University of Florida Election Lab

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Voter Turnout Rates Among Metropolitan Statistical Areas in the 2024 Presidential Election

A Report for the Houston Endowment
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Houston Endowment®

Summary

The Houston Endowment commissioned the Election Lab at the University of Florida to produce a report on the Houston area's turnout rates for the 2024 presidential election

This 2024 report updates a report commissioned previously by the Houston Endowment to calculate Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) turnout rates for the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections.

The primary finding of this report is Houston area's turnout rates in presidential elections remains similar to recent past elections. Among the 25 largest MSAs, Houston continues to be ranked number twenty-four.

Houston's turnout rate is driven largely by factors outside the influence of the Houston Endowment. Turnout rates increase when a state's presidential election is competitive, leading to an increase in mobilization strategies used by the campaigns in their fight for an Electoral College majority, which in turn results in a rise in voter interest. Texas scores low on voter convenience laws that are known to be positively correlated with voter turnout, laws which are determined by state officials. Demographic patterns that shape turnout, particularly education levels, are largely outside of direct influence of Houston communities to affect, other than to promote more education and attracting highly educated workers to the region.

The good news is that with respect to one of these factors, the competitiveness of presidential elections, Texas is becoming more competitive and this appears to have lifted turnout rates statewide and within the Houston area between the 2016 and 2020 elections, as well as Texas as a whole. The recent trend in competitiveness appears to have extended to the 2024 election, relative to its 2016 turnout rate, which was the second lowest behind Hawaii. However, Texas' 2024 turnout continues to rank low overall and fell from the sixth lowest in 2020 to fifth in 2024.

Presidential elections and state laws are largely outside the control of the Houston community. We continue to recommend investments in civic education, which may have positive effects on the public's participation in elections across the national, state, and local levels.

Who We Are

The Election Lab at the University of Florida is a collaboration of faculty and students who study voting and elections through analyses of survey and election data. Our mission is to provide timely and accurate statistics, software, reports, and other useful information, primarily regarding voting and elections in the United States.

Dr. Michael McDonald, Professor of Political Science at the University of Florida, is a co-author of this report. He produces what are widely considered to be the most reliable United States turnout rate reports of those eligible to vote and leads the production of precinct election data used widely by governments, courts, and media. He has authored or co-authored four books and written numerous academic articles on elections.

Dr. Brian Amos, Associate Professor at Wichita State University, is a co-author of this report. He provided statistics analyzed in this report using methodologies he developed for merging data reported in geographically non-conforming boundaries, such as occurs with election results and census data.

A diverse team of five research assistants are assisting with local data collection. These data collection efforts dovetail with the Voting and Election Science Team's collection of precinct boundaries and results for general elections, led by Dr. Steve Gerontakis, Research Associate at the University of Florida.

Voter Turnout Among Large Metropolitan Regions

The federal Office of Management and Budget defines a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) as a collection of urban counties. As detailed in the accompanying methodology appendix, MSAs are composed of an inner core county and adjacent counties with a threshold number of commuters to the inner core county. A full dataset is available on the UF Election Lab website.[1]

Table 1 lists the twenty-five most populous MSAs according to their estimated 2024 citizen voting-age population (CVAP).[2] These MSAs have CVAP populations ranging from 1.9 million for the smallest on the list (Portland, OR) to 13.3 million for the largest (New York, NY). Houston's MSA remains the sixth largest, with a CVAP of 4.3 million.

The MSAs listed in Table 1 are ranked by the 2024 CVAP turnout rate. The overall United States CVAP turnout rate is provided for reference.[3]

The MSA turnout rates in Table 1 to a large degree reflect patterns in statewide turnout rates. The Minneapolis MSA continues to have the highest turnout rates among all the most populous MSAs, even though Minnesota slipped into second place nationally, just slightly behind Wisconsin. Minnesota high presidential election turnout rates are attributable generally to three factors:

1.. Minnesota is often a **battleground state**, drawing the attention of the presidential campaigns and the media. The nature of the United States' Electoral College effectively concentrates presidential election competition into a few battleground states. Battleground states tend to have higher turnout rates than non-battleground states in presidential elections. Voters are mobilized to vote by the presidential campaigns, and further motivated by the perception that their vote will matter due to how close the state's election will be.
2.. Minnesota generally makes it easier to vote. Chief among these voter-friendly policies is **Same Day Registration** (SDR), whereby eligible individuals can register and vote even on Election Day. This policy is well-known to correlate with higher turnout rates in numerous studies.[4] Conversely, states with registration deadlines preceding Election Day tend to have lower turnout rates.
3.. Minnesota's electorate is **highly educated**. Education is known to be correlated with turnout.[5] Indeed, the norther tier of U.S. states tend to have higher education levels than the lower tier.

