

UNLEASHING THE POWER OF POOR AND LOW-INCOME AMERICANS

Changing the Political Landscape

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Cover photo:

Poor People's Campaign Main Stage, June 23, 2018

Photo credit: Steve Pavey, Hope in Focus

About

The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival is a movement dedicated to building power among the 140 million poor and low-income people in America and changing the narrative and national discourse on poverty. It is co-chaired by national leaders Reverend Dr. William Barber II and Reverend Dr. Liz Theoharis.

Reverend Barber is president of and senior lecturer with Repairers of the Breach, a tax-exempt not-for-profit organization that seeks to build a moral agenda rooted in a framework that uplifts our deepest moral and constitutional values to redeem the heart and soul of our country. He is a MacArthur Genius award fellow, author and Bishop with the College of Affirming Bishops and Faith Leaders; Visiting Professor at Union Theological Seminary; and Pastor of Greenleaf Christian Church, Disciples of Christ in Goldsboro, North Carolina. He served as president of the North Carolina NAACP, the largest state conference in the South and the second largest in the country from 2006–2017, led the Forward Together Moral Mondays Movement and currently sits on the National NAACP Board of Directors. He is regularly featured in media outlets such as MSNBC, CNN, New York Times, Washington Post, and The Nation, among others. He has written three books and is also the 2015 recipient of the Puffin Award and the Franklin D. Roosevelt Four Freedoms Award. In 2020, he was deemed by the Washington Post as the second most influential religious newsmaker of the decade, after Pope Francis.

Reverend Theoharis is the Director of the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice, which draws on the power of religions and human rights to raise up generations of religious and community leaders committed to building a broad transformative movement to end poverty. She has spent more than two decades organizing among the poor in the United States, working with and advising grassroots organizations. She is the author of numerous books and publishes regularly in Time, CNN, The Guardian, Boston Review, Sojourners, The Nation, The Christian Century, and others. Reverend Theoharis was named one of the Politico 50 "thinkers, doers and visionaries whose ideas are driving politics" and has been recognized by many faith and community institutions for her commitment to justice and the elimination of racism and poverty. She currently teaches at Union Theological Seminary and is ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA).

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Shailly Gupta Barnes is the Policy Director of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival and the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice at Union Theological Seminary. She has a background in economics, law and human rights. She has worked with and for poor and dispossessed communities in the U.S. and around the world for over 15 years. Working closely with the Institute for Policy Studies, she edited and co-authored *The Souls of Poor Folk: Auditing America* (2018) and *The Poor People's Moral Budget: Everybody has the Right to Live* (2019).

Foreword: Changing the Political Landscape

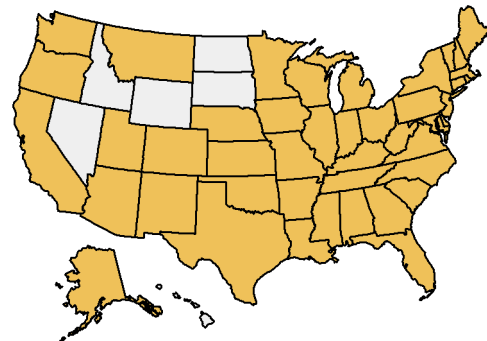
There are approximately 140 million people who are poor or low income in this country.¹ This includes 23.7 million who are black (non-Hispanic), 38 million Hispanic, 8 million Asian, 2 million Native/Indigenous, and 65.6 million white (non-Hispanic) people. Although they make up over 40 percent of the population, their concerns are marginalized within the national political discussion. As the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed, our society's failure to meet the needs of these millions of people - around health care, jobs, wages, housing, food, water and more - presents a critical weakness to the nation's public health and economic well-being. In other words, the concerns of the poor have an impact on everyone. Yet, in the lead up to the 2016 elections and for most of the 2020 primary season, there were more than 3 dozen debates without one single hour of these debates focused on poverty or the issues facing these millions of people.

How would the political landscape change if the needs and demands of poor and low-income voters were better represented in the electoral process? The attached research brief uses nationally representative data to illustrate the potential voting power of low-income Americans. The data suggest some important insights that are consistent with the experiences of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival (PPC).

The Poor People's Campaign is a non-partisan campaign with a comprehensive Moral Agenda that takes on the interlocking injustices of systemic racism, poverty, ecological devastation, militarism and the war economy, and false narrative of religious nationalism. Launched in 2018, the PPC is rooted in state-based campaigns in 41 states and Washington D.C., bringing together those directly affected by these injustices, alongside clergy, labor organizers, activists, and others. Since its launch, both the national and state-level PPC campaigns have been mobilizing poor and low-income voters, particularly in Southern states, around *fusion politics*: building relationships across race and background to unite around commonly held needs and demands. These organizing efforts have proven that low-income voters will mobilize and vote when their issues are in clear focus and they are able to hold policy makers accountable.

The PPC has consistently described its work as "registering people for a movement that votes." This orientation is a response to an ongoing history of voter suppression evidenced by poll closings, registration purges, and racial gerrymandering, for example, as well as the policies enacted by elected officials that harm low-income individuals and families. The Supreme Court has ruled against racial gerrymandering in recent years, yet also critically weakened the Voting Rights Act. The Campaign's response is, therefore, to (1) organize low-income people across race around a common agenda, (2) mobilize this group to vote and thereby push back against voter suppression and harmful policies, and (3) build a movement that can challenge the five interlocking injustices of its Moral Agenda.

PPC State-Level Campaigns



¹ Barnes, Shailly. 2019. "[Explaining the 140 million.](#)" The Kairos Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice. (accessed February 4, 2020). In this report, "low-income" refers to everyone living below twice the official poverty line, therefore any reference to "low income" includes both poor and low-income individuals.

The outcomes of the Kentucky 2019 gubernatorial elections offer a salient example from the PPC's recent history. The Campaign's relationships in Kentucky date back at least ten years. One of the more important relationships has been with Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC), an organization that has been working across the state for many years. With KFTC and others, the Kentucky PPC has brought together a broad coalition of Kentuckians organizing and canvassing in at least two dozen counties around voting rights, immigration reform, housing, good jobs, health care, equitable public education, affordable water and sanitation systems, gun reform, fair taxes, and more.

Kentucky is traditionally a red state when it comes to recent national elections. Days before the 2019 election, President Trump rallied in Kentucky for Republican incumbent Governor Matt Bevin. Trump had won Kentucky in 2016 with 63 percent of the votes cast in the presidential election and retained a 56 percent approval rating in the state as of November 2019.² In comparison, the Kentucky PPC continued its intentional organizing work by hosting the national Campaign and holding mass meetings in several counties. The campaign does not endorse parties or candidates, instead it elevates issues that matter for low-income families.

