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Introduction

We have come too far. We have made too much progress and we're not going back, we're going forward. That's why we all must go to the polls in November and vote like we never, ever voted before.

— Rep. John Lewis, July 26, 2016

On March 7, 1965, state and local police attacked 600 civil rights marchers as they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. The marchers' decades-long cause was well known in the American South, and summed up by a simple phrase: "Give us the ballot."[1] The increased national attention brought by "Bloody Sunday" forced President Johnson to take action, pushing for what would become the Voting Rights Act of 1965 with the words "it is wrong – deadly wrong – to deny any of your fellow Americans the right to vote."[2] In 1974, Willie Velazquez founded the Southwest Voter Registration and Education Project, combating barriers to Latino political participation by encouraging voter registration. Using the slogan "*su voto es su voz*" (your vote is your voice), Velazquez mobilized tens of thousands of Mexican Americans in Texas. When the Voting Rights Act came up for renewal in 1975, Latinos gained federal voting rights protections thanks in large part to advocacy by African American Representative Barbara Jordan, who owed her career in federal politics to the Voting Rights Act. The renewal also provided protections for Asian American voting rights, with Japanese American Citizens League Executive Director David Ushio stating "it was time now to look at the needs of all minorities. A citizen

[1] Title of address by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., May 17, 1957. Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, Washington, DC.
[2] Transcript of speech by Lyndon Baines Johnson, March 15, 1965. Washington, DC.

must be able to vote."[3] Most Asian Americans would have been ineligible for citizenship, or voting, less than a generation before. The interconnected voting rights struggles of the mid-twentieth century shared a single goal: the promise of political equality in America. By the mid 1970s, it seemed as if this goal was in sight.

The expansion of African American, Latino, and Asian American voting rights is made all the more relevant when considering the dramatic demographic shift that coincides with increased access to the ballot: 90 percent of the adult population was White when the Voting Rights Act passed, but today, one in three American adults is non-White. Minority citizens now have the potential to shape national election outcomes in a profound manner. The growing minority population also looks quite different from how it did in 1965. While African Americans now make up 13 percent of the population, slightly up from 11 percent in 1965, Latinos[4] went from a small, mostly southwestern demographic composing roughly 4 percent of Americans in 1965 to over 18 percent today (Pew Research Center 2015). Only one-half of 1 percent of the United States was Asian American in the mid 1960s; today, the population is more than ten times as large.

Perhaps no manifestation of this potential was more obvious than the election of Barack Obama as President in 2008. The son of an African immigrant and a White Kansan, born in Hawaii and attending primary school in Indonesia, then-Senate candidate Obama remarked that "in no other country on Earth is my story even possible."[5] Four years later, with the backing of well over three-quarters of minority voters, the nation had its first Black president (National Election Pool 2008). A historic barrier had been overcome in an America more diverse than ever. Yet, Whites still made up more than 75 percent of the voting population, and analyses indicate that it was an increase in support from White voters that drove Obama's victory, not changes in national demographics (Trende 2013; Cohn 2016). Furthermore, with a similar level of support from minority voters and a more diverse voting eligible population, Hillary Clinton

[3] Quoted in *Pacific Citizen*, August 8, 1975 (Honda 1975).

[4] When referencing contemporary politics, I use the term "White" interchangeably with "non-Hispanic White," "African American" with "Black," and "Latino" with "Hispanic." The distinction between race and ethnicity, as understood by the U.S. Census Bureau, is kept in mind when constructing statistics for these societal groups (see Appendix A.1) but otherwise "race," "ethnicity," and "race/ethnicity" are used interchangeably as well.

[5] Transcript of speech by Barack Obama, July 27, 2004. Democratic National Convention, Boston, MA.

was unable to replicate Obama's success in 2016. America is increasingly Black, Latino, and Asian American, yet at the end of the day the preferences of White voters continue to drive political outcomes. How do we reconcile these competing perspectives of contemporary American politics?