The Denver MSA shares these attributes with Minneapolis. Likewise, the state of Colorado tends to rank highly among state turnout rates. In addition, Colorado conducts **vote-by-mail elections**, whereby election officials automatically send a mail ballot to all active registered voters. A larger share of mail

[1] See: https://election.lab.ufl.edu/voter-turnout-ratesamong-metropolitan-statistical-areas/
[2] We calculate CVAP statistics by extrapolating the Census Bureau's 2022 and 2023 American Community Survey (ACS) estimates within MSAs to November, 2024. We plan to update these statistics when more recent ACS data become available.
[3] For United States national and state turnout rates, see: https://election.lab.ufl.edu/voter-turnout/
[4] For example, see: Michael P. McDonald. 2008. "Portable Voter Registration." *Political Behavior* 30(4): 491–501.
[5] For CVAP turnout rates by education levels, as reported in the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey November Voting and Registration Supplement, see: https://election.lab.ufl.edu/voter-turnout/turnout-demographics/

ballots correlates with higher turnout rates, possibly because of the ease mail balloting affords some voters.[6]

These examples of Minneapolis and Denver illuminate the patterns in Table 1. MSAs above the United States national turnout rates tend to have all or some combination of the factors present in Minneapolis or Denver. Conversely, those MSAs below the national turnout rate tend to have an absence of these factors.

[6] See: Michael P. McDonald, Juliana K. Mucci, Enrijeta Shino, and Daniel A. Smith. 2023. "Mail Voting and Voter Turnout." *Election Law Journal*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2022.0078.

MSA	2024 Rate	2020 Rate	2016 Rate	2016-2024 Average	2024 Rank	2016-2024 Rank	Size Rank
Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington, MN-WI	78.7%	81.1%	74.4%	78.1%	1	1	16
Detroit-Warren-Dearborn, MI	74.6%	74.1%	65.7%	71.5%	2	4	12
Denver-Aurora-Centennial, CO	74.1%	79.5%	70.8%	74.8%	3	2	19
Charlotte-Concord-Gastonia, NC-SC	73.6%	74.0%	63.7%	70.4%	4	6	22
Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV	73.5%	74.5%	68.6%	72.2%	5	3	8
Pittsburgh, PA	73.5%	72.2%	64.8%	70.2%	6	9	24
Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Roswell, GA	71.5%	70.8%	60.6%	67.7%	7	12	7
Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington, PA-NJ-DE-MD	71.4%	73.2%	66.6%	70.4%	8	7	5
Portland-Vancouver-Hillsboro, OR-WA	71.4%	76.9%	64.7%	71.0%	9	5	25
Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue, WA	70.9%	75.9%	63.4%	70.1%	10	10	15
Boston-Cambridge-Newton, MA-NH	69.6%	73.2%	68.1%	70.3%	11	8	10
Baltimore-Columbia-Towson, MD	68.4%	67.3%	62.8%	66.2%	12	16	21
Miami-Fort Lauderdale-West Palm Beach, FL	68.0%	73.0%	63.9%	68.3%	13	11	9
St. Louis, MO-IL	66.4%	68.5%	64.7%	66.5%	14	15	20
San Francisco-Oakland-Fremont, CA	66.2%	72.2%	62.3%	66.9%	15	14	13
Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater, FL	66.0%	71.8%	63.5%	67.1%	16	13	17
Orlando-Kissimmee-Sanford, FL	65.2%	69.9%	62.8%	65.9%	17	17	23
United States	64.7%	67.8%	60.5%	64.3%			
San Diego-Chula Vista-Carlsbad, CA	63.9%	70.1%	57.7%	63.9%	18	18	18
Phoenix-Mesa-Chandler, AZ	63.7%	68.2%	52.6%	61.5%	19	20	11
Chicago-Naperville-Elgin, IL-IN	61.9%	66.5%	61.3%	63.2%	20	19	3
Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX	60.9%	64.0%	52.8%	59.3%	21	23	4
New York-Newark-Jersey City, NY-NJ	60.7%	63.6%	58.4%	60.9%	22	22	1
Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim, CA	60.4%	68.1%	55.4%	61.3%	23	21	2
Houston-Pasadena-The Woodlands, TX	58.0%	61.9%	51.0%	57.0%	24	24	6

Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario, CA	55.4%	61.9%	48.5%	55.3%	25	25	14

Table 1. Twenty-Five Most Populous MSAs Ranked by Average 2024 November General Election Turnout Rate

Recommendations

The analysis here suggests that Houston's presidential turnout rates are largely a product of factors beyond the control of Houston's community; namely, the competitiveness of Texas in presidential elections, the state's election laws, and demographic patterns shaped by migration and other factors.

