



# The Dynamic Consequences of Nonvoting in American National Elections

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A growing body of work examines the consequences of unequal participation in American democracy for electoral outcomes. However, this scholarship has ignored the potential impact of unequal voting for the quality of dynamic representation in the American political system. Using data from the General Social Survey (GSS), we examine the dynamic relationship between the policy preferences of voters and nonvoters in the American electorate. Further, we assess how unequal participation—and the incentives that it may give to policymaking elites—may moderate the relationship between the mass public and policy outcomes. Our analysis reveals that the policy preferences of voters and nonvoters respond in similar ways to the political and economic environment. In addition, we find no evidence that national policymaking elites are differentially responsive to changes in the preferences of voters and nonvoters.

In response to findings that demonstrate a demographic and socioeconomic bias in the American electorate, many researchers have examined the partisan effects of nonvoting—the extent to which unequal participation has benefited one or the other major American parties. This research, however, has taken a static view of the American electorate, focusing on particular elections at particular times. Yet, recent models of dynamic representation suggest other relevant questions with respect to turnout: Do the voting and nonvoting public send distinct preference cues to policymakers? Do policymakers distinguish between the preferences of the electorate and the preferences of the public when deciding how best to respond to public opinion?

Using the General Social Survey (GSS), we develop aggregate measures of the policy preferences of voters and nonvoters from 1974–2002. With these data, we estimate models of governmental responsiveness to voter and nonvoter policy sentiment. We find only marginal differences in the aggregate preferences of voters and nonvoters, that the policy preferences of voters and nonvoters respond similarly over time to political stimuli, and that there is no evidence that Congress responds differentially to either group. We conclude that policymakers do not functionally ignore the nonvoting public, either because nonvoters' preferences are largely indistinguishable from voters' or because they strategically respond to potential voters.

## THE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF NONVOTING IN AMERICAN ELECTIONS

The differences between voters and nonvoters have been a topic of intense study. Nonvoters are generally less well-educated, more likely to be in the “lower” or “working” social classes, and more likely to be racial minorities than

voters (e.g., Burnham 1986, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). This suggests that patterns of nonvoting may bias the distribution of voices heard by politicians, the composition of elected bodies, and public policy (Lijphart 1997, Piven and Cloward 1988).

Nevertheless, evidence of differences between voters' and nonvoters' policy preferences is mixed. Some suggest that the policy preferences of nonvoters on welfare issues and economic redistribution are more liberal than those of voters (e.g., Verba and Nie 1972; Bennett and Resnick 1990). Yet these differences are inconsistent and are often small (Shaffer 1982; Highton and Wolfinger 2001). Thus, socioeconomic differences between voters and nonvoters may not translate into differences in policy preferences. Scholars have also concluded that more equal turnout would *sometimes* increase the Democratic vote share, but that the effects are inconsistent and modest (see e.g., DeNardo 1980; Tucker and Vedlitz 1986; Nagel and McNulty 1996). Further, even a marginally more Democratic electorate may not change election outcomes since few elections are competitive (Brunell and DiNardo 2004; Citrin, Schickler, and Sides 2003). In sum, the voting public is more affluent and conservative than the nonvoting public, but these differences may not have consequences for election outcomes.

While these studies are instructive, they view the electorate in static terms. Almost none consider the *dynamics* of voter and nonvoter preferences or the differential dynamics of voter and nonvoter preferences in relation to public policy. Yet, a growing body of research suggests that it is governmental response to the dynamics of public opinion—not solely elections—that is critical for the representation of public preferences in policymaking. Given that an electoral motive drives many theories of responsiveness to constituent interests in the United States (e.g., Mayhew 1974, Page and Shapiro 1983, Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002), a complete examination of the effects of unequal participation thus requires an analysis of the dynamic consequences of nonvoting for the American political system.

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## NONVOTING IN THE THEORY OF DYNAMIC REPRESENTATION

The policy consequences of elections are obvious: All else equal, the election of more liberal candidates tends to lead to more liberal policies; conservative victories yield conservative policies. But the public can affect public policy through means other than electoral replacement. The idea of *dynamic representation* (Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995) suggests that rational policymakers will respond to changes in public opinion before they have the chance to be punished electorally for failing to reflect these changes. Thus, policy change can occur even in the absence of electoral turnover, as the public, in effect, “notifies” elected officials about its changing preferences and government responds accordingly (e.g., Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Page and Shapiro 1983; Wlezien 1995; Wlezien and Goggin 1993).

