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# Exploring nonvoting and electoral integrity in the 2016 presidential election

Nicholas Clark and Rolfe Peterson

Political Science, Susquehanna University, Selinsgrove, PA, USA

**ABSTRACT**

While voter turnout has been a subject of research for decades, comparatively little attention has been paid to nonvoters. Just as voters can be mobilized by demographic and contextual factors, we theorize that these factors can serve to demobilize people as well. Our study identifies four potential types of nonvoters and theorizes how they differ in their demographics and their motivations for not voting. Using data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) and the Electoral Integrity Project (EIP), we examine nonvoters in the 2016 general election in the United States. We find that apathetic, obstructed, incapable, and conditional nonvoters are each unique. Low electoral integrity can demobilize obstructed nonvoters, while apathetic, incapable, and conditional nonvoters are driven more by political and demographic factors.

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## Introduction

The integrity of electoral processes has come under sharp examination in the United States since the presidential election of 2000. This scrutiny has led to a host of changes in election administration, from the expansion of alternative voting sites in some jurisdictions, to the introduction of voter identification laws in others, to an overhaul of voting machines nationwide. In the same period, states have redrawn their congressional district boundaries, resulting in an increase in gerrymandering. Subsequently, courts at all levels have interjected in the process to interpret election laws, upholding some changes to electoral law and overturning others. These changes have, in turn, sparked a host of research into the effects that election processes have on voter turnout and on election integrity. This paper examines the possibility that low-integrity electoral environments may effectively obstruct some would-be voters from ever casting a ballot, by focusing on self-reported reasons for not voting from nonvoters in the 2016 US election.

**CONTACT** Rolfe Peterson peterson@susqu.edu Political Science, Susquehanna University, 514 University Avenue, Selinsgrove, PA, USA

In this effort, we offer two primary contributions to the existing literature. First, we examine a wider array of contextual factors that may influence voter turnout (or, in the case of our study, non-turnout). Much of the research on this subject focuses on the consequences of voter identification laws and gerrymandered districts. However, there are several other factors that might influence the ease of voting and/or the integrity of the process. For instance, the voter registry may include inaccuracies that prevent individuals from casting a ballot. The polling places may be poorly staffed and resulting long lines may prevent some individuals from being able to vote. Only some states may make ballots available online or establish voting facilities that are accessible to people with disabilities. In some locations, there may still be intimidation of minorities at the polls. While commonplace in the comparative voting literature, the study of such contextual factors is relatively less common in the US literature. This paper relies on state-wide scores developed by the Electoral Integrity Project (EIP) to examine the influence of voting context on the public's behavior in elections.

Second, we develop a conceptual framework for classifying and understanding the different reasons that individuals abstain from an election. Previous studies commonly focus on individual demographic factors and their influence on turnout and vote choice. This research, for instance, suggests that increasing education and income correspond with a greater likelihood of voting and that partisanship strongly predicts the choice of candidate. Far less attention has been paid to why individuals choose not to vote; the assumption being that the inverse of prior findings (less education and income) would explain why some stay at home on election day. However, there may be a greater nuance to abstaining behavior. Some individuals may not vote due to apathy or ignorance, but for others, there may be reasons that their ballot was not cast, such as obstruction at the polls or a personal inability to vote on election day. In many studies, the low incidence of respondents reporting abstention prevents a full analysis of the nonvoting rationale. However, recent studies, such as the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), with large respondent samples provide us with the opportunity to parse to the reasons for nonvoting.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we review the existing research on voter turnout and the influence that political and economic context has on voting behavior. Next, using data from the CCES, the EIP, and other sources, we investigate the individual-level and state-level correlates of reported reasons for abstaining from the most recent US election. Finally, we draw conclusions about both the integrity of electoral processes in the United States, as well as the possibilities for increasing voter turnout in the future by putting more emphasis on addressing the reasons why people do not vote.

## Theory and expectations

### *Trends in nonvoting*

The percentage of nonvoters gradually increased between 1960 and 2000 (Teixeira 1992; Patterson 2002) and then slightly declined in the 2004 and 2008 Presidential elections. The mean percentage of nonvoters in Presidential elections between 1920 and 2012 was 42%. The mean percentage of nonvoters in mid-term House elections between 1922 and 2010 was 58% (Ragsdale and Rusk 2017). Given that turnout, estimates are often based on self-reported voting[1] and that survey respondents collectively over-report voting behavior (Bernstein, Chadha, and Montjoy 2001), the frequency of nonvoting may in fact be much higher.

At this point, the predictors of turnout are so well-established that little discussion is required. The likelihood of voting increases along with age, education, and income, but decreases among non-white persons (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Abramson et al. 2015; Blais and Rubenson 2013; Leighley and Nagler 2014). Scholars have also observed a growing turnout gap between men and women and between married and unmarried persons (Leighley and Nagler 2014). An individual's sense of political efficacy and civic duty (Dalton 2013; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008; Blais and St-Vincent 2011), as well as trust in the electoral and political processes (Birch 2010; Pharr, Putnam, and Dalton 2011), affects whether an individual will vote.