On November 5, 2019, Kentuckians voted out Governor Bevin in favor of the state's Attorney General, Andy Beshear, who ran on a platform that included health care, jobs, public education, and voting rights. Kenton and Scott counties, both predominantly white (88 and 87 percent, respectively), were notable examples of places covered by PPC organizing. Bevin won these counties in 2015, and both flipped for Beshear in 2019 by very small margins: 543 votes in Kenton County and 97 votes in Scott County. In his acceptance speech, Beshear said, "Tonight, voters in Kentucky sent a message for everyone to hear loud and clear. It's a message that says our elections don't have to be about right versus left; they are about right versus wrong." This is language that the PPC commonly uses in reference to its Moral Agenda being non-partisan. The PPC never endorsed the candidate, instead the candidate endorsed the PPC's issues and messaging. Beshear unseated Bevin by just 5000 votes, or less than 0.5 percent of the more than 1.4 million votes cast. Shortly after his election, Beshear ended work requirements for Medicaid, which would have ended health care coverage for 95,000 Kentuckians and restored the right to vote for 140,000 people who were formerly incarcerated.³ These were both core demands of the PPC's Moral Agenda.

The experience in Kentucky is not unique. In North Carolina, the Moral Monday's movement had been organizing on a 14-point agenda that included voting rights, health care, education, and more, when Governor McCrory was unseated in 2016. Moral Monday's fusion organizing model has been credited with contributing to this outcome, as well.⁴

It must be noted that these elections took place in southern states with histories of voter suppression. Millions of voters in these states are, in other words, *deliberately not organized* to participate in elections; however, organizing among this population, around a policy agenda that reflected their needs and demands, has had real political impact.

² Tobin, Benjamin. October 31, 2019. "[President Donald Trump is visiting Lexington: Here's what you need to know.](#)" Courier Journal. (accessed February 4, 2020).

³ Acquisto, Alex. December 16, 2019. "[Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear drops Medicaid work requirements, reversing Bevin policy.](#)" Lexington Herald Leader. (Accessed February 4, 2020); Mosley, Tanya. December 13, 2019. "[Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear restores voting rights to felons.](#)" WBUR Radio. (accessed February 12, 2020).

⁴ Schulson, Michael. February 4, 2017. "[North Carolina went red in 2016. But can it be a model for Democrats?](#)" Politico Magazine. (accessed February 4, 2020).

It must be noted that these elections took place in southern states with histories of voter suppression. Millions of voters in these states are, in other words, *deliberately not organized* to participate in elections; however, organizing among this population, around a policy agenda that reflected their needs and demands, has had real political impact.

A motivating belief of the Poor People's Campaign is that the votes of poor and low-income Americans can make a difference in our elections. Based on this motivation, we sought an independent analysis of the available data to better understand the political potential of mobilizing low-income voters. The research brief that follows provides a closer look at the voting behaviors of these millions of Americans relative to the size of the total electorate as well as recent voting margins by state. We believe this evidence supports our Campaign's analysis that organizing can change the narrative of our electoral process and lead to policies that are just and representative for all Americans.

Shailly Gupta Barnes

Policy Director

Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival

Kairos: The Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice

Executive Summary

While a majority of eligible voters participate in national elections, there is a substantial gap in voting rates by income status. Low income voters, those with family income below twice the official poverty threshold, are underrepresented in the polls. Using the Current Population Survey's Voting and Registration Supplement, this brief explores the potential impact that these voters might have if their participation rates increased. Lower-income Americans may face more obstacles to voting, yet their main reported reasons for not voting are similar to those at higher incomes, including a lack of interest in campaign issues or feeling their vote would not matter. However, nonvoters may have different preferences relative to voters, and low-income nonvoters are more likely to care about issues around health and economic well-being. The most recent midterm election showed that low-income voters can mobilize when motivated. If the eligible population of low-income voters showed up at rates similar to higher-income voters, then as many as 15 states could have changed outcomes in the last presidential election.

Key Findings

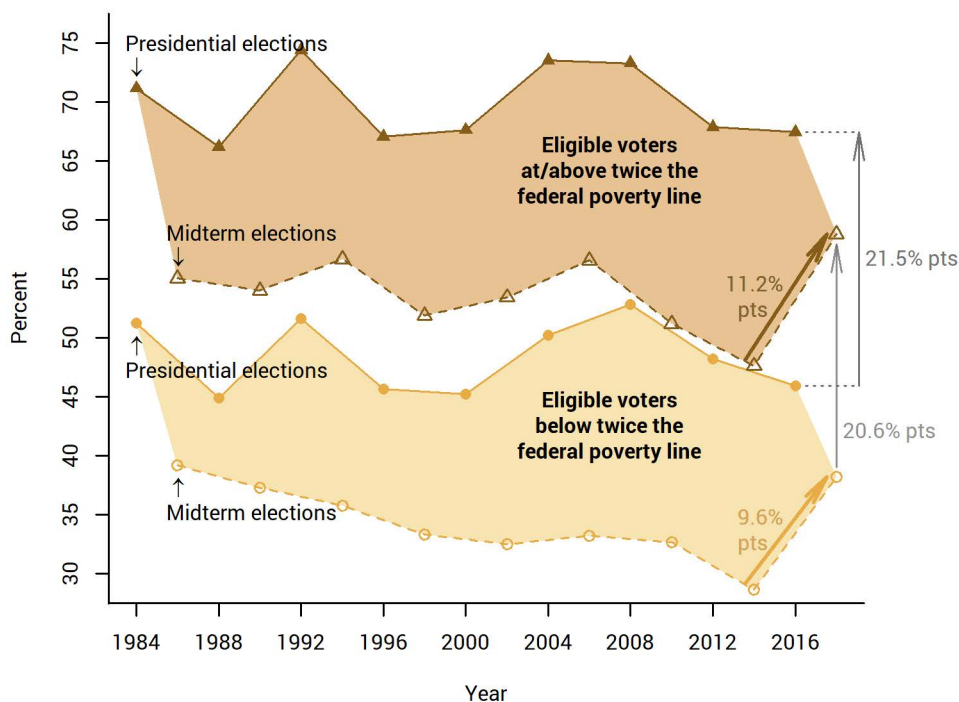
- Low-income eligible voters are about 22 percentage points less likely to vote in national elections than those with higher incomes, yet both groups follow similar trends including a roughly 10-percentage-point increase in voting rates for the last midterm election.
- Regardless of income status, about one quarter of eligible voters do not participate in elections because they are not interested in the candidates or campaign issues, or they feel their vote would not matter. Moreover, low-income individuals are less likely to vote because of illness, disability, or transportation issues.
- Voting by mail represents a quarter of all votes cast, is increasingly common across personal characteristics and income status, and has been strongly bipartisan in state implementation.
- Low-income eligible non-voters make up about one fifth of the total electorate in states like Arkansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and West Virginia, or in several more states for midterm election years.
- An increase of at least 1 percent of the non-voting low-income electorate would equal the margin of victory for Michigan in 2016, or a 4 to 7 percent increase in states such as Florida, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, or Wisconsin.
- If low-income voters participated at similar rates as higher-income voters, a simple majority (51 percent) of these new voters could flip the 2016 Michigan election results. A total of 15 states could flip decisions if a majority of at least 71 percent, on average, voted differently from the winning candidate (10 from red to blue, or 5 from blue to red).