But these analyses focus on aggregate public opinion; they assume that policymakers respond to the preferences of the *entire public*, not the preferences of *voters* alone. Scholars have made this assumption for methodological reasons, but it has important theoretical implications. Since the desire to be re-elected is central, many explanations of why policymakers respond to constituent desires (see, e.g., Fenno 1977; Mondak 1995; Rothenberg and Sanders 2000), it is plausible that policymakers pay disproportionate attention to the opinions of voters in responding to changing citizen demands. Evidence of responsiveness to *aggregate* public opinion, in other words, may mask the fact that only the preferences of the electorate matter to policymakers.

The theory of dynamic representation leads to two competing views about the consequences of nonvoting for the dynamics of policy responsiveness. First, it may be that politicians may have little incentive to respond to the policy preferences of nonvoters (see, e.g., Key 1961). As Burnham (1987) writes, “if you don’t vote, you don’t count.” In this perspective, election-seekers would respond to the preferences of the *electorate* only, ignoring nonvoters.

Alternatively, an office holder might view the public as a pool of *potential* voters who may be more likely to enter the electorate if they feel (or are persuaded to feel by strong electoral challengers) their preferences are not represented (Erikson 1971). Thus, policymakers may have an incentive to respond to the whole citizenry and not solely to those who vote at any given time.

Of course, policymakers can choose to respond to either the policy preferences of an entire electorate or voters alone only if voters and nonvoters send substantively different cues to policymakers with respect to their preferences for public policy. The socioeconomic and demographic differences between voters and nonvoters might mean that those likely to vote and those likely not to vote will respond differently to changes in the political or economic environment. In addition, since nonvoters are, as a group, less politically engaged and attentive, it could be that the aggregate preferences of nonvoters are less likely to respond *at all* to changes in the political or economic context.

In sum, the policy consequences of unequal nonvoting may not be restricted to those created by electoral outcomes. If voters and nonvoters respond in different ways to political and economic events, they will send different signals to government about their policy preferences. Policymakers might then respond to either the preferences of the electorate or the preferences of the public as a whole. If policymakers respond disproportionately to the cues sent by voters, differences in voters’ and nonvoters’ preferences have important policy consequences even if the effects of nonvoting on election outcomes are marginal.

## THE DYNAMICS OF VOTER AND NONVOTER POLICY SENTIMENT

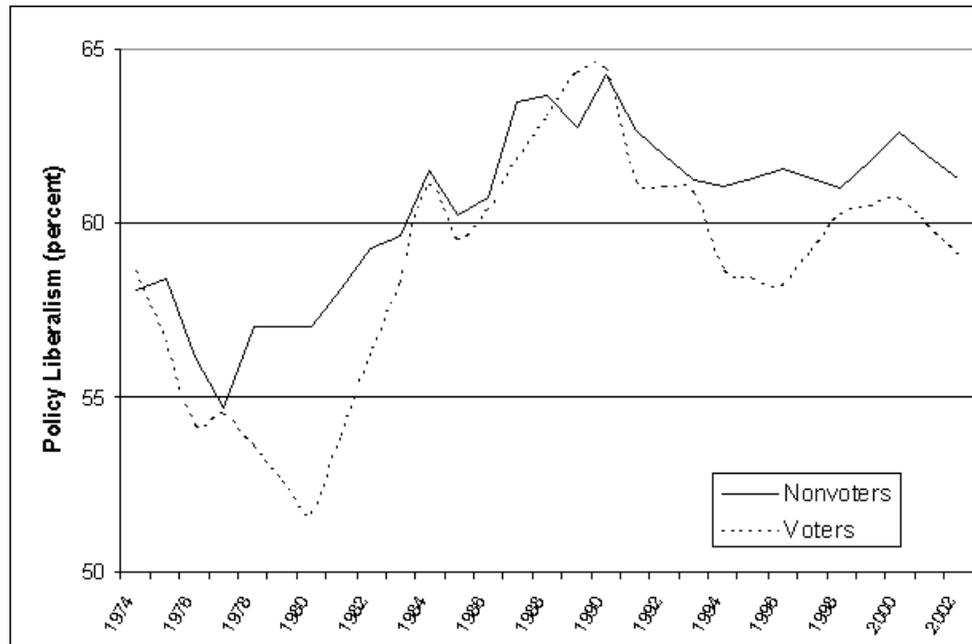
Our goals are to understand how the policy preferences of voters and nonvoters differ over time and whether policymaking elites disproportionately respond to the views of voters vis-à-vis the public at large when making policy. This requires a global measure of public policy preferences. The most widely used measure of public preferences in the study of mass-policymaking elite relationships is Stimson’s Public Policy Mood (Stimson 1991, 1999). Mood is generally interpreted as an indicator of aggregate policy preferences on the dominant dimension of political conflict, typically recognized as a “liberal-conservative” policy space (e.g., Durr 1993; Mishler and Sheehan 1996; Smith 2000).

