

Nonvoters in America 2012

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When Barack Obama was elected to a second term as president on Nov. 6, 2012, about 58 percent of the eligible voters participated in the decision – about 4 percent fewer than cast ballots in 2008. It was the first time turnout for a presidential election had dropped since 1996.

About 126 million Americans voted in 2012, but about 93 million didn't, which begs the quadriennial question: Can a democracy survive without the active participation of more than 40 percent of its members?

That question is one that the Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications has investigated since our landmark study of nonvoters in 1996: "No-Show '96: Americans Who Don't Vote." That survey of 1,001 nonvoters identified five distinct types of nonvoters, all with different reasons for not voting and different ways of engaging in or avoiding civic affairs.

In 2000, Medill revisited the topic, surveying 1,053 people who didn't vote on Nov. 7 that year and adding a sample of 859 voters. In addition to finding the same clusters, that research also identified Now and Then voters, an amalgam of the 34 percent of 2000 Election Day nonvoters who said they frequently voted and the 35 percent of 2000 Election Day voters who said they sometimes didn't vote. This cohort indicated that nonvoting is not necessarily a chronic disease.

Now, in a 2012 post-election online survey of 1,170 nonvoters and 516 voters that I commissioned thanks to the generosity of the Proteus Foundation, it was clear once again that nonvoters do, indeed, reflect the stereotype of being younger, less educated, less engaged and less affluent citizens than voters.

But that monolithic description obscures important differences among nonvoters that are crucial to understand for those trying to better engage these citizens in the public debate and entice them into voting booths on future Election Days as well as for media organizations trying to find ways to engage and interact with audiences while offering the information they need to participate in public affairs.

This new survey has found six distinct groups of nonvoters whose members view politicians, the political process and parties, government and the news in quite

different ways. The clusters are different compared with those found in 1996 and 2000, although there are areas of overlap. The most distinct difference was the appearance of the cluster I dubbed the “Active Faithful,” middle-income news consumers who are civically engaged, are very active in church and volunteer work and have very favorable attitudes toward religious institutions.

The 2012 survey does show, as did the 2000 Medill survey, that the nonvoter label clearly slips on and off a sizeable segment of the voting age population from election to election. While 42 percent of nonvoters in 2012 said they never vote, 31 percent said they vote now and then or most of the time. Meanwhile, 14 percent of voters said they hardly every vote or only vote now and then.

Profiling Nonvoters As a Group

As a whole, the 2012 nonvoters surveyed fit the way they are portrayed by the news media and their fellow citizens:

- Compared with voters, they are disproportionately young. While 18 percent of voters were under age 30, nearly one-third – 31 percent of nonvoters – were 18 to 29. Additionally, 60 percent of nonvoters were under age 45, compared with only 42 percent of voters.
- Nonvoters also were more likely to be male, at 50 percent, while 53 percent of voters were female.
- Household incomes for nonvoters were significantly lower than those of voters. Sixty-one percent of nonvoters earned less than \$50,000 a year; only 41 percent of voters were in that income level. Meanwhile 12 percent of nonvoters earned more than \$75,000 a year; for voters, that figure was 31 percent.
- Related to income, 44 percent of nonvoters said they were employed compared with 51 percent of voters. Nearly a quarter (24 percent) of voters were retired, while only 14 percent of nonvoters were in that category.
- Education levels were another key differentiator. Slightly more than half of voters (51 percent) had college degrees, but only 30 percent of nonvoters had attained that level of education while 42 percent had high school diplomas or less.
- Minorities comprise a larger percentage of the nonvoter cohort. While 84 percent of voters identify as white, fewer nonvoters do (78 percent). Additionally, nonvoters are roughly three times more likely than voters to be Hispanic (22 percent vs. 7 percent).
- Mobility is more prevalent among nonvoters. While 75 percent of voters have lived at their current address more than two years, only 64 percent of nonvoters can make the same claim. And 22 percent of nonvoters have lived at their current address less than a year.

- Nonvoters are far more likely than voters to not be able to articulate what political ideology they subscribe to. When asked whether they were liberal, moderate or conservative, more than one-third (36 percent) had no answer, while only 8 percent of voters were unable to supply a label.
- But they do skew Democrat when asked which party they support (26 percent consider themselves Democrats compared with 15 percent who identify with the Republican Party). However, nonvoters also are more likely to identify themselves as independents (32 percent) or supporters of some other party (13 percent). While a plurality of voters support the Democratic Party (36 percent), the margin with their Republican counterparts (31 percent) is much closer. Only 27 percent consider themselves independent and 5 percent are supporters of a third party.
- Nonvoters also are much less likely than voters to follow political and public policy news. When asked how often they follow what's going on in government and public affairs, 17 percent of nonvoters said "most of the time" and 22 percent said "hardly at all;" among voters, 47 percent said "most of the time" and only 3 percent said "hardly at all."

