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Why Many Americans Don't Vote

And why for some, this year could be different.

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Illustrations by Laura Lannes

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The last time Richard Brown voted was in 2008. He had caught a couple of presidential debates on TV, and found himself liking what the Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, had to say. And as a Black man, he was excited by the idea of voting for the country's first Black president.

Then in 2012, he decided not to bother casting a second ballot for Obama. It wasn't that he had soured on the president — he just didn't think it was necessary. "He's already in office ... [so] I kinda figured he didn't need my help," Brown said. He was willing to take the time out of his day to cast his vote, but he didn't think it would have an impact on the outcome. "I know it's kind of a stupid thought, but I feel like one missed vote isn't going to change anything."

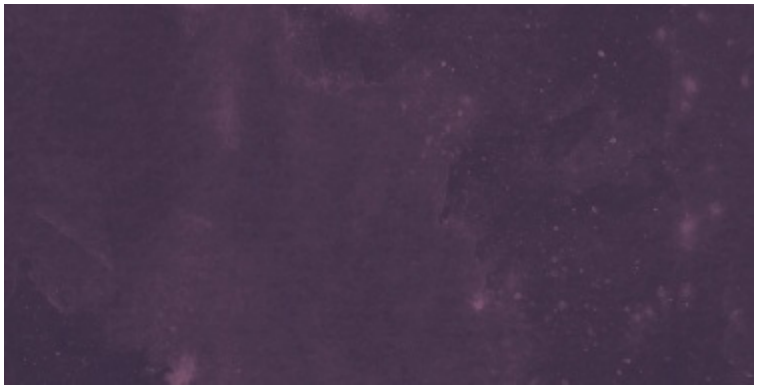
Twelve years later, though, he's planning to vote again. It's not because Brown, who is now 53 and lives in the Midwest, is newly hopeful that his vote will matter. In fact, he's not at all confident that the candidate he's supporting, Joe Biden, will win. But the stakes of this election feel personal. Over the past four years, some of his friends have changed the way they act and talk, saying hateful things about Obama or sharing racist memes on

Facebook.

“I’m not even really keen on Biden,” Brown said. “It’s more so that Trump is bringing racist rhetoric out of a lot of people.” Those kinds of comments are “really hurtful to me, disrespectful to me,” he said. So he’s decided to vote again this year: “This way, if [Biden] does lose the election, I can’t say that it was my fault because I didn’t vote.”

Every election, millions of Americans go through a similar thought process and, it turns out, lots of people feel like Brown: They think voting doesn’t matter or isn’t worth their time.

In any given election, between 35 and 60 percent of eligible voters don’t cast a ballot. It’s not that hard to understand why. Our system doesn’t make it particularly easy to vote, and the decision to carve out a few hours to cast a ballot requires a sense of motivation that’s hard for some Americans to muster every two or four years — enthusiasm about the candidates, belief in the importance of voting itself, a sense that anything can change as the result of a single vote. “I guess I just don’t think that one person’s vote can swing an election,” said Jon Anderson, who won’t be voting for president this year because of moral objections to both candidates.



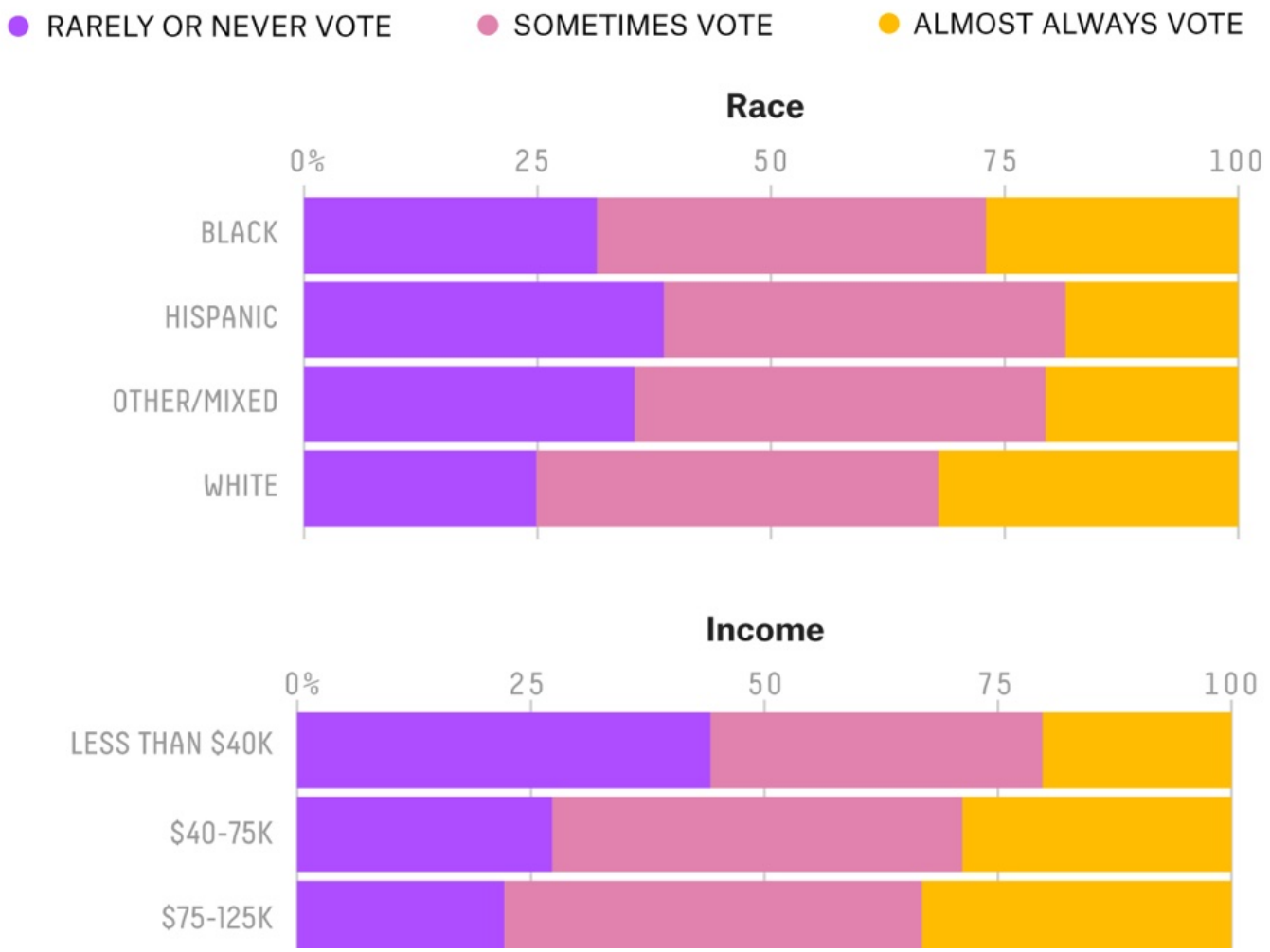
I don’t think if President Trump is reelected or if Joe Biden wins, it’s going to be complete chaos. So I don’t want to vote out of fear.

