

The Impact of Non-Citizen Population in Regional Differences in Non-Voting in the USA

Achintya Ray,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4269-0268>

Ph.D. in Economics, Professor of Economics, Tennessee State University, Nashville, TN, USA

Corresponding author: Achintya Ray, aray4@tnstate.edu

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Abstract: *Given that voting is the bedrock of any functional democracy, it is an intriguing puzzle as to why many eligible voters often choose not to vote. The rational choice theory posits that voters might decide to stay away from voting, especially if they believe that their votes are inconsequential and not enough to change the outcomes of an election, especially involving many unrelated voters. However, other socioeconomic factors may modify that belief as voters may respond to the environment they live in and vote accordingly just to make a statement. Also, affinity to other fellow citizens and the presence of social capital may lead the voters to vote in higher numbers to signal voter solidarity. Using the US Census Bureau's voting participation and citizenship composition data at the state levels for the year 2020, this paper shows that citizens feel positively inclined to participate in voting if a larger percentage of citizens are registered to vote. Furthermore, controlling for voter registration and regional indicator variables, non-voting (by the registered voters) seems to decline (voting seems to increase) as the percentage of non-citizens increases in the population. The first result seems to point to the non-trivial role played by social capital and voter affinity in increasing turnout, while the second and the key result of this paper seems to indicate that larger immigration numbers may energize the citizens to vote in higher numbers, thereby reducing the percentage of citizens who do not vote. Further evidence regarding regional variations suggests that controlling for voter registration and percentage of non-citizens in the population, non-voting may be lower in the North-Eastern and Western regions of the USA compared to the Southern and Mid-Western regions. Asymmetries in regional immigrations, voter registration and voter engagement present a very interesting dynamism for future elections and public policy formulation in the USA.*

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Introduction

Voting is a sacred right and solemn responsibility in a well-functioning democracy. It is a privilege that is not available to billions of people worldwide. It is expected that securing right to vote, either by birth or by naturalization, will propel everyone to exercise their democratic rights. Yet in the USA, tens of millions of eligible voters routinely do not vote even when they are fully empowered to do so. It presents a very interesting puzzle. Why do not eligible voters vote? What causes them to stay away from the polling booths? The grounds covered by these, and similar questions are vast and well-researched. This study takes a narrow aspect of this ever-increasing field. It focuses its attention on the possible role of the presence of non-citizens in modifying citizens' willingness to vote.

Specifically, this paper explores a simple question: does the presence of non-citizens affect the citizens' voting behavior? I examine the question using US Census Bureau's Current Population Survey for the year 2020 elections. The elections of 2020 were a watershed moment in the country's history when the sitting President Donald Trump was beaten by his challenger, Vice President Joseph Biden. It was the first time since 1992 when a sitting president lost his re-election bid and the first time since 1932 when a sitting president not only lost the re-election bid but his party also lost control of both the House and the Senate in the United States' Congress. According to Liasson (2021), President Herbert Hoover was the last president to meet that fate. A record number of over 155 million voters voted in this 2020 election and both candidates won more votes than any other candidates in the history of the USA.

Despite the record voting in the 2020 elections, almost 80 million eligible voters, or about a third of the potential electorate, did not vote. According to Montanaro (2020), about 29% of them were not registered, 23% were not interested in politics, 20% did not like the candidates, 16% felt that their votes would make no difference, and about 10% couldn't decide who they wanted to vote for. While about 8 in 10 voters closely followed the political campaigns, only about 4 in 10 non-voters did so. The overwhelming majority of the non-voters believed that the main political parties *did not care* about them, the mainstream media was less forthcoming with the truth, and it did not matter who became the president as the economy was rigged in favour of the rich and powerful. Such deep-seated disengagement and disillusionment are extremely troubling aspects for American democracy and might pose a significant challenge to democracy and the rule of law in the country for years to come.

These aggregate studies often do not shed light on inter and intra-regional differences in voting patterns, especially those who did not vote. This paper uses the aggregate state-level data from US Census to gain a more nuanced view of the distribution of non-voters in various regions of the country and the role that the presence of non-citizens plays in the voting practices of the citizens. Presidential, House and Senate elections are very appropriate for this investigation as only citizens can vote in these elections. Non-citizens cannot vote in US Federal elections. However, the composition of the population and the presence of non-citizens in the population can contribute to differential voting patterns as immigration remains an extremely hot button issue for the country and a large presence of non-citizens might amplify voters' attitudes to political issues, especially as they relate to immigration policies. For example, Evans and Ivaldi (2021) showed that many non-citizens might contribute to increased voting by the citizens. Van der Brug, Fennema, and Tillie (2000) also described such behaviour modifying impacts in European political contests.

