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# Why don't people vote?

Medill/NPR/Ipsos poll reveals that nonvoters are more likely to cite disconnect  
barriers to submitting a ballot

15 December 2020

Election / Politics / Polling



**Washington, DC, December 15, 2020** – According to a new Medill School of Journalism/Ipsos/NPR poll focused on non-voters, people who did not vote in this election feel a general apathy or disconnect toward politics in Washington. This poll shows that, rather than perceived structural barriers or other concerns about voting (e.g. contracting COVID-19), the main reason non-voters do not engage in the process is because they don't think it matters. Furthermore, differences in voting behavior also extend to wider social circles: non-voters are significantly less likely to say they have friends or family who vote regularly.

## Detailed Findings

Feelings of political alienation and apathy about voting are widespread among non-voters.

A majority of respondents who did not vote in the recent presidential elections express a feeling that voting has little impact on their lives, or that it will change how the country is run. There are significant differences in opinion between non-voters and voters about the effect of voting.

For example, two-thirds of non-voters agree with the statement, “Voting in elections has little to do with the way that real decisions are made in our country,” compared to 45% of voters.

More than twice as many non-voters (53%) than voters (24%) agree that “It makes

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However, non-voters and voters have similar opinions when it comes to other issues, such as their personal financial situation or the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic. Both groups also strongly feel that “the system is broken.”

Though sentiments about voting vary between the two groups, they are not that far apart when it comes to other issues. For example, a vast majority believe the coronavirus pandemic is a serious problem in this country (90% each) and in their state (88% for non-voters, 84% for voters).

Both groups also have identical sentiments about their personal financial situation.

Half say their personal financial situation will stay the same over the next year, 22% say it will improve, and 27% say it will get worse.

Showing some appetite for broader change within America's political system, roughly two-thirds say we should have a third major political party in addition to the Democrats and Republicans (64% of non-voters and 67% of voters agree).

Strong majorities agree with populist themes tested in the survey, though agreement is higher among non-voters. This is true for the following statements:

- ▶ "Traditional parties and politicians don't care about people like me." (80% of non-voters and 73% of voters agree)
- ▶ "The mainstream media is more interested in making money than telling the truth." (80% of non-voters and 72% of voters agree)
- ▶ "The American economy is rigged to advantage the rich and powerful." (78% of non-voters and 69% of voters agree)

Looking closer at groups of non-voters, those with a household income of less than \$50,000 are more likely to believe their personal financial situation will get worse in the coming year, compared with non-voters in other income brackets. They are also the most likely to believe that traditional parties and politicians don't care about them (83% vs. 74% of non-voters with an income above \$100,000).

When it comes to reasons for not voting, non-voters are more likely to cite things like a lack of interest or dislike for candidates, rather than something about the process itself.

While "not registered" is the main reason non-voters cite (29%), they are more likely to say a lack of interest in politics (23%) or the candidates (20%) kept them from voting this year, compared to reasons that speak to barriers or concerns about voting. For example, just 8% say fear of contracting COVID-19, 4% say they worry their vote wouldn't be counted, and 2% say the process is too confusing.

Disliking the candidates is the top reason cited by non-voters with a bachelor's degree or higher (30%). Non-voters without a college degree are more likely to say

“no particular reason” than those with a degree.

Virtually all non-voters (97%) say they did not try to vote in person this year but were unable to.

In general, most non-voters feel voting in this country is easy (75%). However, there is a 30 percentage point gap between voters and non-voters who strongly agree this is the case (59% of voters vs. just 29% of non-voters). Among non-voters, there is correlation with higher education and income levels and perceived ease of voting. Those in the highest income and educational brackets are the most likely to feel that voting is easy.

Non-voters are also more likely to associate with other non-voters, and they are less engaged in reading or watching the news.

When it comes to reported voting behaviors of each group’s friends and family, there are stark differences. Just 28% of non-voters say most of their friends voted in this year’s presidential election, compared to 80% of voters who said most of their friends voted. A similar pattern emerges about family: 31% of non-voters and 83% of voters say most of their family members voted this year.