Overlaps with Voters

However, nonvoters do some areas of commonality with voters.

- Both voter and nonvoters overwhelmingly consider economic and financial issues to be the most important problem facing the country (66 percent of voters and 62 percent of nonvoters). They also both cited government leadership issues as the second most important problem, but only at 14 percent for voters and 10 percent for nonvoters. Health care came in third for nonvoters (7 percent) and basically tied (6 percent) with big government (7 percent) for voters.
- Despite the rise in online news and social media, both groups still overwhelmingly consider broadcast and cable TV their primary source of political news and information (65 percent for voters, and 59 percent for nonvoters).
- Identical percentages (57 percent) think their financial situations will improve a lot or some over the next year.

These attributes of the nonvoting population, though, don't provide the complete picture about what motivates four in 10 Americans to stay home while the rest of the country heads to the polls.

Reasons for Not Voting

Forty-two percent of nonvoters said they never vote, but 31 percent said they vote at least occasionally. Few said their family or friends vote.

Twenty-eight percent said they didn't vote because they weren't registered, by far the top response when given a long list of potential reasons. About a quarter blamed logistical issues – didn't have time (8 percent), working (7 percent), no way to get to the polls (7 percent), traveling or out of town (4 percent), illness (5 percent) or emergency (2 percent).

Voters and nonvoters believe by about the same percentages (26 percent for voters and 28 percent for nonvoters) that allowing Internet voting would increase voter turnout. But voters are more likely to suggest nonprocedural issues that involve reforming politics as ways to encourage higher turnout – specifically cleaning up government and having more or better candidates, which were the top two choices for voters. Nonvoters also supported those ideas, but only at about the same rate (27 percent and 26 percent, respectively) as Internet voting.

Nonvoters were given the option of finding a legitimate excuse for staying home on Election Day: They were asked whether they were prevented from voting or whether they chose not to do so.

Sixty-four percent of nonvoters said they chose not to vote. Only 20 percent of all nonvoters said their choice not to vote means they are satisfied with the direction of the country and therefore didn't feel the need to vote. With nearly two-thirds of nonvoters saying that staying away from the polls on Election Day was an action they chose rather than that it was an unavoidable situation, it is clear that those working to increase turnout must do more than just reduce the procedural barriers to voting.

Sixty-seven percent agreed completely or mostly that voting has little to do with the way decisions are made in this country. They also were much more likely than voters (71 percent to 66 percent) to say elected officials don't care what people like them think.

And, while more than half of both groups – voters and nonvoters -- said the country is on the wrong track, nonvoters were much less likely to say things are going in the right direction (26 percent to 40 percent).

Media Consumption

Nonvoters are markedly less likely than voters to follow what's going on in government and public affairs. Only 17 percent say they follow these topics most of the time, while another 31 percent do so some of the time. Among voters, 47

percent follow government and related issues most of the time and another 34 percent do so some of the time.

Following this pattern, nonvoters are much less likely to be familiar with current events. In the survey, only 46 percent had heard or read at least a fair amount about the attack in Benghazi that resulted in the death of U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens, and an even lower 40 percent had the same knowledge level about news reports about the new voter ID laws requiring people to provide government-issued IDs at the polls. Voters were much more interested; 72 percent were aware of the consulate attack in Libya and 66 percent kept up on the voter ID law controversy.

Showing the relationship between voting and news consumption, voters were twice as likely as nonvoters to have followed news about the political campaigns very or fairly closely (82 percent to 41 percent). In fact, only 9 percent of nonvoters followed such news very closely, and 22 percent hardly followed it at all.

In general, nonvoters are much lower news consumers than voters. For instance, only 59 percent watched a TV news show several times a week or daily compared with 81 percent of voters. Again, 48 percent got news on a computer, compared with 64 percent of voters. And newspapers can't count on nonvoters to subscribe – only 26 percent read a paper at last several times a week and 34 percent said they never do.

However, nonvoters are almost at the same level as voters – in the mid to low 20 percent range – in news consumption on mobile devices; and half of nonvoters use social media sites regularly, not that much lower than voters' 60 percent regular usage.

For political news, nonvoters, like voters, rely on TV. Six in 10 called broadcast and cable TV their primary source for this type of news, about the same as voters. But nonvoters were much more likely than voters to cite friends and family and social media websites, such as Twitter and Facebook, as their primary political news sources. And while 11 percent of nonvoters cited newspapers – about the same rate as friends and family, 15 percent of voters listed newspapers as their primary political news source, a significant difference.