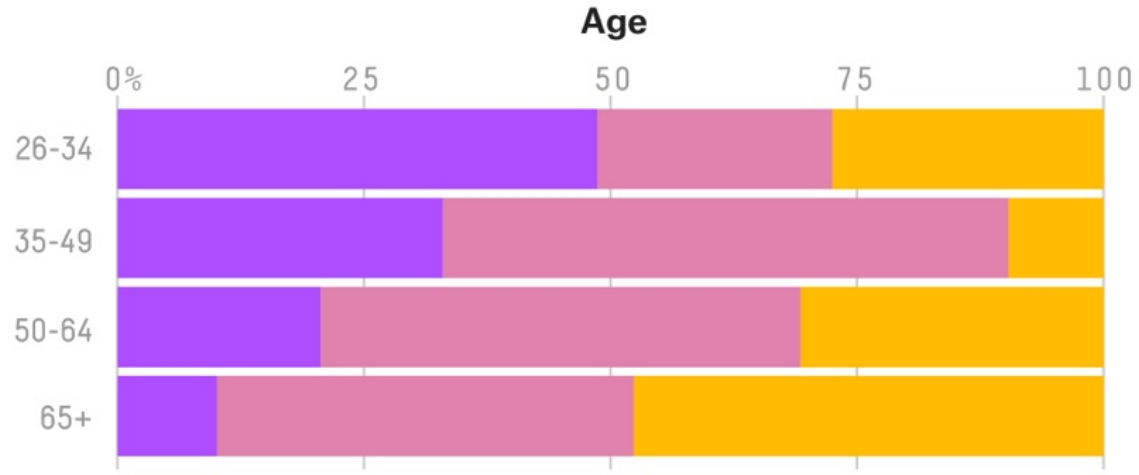
But who does — and doesn’t — vote is complex. Most Americans don’t fall neatly into any one category. Instead, as we found in our new poll with Ipsos, most are like Brown. They vote inconsistently, or at moments when they feel like their vote has a chance to make a difference, or when the stakes of not voting are just too high, which is how many Americans describe this upcoming election.