Compared with voters, fewer non-voters say they watch a TV news program every day (21% vs. 36% of voters), read, watch, or listen to the news on a mobile device (15% vs. 29%), or on a computer (11% vs. 25%). Just 5% of non-voters say they discuss politics with members of their family every day; 41% say they never discuss politics with their family, and 53% say they never discuss with friends.

In some cases, such as consuming news on a mobile device or computer, there are differences among non-voters by education level. Those with a high school education or less are less likely to consume news via online platforms or use social media every day.

From a demographic perspective, non-voters in this survey tend to be younger, less likely to be employed full-time, and less likely to have a college degree, when

compared with voters. Voters in this survey are more likely to be white, while there is a higher prevalence of Hispanic/Latino respondents in the non-voter sample. A plurality of non-voters consider themselves politically independent/do not identify as a Republican or Democrat.

## **Methodology**

This Medill School of Journalism/Ipsos Poll was conducted November 4-13, 2020, using the probability-based KnowledgePanel®. This poll was based on a nationally-representative probability sample of U.S. adults (n=1,843) with 1,103 non-voters and 740 voters in the 2020 U.S. presidential election.

The survey was conducted using KnowledgePanel, the largest and most well-established online probability-based panel that is representative of the adult US population. Our recruitment process employs a scientifically developed addressed-based sampling methodology using the latest Delivery Sequence File of the USPS – a database with full coverage of all delivery points in the US. Households invited to join the panel are randomly selected from all available households in the U.S. Persons in the sampled households are invited to join and participate in the panel. Those selected who do not already have internet access are provided a tablet and internet connection at no cost to the panel member. Those who join the panel and who are selected to participate in a survey are sent a unique password-protected log-in used to complete surveys online. As a result of our recruitment and sampling methodologies, samples from KnowledgePanel cover all households regardless of their phone or internet status and findings can be reported with a margin of sampling error and projected to the general population.

The survey was conducted in English and Spanish. The data were weighted to adjust for gender by age, race/ethnicity, education, Census region, metropolitan status, household income, voter status by gender, voter status by education, voter status by race/ethnicity, and voter status by Census region. The demographic weighting benchmarks are from the KnowledgePanel; the KnowledgePanel was first weighted to the 2020 March supplement of

the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) and benchmarks from the KnowledgePanel were generated for citizen voters and citizen non-voters. Due to the oversample of non-voters, voter status proportions were adjusted to reflect current 2020 voter turnout estimates based on The United States Elections Project Data.

The weighting categories were as follows:

Gender (Male, Female) by Age (18–29, 30–44, 45–59, and 60+)

Race/Hispanic Ethnicity (White/Non-Hispanic, Black/Non-Hispanic, Other or 2+ Races/Non-Hispanic, Hispanic)

Education (Less than High School, High School graduate, Some College, Bachelor's degree or higher)

Census Region (Northeast, Midwest, South, West)

Metropolitan status (Metro, non-Metro)

Household income (Less than \$25K, \$25K–50K, \$50K–\$100K, \$100K+)

Voter status (Voter, Non-Voter) by Gender (Male, Female) by Age (18–44, 45+)

Voter status (Voter, Non-Voter) by Education (Less than Bachelor, Bachelor's degree or higher)

Voter status (Voter, Non-Voter) by Race/Hispanic Ethnicity (White/Other/2+ races/Non-Hispanic, Black/Non-Hispanic, Hispanic)

Voter status (Voter, Non-Voter) by Census region (Northeast, Midwest, South, West)

The margin of sampling error among the total sample is plus or minus 2.9 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The margin of sampling error takes into account the design effect, which was 1.58 percentage points for all respondents. The margin of sampling error is higher and varies for results based on sub-samples. In our reporting of the findings, percentage points are rounded off to the nearest whole number. As a result, percentages in a given table column may total slightly higher or lower than 100%. In questions that permit

multiple responses, columns may total substantially more than 100%, depending on the number of different responses offered by each respondent.

The margin of sampling error among the non-voter sample is plus or minus 3.5 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The margin of sampling error takes into account the design effect, which was 1.42 percentage points for non-voters. The margin of sampling error among the voter sample is plus or minus 3.9 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The margin of sampling error takes into account the design effect, which was 1.20 percentage points for voters.

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