In this book I suggest that these seemingly irreconcilable viewpoints are, in fact, tightly connected. Demographic change is indeed remaking American politics in a myriad of important ways; no one can dispute that non-Hispanic Whites are decreasing as a share of the population, such that year-over-year minority Americans gain greater potential to influence politics. Yet, it is impossible to ignore the political reality of today wherein election outcomes are driven in large part by the preferences of White electorates, even in places where minority citizens could be pivotal to election outcomes. The missing piece, I propose, is an understanding of the *causes and consequences of the persistent gap between minority and White voter turnout*. The epigraph from Representative John Lewis, one of the organizers of the Bloody Sunday march, suggests that the hard-fought victories in providing minority access to the ballot box are important, but not enough. Simply put, demographics are not destiny unless they manifest at the polls. It is the exercise of the vote that will lead to political equality, and as this book demonstrates, it is in the exercise of the vote that minority political power falls short.

As a result, I seek to explain why we witness racial/ethnic differences in who turns out to vote, and what this means for the future of American democracy. I find that African American, Latino, and Asian American turnout has almost always lagged behind non-Hispanic White turnout, even after the removal of *de jure* and *de facto* racial barriers to participation. I label the disparity between a minority group's rate of voter turnout and White voter turnout the *turnout gap*, leveraging decades of survey data along with new voter file-based analyses to determine when, where, and why the turnout gap persists. I show that socioeconomic disparities do not explain the turnout gap, nor differences in voter eligibility. I also confront an emerging narrative regarding election laws and their potential to suppress minority voting, finding that high minority turnout can and does occur even in the face of tremendous institutional barriers. Conventional explanations for racial/ethnic inequalities in voter turnout thus fall short, and cannot explain the variation we see historically or in recent elections.

Instead, I uncover a consistent pattern in who votes across all racial/ethnic groups, including Whites: *when a group is perceived to drive election outcomes, members of that group are more likely to turn*

out to vote. The source of this pattern lies in familiar understandings of what produces political empowerment and mobilization: individuals are more likely to vote when they expect to be able to influence the political process, while candidates and political parties focus their mobilization efforts on minority groups when it is clearly advantageous for them to do so. Combining these notions, and given the size of the non-Hispanic White population in America, it should not come as a surprise that this group is more likely to vote than minorities in almost all situations. However, in places where the demographic composition has already shifted the electoral landscape in favor of African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans, racial/ethnic differences in participation have waned or even reversed.

A deep analysis of the turnout gap helps us understand not just past and present trends in voter turnout, but also why growing diversity could still be accompanied by limited minority political influence. Yet, the demographic changes the United States continues to experience have the *potential* to change this dynamic, closing the turnout gap and producing an America that better represents all of its people. The rest of the book documents these processes, but to further motivate the endeavor, let us begin by considering what impact disparities in participation have on contemporary politics.

POLITICAL INEQUALITY AND VOTER TURNOUT

We know a considerable amount about who votes and who does not. Nearly one hundred years ago, Merriam and Gosnell (1924) found that voter turnout in Chicago was lowest among African Americans, the foreign born, women, recent movers, and young people (27–29). Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) found similar patterns for the early 1970s, adding socioeconomic status to the list of correlates of non-voting (108).[6] In *Who Votes Now? Demographics, Issues, Inequality, and Turnout in the United States* (2013), Jan Leighley and Jonathan Nagler evaluate national survey data from 1972 to 2008 and find, once again, a racial, class, and age bias in who votes: minorities, the poor, and the young are less likely to turn out. These findings are consistent with a much broader literature on electoral politics in America (Downs 1957; Campbell et al. 1960;

[6] Women now vote more than men in presidential elections (File 2013). Merriam and Gosnell's (1924) finding regarding lower turnout for women might be attributable to the fact that women gained the right to vote in Illinois in 1913.

Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Green and Gerber 2008), and extend to nearly all other democracies where voting is not compulsory (Powell 1986; Franklin 2004; Lijphart 2012).