This paper presents two main results: (1) the percentage of eligible voters who did not vote decreases as the percentage of non-citizens increases in the state population; (2) this effect is robust even after controlling for regional variations in terms of the percentage of eligible voters who did not vote. As a control, the regressions use the percentage of eligible voters who are registered. The results also show that an increase in voter registration *generally leads to a decline* in the percentage of eligible voters who did not vote. A larger fraction of non-citizens and higher voter registration led to higher voting numbers and a smaller fraction of voters who stayed away from voting.

Literature Review

In one of the earliest studies on non-voting behaviour, Laponce (1967) stated that "... *failure to vote is associated with conflicting political preferences, with lack of interest in politics, with low position on the social stratification scale, with a feeling of political powerlessness and, to a lesser extent, with sex (women usually voting less than men) and with age (the very young and the very old voting less than the average)*". Much of that characterization remains true and heavily supported even to this date, as corroborated by Montanaro (2020). Following Laponce (1967), Silver (1973) looked at the issue of voting cost and the probability that any single vote will be consequential in an election with many voters. In this framework, any individual voter might consider her cost of voting and weigh that with the probability that she alone will be able to sway the outcome of the election results. Naturally, imposing a high cost of voting might stop many voters from voting. Therefore, one argument for increasing voting involves steps aimed at reducing the costs of voting and making voting as easy as possible for the voters. Husted and Kenny (1997) explore the curious relationship between the voting franchise expansion and the government's size. In a previous study, Knack (1992) reflected on the possibility of voter solidarity and mutually shared social capital as potential drivers behind voting behaviour.

Searching for reliable variables that explain the non-voting behaviour is often frustrating, and typical suspects routinely produce unreliable and low-powered explanatory contributions. Matsusaka, and Palda, (1999) studied many commonly used variables and provided rich contexts as to why a researcher must be mindful of the time-varying nature of voter preferences. Geys (2006) provides an extensive overview of the myriads of explanatory variables used in empirical literature to explain the voters' voting (or, non-voting) behaviour. This comprehensive review brings to the fore the enormous importance of rational choice as a non-trivial factor that demands careful attention. In an immensely influential study, Fowler, Baker, and Dawes (2008) showed the direct connection between genes, voting behaviour and social participation. Genetic predisposition to pro-social behaviour, including voting provides a biological foundation to the rational choice theory. Alford, Funk and Hibbing (2005) explore similar relationship between political orientation and genetic transmission and conclude that "*The results indicate that genetics plays an important role in shaping political attitudes and ideologies but a more modest role in forming party identification; as such, they call for finer distinctions in theorizing about the sources of political attitudes*". This study also calls for political scientists to include more genetic information while studying political outcomes.

This current paper focuses on the presence of non-citizens in the population and its impact on the citizens' voting behavior. Halla, Wagner, and Zweimüller (2017) argue that immigration might trigger nativist tendencies and nudge some voters to increase political activism. In a European context, Moriconi, Peri, and Turati (2019) show that the support for the welfare state increases following significant high-skilled immigration. In a related study on the effect of immigration on voting, Abou-Chadi, and Helbling (2018) conclude that "*.... both liberal and restrictive reforms lead to increasing issue voting. While we show that government parties are not more affected than opposition parties, we see that party ideology partly plays a role*".

The literature that links immigration with voting behaviour and policy formulation has important implications for emerging immigration trends in OECD countries Helbling and Kalkum (2018). Of interest in the line is the study by Helbling, and Leblang (2019) that shows the relationship between immigration policy and political processes that the voting behavior may mediate. Immigration policy-driven political behavior and voting practices may be contextualized in the broader literature on the backlash against globalization, as in Walter (2021). Immigration is an extremely hot-button issue in the USA for several years, as explored in detail in Hoekstra and Orozco-Aleman (2021). Candidate Donald Trump made immigration a central dimension of his campaign platform in 2016. By some estimates as in Hoekstra and Orozco-Aleman (2021), that campaign's focus might have *modestly contributed to him getting elected*. This paper looks at the principal feature of that proposition in a more analytic way.