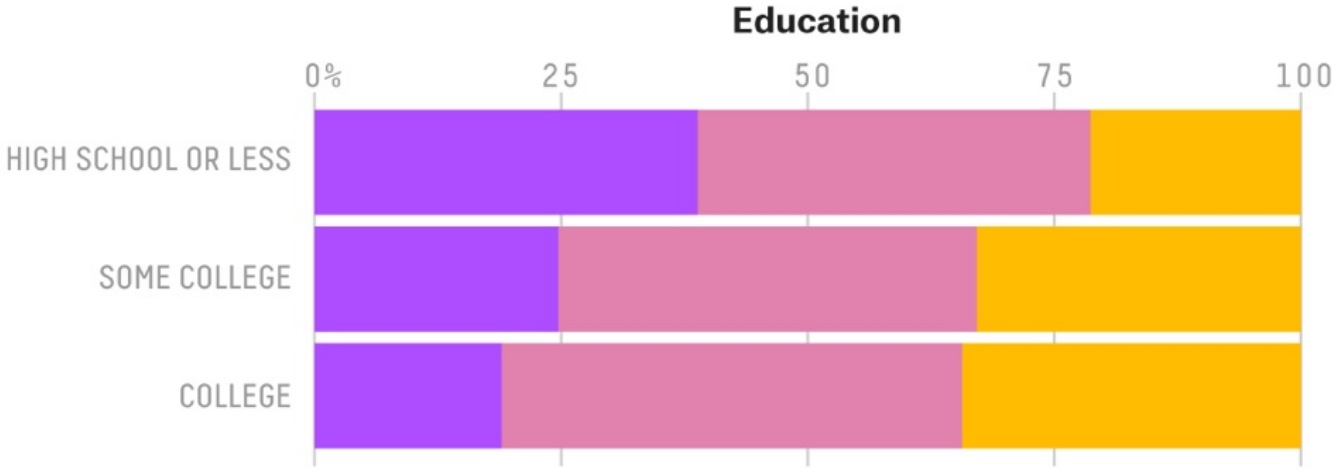
Of the 8,000-plus people we polled, we were able to match nearly 6,000 to their voting history. We analyzed the views of the respondents in that slightly smaller group, and found that they fell into three broad groups: 1) people who almost always vote; 2) people who sometimes vote; and 3) people who rarely or never vote. People who sometimes vote were a plurality of the group (44 percent), while 31 percent nearly always cast a ballot and just 25 percent almost never vote. And as the chart below shows, there weren't huge differences between people who vote almost all the time and those who vote less consistently. Yes, those who voted more regularly were higher income, more educated, more likely to be white and more likely to identify with one of the two political parties, but those who only vote some of the time were also fairly highly educated and white, and not overwhelmingly young. There were much bigger differences between people who sometimes vote and those who almost never vote.

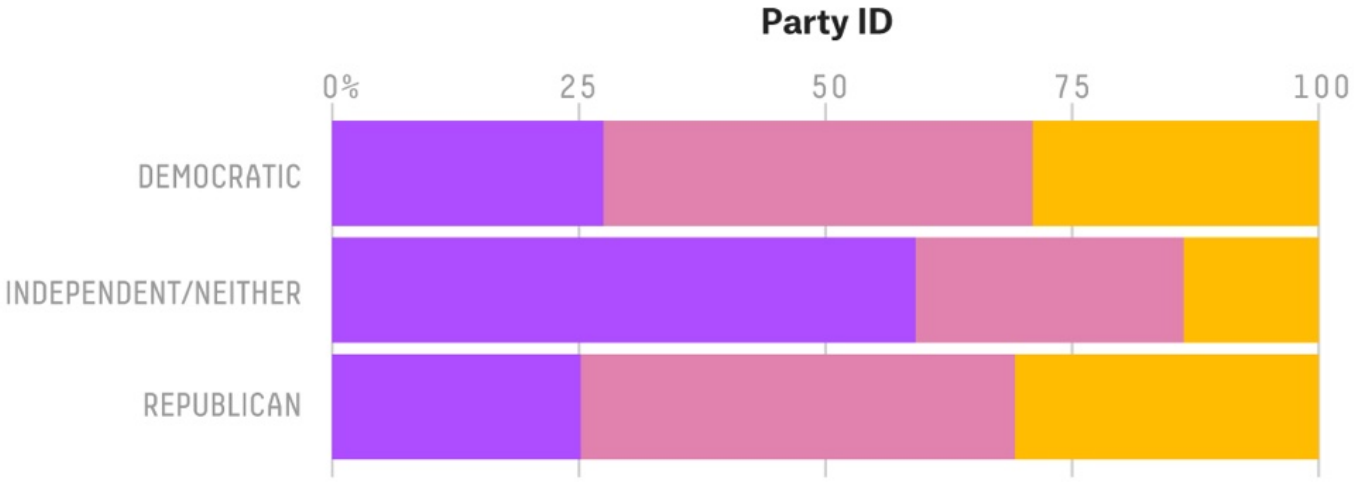
Those who almost always vote and those who sometimes vote aren't that different

Demographic information of survey respondents, by voting history









We used a voter file combined with survey responses to classify voters. ● Rarely or never vote: voted in no more than one election ● Sometimes vote: voted in at least two elections, but not all (or all but one) ● Almost always vote: voted in all (or all but one) election.

SOURCES: FIVETHIRTYEIGHT / IPSOS, ARISTOTLE

Nonvoters were more likely to have lower incomes; to be young; to have lower levels of education; and to say they don't belong to either political party, which are all traits that square with what we know about people less likely to engage with the political system.

Many of the people we spoke with described their decision to vote as very personal, boiling down to the specific candidates, their own ability to navigate the electoral system that year, or whether they thought their vote would matter. But for others, being a "nonvoter" or a "sometimes voter" wasn't really a choice. There are clear barriers to casting a ballot that many of them experienced.

Those barriers and feelings build on each other in ways that are complicated to tease out. But that complexity actually helps us understand why so many Americans don't consistently vote — and why they vote, when they do.