These differences in who votes present a challenge to the operation of representative democracy. In his seminal work *The Semisovereign People*, Schattschneider (1960) contrasts the "60 million" voters with the "40 million" non-voters, indicating that the exclusion of 40 percent of Americans from political life is "the *sickness* of democracy" (102, emph. in original). He concludes that the legitimacy of the outcomes expressed by voters would be enhanced if everyone took part in politics. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) assert that it is the unrepresentativeness of the voting population itself that produces a failure of democracy: "The democratic ideal may be equal consideration for the needs and preferences of all, but the reality of participation is quite different" (2). Later work by these authors outlined a number of reasons why equal political voice may be desirable, and attempted to assuage qualms we may have about equal participation (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012: ch. 4), while Lijphart (1997) goes further in arguing that compulsory voting should be considered in the United States as a "valuable partial solution" to reconciling the goals of popular participation and political equality. Buttressing these normative claims, empirical evidence suggests that representational outcomes are often skewed in favor of those who vote (Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Andersson 1995; Griffin and Newman 2005). The fact that not all Americans take part in elections creates a dilemma wherein differences in who votes have, at very least, the potential to distort politics.

The above evidence notwithstanding, a skeptical reader may wonder whether the mobilization of non-voters would have a measurable impact on election outcomes. After all, individuals who are not voting are likely to be less politically engaged and less informed about politics; many Americans do vote, and their (more informed) views may look similar to the rest of the population. Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) find evidence to this point, as the partisanship of non-voters is skewed toward the Democratic Party but on a host of salient political issues, differences between voters and non-voters are slight (109–112). Highton and Wolfinger (2001) tell a similar story, and while Citrin, Schickler, and Sides (2003) also identify partisan differences, the dearth of competitive election outcomes makes the impact of non-voting minimal. Diverging preferences between voters and non-voters could mean who votes matters

in specific elections (Osborn, McClurg, and Knoll 2010; Burch 2012), but do not confer an ever-consequential advantage to one of the two major parties (DeNardo 1980, but Tucker, Vedlitz, and DeNardo 1986). Hill (2017) goes even further, using data from Florida to assert that changes in turnout advantaged *Republicans* by a substantial margin in 2010, swamping the effect of converting consistent voters from the Democratic to Republican parties.

So does it matter who votes? The normative assertions here are compelling, but empirical evidence for non-voting influencing election outcomes is far more mixed. To get a sense of whether differences in who votes impact recent election outcomes, I turn to large-scale survey data. Previous studies relied on exit polls or small national samples, imputing preferences of non-voters and often assuming a similar relationship between demographic characteristics and vote choice across voters and non-voters (Highton and Wolfinger 2001; Citrin, Schickler, and Sides 2003). Here I leverage the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES),[7] a large ($N > 35{,}000$/year), nationally representative survey of American adults where respondents are asked which candidate they would prefer *even if they did not turn out to vote* in elections from 2006 to 2016. The CCES is large enough that we can deduce voting preferences for elections to the Senate and House of Representatives, in addition to presidential contests. Aggregating these preferences to the House district, state, and national level, we can then see whether the overall distribution of partisan election preferences differs from the actual results we witnessed.

The CCES uses a matched random sample methodology to generate a nationally representative set of respondents from a large pool of online panelists. Demographic information from the American Community Survey, an annual survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, is used to match and weight online panelists such that they have a demographic profile similar to the adult population in the state that they reside in. Because the sample is representative of American adults, and the survey asks preferences for presidential, senatorial, and individual House district contests, the method of aggregation and analysis is simple: sum expressed candidate preferences at the state or U.S. House district level,[8]

[7] http://cces.gov.harvard.edu

[8] U.S. House districts with fewer than 25 respondents expressing candidate preferences were not estimated, and instead the actual election result was imputed. This yields a conservative estimate of the impact of voter turnout on U.S. House election results.