The Voting Potential of Low-Income Americans

Robert Paul Hartley, Assistant Professor of Social Work at Columbia University,
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Columbia Population Research Center, and
University of Kentucky Center for Poverty Research

In the 2016 presidential election, there were approximately 138 million voters out of around 225 million eligible to vote, including individuals who were either registered or not registered. Among the low-income population, with family income less than twice the federal poverty line (FPL), there were about 29 million voters and 34 million potential voters (eligible but non-participating). The voting rate among low-income individuals for 2016 was about 46 percent compared to over 67 percent for those with income above twice the FPL. Figure 1 shows the trends in voter participation rates by income status for presidential election years as well as midterm election years, 1984 to 2018. While the trends by income track closely together, low-income voters are consistently less likely to participate in national elections. Individuals with family income above twice the poverty threshold vote at a rate around 20 percentage points higher than low-income eligible voters, and both income groups saw large increases in voter participation in the 2018 election, about 10 percentage points for the low-income population and 11 percentage points for those with higher incomes. Not only do the trends track closely, but so does the potential for each income group to mobilize voter turnout in a given year.⁵

Figure 1. U.S. Voting Rate Trends, by Family Income
Current Population Survey, November 1984–2018

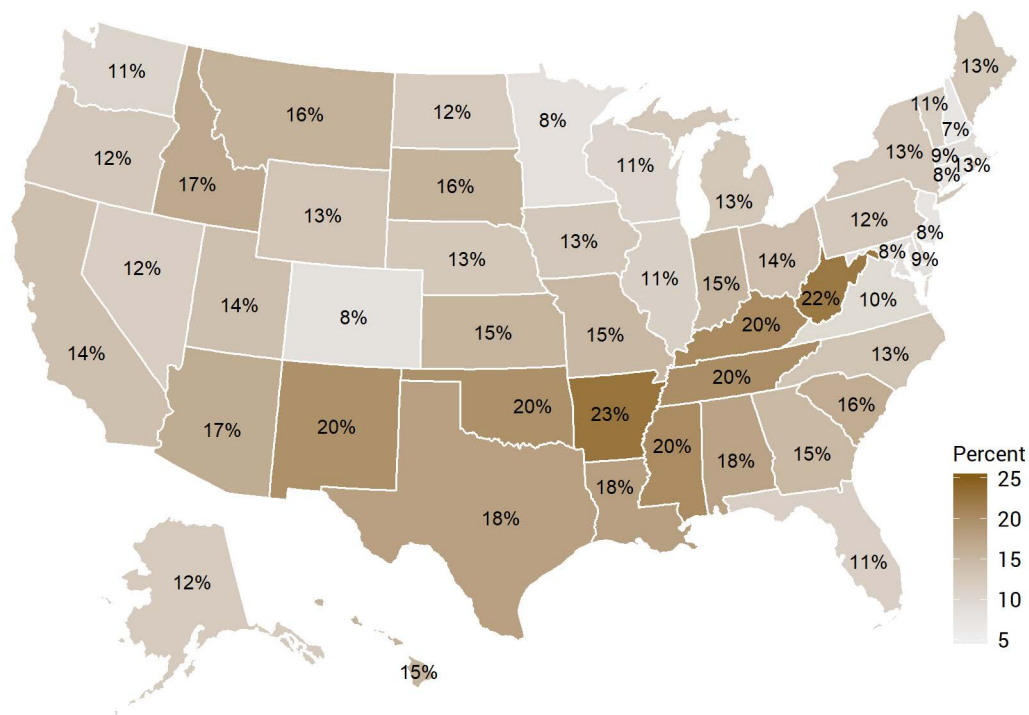


⁵ Note that this analysis relies on Current Population Survey data, as well as the Census Bureau practice of recoding nonresponses among the voting-eligible population as nonvoters. The main findings of this analysis are robust to alternative definitions, including the use of a reweighting procedure suggested by Hur, A., and C.H. Achen. 2013. [“Coding voter turnout responses in the Current Population Survey,”](#) *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 77 (4): 985–993.

The magnitude of potential voters with low family income varies by state as a percentage of the total electorate. Figure 2 shows the percent of each state's total electorate that have low incomes and are eligible to vote yet did not, again, including both those who were registered and unregistered. These results correspond to the 2016 presidential election. The largest concentration of potential low-income voters can be found in Arkansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and West Virginia, each of which have eligible yet nonvoting low-income populations equal to approximately one out of five of all eligible voters by state. Other states with larger magnitudes of potential low-income voters include Alabama, Arizona, Idaho, Louisiana, and Texas. (See Appendix A for detailed counts, and Appendix B and C for the data sources and methodology.)

The voting rate among low-income individuals for 2016 was about 46 percent compared to over 67 percent for those with income above twice the Federal Poverty Line.

Figure 2. Low-Income Eligible Non-Voters as a Percent of the Total Electorate Relative to the 2016 Presidential Election, by State



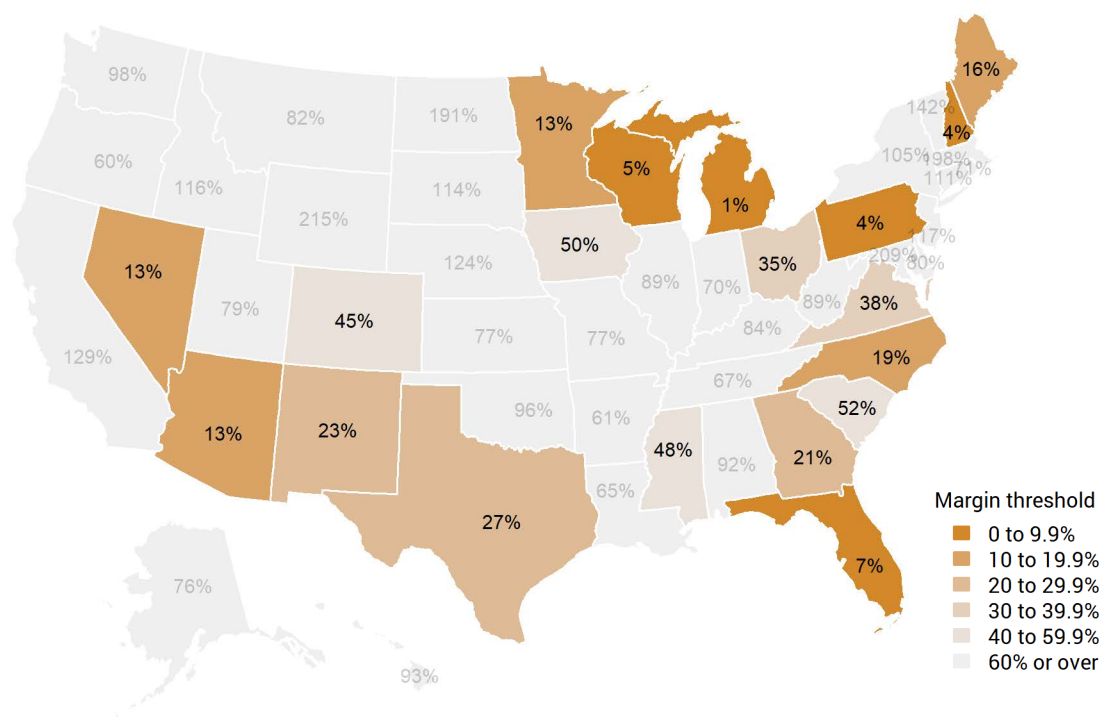
Although low-income voters do not share a monolithic political ideology, they do constitute a rather large proportion of the electorate and they tend to share concerns about healthcare and economic issues. Another way to illustrate the size of this potential voting bloc is to consider the number of eligible nonvoters relative to a recent election margin of victory. For example, what percent of low-income potential voters, those eligible and nonvoting, would need to participate in an election in order to match the magnitude of the 2016 presidential election margins?

