

“Turnout” depends entirely on the *denominator*

One mechanism of elections, examined in depth — why two accurate turnout percentages, using different bases, can look like contradictory statistics.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

How This Guide Works

This is part of **Incognati Civics**, applying the field-guide format to election administration and mechanics — the procedural layer beneath the outcome, examined the same way regardless of which party or candidate it involves. Each specimen goes deep on one mechanism, with official records, court citations, and peer-reviewed or nonpartisan scholarship listed in full on the references page.

INCOGNATI CIVICS – ELECTIONS

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Turnout Percentage Base Switching

Denominator Mutans

Governing precedent / case 2001 Status Standard methodological distinction in political science

OBSERVED SPECIMEN

VOTING-ELIGIBLE POPULATION METHODOLOGY, U.S. ELECTIONS PROJECT

*Turnout is commonly reported against at least three different bases: **voting-age population** (everyone 18 and older, including non-citizens and disenfranchised felons), **registered voters** (only those already on the rolls), and **voting-eligible population** (VEP, which adjusts for those legally unable to vote). The same election can be accurately reported as, for example, "67% turnout" or "61% turnout" depending entirely on which base was used — with no error in either number.*

THE HOOK

A single word, “turnout,” gets used for at least three different percentages, so two accurate-but-differently-based numbers read as if one of them must be wrong.

THE MECHANISM

Voting-age population overstates the eligible pool (it includes non-citizens and, in some states, disenfranchised felons); voting-eligible population corrects for this, which is why VEP turnout is consistently reported higher than VAP turnout for the same election.

Field mark: when comparing turnout figures across sources, check which population each one used as its base — VAP, registered voters, and VEP are three different denominators, not three different facts about the same thing.

See the full references page for complete citations.

References

every source checkable at the link provided; DOIs given where the source has one

PRIMARY SOURCE · DATA PROJECT

McDonald, Michael P. "United States Elections Project," voting-eligible population turnout data.

<https://www.electproject.org/>

Standard academic source for VEP-based turnout calculations, University of Florida.

PEER-REVIEWED SOURCE

McDonald, Michael P., and Samuel L. Popkin. "The Myth of the Vanishing Voter." *American Political Science Review* 95, no. 4 (2001): 963–974.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055400400011>

DOI verified — the foundational peer-reviewed article establishing the VEP turnout methodology.

REFERENCE SOURCE

Pew Research Center, "How Turnout in This Year's Election Compares" methodology notes.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/>

Nonpartisan explainer on the different turnout bases used in U.S. election reporting.

Reading This Mechanism: A Gut Check

four questions before a headline changes what you think happened at the polls

1 Ask what the denominator is

Voting-age population, registered voters, and voting-eligible population are three different bases.

2 Expect VEP to run higher

Voting-eligible population turnout is consistently higher than voting-age population turnout for the same election.

3 Check the source's methodology

Academic and government sources usually state their base explicitly — look for it before comparing numbers.

4 Don't assume a discrepancy is an error

Two different, accurate turnout percentages for the same election is normal, not a red flag.

INCOGNATI CIVICS

The Series Continues

This is Specimen No. 12 of the Elections section within Incognati Civics. The full queue of twelve specimens is listed on the cover. This section joins "How Federal Laws Actually Get Created" within Civics, with local government, official data reporting, and institutional communications planned beyond it. The Incognati Atlas catalogs the underlying patterns across all of it.

Civics Field Edition · Elections · Specimen No. 12

All specimens independently sourced