TABLE 1.1 *Democratic Party electoral outcomes, actual results versus full turnout*

	U.S. House		U.S. Senate		President	
	Actual results (%)	*Full turnout* (%)	*Actual results*	*Full turnout*	*Actual results*	*Full turnout*
2006	53.6	56.9	51	49		
2008	59.1	59.3	59	56	365	390
2010	44.4	45.3	53	53		
2012	46.2	55.9	55	59	332	445
2014	43.2	43.0	46	52		
2016	44.6	49.0	48	53	232	354

Note: Actual results represents the percentage of seats won (U.S. House), number of seats held (U.S. Senate) or number of Electoral College votes won (President) by the Democratic Party after the November election in each year. Full turnout scenarios are counterfactual Democratic Party seats (U.S. House and U.S. Senate) or Electoral College votes awarded to the Democrat (President) based on candidate preferences expressed by CCES respondents in each year from 2006 to 2016.

then combine all of these jurisdiction-level estimates to determine what the counterfactual "full turnout" national distribution of partisan control would be.

Table 1.1 details counterfactual President, Senate, and U.S. House aggregate outcomes based on the preferences of all CCES respondents. Columns labeled "Actual results" indicate the Democratic Party's share of U.S. House seats, the number of U.S. Senate seats, or the number of Electoral College votes won by the Democratic nominee for President.[9] The "Full turnout" columns indicate counterfactual Democratic Party seat shares or Electoral College votes based on the expressed preferences of weighted CCES respondents.

The 2016 election produced a narrow victory for Republican Donald Trump in the Electoral College, despite losing the popular vote by nearly 3 million ballots. Three states, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania were narrow victories for Trump and the focus of many discussions regarding what went "wrong" for the Democratic campaign (Clinton 2017). However, a substantial number of Trump-supporting Whites also stayed home, in these states and elsewhere. In a counterfactual 2016 with

[9] During the period, three Senate seats were, for some duration, held by Independents. As each of these individuals caucused with the Democratic Party, they are considered to be Democrats for the purposes of this analysis.

full turnout, Clinton wins Wisconsin and Michigan, but narrowly loses and Pennsylvania. Instead, the Democrat would have secured an ample Electoral College victory through gains in the heavily minority Sunbelt states of Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and Texas. Furthermore, Table 1.1 also shows that while Barack Obama won both the 2008 and 2012 elections by large margins, if all Americans voted, President Obama would have been elected with landslides not earned by a Democrat since Lyndon Johnson.

Senate outcomes tell a similar story, as indicated by comparison of the middle columns in Table 1.1. On average, only one-third of Senate seats are up for election in any given year, such that changes in election results in a single cycle will still impact the partisan composition of the Senate in a future cycle.[10] Evaluating the partisan preferences of all CCES respondents, we see that the Democratic Party may have narrowly missed out on gaining a Senate majority in 2006 if all Americans had voted and would have held three fewer seats after the 2008 election under a full turnout scenario. This echoes the analysis by Hill (2017), who found that Republicans can also be advantaged with higher voter turnout. However, the considerable gains made by Democrats in 2008 would have held to a much larger degree in the 2010 and 2012 elections than observed in reality, leading to a large boost in 2012 that would have sustained a Democratic majority in the Senate after the 2014 and 2016 elections.

The last decade has seen an unprecedented level of partisan gerrymandering of legislative districts (Royden and Li 2017). While "vanishing marginal" seats motivated research in congressional elections during the 1980s (Mayhew 1975; Jacobson 1987; Ansolabehere, Brady, and Fiorina 1992), U.S. House elections have become even less competitive since, with fewer than 7 percent of seats having a margin of victory of less than 10 percentage points in 2016. Simply put, most House seats are never in doubt, resistant even to dramatic changes brought by a wave election. Yet, in aggregating the expressed preferences of all adults through the CCES, Table 1.1 indicates that Democrats would have regained a majority of seats in 2012 if everyone voted, and in most other recent elections

[10] As there are partisan differences in which seats need to be defended in a given year, the result of differential turnout by Democrats and Republicans is more likely to be a product of electoral geography and candidate positions than in House races or presidential elections. See Citrin, Schickler, and Sides (2003) for a broader discussion of state-by-state variation in the impact of turnout differentials.

the Democrats would have increased their share of House seats substantially. As noted by Fowler and Hall (2017), a victory in one election increases the probability that the party will win the seat in subsequent elections, due to the incumbency effect and other factors. Thus, seats picked up by Democrats in the full turnout scenario may have been easier to defend in 2010 and subsequent elections with an incumbent Democrat, such that the projected percentage of House seats held by Democrats in a full turnout scenario is likely to be an underestimate. Furthermore, the above results are a function of the first-past-the-post system employed in nearly all U.S. elections. When looking at the national popular vote, results shift even more heavily toward the Democratic Party when everyone votes.