BARRIERS TO VOTING

When JeMare Williams went to vote for the first time in Macomb County, Michigan, he had a plan. Tucked inside his wallet were several forms of identification and his voter registration card. He was still smarting from the last time he'd tried to vote, when he lived in Wayne County, outside Detroit. That time, he had come to the polling place with his driver's license but

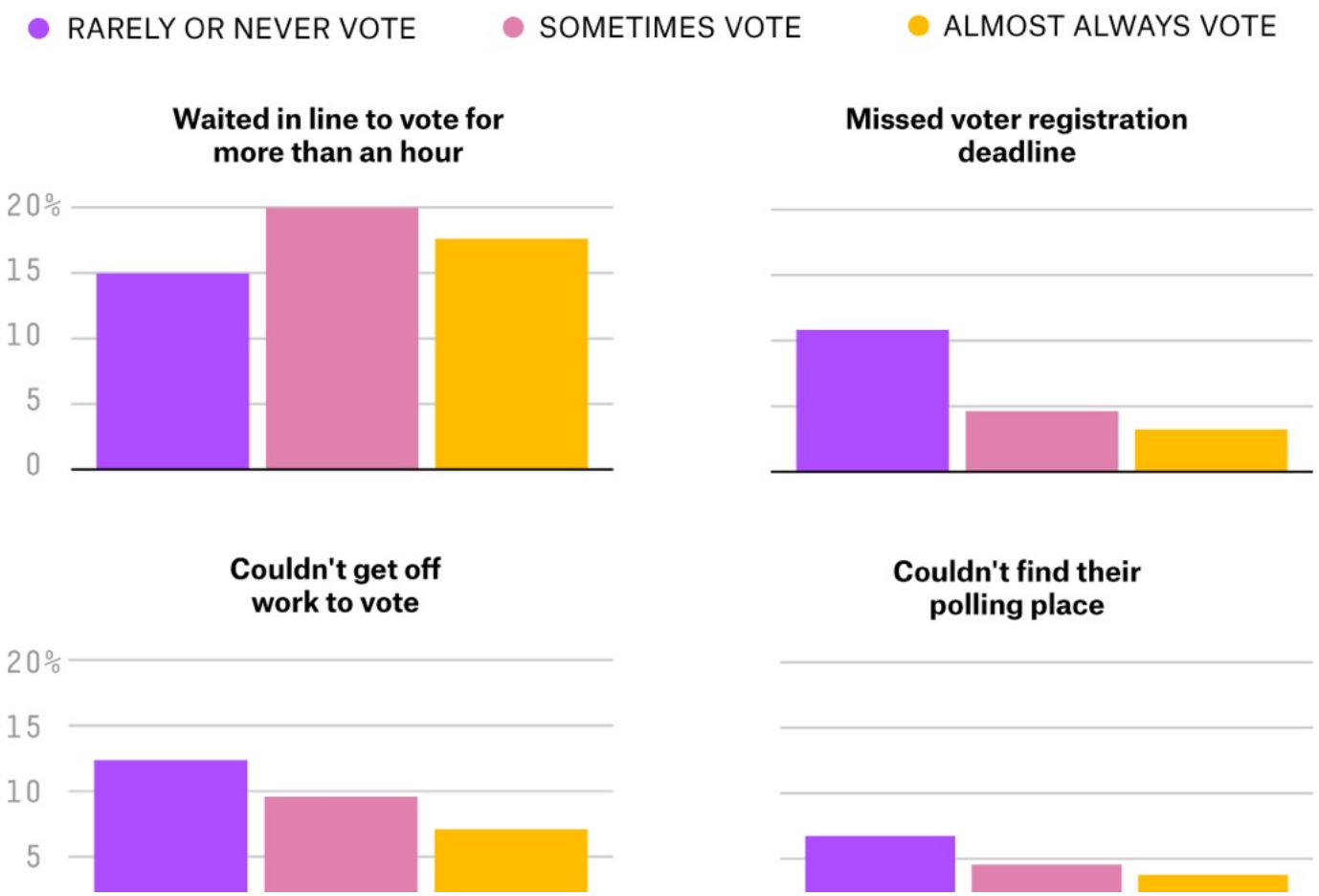
without his voter registration card, and was told he had to fill out a provisional ballot (separate ballots used when a voter's eligibility is uncertain). After he moved, he was determined that he wouldn't have to fill out another ballot that might not get counted. "I was like — you're not going to take this right away," he said. "Whatever you need for me to vote, I have it."

For Williams, voting has never been especially easy. He's missed elections in the past because his job working for a railroad takes him away from home for 24-hour stretches, making it impossible to vote on Election Day. When he has been able to vote, he's stood in line for hours.

Williams is certainly not alone in experiencing these barriers. Of the three groups of voters we identified, those voters who only vote some of the time were actually the likeliest to report having stood in line for more than an hour; they were also likelier than those who vote more regularly to say they couldn't get off work to vote.

All types of voters report experiencing barriers

Types of barriers to voting that respondents reported experiencing, by voting history



Take Christopher McDonald, 28. He voted for the first time in 2016, but the steps he had to take to vote felt intimidating, especially for someone who wasn't that interested in politics. "A lot of it was that I didn't know where to go or what to do -- I didn't even know where the voting centers were," he said. When he did end up voting, he was told that the precinct didn't have his address on file and, like Williams, had to fill out a provisional ballot. He still

doesn't know if his vote actually got counted. "They said, 'Oh you have to call the commissioner's office or the courthouse or something,'" he said. "And when I left the voting place, it just went out of my head."

This year, some of these occasional voters are also dealing with pandemic-specific challenges that could make voting less of a priority. For instance, people who vote more irregularly are a little more likely than those who almost always vote to have lost a job in the past year (13 percent vs. 10 percent) or to have worried about expenses (21 percent vs. 16 percent), although those who almost never vote are even likelier than those who sometimes vote to have reported these experiences.