The good news is that with respect to one factor, Houston's turnout rate should continue to increase in presidential elections relative to national turnout rates. As Texas continues to become more competitive in presidential elections, the statewide turnout rate should increase as campaigns spend more resources mobilizing voters and as voters perceive their vote to matter more to the outcome. This is already evident in Texas' increasing turnout rate from the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, and the slight decrease in Texas' ranking from 2020 to 2024.

There are actions that the Houston community can engage in to increase civic participation generally, and voter turnout specifically. Chief among these is civic education, which is related to education. Mobilization efforts to increase civic participation through messaging and contacts with potential voters are known to increase turnout in experiments conducted by researchers working in collaboration with community groups and campaigns.[7] Such mobilization efforts are likely to have larger effects in lower-turnout environments where other election stimuli are absent.

[7] There have been numerous randomized control experiments conducted on messaging strategies to increase voter turnout. See, for example: Donald P. Green and Alan S. Gerber. 2019. *Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout*. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press.

Methodology Appendix

Metropolitan Statistical Areas

Metropolitan Statistical Areas, or MSAs, are groups of counties surrounding an inner core city. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) is tasked with defining MSAs every decennial census. For the 2020 census, adopted new criteria for MSAs that largely followed prior definitions (See Table A1).[8]

Table A1. Metropolitan Statistical Area Definition
A core county composed of a city of at least 50,000 people *or* have an urbanized area (defined by the Census Bureau) of at least 100,000 people.
Counties surrounding the core county are included if they have a threshold level of commuting to the core county, as determined by responses to the Census Bureau's American Community Survey.

We use these MSA delineations for the 2020 decennial census for this report. The Census Bureau publishes maps of the United States' 384 MSAs on their website.[9]

Turnout Rate Numerator

The numerator for our turnout rates is the total number of votes cast in the 2016, 2020, and 2024 November general elections in the presidential election. The 2016 and 2020 data are drawn from the Voting and Election Science Team's (VEST) precinct data collection disseminated by the University of Florida Election Lab.[10] The 2024 data are compiled from county election returns, except in the case of Alaska where counties do not conform with the Anchorage MSA. For Anchorage we used precinct-level election returns.

MSAs are larger than precincts and composed of entire counties. As part of VEST's quality control, we verify that votes reported within precincts sum to the county votes as recorded by election offices in their certified election results.

Turnout Rate Denominator

The denominator for our turnout rate is the citizen voting-age population (CVAP) of the MSA.[11] We use the Census Bureau's American Community Survey's five-year estimates for CVAP. The American Community Survey is an annual large-scale survey designed to replace the decennial census's long-form questionnaire after the 2000 decennial census. Among its many questions is citizenship status, which we use for our turnout rate denominator.

While the ACS is a large annual survey of a million respondents nationwide, the Census Bureau compiles responses into five-year increments to provide more reliable estimates for smaller jurisdictions. While MSAs are large, they are individually relatively small compared to the nation.

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[8] For the MSA definitions updated for the 2020 decade, see: https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/07/16/2021-15159/2020-standards-for-delineating-core-based-statistical-areas

[9] Maps of MSAs can be found here: https://www.census.gov/geographies/reference-maps/2020/demo/state-maps.html

[10] Available at: https://election.lab.ufl.edu/precinct-data/

[11] We do not make additional adjustments for those eligible to vote, such as ineligible felons and eligible overseas citizens. The primary limiting factor is the limited availability of these data within MSAs. For the ACS data, see: https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/data.html

The Census Bureau recommends the best ACS population estimate for a given year is the mid-point year of the five-year ACS. Following this recommendation, we use the 2014-2018 five-year ACS for our 2016 CVAP estimate. We use the 2017-2021 for our 2020 estimate because at the time of this report, the 2018-2022 five-year ACS data have not been released.[12]

[12] American Community Survey data are available at: https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/data.html