But because Policy Mood is comprised of thousands of survey marginals, it cannot be disaggregated into component parts of interest: in this case, into series of the preferences of voters and nonvoters. However, the measure *can* serve as a standard from which other measures of longitudinal public sentiment can be judged. A measure that correlates strongly with Mood can be considered a reasonably valid measure of “public policy sentiment” as it is commonly conceived, even if the measure is comprised of a smaller number of questions than Mood. The goal is to develop a proxy for Mood that can be disaggregated to examine the dynamics of policy sentiment for voters and nonvoters. To develop such a measure, we turn to data from the GSS.

From 1974-2002, the GSS asked 11 questions of its respondents in each survey year related to preferences on government spending on a variety of issues. We coded the responses to each of these questions for ideological content, with the most liberal possible answer receiving a score of 1, and the most conservative possible answer receiving a score of 0. We then averaged the responses to each question to create a measure (bounded between 0 and 1, with higher values indicating more liberal preferences) of policy sentiment for each question in each survey year and averaged across all questions to create a single, aggregate measure of public policy preferences for each GSS survey year. This new measure of policy preferences correlates with Stimson’s policy Mood at 0.89.<sup>1</sup> And because this measure

<sup>1</sup> We weigh each of the 11 issues equally in the Mood proxy. An individual-level non-rotated factor score of preferences on these 11 issues correlates at .92 with the basic additive scales.

≡ FIGURE 1  
POLICY PREFERENCES OF VOTERS AND NONVOTERS, 1974-2002



Source: General Social Surveys Cumulative File.

is comprised of questions that are common to all respondents in all years, it can be disaggregated by changing the set of respondents over which responses are aggregated. We use the technique described above to create two time series: one for GSS respondents who reported voting in the election most proximate to the survey year and one for respondents who reported not voting in that election.<sup>2</sup>

Time series of the policy preferences of voters and nonvoters using the proxy for Policy Mood are shown in Figure 1.<sup>3</sup> As expected, there is some evidence that unequal partic-

ipation introduces a conservative bias into the electorate. Voters are on average more conservative than nonvoters in 20 of 22 of the survey years, though the differences are modest both statistically and substantively. We reject the null hypothesis that voters as a group are more conservative than nonvoters in only 9 of the 22 survey years, and the mean difference of policy liberalism between voters and nonvoters is roughly 1.7 percentage points. Given that the range of aggregate policy liberalism during this period is about 15 points, the differences between voters and nonvoters are quite small.<sup>4</sup> On the whole, the differences in policy preference liberalism between voters and nonvoters are relatively small—often indistinguishable from 0. On this measure of policy sentiment, voters are only marginally more conservative than nonvoters.

More importantly, the dynamic differences between voters and nonvoters are also modest. The voter and nonvoter time series track closely together over time, correlating at 0.87. Although there is some movement unique to each series, the dynamics of both are quite similar. Simply put, public opinion moves systematically in response to political and economic events, but these events have similar effects in the voting and nonvoting publics.

<sup>2</sup> On average, roughly 65 percent of GSS respondents reported voting in the previous election, compared with the roughly 50 percent turnout generally observed in Presidential elections. Thus, there is likely to be some systematic error in time series of “voter” and “nonvoter” preferences. We note this concern, but operationalize voting via self-report for two reasons. First, we have no way to validate reported voting, and using statistical techniques to predict which respondents reported voting when they actually did not may confound our measure of turnout with other things—like policy preferences—that are our more proximate interest here. Second, misreporting of voting is likely to make voters and nonvoters appear more similar, as it will classify a disproportionate number of educated nonvoters—those who are more likely to hold preferences similar to those of voters—as voters. Relying on respondent self-reports is likely to exaggerate the differences between voters and nonvoters (Highton and Wolfinger 2001), implying that our findings represent an outer boundary of the consequences of nonvoting.

