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A Literature Review: Voter Turnout in 2016 Presidential Election

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Literature Review

Introduction

The 2016 Presidential election was one where data collected showed that the Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, was going to win. However, the polls were wrong, and the Republican nominee, Donald Trump, came out on top. This opened researchers in the political science field to dig deeper into this phenomenon to get a better understanding of voting behaviors of those who participated in the 2016 presidential election. Understanding voting behavior is very important, because it allows us to understand why people voted that way they did and how it affected the results. This is important for political scientists to examine voting behavior and the factors surrounding it because then further studies can be done to understand the influences that impacted the decisions of the voters. In the 2016 presidential election, there are a number of factors that affect voter turnout. Therefore, this literature review is going to reevaluate the links between race, age, and gender on voter turnout using data that has already been provided by peer reviewed sources. These external factors are important to analyze in regard to voter turnout because it helps give an understanding of the democratic decisions.

Polls from the 2016 election show that there was a historically low favorability for the two candidates, however, this election resulted in the third highest turnout rate in a presidential election since 1971 (Pillsbury & Johannesen, n.d.). The election saw the first female candidate, Hillary Clinton, representing a major political party, which also had an impacted the influence of gender in the 2016 presidential election (Bock et. al., 2017).

Race

For years, there has been a noticeable gap in voter turnout with minority groups in the United States. Research collected by Kim (2016) is useful to examine the effects of labor union

membership and their mobilization effects on minority voter participation. The research concluded that when labor unions use mobilization efforts to their advantage, they are able to drastically increase the minority group members to participate in voting more than those of the white population. The Latino population's voter turnout rate in the 2016 election had a slight increase from the turnout rate reported in the 2012 Presidential election, with a 1.5 million increase from 11.2 million in 2012 to 12.7 in 2016 (Pillsbury & Johannesen, n.d.). All things considered, Latinos are the fastest growing minority group in the United States, which explains the increase of votes in the 2016 Presidential election. However, there are changing demographic conditions for the Latino group, and the process of integrating into the political system is one that is being worked on through labor union mobilization. Further analysis of Kim's (2016) research explains the specific ways that labor unions help minority group members who have fewer resources to political knowledge than whites. This is done through education of the political processes in the United States as well as engaging minority workers in various campaign activities and encouraging them to register to vote. Although unions work to mobilize minority group voters, there was a large number of Latino non-voters in the 2016 Presidential election, with those eligible to vote who did not (14 million) being significantly higher than any previous election since 1996 (Krogstad & Lopez, 2017). Due to the fact that the Republican nominee, Donald Trump, was campaigning on stricter laws towards the Latino minority group as well as tightening laws on the southern border, Latino's may have been demoralized. Therefore, making them not want to participate in the 2016 Presidential election. Latino voters also face language and cultural barriers, however, as time advances the Latino voter population will impact elections in the future.

The white working class was one of the largest groups that turned out to vote in the 2016 Presidential election, and research proposes that this is due to Donald Trump's campaign topics being aligned with the white working class. The U.S. Census reported voter turnout rates in the 2016 Presidential election at 61.4 percent of the population that was eligible to vote, which is not much different from 61.8 percent of eligible voters who participated in the 2012 election. However, the demographics of those who participated were much different. In the 2016 Presidential election, 65.3 percent of votes came from the white population, while only 59.6 percent came from the black population (File, 2017). Literature published on this topic explains the increase of white voter turnout in the 2016 Presidential election. Brenda Major et. al. (2016) examines the phenomenon of the widespread support for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election. The research findings show that the changing racial demographics in the United States lead to Trump's success from white voters who perceived threats to the group's status (Major et. al., 2016). This aligned clearly with the group's support for Trump's anti-immigrant policies and increased opposition to political correctness. The analyzation of this research shows that increased racial diversity and fear of loss of group identity pushed white voters to participate in the 2016 presidential election.

Donald Trump's economic plans, that homed in on protectionism policies to help the working class influenced more support from the white working class than any other race. An explanation of this is that the white working class was left behind in the economy recovery during the Obama administration (Schaffner et. al., 2017). This allowed the white working class to resonate with Trump while others were more in support of Clinton.