Figure 3 shows the percent of low-income eligible nonvoters in each state that would just meet the threshold of that state's election margin. A 1-percent shift in participation among low-income potential voters would match Michigan's election margin, and less than a one-third shift in participation would match the election margin in Texas. To put that into perspective, if potential low-income voters participated in the 2016 election at a similar voting rate as those with higher incomes, then those additional low-income voters would match or exceed the presidential election margin in 15 states:

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Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, New Hampshire, Arizona, Minnesota, Maine, Florida, New Mexico, North Carolina, Nevada, Georgia, Texas, Mississippi, and Ohio (in descending order of influence). Notably, this list includes Southern states such as Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Texas, each of which were at least partially subject to federal preclearance conditions on voting legislation because of historical records of racial discrimination, though *Shelby County v. Holder* lifted this provision of the Voting Rights Act as of 2013.⁶ Overall, states with potential changes include states with both Democrat and Republican outcomes, which underscores that this evidence is related to the potential for a more representative vote by income status, and perhaps to a call for increased campaign focus on issues that matter to low-income families.

Figure 3. Percent of Low-Income Eligible Non-Voting Population Equal to the 2016 Presidential Election Margin, by State



⁶ See Brandeisky, K., H. Chen, and M. Tigas, "[Everything that's happened since Supreme Court ruled on Voting Rights Act](#)," *ProPublica*, Nov. 4, 2014. Preclearance applied only to certain counties in Florida and North Carolina.

The results so far have highlighted the potential magnitude of engaging low-income voters relative to the 2016 presidential election, however, these votes could also weigh importantly for United States Senate elections in midterm election years. The following estimates are averaged over the four most recent midterm election years: 2006, 2010, 2014, and 2018. Figure 4 again shows the magnitude of low-income potential voters, those who are eligible and nonvoting, relative to recent averages for midterm election years by state. Compared to the same results for the 2016 presidential election shown in Figure 2, states are more likely to have a higher percentage of the total electorate be comprised of potential low-income voters for midterm elections. This is largely a mechanical result of the lower voting rates in these years and thus larger eligible nonvoting populations, though the map also shows that these potential voters make up at least one fifth of the electorate in 15 states. Again, for comparisons of potential voting populations to recent margins of victory, Figure 5 shows that even more states could see some impact with greater voter mobilization among low-income individuals. If the low-income population were to match voting rates of those with higher incomes, then there would be 16 states where these additional low-income voters would exceed the midterm election margins of victory: Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, North Carolina, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

If the low-income population were to match voting rates of those with higher incomes, then there would be 16 states where these additional voters would match or exceed the average midterm election margins from 2006–2018.

Figure 4. Low-Income Eligible Non-Voters as a Percent of the Total Electorate Relative to Average 2006–2018 Midterm Election Years, by State

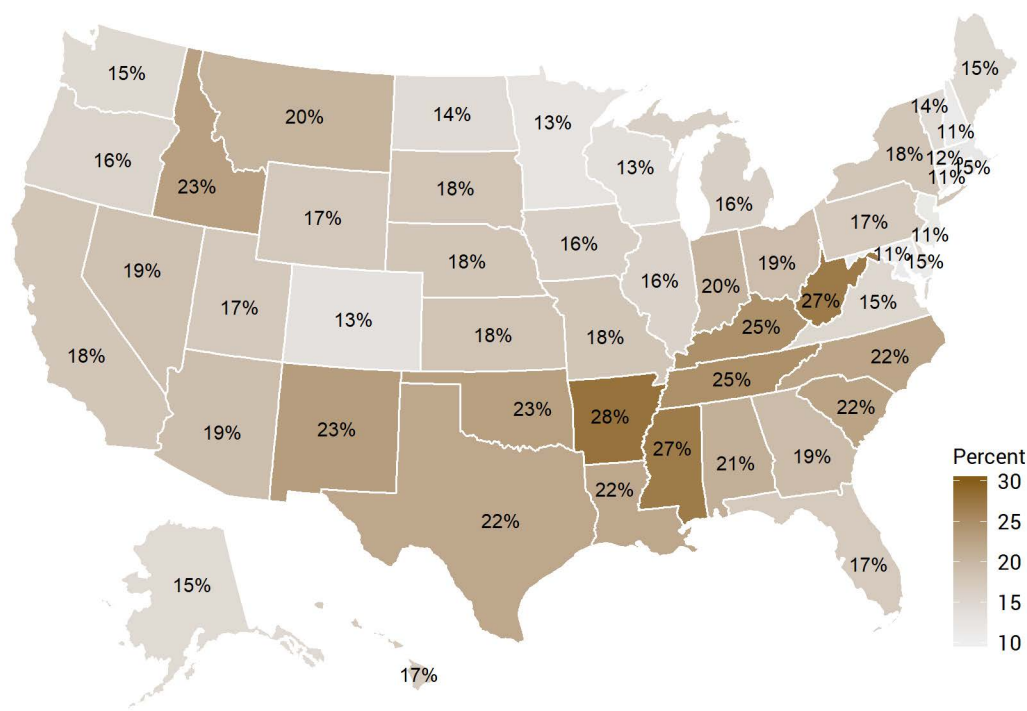
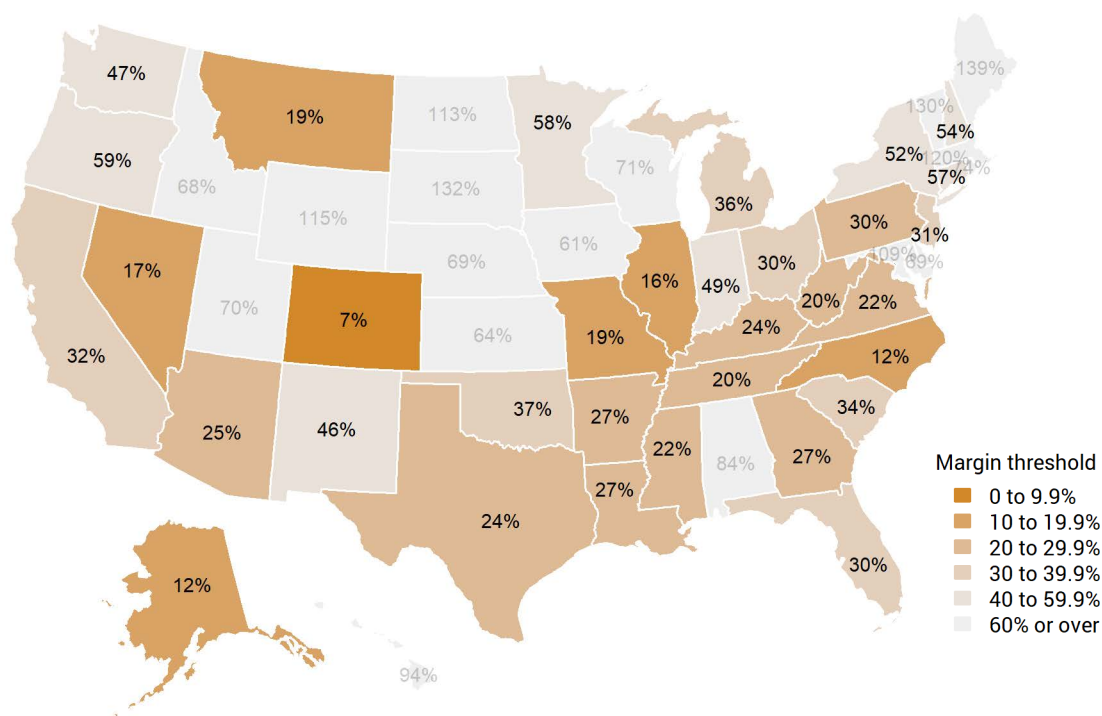