<sup>3</sup> Given that the GSS interviews new respondents each year, it is impossible to tell whether changes in the preferences of voters as a bloc are driven primarily by changes in the preferences of habitual voters or by the entry and exit of episodic voters. This is a fruitful topic for future work, but our interest is whether policymakers respond disproportionately to the preferences of voters. If election-seeking politicians are

disproportionately concerned with the electorate rather than the general public, they will be moved by the opinions of those who vote at a particular point in time, regardless of whether those people will remain voters at some point in the future.

<sup>4</sup> Only from 1978-1982 are differences between voters and nonvoters regularly significant.

## NONVOTING AND DEMOCRATIC RESPONSIVENESS

With over time measures of the policy preferences of voters and nonvoters, we now consider the degree to which Congress responds *differentially* to changes in the preferences of voters and nonvoters in forming public policy. Perhaps the most comprehensive study of global policy responsiveness in the American electorate is Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson's (EMS) (2002) work on the relationship between *public opinion* and *policy activity* in the United States. This research uses global measures of policy liberalism for all branches of government, along with Mood, to analyze the dynamic relationship between public opinion and policymaking. Although differences exist across branches of government (and Houses of Congress), these analyses show that policymakers respond, often quite rapidly, to changes in mass opinion.

Using EMS' analyses as a guide, we consider the dynamic relationship between the policy preferences of voters and nonvoters and the policy activity in both the House of Representatives and Senate.<sup>5</sup> In effect, we estimate the independent effects of voter and nonvoter public sentiment on public policy (including relevant controls), substituting our 11-issue measure of public preferences for Mood. We restrict our analysis to 1974-1996, the years in which both GSS and *Policy Liberalism* data are available. The dependent variables in the following analyses are a series of House and Senate policy liberalism scores created using EMS's indicators of policy activity liberalism. The dependent indicators for both the House and Senate include measures of average of House (Senate) ADA/ACU scores, the percentage of ideological votes won by liberals, and median size of the "liberal" coalition on ideological votes.

As in EMS, models of House and Senate liberalism are estimated using the DYMIMIC Kallman Filter Setup, which allows for the one-step estimation of both principal components analysis (since the dependent variable is composed of multiple indicators) and regression of independent variables on the dependent concepts of interest (See Beck 1990; Kellstedt, McAvoy, and Stimson 1996). Each of the dependent indicators for these series loads strongly on a single factor, suggesting that each taps the same latent concept of policy liberalism.

Analyzing the independent effects of voter and nonvoter policy preferences for both houses of Congress is especially useful given the fact that EMS find that public opinion has a significant impact on the policymaking actions of the House but does not have a direct impact the Senate. We test whether these results mask heterogeneity in how legislative bodies respond to the changing preferences of voters and nonvoters. If policymakers respond differentially to voters and nonvoters, we would expect that the impact of one group's preferences on House activity is stronger than that of the other's. In addition, it may be the case that there is a link

between Senate policymaking and public opinion, but that this relationship is obscured in analyses that do not distinguish between the electorate and the public as a whole.

Conversely, if there *are* no meaningful differences in how Congress responds to changes in voter and nonvoter policy sentiment, we expect significant predicted effects for both voter and nonvoter preferences in the House, and a non-significant effect for both voters and nonvoters in the Senate. These analyses thus provide a way to evaluate the competing hypotheses with respect to the dynamic consequences of nonvoting and to evaluate dynamic representation in light of the idea that policymakers may respond differentially to voters and nonvoters.

The results are presented in Tables 1 (The House of Representatives) and 2 (The Senate). Each table contains five columns. The first is a replication of EMS's analyses for the restricted time frame we for which we have data. The second substitutes our aggregate measure of policy sentiment (including voters and nonvoters) for Policy Mood. The third includes only the policy sentiment of voters; the fourth contains only preferences of nonvoters. The final column includes series of both voter and nonvoter policy sentiment.<sup>6</sup>

