

Is Voter Registration Up Everywhere in America?

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Many election observers predict a record voter turnout in the coming election. Many factors favor higher turnout. The election is close, interest in the campaign is up, and people perceive that the outcome matters. Surprisingly, registration statistics reported by state election offices suggest that turnout may not peak this November. Although voter registration is increasing in most of the battleground states in the 2004 presidential election, it is decreasing in most of the remaining "sleepy" states.

Overall total registration as a percentage of those eligible to vote running up to the 2004 election is 80.9%, down from 82.2% in 2002, the most recent national election. The numbers can be misleading, however, since election offices vary the timeliness of their reporting. Some provide weekly updates, while others report for the last statewide election. By November 2, the number may reach the 2002 benchmark as last minute registrations pour into local registrars' offices, but we won't know until all states can process registration forms, including the four states — Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, and Wisconsin — with election day registration.

Although some care should be taken in interpreting the registration numbers before the final close of registration, a trend is starkly evident. In every battleground state, except Arkansas, Colorado, Maine, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and Washington, voter registration increased since 2002. Among the sleeping non-battleground states, voter registration increased from 2002 in only nine. And of these nine states, those like North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia teeter on the brink of battleground status or have a hotly contested Senate race.

Why might registration rates have decreased? Voter files contain deadwood: people who no longer live, but are still registered, at an address. Updating registration rolls for persons who have moved is a continual challenge to local registrars across the country, and the criteria for removal varies among the states. A 2000 Census [report](#) reveals that the United States is a mobile society, with 46.7% of the U.S. population having moved in the previous 5 years. The people most likely to become deadwood are those that moved outside the county which they formerly resided in, which was 21.3% of the U.S. population.

Deadwood is a real issue, as the Current Population Survey routinely reports that about 10% fewer people claim to be registered to vote than the official registration roles indicate. Colorado is emblematic of the problem. Colorado tracks registered voters who are active, or recently voted in an election, and those that are not active. In 2002, there were 2.9 million active registrants, or 94.7% of those eligible to vote. When the inactive voters are included, there were 3.1 million active registrants, or 100.5% of the eligible population. Better database management technology has enabled more accurate and timely purging, and state laws enacted following the 2000 election have sometimes mandated more efficient purging practices.

The clear implication, then, is that voter registration roles are not being replenished in the sleepy states as fast as they are being diminished by purging. The active registration projects conducted in the battleground states are not found in the sleepy states. People in the sleepy states snooze through the election because what happens in their state does not appear to affect the outcome of the presidential election.

Ironically, the votes of those in the sleepy states do matter, though not directly to the outcome. For instance, public discourse about the 2000 presidential election would have been much different had President Bush won the popular vote. Circumstances may have differed if Texas voter turnout had been on par with the remainder of the country (of course, the opposite could be said of New York). the real solution to this problem of voter motivation is to make every vote count by reforming the antiquated Electoral College, which narrows the election battleground to a few states.

The number of people who are registered to vote places an upward bound on election turnout. Although there are still more than enough registered voters to produce a record turnout in November, the emerging registration numbers suggest that higher turnout in the battleground states will be tempered by lower turnout in the sleepy states. Voter turnout in the 2004 election, then, may not be as high as predicted.

Note: At the end of this report is a table of state registration statistics and web links to the most recent statewide reports which can be used to update these data.

Table 1. Aggregate Voter Registration Statistics

Year	Voting-Eligible Population	Registered Voters	% Registered of VEP	% Registered of Citizen-VAP (CPS)
2004	203,864,860	164,984,051	80.9	—
2002	199,071,724	163,641,884	82.2	66.5
2000	194,331,440	160,740,688	82.7	69.5
1998	190,024,290	155,905,693	82.1	67.1
1996	185,854,442	146,209,624	80.9	65.9

Notes: North Dakota has no voter registration, and Wisconsin has election day registration at the polls and reports no statewide voter registration statistics. I count all eligible persons in these states as registered to vote. 2002 and 2004 voter registration statistics are drawn from Secretary of State websites or phone conversations. 2000 registration data from Federal Election Commission [LINK](#). 1998 and previous from Congressional Research Service reports. Voting-eligible population calculated by Dr. McDonald [LINK](#). Current Population Survey reports are released by the Census Bureau [LINK](#).