There is a significant distinction in that this current study does not present any proof of voters voting in a certain way but merely looks at the very act of voting itself. In other words, the results of this paper do not present any conclusive evidence that increased voting helped a political party. There is no data in the state-level summary tables to connect voting behavior with candidate choice. Modeling that aspect is not even a goal of this paper as this research is exclusively focused on finding the drivers that might lead to increased voting *only*.

Methodology and Research Methods

The author uses the state-level data from the US Census Bureau on the voting behaviour of the US voters in the 2020 election. Fifty states and Washington DC are divided into four *mutually exclusive regions*, as in Table 1.

Table 1. The Designation of States in Various Census Divisions

<i>Midwest</i>	<i>Northeast</i>	<i>South</i>	<i>West</i>
Illinois	Connecticut	Alabama	Alaska
Indiana	Maine	Arkansas	Arizona
Iowa	Massachusetts	Delaware	California
Kansas	New Hampshire	District of Columbia	Colorado
Michigan	New Jersey	Florida	Hawaii
Minnesota	New York	Georgia	Idaho
Missouri	Pennsylvania	Kentucky	Montana
Nebraska	Rhode Island	Louisiana	Nevada
North Dakota	Vermont	Maryland	New Mexico
Ohio		Mississippi	Oregon
South Dakota		North Carolina	Utah
Wisconsin		Oklahoma	Washington
		South Carolina	Wyoming
		Tennessee	
		Texas	
		Virginia	
		West Virginia	

Source: https://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/maps-data/maps/reference/us_regdiv.pdf

For each of the states, the following data is collected from <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-585.html> (Accessed August 20, 2022):

- *population*: Number of people in the state or Washington DC;
- *citizens*: Number of citizens in the state or Washington DC;
- *registered*: Number of registered voters in the state or Washington DC;
- *voted*: Number of people who voted in 2020 in the state or Washington DC.

From this basic data, the following variables are calculated:

- *noncitper* = Percentage of non-citizens in the state or Washington DC;
- *regper* = Percentage of citizens in the state or Washington DC who are registered to vote;
- *voted* = Percentage of citizens in the state or Washington DC who voted;
- *notvoted* = Percentage of citizens in the state or Washington DC who did not vote in 2020.

The following regression models are estimated after carefully weighting the observations by the respective population sizes to ensure that larger states are not underrepresented, or smaller states are not over-represented in the analysis.

$$\text{notvoted} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{noncitper}) + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

$$\text{notvoted} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{noncitper}) + \beta_2(\text{regper}) + \varepsilon \quad (2)$$

$$\text{notvoted} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{noncitper}) + \beta_2(\text{regper}) + \sum_{i=1}^3 \gamma_i(\text{region}) + \varepsilon \quad (3)$$

Results

Table 2 presents the summary values for various regions. Different regions have different percentages of citizens and non-citizens in the population. Midwest has the highest percentages of citizens and lowest percentages of non-citizens, while the West has the highest percentages of non-citizens and lowest percentages of citizens. Regions also differ in terms of the percentage of registered citizens to vote. Midwest not only has the highest percentage of citizens but also the highest percentage of citizens *registered to vote*. In this regard, Midwest is followed by the Northeast, South, and West. South has the lowest percentage of citizens registered to vote but it may not statistically differ from that in the West.

Table 2. Summary of the Basic Data

Region	Percentage of Citizens in the Population	Percentage of non-citizens in the population	Percentage of Citizens who are registered to vote	Percentage of Citizens who voted in 2020	Percentage of citizens who did not vote in 2020
Midwest	95.60	4.40	75.07	68.61	31.39
Northeast	91.16	8.84	74.92	68.89	31.11
South	90.07	7.93	71.16	64.66	34.34
West	89.17	10.83	71.30	66.94	33.06

Source: Calculations are done on the basis of the data collected from <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-585.html>

Note: The percentages may not add to 100 exactly for rounding up reasons.

The percentage of Citizens who voted in 2020 varies across the regions with the highest percentages observed in the Northeast and the lowest percentages observed in the South. Over a third of the eligible citizens did not vote in 2020 in both West and South. The regression results are presented in Table 3. Model 1 indicates that an increase in the Percentage of non-citizens in the population also increases the Percentage of citizens who did not vote in 2020. But this model does not control the percentage of citizens registered to vote and various regional dummies. Although the coefficient of *noncitper* is positive and statistically significant, the model has a very poor fit and low predictive value especially when we consider its R^2 of 0.02. Models 2 & 3 attempt to rectify these shortcomings by including *voted* and other regional dummies in them.