In the House, aggregate policy sentiment, using either our measure or Mood, is a powerful predictor of policy activity. But, the results do not suggest that this responsiveness is driven by disproportionate attention paid to the preferences of voters. In separate models, the effects of voter and nonvoter policy sentiment perform similarly. As expected, the independent explanatory power of both voter and nonvoter sentiment are reduced when both series are included as independent variables in the same model. But the effects do not suggest that the House of Representatives responds differentially to either group. When the series are analyzed together, only nonvoter preferences remain a significant predictor of policy activity (although the coefficients for the voter and nonvoter series are not significantly different from each other). There is evidence, then, that both the preferences of voters and nonvoters matter to the actions of the House of Representatives. When entered into separate analyses, the models predict a 3.1 point increase in policy liberalism for each percentage-point increase in voter liberalism and a 5.2 point increase in policy liberalism for each point increase in nonvoter liberalism. In general, the House response seems to answer to the preferences of both voters and nonvoters.

Consistent with the findings of EMS, Table 2 suggests that aggregate public policy sentiment plays little direct role in the policy activity of the U.S. Senate. However, there is little evidence to suggest that the aggregate results mask the fact that the Senate pays attention to only the preferences of voters. In separate models, the coefficients for voter and nonvoter sentiment are both positive (such that increased

<sup>5</sup> EMS also estimate models of the policy activity of the President and the Supreme Court. Replicating these analyses yield conclusions consistent with those presented here.

<sup>6</sup> EMS test additional models for each branch of government. To save space, we include only the most fully specified one in Tables 1 and 2. Specifying different combinations of control variables produce results consistent with those in these tables.

≡ TABLE 1  
POLICY ACTIVITY IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, 1974-1996

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Dynamics ( $Y_{t-1}$ )	.02 (.18)	-.13 (.18)	-.11 (.22)	-.10 (.14)	-.10 (.17)
Democratic Party Control (Dummy)	63.88* (33.40)	49.18* (19.30)	51.96 (31.76)	43.63 (26.15)	42.77 (25.20)
Percentage Democratic	.40 (.29)	.95* (.29)	.65* (.31)	1.57* (.40)	1.50* (.36)
Public Policy Mood (t-1)	1.93* (.38)				
11-issue proxy for Mood (t-1)		3.95* (.49)			
Voter Mood (t-1)			3.14* (.62)		.55 (1.20)
Nonvoter Mood (t-1)				5.16* (.61)	4.26* (1.42)
Constant	-130.46* (18.68)	-256.10* (27.64)	-194.06* (29.90)	-367.54* (39.47)	-341.06* (36.00)
N	21	21	21	21	21
Measurement Model Commonalities					
Percentage Liberal Wins	1.00	.99	.99	.98	.98
Liberal Coalition Size	.94	.97	.96	.98	.98
Interest group ratings	.74	.78	.77	.80	.79
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> (full model)	.89	.91	.91	.90	.92

Notes: standard errors in parentheses.

\*  $p < .05$  (two-tailed).

mass liberalism leads to more liberal policy), but are not distinguishable from 0 or 1 another. When entered together, neither voter nor nonvoter sentiment significantly affect Senate liberalism. Again, the sizes of the effects are not distinguishable from one another. Simply put, there is no evidence to suggest that the lack of a direct aggregate relationship between public opinion and Senate policy activity obscures responsiveness to changes in the preferences of the voting public alone.

The key result is that the effect of voter sentiment for either the House or the Senate is not significantly larger than the impact of nonvoter sentiment, either in separate models or in the same model. There is thus no *aggregate* evidence that lawmaking bodies respond differentially to the preferences of the electorate or the mass public. There are two interpretations of this finding. First, officeholders may feel obligated to take into account the preferences of everyone they represent. Alternatively, election-seekers may incorporate nonvoter preferences in decision-making, as those who act inconsistently with the preferences of nonvoters may risk mobilizing new voters who may be apt to support an opponent (Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002).

The latter interpretation attaches substantive meaning to the collinearity between the voter and nonvoter series. Because voter and nonvoter preferences are similar over time, it may not be possible for officeholders to distinguish between them. Given the similarity of the voter and nonvoter time series and the degree of measurement error endemic to any measure of public sentiment, differences in the series' dynamics may not be distinguishable, even to the keenest elected officials. It may be meaningless to say that politicians respond only to the voting public; differences between the dynamics of voter and nonvoter preferences may be so minute that even politicians who wish to only pay attention to those who vote cannot do so in a meaningful sense.