Adam Sanchez, 27, isn't sure if he's voting this year, in part because he doesn't want to risk his health by voting in person, but also because he doesn't trust mail-in ballots. "The last time I tried to vote by mail, it didn't get counted — it was too late," he said. As a result, Sanchez told us, "I don't know where my ballot is going to end up, if I don't see it put into the voting machine."

On the whole, though, those who don't vote as frequently didn't view methods of voting — like in-person voting or mail-in ballots — all that differently than people who always vote. Nonvoters, on the other hand, trusted these methods less across the board.

There are, of course, other systemic reasons why some people might vote more inconsistently. Our survey found, for instance, that occasional voters were slightly more likely than frequent voters to have a long-term disability (8 percent vs. 5 percent), and nonvoters were even more likely to fall into this category (12 percent). Black and Hispanic voters are also more likely to experience hurdles, perhaps in part because there tend to be fewer polling places in their neighborhoods. About 24 percent of Black respondents said that they had to stand in line for more than an hour while voting, and Hispanic respondents were more likely to say they had trouble accessing the polling place or couldn't get off work in time to vote.

Every year, people make it sound like it's doomsday all over. But I do think this election will determine the direction of the country.

Some people, like Donna Thompson, 59, told us that a long line or complicated voting system is something that's just baked into the process for them. "I'm going to have to take time off work to go get in line, because my job doesn't give me time off to vote," she said, adding that she's had to wait five or six hours in past elections. "It's very frustrating." But she added that while she's not as consistent about voting in state and local elections, she tries to always vote in national elections despite the hassle. As a Black woman, "it's very important that my vote counts because my people died trying to get the right to vote," she said. "I think I owe it, if nothing else, to them because it wasn't something that was guaranteed for us."

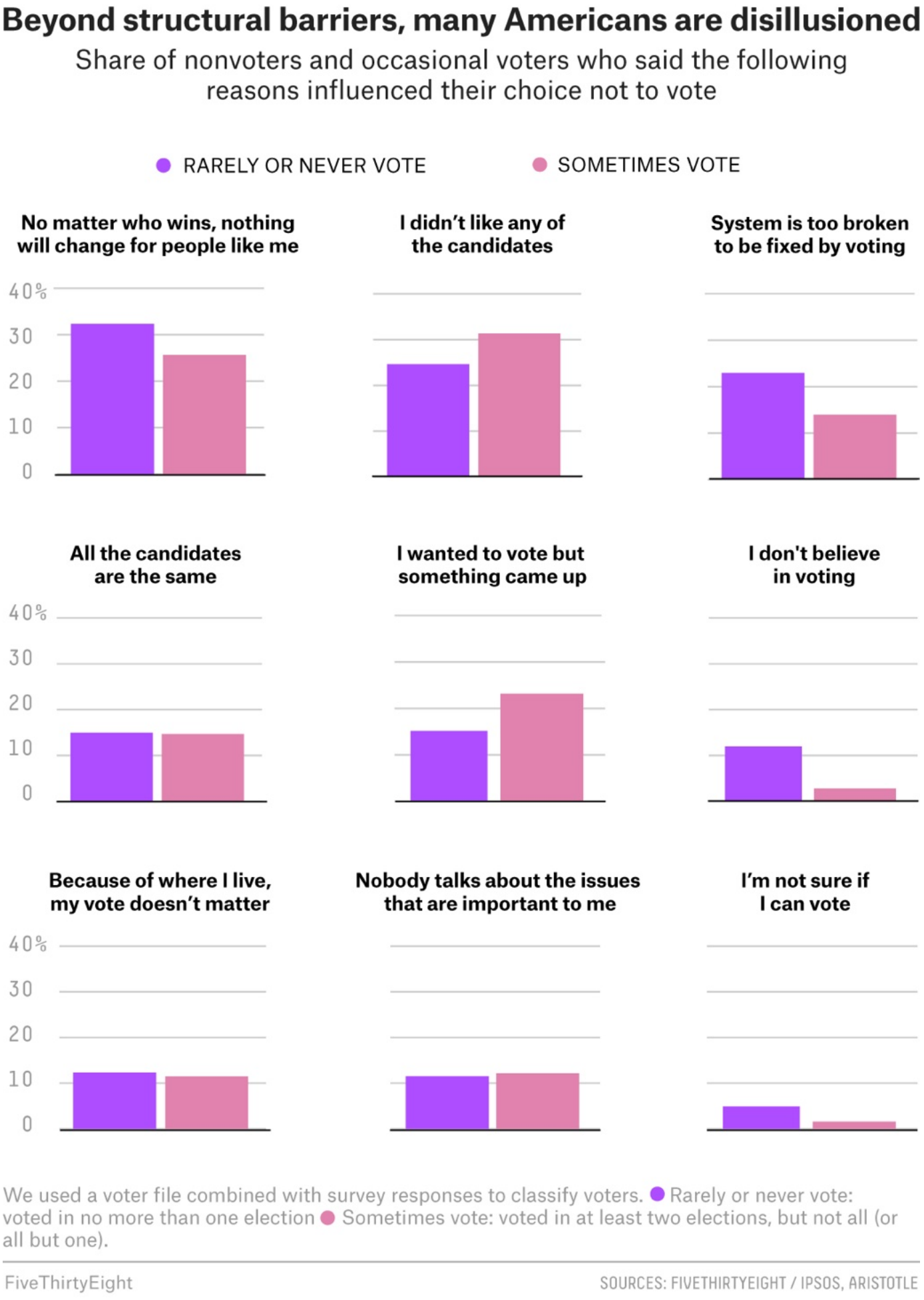
Thompson thinks a lot of the problems on Election Day come down to logistical issues that could be fixed. Others agreed that there's more the U.S. could be doing to encourage people to vote. Fifty-one percent of respondents thought that making Election Day a national holiday would allow more people to cast a ballot. Similar shares agreed that more information about the candidates from unbiased sources (51 percent) or early in-person voting (52 percent) would help, too.