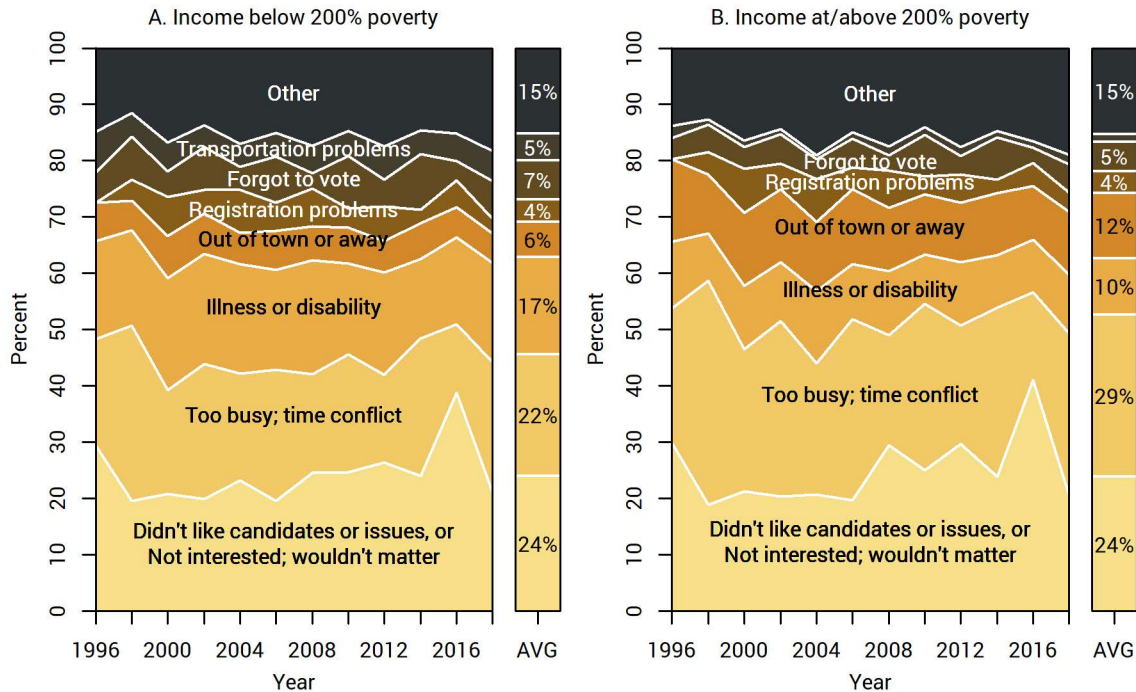
Figure 5. Percent of Low-Income Eligible Non-Voting Population Equal to Average 2006–2018 Midterm Senate Election Margins, by State



Voter Participation Choice and Method of Voting

Why is it that lower-income Americans vote less? Based on self-reported data, Figure 6 shows key similarities and differences across election years by income status. The most common reason that low-income individuals did not vote in 2016 was that they did not strongly identify with the candidate or campaign issues, which was closely followed by disinterest or not believing their vote would make a difference. In fact, the proportion of nonvoters that were disillusioned with their voting prospects was no different by income status in 2016, which applied to about one out of four nonvoters. Relative to the rest of the population, lower-income Americans are more likely than those at higher incomes to not vote because of issues like transportation problems or illness/disability, and less likely relative to higher-income Americans to not vote because of time conflicts, general busyness, or travel. These descriptive comparisons suggest that lower- and higher-income Americans are similar in nonvoting patterns related to how candidates connect to their issues or belief that their vote matters. However, the electorate differs by income status in that low-income nonvoters are more constrained by issues out of their control (transportation, illness/disability) compared to higher-income nonvoters that report being busy or away.

Figure 6. Trends for Reported Reasons for Not Voting, by Family Income
Current Population Survey, November 1996–2018



One interpretation of this evidence is that low-income voters may be avoiding the polls predominantly because no one is speaking to their issues and values. While the literature on political science has generally held that there are little differences between voters and nonvoters, more recent evidence summarized by Jan Leighley and Jonathan Nagler in *Who Votes Now?* (2014) suggests there may

A large proportion of the electorate is not participating in elections because they are not motivated by a particular candidate who might make a difference on issues that matter to economically vulnerable families.

be important differences in policy outcomes. In particular, welfare benefits and federal grants are both higher in states where low-income voters participate in elections. Leighley and Nagler also find that lower-income voters perceive less policy differentiation between candidates.⁷ This evidence accentuates the point that a large proportion of the electorate is not participating in elections because they are not motivated by a particular candidate who might make a difference on issues that matter to economically vulnerable families, which was particularly true in 2016.

When considering the differential participation in elections, the survey results shown in Figure 6 do not tell the whole story. For example, some survey respondents may refuse to answer certain questions or decline participation in the survey, and further, the survey questions do not include the potential for multiple factors or perhaps nuanced factors that intersect with institutional

barriers or structural inequalities. Legislation has, in fact, been passed to support increased voting participation among low-income Americans via the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, which

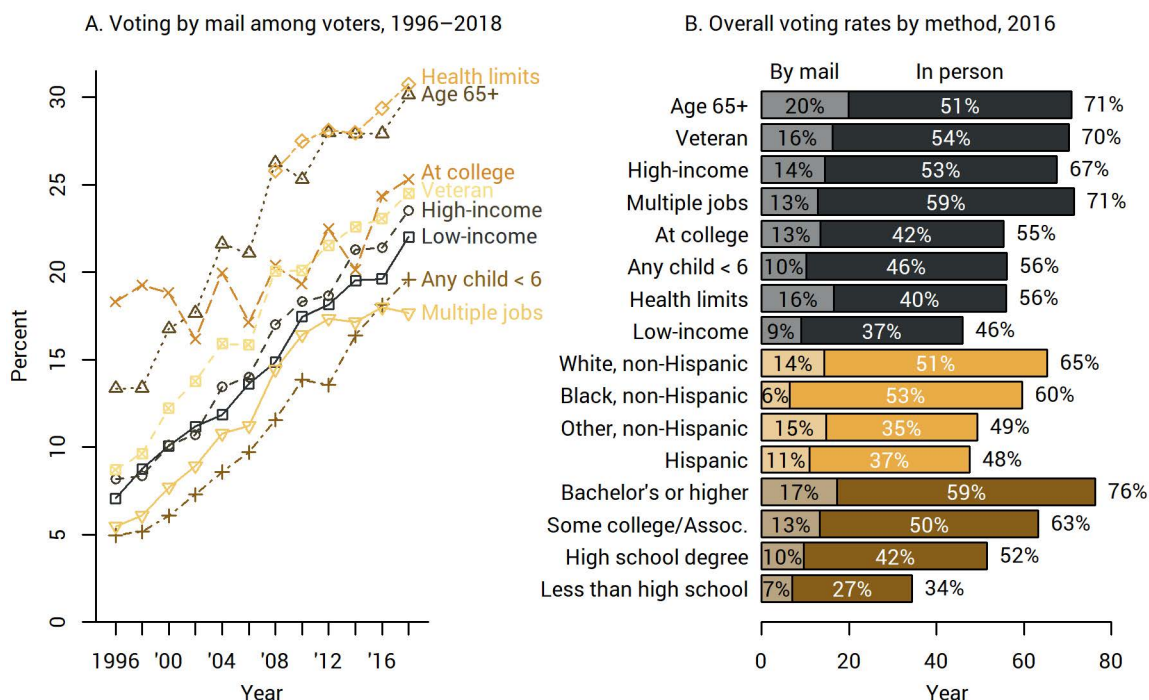
⁷ See Leighley, J., and J. Nagler. 2014. [Who Votes Now? Demographics, Issues, Inequality, and Turnout in the United States](#). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. ISBN: 9780691159355.