The Demographics of Voter Registration

Who are the registered voters? Lists of registered voters cannot answer this question, since voter registration applications do not ask detailed demographic questions. We must turn to surveys, among which the most informative source is the Current Population Survey. Not surprisingly, the same factors that are widely agreed to be associated with voting are also associated with voter registration. Persons with higher "socio-economic status" (education and income) are more likely to be registered. Older and married persons also are registered at higher rates. Non-Hispanic white persons are the most likely to be registered, as are native-born citizens, women, and the employed, especially government workers.

Table 2. 2002 CPS Selected Demographics of Registration Among Citizen Voting-Age Population

	% Citizens of Voting Age Registered (2002 CPS)
ALL	66.5
AGE	
18 to 24 years	43.0
25 to 44 years	63.2
45 to 64 years	73.4
65 to 74 years	78.6
75 years and over	77.3
SEX	
Male (All)	64.8
18 to 24 years	40.1
Female (All)	68.0
18 to 24 years	45.8
RACE	
Non-Hispanic White	69.4
Non-Hispanic Black	62.7
Hispanic	52.5
Asian and Pacific Islander	49.2
CITIZENSHIP	
Native	67.3
Naturalized	54.4
EDUCATION	
Less than H.S.	48.4
H.S. Graduate	61.0
Some College or Associates Degree	69.8
Bachelor's Degree	78.9
Advanced Degree	83.4
INCOME	
<5K	54.1
5-10K	49.1
10-15K	58.4
15-25K	61.8
25-35K	64.3
35-50K	68.4
50-75K	74.1

75K+	79.2
MARITAL STATUS	
Married	73.5
Divorced or Separated	60.5
Single	55.8
EMPLOYMENT	
Not in Labor Force	66.1
In Labor Force	66.7
Government Workers	79.1
Private Industry	64.6
Self-Employed	71.4
Unemployed	54.7
<i>Note:</i> Current Population Survey reports are released by the Census Bureau LINK .	

How Do People Register?

Following the adoption of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, the so-called "Motor Voter" law, voting-eligible persons could obtain and return voter registration applications at government offices, such as the Department of Motor Vehicles. The Current Population Survey began tracking the implementation of Motor Voter by asking where people registered to vote. Far and away, the most popular way to register is when getting a driver's license.

Table 3. Method of Registration, Among Those Who Registered After 1/1/95

METHOD	% Of Registrants
With driver's license	40.8
At public assistance agency	1.3
Mailed form to election office	9.6
At school, hospital, campus	5.7
County or government registration office	13.7
Registration booth	8.1
At polls on election day	5.7
Other place/way	4.5
Don't know or refused	10.6
<i>Note:</i> Current Population Survey reports are released by the Census Bureau LINK .	