Table 3. Regression Results

Variable	Dependent Variable: Percentage of citizens who did not vote in 2020 (notvoted)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
<i>Percentage of non-citizens in the population (noncitper)</i>	0.152 (0.0021)	-0.118 (0.0007)	-0.0489 (0.0007)
<i>Percentage of Citizens who are registered to vote (voted)</i>		-1.012 (0.0007)	-1.02 (0.0007)
<i>Dummy for Northeast</i>			-0.193 (0.009)
<i>Dummy for South</i>			0.1456 (0.008)
<i>Dummy for West</i>			-1.853 (0.009)
<i>Constant</i>	32.02 (0.019)	107.76 (0.055)	108.112 (0.052)
R^2	0.02	0.887	0.914

Source: Author's calculations using the data collected from <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-585.html>

Notes: 1. All regressions are performed using least squares method using the state level data with populations used as weighting variable. 2. Standard errors are provided in the parentheses. 3. All coefficients are statistically significant at 5% level.

As Model 2 exhibits, after controlling for the Percentage of Citizens who are registered to vote (*voted*), the percentage of non-citizens in the population (*noncitper*) has a measurable and *statistically significant negative impact* on the percentage of citizens who did not vote in 2020. In other words, as the percentage of non-citizens rises in the population, citizens vote in higher proportions leading to a decline in the percentage of citizens who did not vote. The model does not imply anything definitive regarding the causal factors that drive such a behavioural response. But anecdotal evidence may point to the possibility of increased political awareness and closer affiliation with party platforms if one experiences a higher influx of non-citizen immigrants in the community. The fit of Model 2 is considerably better than that of Model 1 as the R^2 rises from 0.02 to 0.887. Model 3 not only controls for the *voted* but also for *dummies for all regions*. In Model 3, the Midwest dummy is dropped to *avoid perfect multicollinearity* and other regions are compared *vis-à-vis* Midwest.

The basic conclusion remains the same as we move from Model 2 to Model 3 in that the Percentage of non-citizens in the population (*noncitper*) once again found to have a measurable and *statistically significant negative impact* on the percentage of citizens who did not vote in 2020. Interestingly, after controlling for the percentage of non-citizens in the population and the percentage of citizens who are registered to vote, both Northeast and West seem to have a smaller percentage of voters who did not vote compared to the Midwest, while a considerably larger percentage of voters in the South did not vote again compared to the Midwest. In other words, after controlling for mitigating factors, the political engagement of both Northeast and West seems to dominate in the South and the Midwest. In both Models 2 and 3 we find that *increasing*

voter registration has a positive impact on voting in that the percentage of citizens who did not vote declines as the percentage of citizens who are registered to vote increases.

Conclusions

This paper presents the impact of the presence of non-citizens on citizens' voting behavior in the 2020 US elections. Aggregate state-level data from the US Census Bureau is used in this study. Variations in the citizenship composition of the population, voter registration, and voting behavior are analyzed for all Census regions of the USA. After controlling for the percentage of citizens eligible to vote and various other regional indicator variables, the presence of a larger fraction of non-citizens in the population seems to have a statistically significant negative impact on the percentage of citizens who did not vote in the election. In other words, there is modest evidence that an increase in immigration may lead to increased voting by the citizens. It is also found that an increase in voter registration leads to higher voting also. The results presented in this paper do not address the precise reasons as to why increased immigration encourages higher voter turnouts. It does not also provide any definitive characterization of the channels through which increased voter registration might lead to higher voter turnouts. There is considerable scope for *expansive qualitative studies* that can build on these broad regression-based results, especially if they can harness the strengths of focus groups and voter surveys regarding the voter motivations. Applying *sentiment analysis* and *textual analysis* of voter surveys and qualitative focus groups may provide invaluable insights regarding the channels connecting voter registration and immigration to citizens' voting behavior. The linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the immigrants may also play a role in modifying the voters' behavior. Qualitative studies may be powerful tools in disentangling various aspects of such mitigating factors.

Conflicts of Interest: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: This paper uses publicly available data from US Census Bureau located at <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-585.html>.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

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