introduced a requirement that public assistance agencies also offer voter registration to benefit recipients. Jamila Michener (2016) demonstrated, however, that the implementation of this new law has not been consistent across all states, and that its enforcement has generally declined over time. Moreover, Michener’s findings highlight less compliance with this legal mandate in states with a more civically engaged non-white population or states in which African Americans are a larger share of the population.⁸ Unequal voting access and voter suppression illustrate the ongoing need for greater accessibility and representation at the polls.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, voting access has the potential to become more unequal. A critical question for November 2020 will be the degree to which states are prepared for voting by mail.

The practice of voting by mail has been used extensively by the armed services and other Americans living overseas, and it is increasingly common domestically, as well. In total, about 1 in 4 votes in the 2018 election was cast by mail.⁹ Using survey responses for households residing in the United States, Figure 7 shows trends in voting by mail as a percent of those who voted in elections from 1996 to 2018 in panel A, and it decomposes overall voting rates by method for the 2016 election in panel B. For example, those with health limitations and those aged 65 and over are the most likely to vote by mail if they vote (panel A), though health limitations make it much less likely someone votes at all (panel B). Individuals at college and those who are veterans are also more likely to vote by mail, while those with a young child or working multiple jobs have a lower probability of voting by mail, despite the potential efficiency of doing so. Notably, the prevalence of voting by mail has been increasing across a wide range of personal characteristics, and there is little difference in voting by mail according to income status. High- and low-income individuals have similar trends of increasingly voting by mail, yet the low-income population is less likely to vote overall. Among low-income voters, the 2016 voting rate was 46 percent: 9 percent of eligible low-income voters mailed in ballots, which is one-fifth of those who voted.

Figure 7. Prevalence of Voting by Mail
Current Population Survey, November 1996–2018



⁸ Michener, J. 2016. “Race, poverty, and the redistribution of voting rights,” *Poverty and Public Policy*, 8 (2): 106–128.

⁹ See the [Election Administration and Voting Survey 2018 Comprehensive Report to the 116th Congress](#).

Each state has the authority to determine how accessible voting by mail is for its residents. Five states have made voting by mail universally accessible and send ballots to every eligible voter: Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah, and Washington. Another 29 states allow registered voters to request a mail-in ballot for any reason. In 16 states, voters need to provide a valid reason for voting absentee, 4 of which disallowed COVID-19 as a valid reason during recent primary elections: Mississippi, Missouri, Tennessee, and Texas. There is no partisan divide between states that offer “no-excuse” mail-in voting compared to those who require valid reasons (including the pandemic); each group of states is evenly split in terms of gubernatorial political party. States that allow voting by mail for any reason include 15 Democrat-led and 14 Republican-led states, and those requiring valid reasons are comprised of 7 Republican-led and 5 Democratic-led states.¹⁰

Mail-in voting is already prevalent, increasingly common across income types and other personal characteristics, and bipartisan in its implementation. Increased access for individuals to exercise their right to vote would benefit democracy in normal times, and supporting a consistent infrastructure for voting by mail is all the more important for times of great social need, such as the current pandemic.

Would More Low-Income Voter Participation Matter?

The main story of these data so far is that the low-income electorate is a substantial group that votes less often than higher-income individuals although at similar trends and changes in voting patterns over time. This is a group that could mobilize if they were more engaged by candidates or campaigns, or if they believed that voting might make a difference, though increased voting accessibility could address important constraints for those with illness, disability, transportation issues, or multiple jobs. One question not addressed directly is what difference the low-income electorate could actually make. It is difficult to answer because their voting preferences are not observed if they do not show up at the polls. However, one could consider what might happen if low-income individuals were to vote at the same rate as those with higher incomes in their same states.

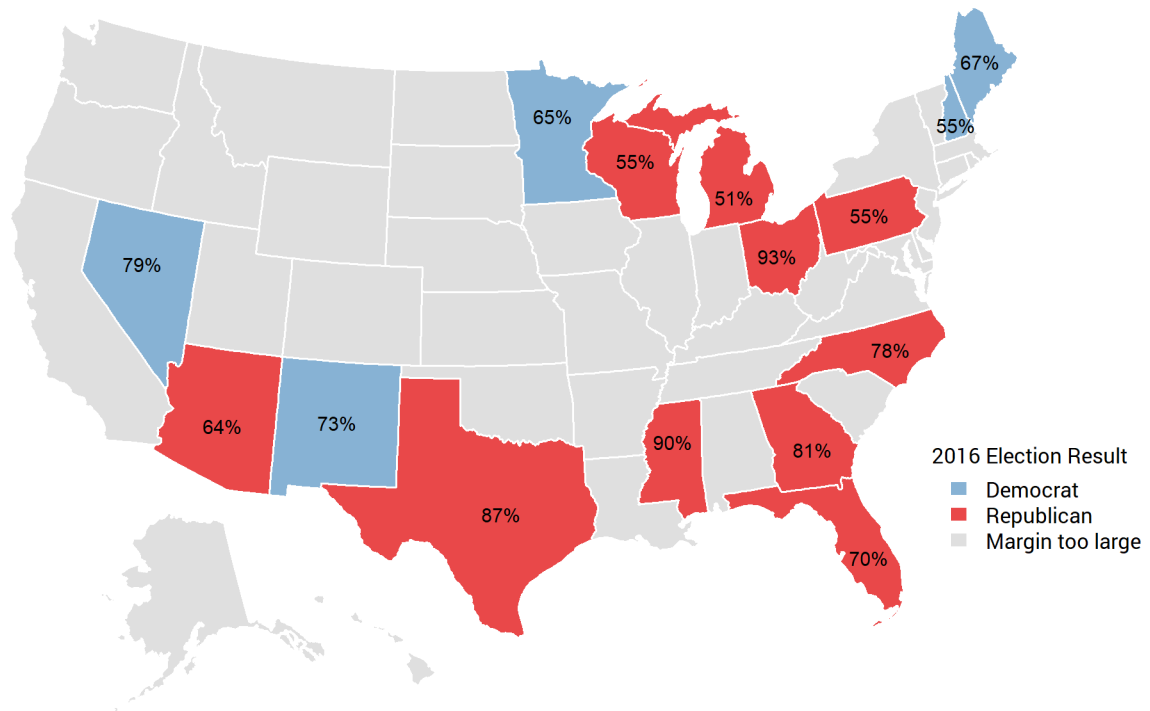
Figure 8 shows what percent of the additional low-income voters would be needed to flip the results of a given state in the 2016 presidential election. There are 15 states total that would potentially flip if at least 71 percent (on average) of the newly voting low-income population voted for the party that lost in that state in 2016: 10 states could flip from red to blue, and 5 states from blue to red. For each state in Figure 8, the percentage shown is the proportion of new voters needed to flip the election based on the observed outcomes in 2016: blue for states that voted predominantly Democrat and red for Republican. (States shown in gray would need more than 100 percent of these new voters to change the election results.) For example, in Georgia, if the low-income

There are 15 states total that would potentially flip if at least 71 percent (on average) of the newly voting low-income population voted for the party that lost in that state in 2016: 10 states could flip from red to blue, and 5 states from blue to red.