Table 4. National and State Registration Statistics, 2002 and 2004

	2002 Eligible Population	2002 Voter Reg.	2002 Percent Eligible Reg.	2004 Eligible Population	2004 Voter Reg.	2004 Percent Eligible Reg.	2004 Last Updated	Last Update on the Web
U.S. Total	199,071,724	163,641,884	82.2	203,864,860	164,984,051	80.9		http://www.fec.gov/votregis/state_voter_reg_deadlines02.htm
Alabama	3,286,005	2,356,423	71.7	3,333,450	2,336,419	70.1	6/4/2004	http://www.sos.state.al.us/
Alaska	428,254	460,855	107.6	443,254	461,059	104.0	9/8/2004	http://www.gov.state.ak.us/ltgov/elections/faqs.htm#stats
Arizona	3,438,820	2,229,180	64.8	3,613,391	2,440,144	67.5	9/7/2004	http://www.azsos.gov/
Arkansas	1,957,780	1,563,784	79.9	1,993,991	1,583,155	79.4	5/18/2004	http://www.arelections.org/index.php?elecId=55
California	20,784,442	15,303,469	73.6	21,502,515	15,625,180	72.7	9/3/2004	http://www.ss.ca.gov/elections/elections_u.htm
Colorado	3,077,142	3,093,696	100.5	3,157,395	2,955,483	93.6	9/14/2004	Most recent data obtained by phone
Connecticut	2,424,061	1,847,247	76.2	2,474,586	1,831,567	74.0	2/28/2004	http://www.sots.state.ct.us/ElectionsDivision/Electionindex.html
Delaware	566,587	503,614	88.9	582,050	536,291	92.1	9/1/2004	http://www.state.de.us/election/reports/voter_totals.html
DC	412,985	363,168	87.9	404,651	369,477	91.3	9/14/2004	http://www.dcboee.org/information/vrs_index.shtml
Florida	11,209,844	9,302,360	83.0	11,672,341	9,753,819	83.6	2/9/2004	http://election.dos.state.fl.us/voterreg/vrArchive/2004voterreg.shtml#04primary
Georgia	5,747,457	4,735,610	82.4	5,927,030	4,771,100	80.5	8/1/2004	http://www.sos.state.ga.us/elections/voter_registration/statistics.htm
Hawaii	868,346	676,242	77.9	895,484	626,120	69.9	9/18/2004	http://www.hawaii.gov/elections/
Idaho	923,335	679,535	73.6	967,761	642,011	66.3	5/25/2004	http://www.idsos.state.id.us/elect/results.htm
Illinois	8,602,470	7,025,999	81.7	8,734,675	7,137,954	81.7	3/16/2004	http://www.elections.state.il.us/elecinfo/pages/TotalsSearch.asp?Election=15
Indiana	4,502,096	4,008,636	89.0	4,567,371	4,162,606	91.1	5/4/2004	http://www.state.in.us/sos/elections/elections/index.html
Iowa	2,140,846	1,812,271	84.7	2,174,215	2,045,050	94.1	9/3/2004	http://www.sos.state.ia.us/elections/voterreg/regstat.htm
Kansas	1,909,850	1,615,699	84.6	1,940,330	1,591,428	82.0	7/1/2004	http://www.kssos.org/elections/elections_statistics.html
Kentucky	3,047,248	2,649,084	86.9	3,093,509	2,706,593	87.5	5/18/2004	http://www.kysos.com/Elecfil/Turnout/reportindex.asp
Louisiana	3,165,839	2,806,202	88.6	3,222,149	2,859,237	88.7	9/17/2004	http://204.196.221.226/weekly_stats/weekly_stats.htm
Maine	995,552	950,059	95.4	1,019,972	957,485	93.9	1/1/2004	http://www.maine.gov/sos/cec/elec/votreg.htm
Maryland	3,686,297	2,776,362	75.3	3,784,457	2,876,242	76.0	6/30/2004	http://www.elections.state.md.us/citizens/registration/activity_reports.html
Massachusetts	4,480,939	3,972,651	88.7	4,494,501	3,904,361	86.9	2/11/2004	http://www.sec.state.ma.us/ele/
Michigan	7,177,764	6,797,293	94.7	7,286,565	6,916,340	94.9	6/6/2004	http://www.michigan.gov/sos/0,1607,7-127-1633_8722-29616--,00.html
Minnesota	3,533,442	2,844,428	80.5	3,627,805	2,872,540	79.2	9/14/2004	http://www.sos.state.mn.us/election/