But there wasn't a lot of consensus around a single fix — and notably, those who voted less frequently were less likely than people who always vote to agree that any one solution would boost turnout. And that might be because concrete barriers are only one piece of the puzzle.

TRUST IN THE SYSTEM

Kelly Bryan isn't voting this year — not because the process is too difficult, or she's uninformed about politics. "I genuinely feel like my vote doesn't matter," she said. For most of her life, the 33-year-old has lived in two states, Illinois and Oregon, which both overwhelmingly vote for Democrats in presidential elections. "If I lived in Pennsylvania or Michigan, I'd be first in line to vote," she said.

In the survey, we asked voters who have missed at least one national election — which included some people who almost always vote — why they didn't cast a ballot. Nearly a quarter cited some of the structural barriers we mentioned above. But another 31 percent said that they decided not to vote because they disliked the candidates or they thought nothing would change as a result of the election (26 percent).

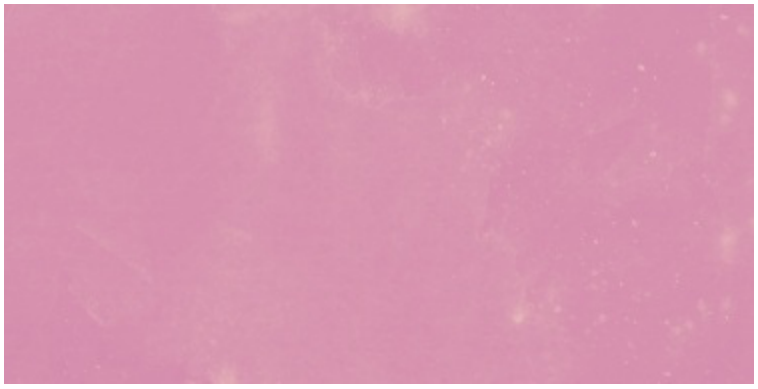


That sense that the candidates are too flawed to be worth voting for — or that

the system is rigged, or can't be fixed by voting — came up in many of our conversations with survey respondents. For most of his life, Eduardo Martinez thought that politics just didn't impact his life. "I'm ashamed to say it, but like a lot of people, I said, 'My vote doesn't count.' … Generally what the politicians do doesn't affect me,'" he said.

That changed in 2018, when Beto O'Rourke ran for Senate in Texas. "That's where I said 'Hey, the guy needs my help,'" Martinez said. He cast his first vote for O'Rourke in 2018, at the age of 70. This year, he's voting again — when we spoke, he had just received his absentee ballot and was planning to fill it out that evening.

But getting to a similar place might be harder for other occasional voters or nonvoters. For one thing, occasional voters (80 percent) and nonvoters (68 percent) are less likely to believe that politicians have an impact on their lives than consistent voters (84 percent). Similarly, people who vote sometimes (78 percent) or rarely (60 percent) are much less likely than voters who vote almost all of the time (85 percent) to say that there are people in politics who look like them — which could in turn make it harder to trust or identify with the candidates running for office.



Every vote should count. The way our electoral system operates now, it's just not true.

Another hurdle for Martinez were politicians and the political parties, which he described as "not for the people." Many of the other survey respondents felt similarly: A substantial chunk of respondents said they don't think either party wants people like them to vote. (Twenty-three percent said this of Democrats and 31 percent of Republicans.) Black and Hispanic people were especially likely to say the Republicans don't want people like them to vote: Fifty-four percent of Black respondents and 35 percent of Hispanic respondents agreed with this statement, compared to just 26 percent of

white respondents.

That perception may be turning off some voters who might otherwise be more likely to cast a ballot. Martinez, who identifies as Mexican American, said he thinks Republicans benefit from lower turnout from people like him. “The only reason the Republicans win is because of people like me,” he said. “Latinos, brown people and Black people don’t vote. That’s why Democrats lose.” JeMare Williams even said that he was a “Republican by nature” in terms of his policy views — but as a Black man, he couldn’t vote for Republican candidates. “They shunned the African American vote because of everything they do to suppress it,” he said. “When you do so much to suppress the vote, you can’t tell me you’re welcoming me into your party.”