¹⁰ See the OSET Institute’s briefing, [“The bipartisan truth about by-mail voting,”](#) May 2020. For evidence that voting by mail is independent of partisan outcomes, see Thompson, D.M., J.A. Wu, J. Yoder, and A.B. Hall. 2020. [“Universal vote-by-mail has no impact on partisan turnout or vote share,”](#) *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 117 (25): 14052–14056; and, Barber, M., and J.B. Holbein, “The participatory and partisan impacts of mandatory vote-by-mail,” forthcoming at *Science Advances*.

population showed up to vote at the same rate as the rest of the Georgian electorate, then at least 81 percent of these new voters would have to vote Democrat to flip the Republican-leaning election results. Michigan would only need a slim majority of 51 percent of newly participating low-income voters to choose the Democrat to flip that state from red to blue, and New Hampshire would also only need a small majority of 55 percent of new voters to flip that state from Democrat to Republican.

Figure 8. If the Low-Income Electorate Voted at the Same Rate as Higher-Income Voters, the Minimum Percent of New Low-Income Voters Needed to Flip the 2016 Election Results by State



Note that the map colors above correspond to the political party that actually won the 2016 elections by state, and the states highlighted are those that could possibly flip to the other party if the low-income electorate voted at the same rate as higher-income voters.

In order to change an election outcome, over 50 percent of the new voters would have had to vote differently from the state winner. For the example of Michigan, only a simple majority of 51 percent would be needed, yet for Texas, it would require at least 87 percent of new voters to oppose the winning party and flip the election.

Conclusion

It is well documented that low-income voters are not as likely to show up at the polls. However, this is a relatively large potential voting population with similar voting trends and mobilization possibilities as the rest of the population. After the 2016 presidential election, both those with low income and those with relatively higher income increased turnout by nearly the same percentage-point change for the 2018

Campaign policy proposals are typically targeted toward the middle class, and political debates spend a minority of the time on issues directly relevant to most lower-income voters.

midterm elections. Not only is the potential low-income voting population relatively large compared to the total electorate by state, there are several important election states in which low-income voting at the rates of the rest of the population would match or exceed recent election margins of victory.

Low-income voters may have a diversity of political leanings, that is, they certainly do not all vote the same party. At the same time, there is consistency in the reasons why people do not vote, whether low-income or otherwise, and that is mainly because the candidates or campaigns do not appeal to them. The political landscape might not change overnight if greater percentages of low-income voters show up, however, this is a large potential voting group that does not receive much attention from candidates. Campaign policy proposals are typically targeted toward the middle class, and political debates spend a minority of the time on issues directly relevant to most lower-income voters.

This evidence is also not intended to diminish the impact of voter suppression that might target low-income or minority voters, nor the role of gerrymandering, which has been struck down in some places as unconstitutional. Even though individuals report one reason for not voting, other reasons may also matter, including accessibility. Ultimately, it is true that low-income Americans are less likely to vote, yet it does not have to be that way. For a more representative democratic election, and a large potential gain for those who speak to this population, the low-income electorate may offer a new focus for organization, mobilization, and campaign debate in the years going forward.

Appendix A. Additional State-Level Estimates

Table A1. Number of Eligible Voters and Election Margins, by State (in thousands)

State	2016 presidential election			2006–2018 midterm elections		
	Low-income nonvoters	Total electorate	Election margin of victory	Low-income nonvoters	Total electorate	Election margin of victory
Alabama	640	3,670	590	730	3,480	610
Alaska	60	510	50	70	480	10
Arizona	730	4,400	90	830	4,360	210
Arkansas	500	2,180	300	580	2,070	150
California	3,310	24,140	4,270	4,190	23,500	1,340
Colorado	300	3,700	140	470	3,610	30
Connecticut	200	2,610	220	270	2,500	150
Delaware	60	660	50	100	650	70
Florida	1,560	13,730	110	2,310	13,430	700
Georgia	1,030	6,960	210	1,290	6,680	350
Hawaii	150	970	140	160	930	150
Idaho	190	1,120	220	250	1,100	170
Illinois	1,060	9,360	940	1,380	8,770	230
Indiana	750	4,930	520	940	4,660	460
Iowa	300	2,340	150	360	2,220	220
Kansas	320	2,070	240	360	1,980	230
Kentucky	680	3,330	570	780	3,170	190
Louisiana	620	3,430	400	710	3,230	200
Maine	140	1,080	20	150	1,040	210
Maryland	350	4,170	730	450	4,020	490
Massachusetts	460	5,000	900	550	4,710	660
Michigan	980	7,710	10	1,180	7,250	430
Minnesota	330	4,050	40	480	3,850	280
Mississippi	450	2,240	220	570	2,120	130
Missouri	680	4,610	520	790	4,410	150
Montana	120	790	100	160	770	30
Nebraska	170	1,360	210	230	1,280	160
Nevada	210	1,850	30	340	1,820	60
New Hampshire	80	1,050	< 10	110	1,010	60
New Jersey	470	6,170	550	670	5,860	210
New Mexico	290	1,460	70	330	1,400	150
New York	1,760	13,970	1,850	2,370	13,290	1,240
North Carolina	920	6,930	170	1,500	6,740	180
North Dakota	60	540	120	70	510	80
Ohio	1,270	8,990	450	1,620	8,480	490
Oklahoma	550	2,800	530	610	2,650	230
Oregon	370	2,930	220	450	2,880	270
Pennsylvania	1,230	9,940	40	1,610	9,390	480
Rhode Island	100	800	70	110	760	80
South Carolina	580	3,500	300	770	3,430	270
South Dakota	100	620	110	110	600	140
Tennessee	980	4,880	650	1,160	4,700	230
Texas	2,960	16,580	810	3,580	16,260	860
Utah	260	1,870	200	320	1,870	230
Vermont	60	510	80	70	480	90
Virginia	550	5,790	210	850	5,580	190
Washington	530	4,980	520	700	4,760	330
West Virginia	340	1,510	300	380	1,410	80
Wisconsin	460	4,410	20	560	4,190	400
Wyoming	60	430	120	70	410	80

Notes: Author's calculations using Current Population Survey data and reported election outcomes. Adjusted estimates are used for estimating the 2016 electorate sizes to be representative by state. Estimates are rounded to the nearest 10,000.