The survey asked what could be done to improve news coverage of politics and campaigns. Nonvoters suggested including more diverse viewpoints and having more objective coverage as their two top choices, cited by 27 and 26 percent respectively. However, half of voters suggested more objective coverage, with diverse viewpoints a less popular second at 39 percent, an indication of their higher interest in news.

Other ideas from nonvoters to improve political news: including political coverage from multiple sources and having the voices of potential voters more often.

But 28 percent had no answer and 18 percent said nothing would help, showing their lack of interest and involvement in politics.

Nonvoter Typologies

In addition to comparing the attitudes of behaviors of voters and nonvoters, we also conducted statistical analysis in order to identify and evaluate different types of nonvoters. This analysis yielded six different clusters of nonvoters who share similar traits and attitudes. We created names for each cluster, and they are listed below in descending order based on size:

1. "Pessimists," representing 27% of nonvoters
2. "Too Busys," representing 20% of nonvoters
3. "Strugglers," representing 19% of nonvoters
4. "Tuned Outs," representing 16% of nonvoters
5. "Active Faithfuls," representing 11% of nonvoters
6. "Doers," representing 8% of nonvoters

Looking across the clusters, two of these groups, the Too Busys and the Doers are most like voters in their outlooks and attitudes towards civic participation. People in these clusters mainly said they didn't vote because of logistical reasons, such as working, lack of transportation or other barriers.

The Pessimists and Active Faithfuls seem the most hostile towards the government generally and seem to actively choose not to vote; they do not appear to be engaged with the political system and have a very poor view of politicians and the government generally.

The least active groups are the Strugglers and the Tuned Outs. These two clusters are not actively hostile toward the body politic (indeed, the Strugglers favor a big role for government), but are simply highly disengaged from the political process.

Pessimists are the largest group of nonvoters. They earned their label because, compared with other nonvoters, they are more likely to think the country is headed on the wrong track (49 percent compared with 54 percent of nonvoters overall), and are more likely to dislike both the 2012 political candidates and the government more generally. They are also more pessimistic about their economic future (56 percent think it will get worse over the next year, an attitude shared by only 43 percent of all nonvoters). They rarely vote and are lower than other nonvoters on civic engagement and activism measures. In terms of their media consumption, they tend to watch TV and are less likely to be online.

Politically, they lean conservative (24 percent identify as conservative, compared with 23 percent moderate and 13 percent liberal), but this doesn't mean they would have voted for Mitt Romney. From a demographic perspective, they are more likely than other nonvoters to be retired, male, lower income, lower education and middle-aged or older (see Table 1).

TABLE 1		ALL NONVOTERS	PESSIMISTS			ALL NONVOTERS	PESSIMISTS
AGE	18-29	31.3%	18.2%	SEX	Male	50.0%	58.8%
	30-44	28.7%	29.0%		Female	50.0%	41.2%
	45-64	28.0%	34.0%	INCOME	Under 25k	32.4%	34.8%
	65+	12.0%	18.8%		25k-75k	43.1%	40.8%
RACE / ETHNICITY	White Only	65.5%	66.6%		Over 75k	11.9%	10.3%
	Black Only	4.5%	5.0%	Refused	12.6%	14.0%	
	Hispanic	22.0%	19.6%	EMPLOYMENT	Full time	31.6%	31.2%
	Others	5.9%	4.5%		Part time	12.2%	10.0%
	DK	2.1%	4.3%		Retired	13.5%	17.2%
EDUCATION	No college	41.6%	48.0%		Student	9.1%	4.4%
	Some college	39.6%	37.7%		Homemaker	10.0%	8.1%
	College+	18.8%	14.3%	Not employed	20.4%	23.8%	

Those termed **Too Busys** represent one in five nonvoters. In many ways, they look like voters: they have voted in the past (63 percent vote at least occasionally, compared with 35 percent of nonvoters overall) and their friends and family vote; they have political preferences rather than being undecided (like many nonvoters); and they tend to be civically engaged. Their stated reasons for not voting are logistical, such as being too busy/having no time (28 percent), working (24 percent), illness (24 percent), and having no way to get to the polls (23 percent). They are political moderates (40 percent identify as moderate compared with 27 percent of all nonvoters) and demographically, they skew female, middle income and middle education (see Table 2).

