

A Wealth of Suppression:
How socioeconomic status plays a role in voter turnout

Professional Project Proposal
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Introduction

In the fall of 2020, despite a global pandemic, one hundred and fifty-eight million Americans voted in our country's presidential election (uselectionatlas.org). Even though there was a record turnout of American voters, there were still twenty-three percent of Americans age eighteen and older who didn't participate in the election (census.gov).

In terms of why someone decides whether to vote or not, there may be many factors that influence their decision. When I decided to pursue my master's degree in communications, one of the goals I hoped to achieve was a better understanding of the economic influence on the electoral process in nationalized elections. Is it possible that an individual's socioeconomic status has influence on whether that individual decides to vote, not for one particular candidate or another, but did they actually cast a ballot in that election?

"A Wealth of Suppression" is a documentary that examines the role an individual's socioeconomic status plays in their participation in an election. For the last twenty-five years I have worked in the investigates division at NewsChannel 5. Over the years, I have done a lot of database analysis for various stories. Many of these stories have required the analysis of voter registration data. While analyzing the datasets, I have often wondered what drives an individual whether to vote or not vote. Is their race a factor, could their age be the determining factor or could it be something else?

After obtaining an updated database of active registered voters from the Metropolitan Nashville Davidson County election commission, an analysis of voting trends between different socioeconomic divisions revealed a lack of participation in the areas with the least amount of wealth. Could there be a suppression of voting simply based on someone's economic circumstance? My goal was not to find a definitive answer, I don't believe there is one, but to

examine the different elements that might lead to a greater understanding of why there is such voter apathy in the poorest ZIP codes in Nashville.

I used the latest data from the 2020 census to categorize the ZIP codes in Metro Nashville according to median household income. I then ranked those ZIP codes in ascending order and extracted the voters from the five lowest median household income ZIP codes and the five highest median household incomes. After careful analysis a pattern began to emerge. By analyzing voter participation in the last five federal elections, I could see a trend of lower income voters not turning out in the numbers that voter who lived in the wealthier ZIP codes did.

Literature Review

Although it is difficult to isolate what factor could determine if whether an individual decides to cast a ballot, some researchers have tried to answer that question by looking at one specific factor, their level of income. Shields and Goidel (1997) found decades of class bias, from the 1960's to the 1990's, when it came to voter turnout. Their data indicated, "The class bias is clear--those in the highest income levels typically vote at around 75% while those at the lowest levels vote around 42%" (Shields and Goidel 1997, p. 685). The bias, when it came to turnout, was there regardless of whether it was a Presidential election or a midterm.

A different type of study looked at the correlation between voters and their increased likelihood to vote out as they move up through the income brackets. Using voter participation data from federal elections from 1948 – 1972, Filer, Kenny and Morton (1993) discovered that turn out seems to increase as an individual's income grows. In their conclusion they reveal, "We find that turnout first falls and then increases with increases in relative income and that relative income...is a very important determinant of voter turnout" (Filer, Kenny and Morton 1993, p.

80-81). Their study does not look into zip codes or specific areas with regard to median household income.

These two previous studies looked at American elections, but what about other countries? Is the income class bias uniquely an American voter trait? A study on the election turnout in Taiwan did not provide concrete evidence of a relationship between income level and voter turnout. However, it does provide some “empirical” evidence. The study conducted by Wen-Chun Chang (2014) found, among Taiwanese voters, income inequality wasn’t the only reason for lack of voter turnout, but “the political disparity between the rich and the poor that grows with income inequality has been the main reason why policy responses to poor people’s need are lacking.” (Chang, 2014). This study presents a chicken-or-the egg scenario. Do lower income people simply not vote because they feel political policy doesn’t benefit them or has political policy left out their voices for so long these voters feel disenfranchised?

While Wen-Chun Chang’s study focused on Asia, Daniel Horn (2011) put Europe’s class system under the voter turnout microscope. During his GINI (Growing Inequalities’ Impacts) report, Horn uses a variety of sources including the poverty rate from the Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) to come to his conclusion about the concept of income and inequality with respect to voter turnout. Horn states, “These all indicate overall income inequalities.” (Horn, 2014. p. 12) with respect to voter turnout. It appears that registered voters not voting in elections is not strictly an American problem.

Perhaps a more recent study can provide additional evidence on the matter. Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry Brady and Sidney Verba (2018) took a look at several variables that might affect voter turnout over a long period of time. Examining voter turnout data as far back as the 1950’s, they came to the conclusion, “those in the top quintile are on average roughly twice as

likely to go to the polls as those in the bottom quintile.” (Schlozman, Brady and Verba 2018, p. 223). They also concluded this difference between the income groups is not a new phenomenon. They’re research shows it is evident “in our data as far back as they go.” (p.223). According to the researchers, there is a long history of low-income voters not turning out in the same numbers as upper income voters. With all of the changes the United States has gone through in the last fifty years, the disparity between income and voter participation still remains just as much of a problem.