Age

Voting has varied based on age throughout the years, as younger Americans are less likely to turnout to vote than those of higher ages. In 2016, this was proven as 70 percent of those 65 and over voted while every other age group was less than that. However, the 2016 Presidential election did include more votes from the 18 to 29-year age bracket, where 46 percent voted which was an increase from the 2012 election (Krogstad & Lopez, 2017). Leading up to the election, low turnout among young voters was expected due to the divisiveness between the two candidates. The Brookings Institution, an American research group in Washington D.C. developed the Brookings Governance Studies to further analyze political institutions and processes in the United States. In 2016, the research group examined the impact of Millennial voting in the presidential election. The findings showed that Clinton had won the youth vote over Trump with 55 percent to 37 percent. However, these findings were not surprising as the 2012 turnout was similar with 60 percent of young adults supporting Obama while only 37 percent supported Mitt Romney (Galston & Hendrickson, 2016). Although the data is particularly similar, Brookings research explained that leading up to the election, minority youth voters were “scared” of the possibility of Trump being president, pushing them to vote for Clinton. This shows that young adults were divided on key issues in the election as well as lacking political identity that older voters have already established. Key data from Brookings explained that minority youth voters were more likely to vote for the democratic nominee, however, Donald Trump held support from majority of white youth voters with 46 percent of white males and 33 percent of white females turning out to vote for Trump (Galston & Hendrickson, 2016).

Gender

The gender differences in the 2016 Presidential election varied by each party and race. It is important to understand the impact gender has on voter turnout, because before 2020 the

United States never had proper gender representation in the highest office. Another aspect of voter turnout and gender to analyze is understanding the impact of having a female candidate run for office and that impact on voter turnout. In the 2016 Presidential election, Women supported Clinton over Trump by 54 to 42 percent (Krogstad & Lopez, 2017). However, there was a 52 to 48 percent difference between women and male voters in the election (Roper Center). Since 1980, there has been a significant increase in votes from women, so much that women's votes have exceeded men's votes since then. The most significant increase of women's votes is from the Black population. The gender gap in voter turnout among women has also increased higher than men in both the Hispanic and White population in the last eight Presidential elections and the gap continues to increase. This is an intriguing statistic because historically men have been more involved in the political process than women. However, according to Barbara Burrell (2005), the gender gap continues to explain how women have impacted elections. It is important to analyze gender and voter turnout to understand how women's votes affect the outcome of elections since women hold the majority of votes (Burrell, 2005). However, studies believe that voting is the most powerful form of political participation. The gender gap is an important term to understand in regard to voter turnout because it includes the differences between men and women and their opinions on political matters.

Women's identification in the election also played a role in voter turnout. Women who possessed a level of feminist identification were more likely to vote for Clinton. Due to the fact that Clinton's campaign aligned closer with feminism and marginalized groups, feminist women were more likely to vote for her than non-feminists (Pahlke et. al., 2018).

As mentioned above, understanding voter turnout in terms of a female candidate can be analyzed as another aspect of the impact of gender on voter turnout. A number of voters bring

their own views of gender to their candidate selections. Sexism's influence on voter turnout is extremely important for the 2016 presidential election as this was the first time in history that a woman ran against a man for the presidency. Research conducted by Ana Bracic et. al., (2019), evaluates the links between sexism and votes for Trump. The researchers of this study defined sexism as "the belief that men are better suited emotionally for politics than women" (Bracic et. al., p.1, 2019). Bracic et. al., (2019), hypothesized that sexism would be positively associated with support for Donald Trump. It also ties back to race, as sexism is more likely to attract white voters in favor of Trump as well. Bracic et. al., (2019) make a point to explain that previous research suggests that Whites are more likely to employ sexism to inform their political decision making in order to maintain the dominant power structure. Although a threat to power structure influenced gender voting decisions among White and Black females, Donald Trump's comments made gender a salient part of the election which in turn, activated a sexist environment. This argument about sexism's impact on voter turnout can seem demeaning, however, African American women are more likely to reject this ideology over white women who are less likely to vote for a female candidate. The analysis of the findings from Bracic et. al., (2019), suggest that there is a significant relationship between sexism and the favorability of Donald Trump from White voters, both men and women, and that gender affected voter turnout in the 2016 presidential election. Another study conducted by Jarrod Bock et. al. (2017) sought to further understand the role of sexism in the 2016 presidential election. The results of this research concluded that voter's sexism, attitudes toward women, and gender role beliefs play a significant role in voting behavior. Voters, both men and women, who held traditional values toward women served a strong predictor of voting for Donald Trump.