TABLE 2		ALL NONVOTERS	TOO BUSYS			ALL NONVOTERS	TOO BUSYS
AGE	18-29	31.3%	31.5%	SEX	Male	50.0%	44.3%
	30-44	28.7%	33.2%		Female	50.0%	55.7%
	45-64	28.0%	23.1%	INCOME	Under 25k	32.4%	30.6%
	65+	12.0%	12.3%		25k-75k	43.1%	47.4%
RACE / ETHNICITY	White Only	65.5%	69.4%		Over 75k	11.9%	10.0%
	Black Only	4.5%	2.3%	Refused	12.6%	12.0%	
	Hispanic	22.0%	18.1%	EMPLOYMENT	Full time	31.6%	34.7%
	Others	5.9%	9.5%		Part time	12.2%	12.8%
	DK	2.1%	.7%		Retired	13.5%	17.6%
EDUCATION	No college	41.6%	34.6%		Student	9.1%	7.8%
	Some college	39.6%	46.1%		Homemaker	10.0%	9.6%
	College+	18.8%	19.4%	Not employed	20.4%	15.0%	

The group coined **Strugglers** are worried about finances. They are more worried than other nonvoters about employment (29 percent are concerned) and are more likely to be lower income and less likely to be employed (see Table 3). They tend to support a larger role for the government, but they are not active at all in volunteering or civic activities. They almost never vote, and their main reason for not voting is that they are not registered: indeed, 100 percent of these Strugglers are

not registered to vote. The main reason (20 percent) they give for not being registered is that they “just never have been,” and indicate that the things that would make them more likely to register would be to make registering easier and allow same-day registration. Politically, Strugglers tend to support Obama and dislike Romney.

TABLE 3		ALL NONVOTERS	STRUGGLERS			ALL NONVOTERS	STRUGGLERS
AGE	18-29	31.3%	35.3%	SEX	Male	50.0%	44.7%
	30-44	28.7%	22.8%		Female	50.0%	55.3%
	45-64	28.0%	35.4%	INCOME	Under 25k	32.4%	35.5%
	65+	12.0%	6.4%		25k-75k	43.1%	39.8%
			Over 75k		11.9%	11.2%	
RACE / ETHNICITY	White Only	65.5%	68.1%	EMPLOYMENT	Refused	12.6%	13.6%
	Black Only	4.5%	3.8%		Full time	31.6%	29.3%
	Hispanic	22.0%	22.5%		Part time	12.2%	7.8%
	Others	5.9%	5.0%		Retired	13.5%	12.7%
	DK	2.1%	.6%	Student	9.1%	9.3%	
EDUCATION	No college	41.6%	43.3%	Homemaker	10.0%	12.8%	
	Some college	39.6%	40.5%	Not employed	20.4%	25.1%	
	College+	18.8%	16.3%				

About one in six nonvoters are truly **Tuned Out**. These nonvoters are the least engaged and least aware of elections and political events. It is possible that this apathy is not limited to politics (although to say so with certainty is beyond the scope of this study); they are much more likely to respond with “refused” or “don’t know” to the survey questions.

They display no interest in or knowledge of political events and have a low awareness of current events. They are more than twice as likely to say they “hardly ever” follow government and public affairs (49 percent of Tuned Outs compared with 22 percent of all nonvoters). When asked about their attitudes towards politics and government, Tuned Outs indicate they feel a lack of connection with these events: They are more likely to say that election outcomes make no difference, and to believe their vote doesn’t count. They engage in little or no civic or volunteering activity and consume little news. Demographically, they are more likely to be younger (see Table 4).

TABLE 4		ALL NONVOTERS	TUNED OUTS			ALL NONVOTERS	TUNED OUTS
AGE	18-29	31.3%	38.3%	SEX	Male	50.0%	45.2%
	30-44	28.7%	27.8%		Female	50.0%	54.8%
	45-64	28.0%	22.0%	INCOME	Under 25k	32.4%	34.0%
	65+	12.0%	11.9%		25k-75k	43.1%	39.7%
			Over 75k		11.9%	12.0%	
RACE / ETHNICITY	White Only	65.5%	63.9%	EMPLOYMENT	Refused	12.6%	14.3%
	Black Only	4.5%	5.1%		Full time	31.6%	28.0%
	Hispanic	22.0%	21.1%		Part time	12.2%	13.3%
	Others	5.9%	6.6%		Retired	13.5%	12.3%
	DK	2.1%	3.3%				

EDUCATION	No college	41.6%	41.7%		Student	9.1%	14.8%
	Some college	39.6%	37.3%		Homemaker	10.0%	10.7%
	College+	18.8%	21.0%		Not employed	20.4%	19.4%

The fifth cluster, **Active Faithfuls**, is identified in part by its members’ religiosity. They are three times more likely than other nonvoters to cite “religious reasons” for not voting, and twice as likely to be “very favorable” towards their religious institution (46 percent compared with 21 percent). In total, three quarters (76 percent) are favorable towards the religious institution they are most familiar with, compared with under two-thirds (64 percent) of all nonvoters. Furthermore, while just 2 percent of the Active Faithfuls occasionally or regularly volunteer for a political campaign or government organization, 100 percent of them do so for a religious organization or charity.

