

Jan E. Leighley and Jonathon Nagler. *Who Votes Now? Demographics, Issues, Inequality, and Turnout in the United States.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014. xxi, 206 pp. (\$75.00 cloth, \$28.95 paper).

Has the American electorate experienced significant demographic change in the last three and a half decades? If poor voters continue to lag behind wealthier voters in patterns of turnout, what implications does this have for economic inequality and democracy? Jan Leighley and Jonathon Nagler have updated and extended the seminal analysis of Raymond E. Wolfinger and Steven J. Rosenstone in *Who Votes?* (1980), with this comprehensive investigation of demographics and political opinions of voters and nonvoters since 1972. They also consider the impact of recent electoral reforms such as early voting and extended closing dates for registration as well as the influence of candidate choice on turnout. Their analysis concentrates extensively on differences in the political (especially economic) opinions of poor and wealthier voters, and, in the context of choices offered by the major parties, what this means for differences in turnout and policymaking.

While much of Wolfinger and Rosenstone's earlier work is reconfirmed for subsequent years, more interesting is what changes have occurred, and especially Leighley and Nagler's contention that poor people would *not* make vote choices in similar patterns as wealthier voters as Wolfinger and Rosenstone concluded. Their main departure is that poor voters should be differentiated from wealthier voters on *issues*, not just candidates or parties. [They] "believe that candidates offering distinct policy choices to citizens constitutes another mechanism by which voter turnout might be increased, and could also lower the income bias of voters" (p. 4).

The authors begin with a quantitative empirical description of what happened to patterns of turnout since 1972, outlining what has *not* changed ("turnout of *eligible* citizens has not declined since 1972, and ... the overrepresentation of the wealthy versus the poor among voters has remained stable and large over time" p. 12), and what *has* changed ("the relative turnout rates of men and women, blacks and whites, and younger and older adults" p.12) during that time period. They then turn to a model that estimates turnout as a function of their demographic characteristics of interest. Here, they estimate the conditional impact of single demographic characteristics on turnout while controlling for other demographic characteristics. Again, they focus on the relationships that have remained stable (conditional income bias) and those that have changed ("conditional relationships between age, race, gender, and turnout" p. 13).

A description and analyses of the effects of election reforms on turnout finds modest effects of election-day registration, absentee voting, and moving the closing date for registration closer to the election, but is inconclusive on the impact of early voting. They move on to a thorough examination of the relationship between perceived policy differences and turnout, as well a comparison of the policy preferences of voters and nonvoters. This is the part of the analysis that is perhaps most problematic. While social issues are incorporated into the analysis, the overwhelming importance of economic issues in their models may overstate the salience of economic issues while underemphasizing social issues.

Leighley and Nagler estimate multivariate logit models for all presidential elections from 1972 to 2008 in an effort to understand the relative explanatory power of seven demographic variables (education, income, age, race, ethnicity, gender, and marital status) on turnout. This technique “allow[s] the marginal effect of each demographic characteristic to vary by election. We can then compare these specific election-year estimates over time to assess whether the strength of their effects on turnout increases, decreases, or remains the same” (p. 57). They utilize excellent graphics to show trends from 1972 to 2008 of changes in the effects of the demographic variables over time. Some of the more interesting findings include that even though blacks vote less, “all of this difference can be accounted for by the other demographic characteristics of blacks compared to whites” (p. 80), a reconfirmation that “education is a more influential predictor of turnout than income” (p. 80), and that education and income “remain critical and overwhelming in their roles as correlates of turnout” (p. 81).

The chapter focusing on the legal context of turnout is a detailed treatment of the impact of election law changes on turnout. They conclude that Election Day Registration has an important effect on turnout, but also that “inability to deal with registration barriers is *not* what accounts for the lower turnout of poorly educated individuals” (p. 117). This chapter is important in that it considers the costs portion of the turnout decision, but could have been shortened, especially given the weak impact of all of the changes considered.

The influence of economic policy choices offered by presidential candidates matters in that poor voters are less likely than wealthier voters to perceive differences between candidates, suggesting “that theoretical expectations that people at the bottom of the income distribution will be motivated to vote by a desire for economic redistribution are not likely to be met, as those persons are precisely the ones least likely to see the candidates as offering meaningful choices on issues” (p. 141). Again, while the analysis is thorough and convincing, the emphasis on economic issues as the primary determinant of turnout among poor voters obscures the potential for less wealthy voters to be motivated to turn out for non-economic issues. Poor southern whites voting Republican are an example of a demographic group that is overlooked by this analysis. Still, it is hard to argue with what they assert are the policy implications resulting from this lack of choice, that “increasing economic inequality is unlikely to be met by increased turnout on the part of the poor unless one or both of the major parties offers a distinctive and compelling policy choice” (p. 143).

Leighley and Nagler question one of the main findings of Wolfinger and Rosenstone, that non-voters are the same as voters in voting preferences, so who doesn't vote doesn't matter. Their basic finding is that social conservatives and economic liberals are underrepresented among voters, which should lead to policies that are both too liberal socially and too conservative economically. Their own bias in terms of their own interests is that (in the context of a discussion of social issues and abortion) “the more interesting differences between 1972 and 2008 relate to the role of government in providing jobs or health insurance because these issues relate most directly to the possibly distinct preferences of voters and nonvoters on redistributive issues” (p. 161).

Although the work has a few shortcomings, the overall impact of this book is likely to influence our understanding of turnout and its implications for policy, especially economic policy, more than most work in this field for quite some time. Wolfinger and Rosenstone's work served an important purpose for about three and a half decades, and was in need of a comprehensive update. Leighley and Nagler have provided that, and more.

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References

Raymond E. Wolfinger and Steven J. Rosenstone. 1980. *Who Votes?* (New Haven: Yale University Press).