Andrea Johnson, meanwhile, has voted in the past but thinks that not voting this year is the best way to send a message to the parties. Like other voters in relatively noncompetitive states, she was skeptical that her vote can make a difference in Virginia, where she’s currently a graduate student. And although she admitted that she’s ideologically closer to Biden than to Trump, she supported more progressive candidates in the Democratic primary and resents the assumption that she’ll simply fall in line behind the Democrats’ chosen candidate. “If Trump were to get reelected, it would send a bigger message to the Democratic Party that ‘Hey, we're tired of you giving us candidates that we don't necessarily agree with,’” she said.

BELIEFS ABOUT POLITICS

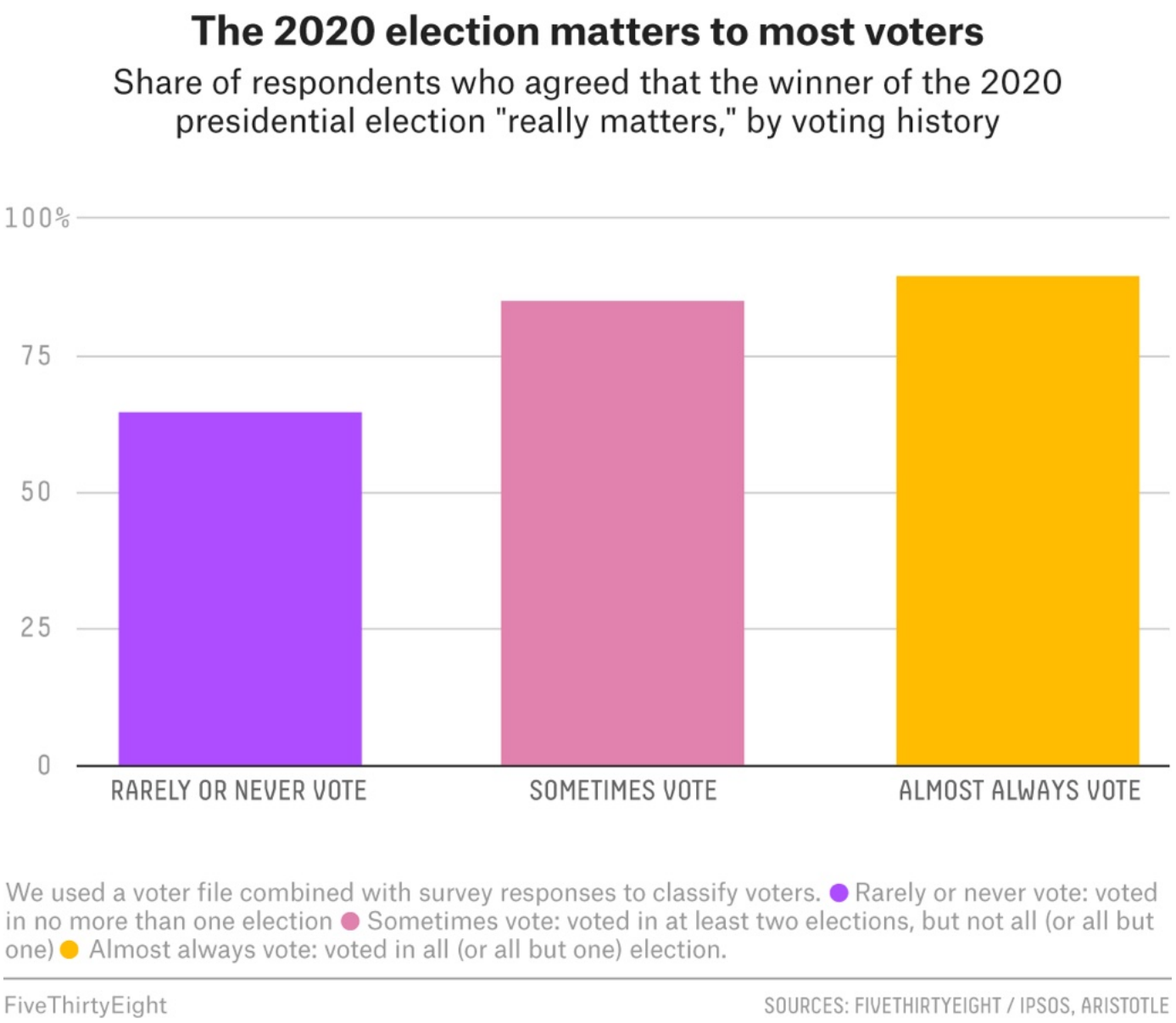
This year, though, there are signs that we could be heading for record-breaking voter turnout. And if that happens, it could be due in large part to the fact that a lot of people who vote only sometimes cast a ballot this year. According to our survey, 82 percent of these voters are following the 2020 election somewhat or very closely, and 93 percent are planning to vote in 2020 — very close to the share of those who say they always vote (97 percent). A much smaller but still non-negligible share of nonvoters (51 percent) also say they're planning to vote this year. (Of course, many people who say they will vote don't end up casting a ballot.)

For voters like Amanda Robey, 38, this election feels like a chance to hit the reset button. Robey said that although she generally tries to turn out for national elections, she didn't vote in 2016. "I knew enough about Trump at that point to know that I didn't want to vote for him," she said. But she added that she had misgivings about Clinton that she now chalks up to "Russian bots and misinformation," so she sat the election out. She regretted that decision almost immediately.