Mississippi	2,050,953	1,739,858	84.8	2,079,049	1,739,858	83.7	No statewide registration report, 2000 FEC statistics reported	
Missouri	4,121,656	3,681,844	89.3	4,189,455	3,511,894	83.8	8/1/2004	http://www.sos.mo.gov/elections/registeredvoters.asp?rvmID=0004
Montana	684,304	624,548	91.3	704,593	595,668	84.5	6/8/2004	http://sos.state.mt.us/css/ELB/Results.asp
Nebraska	1,211,999	1,083,544	89.4	1,236,680	1,087,842	88.0	5/11/2004	http://www.sos.state.ne.us/elec/
Nevada	1,405,434	869,801	61.9	1,508,328	945,981	62.7	8/1/2004	http://sos.state.nv.us/nvelection/voter_reg/2004/index.htm
New Hampshire	933,731	690,159	73.9	961,505	714,119	74.3	1/27/2004	http://www.sos.nh.gov/presprim2004/index.htm
New Jersey	5,630,611	4,654,897	82.7	5,723,017	4,624,004	80.8	6/8/2004	http://www.state.nj.us/lps/elections/electionshome.html
New Mexico	1,257,536	950,743	75.6	1,300,005	1,040,795	80.1	6/25/2004	http://web.state.nm.us/avrs/AVRSINDX.htm
New York	12,715,360	11,246,362	88.4	12,891,280	11,075,460	85.9	3/1/2004	http://www.elections.state.ny.us
North Carolina	5,896,440	5,038,826	85.5	6,032,533	5,279,588	87.5	9/25/2004	http://www.sboe.state.nc.us/index_data.html
North Dakota	476,953	476,953	100.0	481,655	481,655	100.0	No voter registration	
Ohio	8,339,117	7,113,826	85.3	8,427,425	7,204,856	85.5	3/2/2004	http://www.sos.state.oh.us/sos//results/index.html
Oklahoma	2,518,272	2,067,911	82.1	2,564,424	1,938,377	75.6	1/15/2004	http://www.state.ok.us/~elections/
Oregon	2,511,785	1,872,615	74.6	2,591,580	1,949,592	75.2	9/24/2004	http://www.sos.state.or.us/elections/votreg/04mvr.htm
Pennsylvania	9,158,279	7,835,775	85.6	9,275,167	7,634,577	82.3	4/1/2004	http://www.dos.state.pa.us/bcel/cwp/view.asp?a=1099&q=431553
Rhode Island	743,313	672,950	90.5	758,276	639,459	84.3	3/2/2004	http://www.elections.state.ri.us/electmain.htm
South Carolina	2,990,621	2,047,368	68.5	3,066,155	2,157,442	70.4	9/17/2004	http://www.state.sc.us/scsec/regissta.htm
South Dakota	556,319	475,984	85.6	567,215	480,266	84.7	9/24/2004	http://www.sdsos.gov/elections/#Past%20Election%20Information
Tennessee	4,174,938	3,347,979	80.2	4,274,705	3,118,316	72.9	6/1/2003	http://www.state.tn.us/sos/election/data/index.htm
Texas	13,247,385	12,563,459	94.8	13,755,786	12,264,663	89.2	3/1/2004	http://www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/historical/70-92.shtml
Utah	1,508,891	1,135,492	75.3	1,561,513	1,125,868	72.1	5/11/2004	http://elections.utah.gov/voterstatistics.html
Vermont	471,688	418,718	88.8	481,325	420,554	87.4	9/14/2004	http://vermont-elections.org/soshome.htm
Virginia	5,150,025	4,219,956	81.9	5,301,155	4,387,413	82.8	9/1/2004	http://www.sbe.state.va.us/VotReqServ/VVRS_Stats/2004_statistics.htm
Washington	4,184,152	3,209,648	76.7	4,319,948	3,282,795	76.0	9/14/2004	http://vote.wa.gov/results/
West Virginia	1,398,924	1,060,892	75.8	1,411,867	1,103,264	78.1	5/11/2004	http://www.wvsos.com/elections/history/registration/registrationstats.htm
Wisconsin	3,926,709	3,926,709	100.0	4,002,710	4,002,710	100.0	Election Day registration. No statewide registration report.	
Wyoming	370,643	241,200	65.1	379,570	215,374	56.7	8/6/2004	http://soswy.state.wy.us/election/2004/vote-sum.htm

Notes: States that increased voter registration are in green, those that decreased are in red. Those with no information are in blue. North Dakota has no voter registration. Wisconsin has election day registration at the polls and does not report statewide registration. The eligible population (calculated by Dr. McDonald [LINK](#) for these states is reported. Maine, Minnesota, and New Hampshire have election day registration at the polls and report voter registration. The statewide reports are given here. Mississippi does not report statewide voter registration, and in lieu of calling all local county registrars offices, the 2000 FEC number is reported here. Arkansas's 2002 number of registered voters is likely higher due to purging of the current file used to generate the 2002 number.