However, the group is not identified solely by faith. The main reasons this cluster give for not voting are not being registered and not liking the candidates. However there is a distinct sense of “protest” or active disengagement among this group; one in five say they “just chose not to” vote, and the same proportion feel that voting makes no difference. However, the group is not entirely disengaged from civic affairs: Many say they do see a difference between the parties, and a majority agrees that issues in Washington affect them (83 percent compared with 66 percent among all nonvoters). They are pessimistic about the country’s direction and dissatisfied with government, yet are optimistic about their economic future and are also very knowledgeable about how government and politics work. They are also high news consumers.

Politically, the Active Faithfuls tend to identify as “other” when asked about their political party preferences, and they self-identify as “moderate” on a conservative-liberal scale. Demographically, they are well educated and well-employed (they are more likely to be self-employed), and have middle to higher incomes (see Table 5). They are also slightly more likely than all nonvoters to live in the South.

<i>TABLE 5</i>		ALL NONVOTERS	ACTIVE FAITHFULS			ALL NONVOTERS	ACTIVE FAITHFULS
AGE	18-29	31.3%	33.2%	SEX	Male	50.0%	45.4%
	30-44	28.7%	30.9%		Female	50.0%	54.6%
	45-64	28.0%	27.6%	INCOME	Under 25k	32.4%	21.9%
	65+	12.0%	8.3%		25k-75k	43.1%	51.2%
			Over 75k		11.9%	18.9%	
RACE / ETHNICITY	White Only	65.5%	67.0%	EMPLOYMENT	Refused	12.6%	8.0%
	Black Only	4.5%	7.7%		Full time	31.6%	35.3%
	Hispanic	22.0%	20.2%		Part time	12.2%	19.0%
	Others	5.9%	3.8%		Retired	13.5%	4.2%
	DK	2.1%	1.3%		Student	9.1%	10.5%
EDUCATION	No college	41.6%	32.0%	Homemaker	10.0%	13.1%	
	Some college	39.6%	40.0%	Not employed	20.4%	17.4%	
	College+	18.8%	28.0%				

Those in the smallest nonvoter cluster, the **Doers**, are similar to the Too Busys in some ways. They are twice as likely as nonvoters overall to cite work as the reason for them not voting. Doers are also a highly engaged and active group: They tend to be very knowledgeable about politics and the structure of government, and they are avid consumers of media (new and traditional). They are also engaged in their communities and in local issues, but feel removed from Washington (51 percent agree that things in Washington don't affect them personally, compared with 33 percent of all nonvoters). This disconnect might be part of the reason for them not voting on Election Day.

On the whole, this cluster is very pro-government, and pro-Obama and the Democrats (35 percent identify as Democrats compared with 26 percent of nonvoters overall). They are also almost twice as likely as nonvoters in general to identify as liberal (28 percent vs. 15 percent). They are optimistic about their personal finances as well as the country's future. Demographically, the group tends to be younger, more educated and is more likely to be Hispanic (see Table 6).

<i>TABLE 6</i>		ALL NONVOTERS	DOERS			ALL NONVOTERS	DOERS
AGE	18-29	31.3%	52.8%	SEX	Male	50.0%	59.6%
	30-44	28.7%	28.9%		Female	50.0%	40.4%
	45-64	28.0%	13.5%	INCOME	Under 25k	32.4%	31.3%
	65+	12.0%	4.8%		25k-75k	43.1%	44.5%
RACE / ETHNICITY	White Only	65.5%	47.2%		Over 75k	11.9%	14.4%
	Black Only	4.5%	3.9%	Refused	12.6%	9.8%	
	Hispanic	22.0%	43.1%	EMPLOYMENT	Full time	31.6%	33.7%
	Others	5.9%	5.8%		Part time	12.2%	17.9%
	DK	2.1%	0.0%		Retired	13.5%	6.2%
EDUCATION	No college	41.6%	43.6%		Student	9.1%	16.2%
	Some college	39.6%	32.6%		Homemaker	10.0%	6.2%
	College+	18.8%	23.8%	Not employed	20.4%	16.6%	