Appendix B. Data Sources

Survey data on family income and voting participation come from the Current Population Survey, November Supplement, 1984–2018. Family income is categorized by different bins of income for different years, so earlier years of data are recoded in order to consolidate into a consistent estimate of family income, and low-income families are defined as having income below 200 percent of the official poverty threshold by year. Note that the official poverty measure (OPM) is being used because the supplemental poverty measure (SPM)—preferred in the research community—is unavailable in the November Supplement. Given data on income measures in 2018, the total size of the low-income electorate would be almost 25 percent larger based on the SPM framework pre-tax/transfers, or 47 percent larger accounting for income after taxes. (SPM poverty accounts for net income after taxes, transfers, and certain expenses, and the poverty threshold is adjusted for expenditure needs that vary geographically and are adjusted by housing status.) Therefore, the results in this brief understate the number of individuals who might be considered to have low incomes relative to the poverty threshold.

Sarah Flood, Miriam King, Renae Rodgers, Steven Ruggles and J. Robert Warren. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Current Population Survey: Version 7.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2020. <http://doi.org/10.18128/D030.V7.0>

Election results data were sourced from the MIT Election Data and Science Lab, which offers packaged data on detailed state-level election voting outcomes.

MIT Election Data and Science Lab, 2017, "U.S. President 1976–2016", <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/42MVDX>, Harvard Dataverse, V5, UNF:6:Mw0hOUHAijKPTVRAe5jJvg==

MIT Election Data and Science Lab, 2017, "U.S. Senate 1976–2018", <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PEJ5QU>, Harvard Dataverse, V4, UNF:6:WzSZLQX8O9Nk6RKWwkjx9g==

Appendix C. Estimation Methodology

Estimates for state-level voting status in presidential election years are constructed based on multiple years of self-reported voting status during years with stable voting rates by family income: 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016 (see Figure 1). Since these years exhibit some differences from the 2016 presidential election year, the estimates are adjusted according to the following process.

Let the total electorate for income group i , state s and year t be denoted E_{ist} , where the total number of eligible voters is comprised of voters V_{ist} and nonvoters N_{ist} such that $E_{ist} = V_{ist} + N_{ist}$. Further, let the estimated numbers be represented by $\{\hat{V}_{ist}, \hat{N}_{ist}, \hat{E}_{ist}\}$, and the true values by $\{V_{ist}^*, N_{ist}^*, E_{ist}^*\}$. While public-use survey data provide estimates for each of these counts by income group, official voting results are reported for the total votes counted in aggregate, not by income status and not for the total electorate including the nonvoting population. The estimation bias for the total count of the eligible non-voting population is given by

$$\hat{N}_{ist} - N_{ist}^* = (\hat{E}_{ist} - \hat{V}_{ist}) - (E_{ist}^* - V_{ist}^*) = \hat{E}_{ist} - E_{ist}^* - \hat{V}_{ist} + V_{ist}^*.$$

If we assume that the data are approximately representative of the true population, then we can assert that $\hat{E}_{ist} \approx E_{ist}^*$, which leads to $\hat{N}_{ist} - V_{ist}^* + \hat{V}_{ist} \approx N_{ist}^*$ as an estimator for the true nonvoting

population size in a given group, state, and year. Since the survey data counts are constructed by using representative survey weights, the yearly counts for 2004, 2008, and 2012 are first adjusted to be comparable to the population size in 2016, which is done by inflating the weights in earlier years to sum to the total of the weights in 2016. For the set of four presidential election years used in estimation, $T = \{2004, 2008, 2012, 2016\}$, the 2016 counts are estimated by

$$\hat{N}_{is,2016} = \frac{1}{4} \sum_{t \in T} \sum_{k=1}^{K_{st}} \tilde{w}_{kt} N_{k,ist} \text{ and } \hat{V}_{is,2016} = \frac{1}{4} \sum_{t \in T} \sum_{k=1}^{K_{st}} \tilde{w}_{kt} V_{k,ist},$$

where there are K_{st} state-level observations per year, $N_{k,ist} = 1$ for those who are eligible and nonvoting (and $V_{k,ist} = 1$ for those who are eligible and voting) by income group, state, and year, and the yearly sample weights are calibrated to the population size relative to the 2016 presidential election according to $\tilde{w}_{kt} = w_{kt} (\sum_{k=1}^{K_{2016}} w_{k,2016}) / (\sum_{k=1}^{K_t} w_{kt})$. Taking the official voting results as the true counts, the adjusted 2016 presidential election counts of low-income (l) eligible nonvoting population is estimated by

$$\tilde{N}_{ls,2016} = \hat{N}_{ls,2016} - V_{ls,2016}^* + \hat{V}_{ls,2016} \approx N_{ls,2016}^*,$$

however, the true state-level value of $V_{ls,2016}^*$ is still unknown for the low income group. As long as the survey data accurately describe the proportions of voters who are in the low-income group, then $V_{ls,2016}^*$ can be estimated by $\tilde{V}_{ls,2016}^* = V_{s,2016}^* (\hat{V}_{ls,2016} / \hat{V}_{s,2016})$, where $V_{s,2016}^*$ is the official vote count by state, and $\hat{V}_{ls,2016} / \hat{V}_{s,2016}$ is the proportion of voters estimated by income group to the total estimated number of voters. Thus, the number of low-income eligible nonvoting population in the 2016 presidential election, $N_{ls,2016}^*$, is estimated by:

$$\tilde{N}_{ls,2016} = \frac{1}{4} \sum_{t \in T} \sum_{k=1}^{K_t} \tilde{w}_{kt} N_{k,lst} + \left(\frac{1}{4} \sum_{t \in T} \sum_{k=1}^{K_t} \tilde{w}_{kt} V_{k,lst} \right) \left(1 - \frac{V_{s,2016}^*}{\frac{1}{4} \sum_{t \in T} \sum_{k=1}^{K_t} \tilde{w}_{kt} V_{k,st}} \right).$$

For midterm election years, comparisons between the low-income electorate and election outcomes are constructed based on four-year averages for the most recent years: 2006, 2010, 2014, and 2018. Therefore, the sample estimates are constructed without the adjustments used to match the 2016 election described above. For the set of midterm election years, $T_m = \{2006, 2010, 2014, 2018\}$, the average nonvoting and voting counts by income group are estimated by

$$\bar{N}_{ism} = \frac{1}{4} \sum_{t \in T_m} \sum_{k=1}^{K_t} w_{kt} N_{k,ist} \text{ and } \bar{V}_{ism} = \frac{1}{4} \sum_{t \in T_m} \sum_{k=1}^{K_t} w_{kt} V_{k,ist}.$$

The total electorate estimates are given by $\hat{E}_{is,2016} = \hat{N}_{is,2016} + \hat{V}_{is,2016}$ for the 2016 presidential election year, and $\bar{E}_{ism} = \bar{N}_{ism} + \bar{V}_{ism}$ for the average midterm year from 2006 to 2018. The election margins of victory are taken directly from the election results data as obtained from the MIT Election Data and Science Lab.

The findings in this report are robust to estimating potential outcomes using alternative data rules for defining nonvoters and reweighted electorate numbers, and for the presidential election findings, estimates are robust to only using 2016 data instead of the adjusted averages. For reweighting procedure details, see McDonald, M.P. "United States Election Project", <http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/cps-methodology> (retrieved July 30, 2020), which is based on work by Hur and Achen (2013).