The tick in the box for 'Legal Voter' was hardly definitive as over a quarter of the voters were not on the tax list. Moreover, half of the voters declared eligible (1805 of 3479) did not vote.

⁵⁵ Kentucky repealed its 'whites only' requirement for voting in February, 1870. See Rusk, *A Statistical History*, Table 2.14, p.33.

⁵⁶ This was true of the Congressional election. On the other hand only 94 blacks voted in the election for sheriff held as part of the same ballot, whether because they boycotted this contest or were not allowed to vote. In the November election, blacks made up 38 percent of both the Congressional vote and that for a circuit court judge. Race is not stated for 41 voters in these two elections.

⁵⁷ Of the 1238 November voters, 63 do not appear on the census. Of the total of 315 voters in the April or November elections missing from the census, 122 were white and 152 were black. As noted above, the race of 41 of the voters was not recorded.

⁵⁸ The data suggests a census undercount of eligible voters of 5 percent in Washington County (42 of 786), 10 percent in the Todd County election (315 of 3134), and 10 percent in Alexandria (256 of 2442) where the election was a year in advance of the census. These undercounts would reduce the census based turnout of 5.3 percent in Washington County, 10.4 percent in Alexandria, 10.1 percent and 10.0 percent in the April and November elections in Todd County. The average decrease is 9 percent from the original census based turnout figure.

⁵⁹ Burnham's technique produces an average turnout since 1984 of 51.4 percent, Rusk's suggests 55.0 percent and McDonald's and Popkin's yields 56.0 percent. The McDonald and Popkin approach produces turnout figures before 1984 below Rusk's but above the Bureau's. McDonald and Popkin exclude ineligible groups such as non-citizens and felons; they add to the eligible population citizens, civilian and military, living overseas. They do not adjust the figures for residency requirements or mentally incompetent persons. Most importantly they do not attempt to correct for census undercounts. See McDonald and Popkin, 'The Myth of the Vanishing Voter', p. 965.

⁶⁰ Rusk's series runs through the 1996 election and McDonald/Popkin's through the 2000 election. Only the Bureau has a figure for the 2004 contest.

⁶¹ All three approaches find higher turnout rates substantially higher in the 1950's and 60's than in subsequent years.

⁶² Burnham, 'Those High Nineteenth Century American Voting Turnouts', p. 641.

⁶³ In all about 52 percent of voters voted for the same party, seven percent changed and about 31 percent dropped in or out. The remaining eight percent present and eligible did not vote in either contest. See Bourke and DeBats, *Washington County*, p. 197.

⁶⁴ This is seen in the rigidity of party lines within contests: in the 1868 general election in Todd County only one of 710 voters cast a ballot for a congressional candidate of a different party than the party of the voter's choice for president and only eight deviated between congressional and gubernatorial vote. In 1870 when two congressional elections were held, only 16 of 886 votes changed parties. Between 1868 and 1870, when blacks could first vote, only eight of 550 men who voted in both elections changed parties, but 161 voters dropped out (including 50 percent of the small number of white Republicans) but 1315 new voters appeared. Of the 2576 men who voted in either or both of these elections, less than a half of one percent changed parties, 21 percent voted for the same parties in both elections, 28 percent dropped out, and 51 percent entered the electorate. Elections were about mobilization, not conversion.