Between 2008 and 2016, the Democratic Party went from control of each branch of the federal government to complete exclusion. Defying the demographic-trends-based predictions outlined by pundits and academics alike (Judis and Teixeira 2002; Bowler and Segura 2012), demographic change has not *yet* resulted in a growing Democratic advantage at the federal level. Table 1.1 suggests that much of the recent decline in the fortunes of the Democratic Party may now be attributed to low voter turnout, as under a full turnout counterfactual, the Democratic Party would have held the presidency and Senate from 2008 through at least 2018. To emphasize, the above estimates are not the result of groups switching their vote, nor changing proportions of the population held by each group. By the time the surveys were fielded, candidates had chosen their platforms, campaigns had already run their course, and nearly all American adults had already decided who they would prefer to have as their representatives in the federal government. The only difference is that some individuals voted, and some did not.

As noted above, many scholars have examined the question of whether who votes matters. Indeed, the analysis performed here only serves as one demonstration of the potential relationship between significant disparities in voter turnout and inequitable representational outcomes. In many ways, this is an extremely strict test as well: as Leighley and Nagler (2013) note, examinations based on changing election outcomes do not address the very real *policy* consequences of distortions in who participates. Seminal theories of Congress by Fenno (1978) and Arnold (1992) see representatives as responsive, in one way or another, to their constituents' preferences. Gilens (2014: 173) indicates that elections force policy makers to take actions they would not otherwise take, including paying attention to issues of concern for low-income Americans. Perhaps

Table 1.1 does not reflect the electoral reality of a "full turnout" world, as parties would change mobilization strategies and platforms to cater to a new electorate. Yet, the possibility of such a change occurring once again demonstrates how important voter turnout is to both the current state of our democracy and the future of representative government.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE AND THE TURNOUT GAP

In this volume I focus on one part of the political inequality of who votes: racial/ethnic differences in voter turnout. More than a half century has passed since implementation of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Academics and journalists alike acknowledge tremendous progress in the decades since, and the results are difficult to dispute: according to self-reported voting participation in the American National Election Studies and Current Population Survey, Black voter turnout grew from 35 percent in the 1956 presidential election to 58 percent in 1968 and 67 percent in 2012. Southern Black turnout tripled between 1956 and 1968, and is now at parity, or even exceeds, Black participation in the North. Rates of Black voting have clearly improved since the days of Jim Crow. Amendments to the Voting Rights Act in 1975 attempted to remove barriers to Latino and Asian American voting, yet despite these gains, Latino and Asian American turnout continues to lag far behind the national average. After accounting for citizenship, Latinos and Asian Americans remain 15 to 20 percentage points less likely to vote than African Americans or Whites (File 2013, 2015). Even for African Americans, a group whose voting rates were roughly equal to Whites in the 2008 and 2012 elections, a notable decline in turnout occurred in 2016. Chapter 2 provides a more extended discussion of historical trends in voter turnout by race, but, for now, the key point is that voter turnout for non-White Americans overall has been and continues to be substantially lower than that for Whites.

Connecting this focus with the previous section, the partisan preferences of African American, Latino, and Asian American voters indicate that low turnout for these groups may exacerbate the representational consequences of non-voting. According to National Election Pool (NEP) Exit polls, less than one-tenth of African American voters backed Republican candidates for President from 2008 to 2016, along with less than one-third of Latinos and Asian Americans (National Election Pool 2008). While White voters display more variation in their partisan proclivities, Democrats have not won a majority of non-Hispanic Whites in a presidential election since Lyndon Johnson was elected in 1964. Previous