Conclusion, Gaps & Limitations

The data that was collected from researchers in the field and data collecting organizations provided clear information about the different variables that influenced voter turnout in the 2016 presidential election. The intriguing part about analyzing data on this topic is understanding why the data is what it is. For example, for race, the distinctive factors that led groups to vote all had different motivating factors. For Latino groups, the data analyzation explained why this minority group participates in voting at a lower rate than non-minority groups. The cultural and language barriers prohibit minority groups from being able to gain knowledge on the American political system. By implementing ways to better educate minority groups, such as labor unions, the minority voter turnout will increase.

Age was another factor used to measure influences on voter turnout in the 2016 presidential election. In a democracy, it is important to understand that voting is one of the most powerful forms of political participation. It gives citizens the opportunity to have a direct influence on the future of the country, which is why it was interesting to find in past literature that older voters are more likely to vote than youth. This can be explained through past literature that claims that young voters can be divided on key issues in elections as well as lack of political identity being a new young voter trying to understand where their personal beliefs align best. To fix the age gap in voter turnout, young voters need to be mobilized and educated on the political process in the United States and their influence on the future of the country.

Gender, the final variable assessed in the literature review, had a powerful impact on the results of the election. Sexism and feminism went head-to-head in the 2016 presidential election with voters choosing a candidate based on their gender. Women played a powerful role in the election as well, with higher turnout rates than men. The literature explains that a women's voting preferences were based on race and personal identity. However, in the future it will be

interesting to analyze if there are significant changes to voter turnout from women since the first women has been elected to the highest office this past year.

In order to fully analyze and understand the topic of voter turnout in the 2016 presidential election, it is important for further research to be done to identify other variables. The research above suggests that there are other various factors that influence voter turnout. A factor not included in this research is the geographical location of voters in relation to Donald Trump's campaign trail. Donald Trump held a much larger share of rural votes over Clinton with 63.2 percent vs 31.1 percent, however, this is not a new trend as Republicans have historically won large rural votes (Monnat & Brown, 2017). Clinton failed to campaign in states that Obama had won in 2008 (Wisconsin, Michigan, Florida, and Pennsylvania), which placed her at a disadvantage of gaining electoral votes in those states.

Economic issues are another variable to be analyzed that can close the gap on understanding voter turnout in the 2016 election. Rural voters' large turnout was a result of Donald Trump's proclamation to bring back the manufacturing economy to the United States. The surge in votes from this group was substantial in the results of the election, from Whites who worked as farmers, ranchers and other agricultural positions (Morgan & Lee, 2017). Scholars have made connections between economic anxieties and support for Trump, which explains the surge of votes from rural communities who share these beliefs (Whitehead et. al., 2018).

Religion's impact of voter turnout in 2016 is another important variable that can help evaluate support for Trump. For years, the religious right has been linked to the Republican party, and exit polls show that President Trump was deeply supported by evangelical Christians, some researchers argue that they are the sole group that helped Trump achieve his victory. Pew Research reported that 81 percent of evangelicals voted for Trump while only 16 percent voted

for Clinton (Martinez & Smith, 2016). Research conducted by Whitehead et. al. (2018) evaluates the influence of evangelical votes in 2016. The research concluded that there is strong evidence in explaining Christian nationalism as a determining factor of those who voted for Trump.

Methods

The procedures used as the basis for this research were from data compiled from voter registration records, social surveys, government reports, US Census, exit polls and other general surveys provided to a given population to determine their voting decisions in 2016. The methodology approach for this study is a method referred to as ex-post-facto research. This gives the researchers high credibility and validity because they are analyzing data that has already been collected so there is little bias and no room for interference from the researcher. The quantitative methods of this research are used to analyze and report the findings found from the data provided from the ex-post-facto research. The researchers should continue to use this method, however, if this research is to be continued, qualitative methods can come into play when trying to specifically understand more about voting patterns and voter turnout. A meta-analysis is another great way to continue research on the topic of what variables influence voter turnout because it allows researchers to work together from past studies and publish new findings in future research studies.

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