"I honestly did not think there was any way Trump was going to win," she said. "It felt like a nightmare when I woke up in the middle of the night to check the vote and found out he had won the election."

But this year, Robey told us, the stakes of the election are high enough that she's considering voting in person if that's what it takes, even though she is at moderate risk for COVID-19. Overall, most voters agree that, as far as

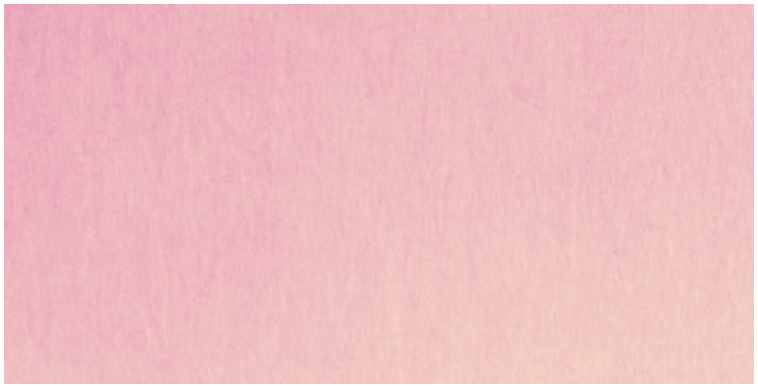
making progress on the important issues facing the country is concerned, the winner of this year's election really matters. However, those who rarely vote were the likeliest to say the election doesn't matter.



That's true of voters of all political leanings, not just people like Robey who dislike Trump. Trump supporters like Jared Gaffney, 42, agreed that this year's choice feels more weighty than any election in recent memory. "There's definitely more importance to this election, which is kind of odd to say because I thought the last election had quite a bit of importance to it too," Gaffney said. "But these two candidates are like polar opposites of each other."

In interviews and the survey, we found, time and again, an increased sense of urgency to vote among less-frequent voters. And in some instances, that's prompting them to get more engaged with all aspects of the political system, not just the presidential race. The statewide restrictions put in place during

the COVID-19 pandemic, for one, convinced Lila Haddad, 31, to start paying more attention to down-ballot races. “I’m a mom with three kids and sometimes I don’t have the time to do the research that I need to in those races, so I just don’t vote,” she said. Now, though, she said she’s going to make those contests more of a priority. “Before this year, it felt like the presidential elections were the really important ones, but now it’s become really plain to me that who we have for city council, governor — that also makes a huge difference in people’s lives.”



There’s really nothing about [Biden] that makes me want to vote for him. It’s just the idea of not voting for Trump.

But those feelings might not persist. It’s one reason why voter turnout tends to ebb and flow. Take someone like Thomas Jones, 56, who didn’t vote in 2016 but plans to cast his ballot for Biden this year. Jones’s daughter was sick with COVID-19 earlier this year (she’s since recovered); however, he is still unhappy with Trump’s response to the pandemic. “The lies that they've told, his insistence that it's going to disappear, his idea that he can use bleach to kind of get rid of it and then say, ‘Oh, I was just joking,’” Jones said. “There are too many people dying to joke about something like that.” But despite his support for Biden, Jones didn’t have much enthusiasm for the Democratic Party. “There’s no voice of reason on either side,” he said.

That deeply rooted disgust with the state of the country’s politics was also evident in our survey and interviews. This year, many Americans on both sides of the political divide feel a need to participate that overrides their distaste for the candidates and the system, but it may not last. Each individual voter will face a new calculus two or four years from now, when the political context could be quite different. Eduardo Martinez, for instance, said that if Trump loses the popular vote but wins the Electoral College, he

might not bother voting in the future. “That would really be very upsetting,” he said. “I probably wouldn’t vote again.”

High voter turnout this year shouldn’t be taken as a sign that Americans are newly confident in their electoral system — instead, the driving emotion seems to be desperation. Richard Brown, for his part, thinks he probably won’t vote again for a while after 2020. “I just really feel like if voting really made a difference, [the government] wouldn’t let us vote,” he said. But things feel bad enough right now that he doesn’t care — and he wants to have his say anyway.

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Data presented here comes from polling done by Ipsos for FiveThirtyEight, using Ipsos’s KnowledgePanel, a probability-based online panel that is recruited to be representative of the U.S. population. The poll was conducted from Sept. 15 to Sept. 25 among a sample of U.S. citizens that oversampled young, Black and Hispanic respondents, with 8,327 respondents, and was weighted according to general population benchmarks for U.S. citizens from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey March 2019 Supplement. The voter file

company Aristotle then matched respondents to a voter file to more accurately understand their voting history using the panelist's first name, last name, zip code, and eight characters of their address, using the National Change of Address program if applicable. Sixty-four percent of the sample (5,355 respondents) matched, although we also included respondents who did not match the voter file but described themselves as voting "rarely" or "never" in our survey, so as to avoid underrepresenting nonvoters, who are less likely to be included in the voter file to begin with. We dropped respondents who were only eligible to vote in three elections or fewer. We defined those who almost always vote as those who voted in all (or all but one) of the national elections (presidential and midterm) they were eligible to vote in since 2000; those who vote sometimes as those who voted in at least two elections, but fewer than all the elections they were eligible to vote in (or all but one); and those who rarely or never vote as those who voted in no elections, or just one.

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