It is possible, of course, that these analyses understate the differential dynamic impact of voter and nonvoter sentiment on policy outcomes by ignoring electoral effects. In both elected branches of government, party control and party composition of legislative bodies matter a great deal to policy activity. Given that the preferences of voters are, by definition, overrepresented in elections, the effects of voter preferences may disproportionately affect policy—not simply through responsiveness of already elected office-

≡ TABLE 2  
POLICY ACTIVITY IN THE UNITED STATES SENATE, 1974-1996

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Dynamics ( $Y_{t-1}$ )	-.23 (.15)	-.24 (.16)	-.24 (.16)	-.24 (.15)	-.24 (.19)
Democratic Party Control (Dummy)	39.78* (11.87)	44.37* (14.55)	46.25* (14.61)	41.75* (12.75)	43.27* (14.43)
Percentage Democratic	1.06 (.72)	.68 (.85)	.55 (.82)	.91 (.90)	.80 (1.09)
Public Policy Mood (t-1)	.22 (.38)				
11-issue proxy for Mood (t-1)		.29 (.62)			
Voter Mood (t-1)			.20 (.52)		.05 (1.47)
Nonvoter Mood (t-1)				.56 (.79)	.32 (2.23)
Constant	-27.57 (51.69)	-13.24 (73.68)	-1.11 (66.52)	-39.77 (87.10)	-23.45 (110.56)
N	21	21	21	21	21
Measurement Model Commonalities					
Percentage Liberal Wins	.99	.99	.99	.99	.99
Liberal Coalition Size	.97	.97	.97	.97	.97
Interest group ratings	.66	.66	.66	.66	.66
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> (full model)	.92	.92	.92	.92	.92

Note: standard errors in parentheses.\*  $p < .05$  (two-tailed).

holders, but through electoral outcomes themselves (see e.g., DeBoef and Stimson 1995).

It is thus worth noting that EMS (and others) have modeled the direct effects of changes in Mood on the dynamics of aggregate election outcomes. As a counterfactual, we can see what would happen to the composition of Congress if the electoral system were “shocked” such that everyone voted. On average, EMS find that a percentage-point increase in Mood liberalism produces, on average, 2.5 additional Democratic House Seats and 2 additional Senate seats.

Given our estimates of voter and nonvoter policy preferences, we know that an electorate that consisted of all eligible citizens would be, on average, given the available data, roughly 0.5 percentage points more liberal than an electorate consisting of only those who reported voting. If all citizens voted, and policymakers and parties did not adjust their platforms or strategies in response to the full turnout electorate, compulsory voting would be expected to produce roughly 1 additional Democratic House and slightly less than 1 additional Democratic Senator. More likely, the shock would cause strategic members of both parties to move modestly to the left. This is, to be sure, a rough guess. But, based on the most comprehensive analysis of aggregate election

outcomes available, the small differences in the liberalism of voters and nonvoters means that full turnout would likely do very little to affect the composition of Congress.

## CONCLUSIONS

Using a proxy for Stimson’s (1991, 1999) Policy Mood, we have shown that the differences in the policy liberalism of voters and nonvoters are marginal, and that, in the aggregate, the liberalism of voters and nonvoters respond similarly over time to economic and political events. We also find little evidence that policymakers respond disproportionately to the policy preferences of the electorate, ignoring the large segment of the public that does not vote.

This article also integrates the literature on the implications of unequal voting with studies of dynamic representation. Cross-sectional studies have found small but significant differences in the preferences of voters and nonvoters on several salient issues. However, these differences matter only if they affect elections or the actions of elected officials. We find that there is little evidence that the preferences of voters matter disproportionately to the activity of policymakers. The dynamic approach used here provides evi-

dence that the *dynamics* of voter and nonvoter preferences are not particularly different. Further, the small differences in absolute *levels* of liberalism between voters and nonvoters suggest that the election outcomes produced by a full turnout electorate would only be modestly different from those produced by the actual electorate.

These results do not indicate that differences between voters and nonvoters are not meaningful in other ways. Nonvoters may have different *priorities* than voters (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), and it is possible, that politicians give priority to issues salient among voters, even if overall policy liberalism reflects the preferences of the broader public. This analysis also conceives of the electorate solely as the Presidential electorate: it is possible that the differences in preferences of voters and nonvoters would be greater in off-year or subnational elections. But at least in terms of global policy preferences, the relationship between public opinion and government action is not inhibited by unequal participation.

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