Does a Middle Tennessee voter’s income status have a direct relationship to frequency of voting in federal elections? There is evidence from Asia and Europe of a direct relationship. A couple of the studies have discovered a problem between an income and voting disparity in the United States that reaches back decades. The Nashville community is a diverse one with 100 people a day moving into the city. (Garrison, 2017). Studying the voting habits of the Nashville community would be beneficial in confirming whether the patterns observed in similar studies apply to Middle Tennessee.

Discussion

By analyzing the five ZIP codes with the lowest median income levels and the five with the highest, I found in the data a correlation indicating that lower income areas in Nashville, Tennessee are less likely to vote in federal elections than are voters in higher-income ZIP codes. Significantly more registered voters in the top five highest income brackets voted in at least one of the last five federal elections, than did registered voters in the five lowest income brackets. It is unclear from this study what other external factors could be the reason for the numbers. An analysis of race or gender could provide some relevant data to compare with this study, but the dataset used does not contain a consistent field of identifiers of race.

Each of the individuals in the database is an active registered voter in Davidson County. Perhaps by comparing a wider sample to these results we could determine if there is in fact a pattern. It is interesting that each of the individuals in this database took the time to confirm his or her address with the Election Commission. But 37.4 percent of those registered voters never voted in any of the last three federal elections. Could registered voters in higher income ZIP codes have an easier time getting to the voting precincts? Is there proper mass transit in these communities? Are there longer lines at the polls in some of these less affluent precincts? How prevalent is early voting in these ZIP codes? Are registered voters taking advantage of these opportunities or are they unable to make time due to job restrictions?

Perhaps the most surprising aspect in the data is that the type of election made virtually no difference in the turnout numbers. The numbers didn't change much whether it was a presidential race, a mayor's race or judges' race. For example, the ZIP code 37208 had 14,204 active registered voters. Of these 4,047 voters, or 28 percent, hadn't voted in the last five federal elections. But if you factor in all of the local elections over that same time period, the percentage doesn't change, it is still 28 percent. The 37203 ZIP code, contains 15,543 active registered voters. 4442 voters, or 29 percent, hadn't voted in the last five federal elections. The percentage increased by only two percentage points when all of the local elections were factored in.

My process included interviews with a number of Nashvillians, including individuals who have been working on improving voter turnout numbers for years. I did talk to several citizens who live in these lower income areas. None of them wanted to talk to me on camera. They talked with me, but refused to be part of a televised documentary. These people told me about their apathy and the various other suppressions they feel impact their interest in voting.

Being able to interview specific voters in certain income brackets supplied me with a better understanding of what they may face in order to participate in the election process and provided a foundation on which to build this documentary. Many of these active registered voters have always had the same habits when it comes to voting and it hasn't really changed over the years, regardless of who was running for political office.

This documentary takes the time to interview both a Nashville historian and a political science expert to try and dig deeper into the psychological nature of these findings. Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs seems to contribute to the psychological nature of voter suppression in these areas. There are certain sections devoted to the use of voter ID laws and other procedures to suppress the vote in these communities.

One interesting angle I found was regarding the loss of someone's right to vote. One of the lower-income ZIP codes profiled in the documentary is 37208. This ZIP code recently had the unfortunate distinction of having the highest incarceration rate in the country. Once these individuals lose their right to vote it is very hard to have those rights restored.

The documentary also examines the role culture might play in voter apathy. Many of the voters in these ZIP codes have never had a family member vote. Pastor Enoch Fuzz, who works to mobilize voters in low-income areas, believes some of these voters can't read or might be confused about what is on the ballot. Could voter apathy be a part of a culture within our society or is there something we can do to reconnect these voters with the political process?

Conclusion

Voter suppression is real but the data analysis and the interviews conducted lead me to believe there is not a just one single reason for it. Unfortunately, voter suppression has become

entrenched in our society and the process used for our elections. The apathy and disinterest from individuals, who reside in the lower income areas of Nashville, suppresses the need for these voters to express their political will. Daily struggles keep them focused on survival and a limited education may potentially restrict the amount of interest they have in the election.

When constructing this documentary, I wanted to not only examine the pattern from the dataset but to dive deeper in the psychological aspects of why someone who is poor feels disconnected from the political world. The academic literature on this issue needs to be expanded. I would really like to see an entity with substantial resources continue this thread and see whether what I have observed from the voters of Nashville, has been replicated in another major American city. There are some findings that agree in principle with what I have found, but not enough and certainly there needs to be more recent research into the influence of media and the socioeconomic aspect of voter participation.

Suppression of any kind needs to be eliminated when it comes to the nation's political process. Pinpointing factors that could lead to a lack of participation in our electoral process could hopefully help strengthen the legitimacy of our elections and keep a tragedy like the January 6th Capitol riot from happening again.

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