Moreover, recent work on turnout in American elections focuses on whether politically-motivated voting laws effectively disenfranchise certain groups of potential voters. Several states have now passed voter identification (ID) laws, requiring or requesting that prospective voters present ID before casting a ballot. The strictness of such laws varies across states, according to whether a state-issued ID is required, whether the ID must have a photo, and whether persons without an acceptable ID can still cast a provisional ballot (Alvarez, Bailey, and Katz 2011; Highton 2017). The extent to which such laws influence voting remains unclear. Some contributions suggest that strict voter ID laws indeed depress turnout (Alvarez, Bailey, and Katz 2008; Vercellotti and Anderson 2009), while others find unsubstantial effects from such laws once the standard individual-level predictors of turnout are taken into account (Ansolabehere 2009; Mycoff, Wagner, and Wilson 2009). Similarly, while earlier research (conducted prior to the advent of many of the ID laws) finds no unique effect on minorities (Hood and Bullock 2012; Mycoff, Wagner, and Wilson 2009), more recent work demonstrates that turnout declines disproportionately amongst racial and ethnic minorities in states with stricter ID laws (Hajnal, Lajevardi, and Nielson 2017). While

[1]Ragsdale and Rusk (2017) are an exception with turnout estimates based on the total ballots cast (as a percentage of the voting age population).

offering a strong foundation on which to study the relationship between institutions and voter participation, this research dwells on the effects of a single, admittedly important, institution. However, there are a number of other meso- and macro-level conditions that might influence turnout.

The comparative research, for instance, identifies a number of institutional, political, and economic variables that influence levels of voter participation. As one might expect, compulsory voting laws generate higher turnout rates (Lijphart 1997). Proportional-based institutional arrangements generate more competitive party systems, prompting political parties to mobilize greater turnout. Such systems also lead to more representative outcomes, which instills within individuals a sense that their vote is important (Powell 1986; Jackman 1987). Similarly, Ragsdale and Rusk (2017), in an American-based study, demonstrate that greater uncertainty around the election outcome diminishes the percentage of nonvoters. Higher levels of economic development and lower levels of income inequality are also correlated with the greater turnout (Blais and Dobrzynska 1998; Anderson and Beramendi 2012).

This paper offers two contributions to the existing literature. First, we expand on the prior research that examines the role of the political and institutional context in explaining turnout in the United States. While the same fundamental electoral institutions exist throughout the US, some variation exists in the integrity of the electoral process across the individual states (Norris, Nai, and Grömping 2017). In addition to the recent focus on ID laws in the turnout literature, earlier contributions examine the effects of other election-related practices, such as gerrymandering (Rush 1992) and the use of intimidation tactics at polling places (Lehoucq 2003). However, so far as we are aware, there has not been any analyses that seek to analyze the cumulative effect of different laws and practices that may collectively hinder the ability of some individuals to vote. Second, most existing analyses overlook potential nuances in the motivations of individuals who abstain from an election. By isolating and focusing on non-voters, we hope to develop a better understanding of the forces working against a more participatory American electorate.

## *Conceptualizing nonvoter types*

The conventional wisdom suggests that the demographic profile of nonvoters (young, poor, and uneducated) coincides with a lack of interest in the political process (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). However, nonvoters are not simply the opposite of voters; some are, in fact, well-informed and interested in the process (Doppelt and Shearer 1999; Ragsdale and Rusk 2017). Ragsdale and Rusk (2017) distinguish four reasons for nonvoting: political ignorance, indifference, dissatisfaction, and personal hardship. While useful toward moving beyond categorizing all nonvoters as the same, this typology still overlooks much of

the nuance in nonvoting behavior and, in particular, disregards the potential role of obstructionist forces in the election process.

The typology advanced here identifies four categories of nonvoters. First, the *apathetic nonvoter* indeed lacks any real interest in the political process, believing that electoral outcomes do not affect their own life. This person typifies the assumptions often made about those individuals who do not participate in elections. In contrast, the *obstructed nonvoter* holds a high level of interest in the political process and actively seeks to participate in elections. However, issues related to the integrity, reliability, and/or accessibility of the electoral process (such as overly long lines or intimidation at the polls) effectively prevents them from casting a ballot. In between these two types, the *incapable nonvoter* may be interested in the political process but is unable to vote due to personal reasons, such as not having transportation or having an illness on election day. Finally, the *conditional nonvoter* expresses an interest in the political process and has voted in past elections, but actively chooses not to participate in the most recent election due to dissatisfaction with or ignorance about the candidates. Of note, three of these four types of nonvoters possess an interest in and knowledge about the political process. Their reasons for nonvoting lie with factors largely beyond their control.

A crucial distinction in this typology is between the apathetic and the obstructed nonvoter and the relationship of each type with conventional explanations of turnout. Many contributions link voting with socio-economic and demographic indicators such as age, political interest, and (most importantly) education (Mann and Wolfinger 1980; Highton 2017). The delineation between obstructed and apathetic nonvoters allows separate analyses of politically-interested and educated nonvoters who are deterred from voting by institutional obstacles and nonvoters who would not participate in elections even if you lowered institutional barriers.

## *Electoral integrity and motivating the vote*

Just as previous research has found that socio-economic status may shape the ability and motivation to vote, we posit that the political and institutional context may both hinder and facilitate turnout. The comparative voting research finds that contextual conditions, such as the competitiveness of parties and the representativeness of electoral outcomes, may increase turnout by generating both interest in the election and a sense of efficacy in voting (see Jackman 1987). In recent US elections, several context-specific conditions that vary across the states have been found to influence the ease with which Americans vote (Norris, Nai, and Grömping 2017). The Electoral Integrity Project (EIP) classifies such conditions into eleven categories of election integrity (found in Appendix A).

Some of these institutional barriers, such as registered voters being removed from the voter rolls or intimidation at the polling place, may directly influence turnout by effectively preventing eligible would-be voters from casting a ballot. Other factors, such as long lines due to a lack of available polling places, may prompt some would-be voters to return home due to an inability to cast a ballot within the available amount of time. Under our typology, these individuals would qualify as obstructed nonvoters and differ from other types of nonvoters in one key respect. Obstructed nonvoters should be more likely to live in states with lower electoral integrity; individuals living in states more likely to maintain a fair and transparent electoral process should be less likely to encounter institutional obstructions.

H1: Electoral integrity has a negative relationship with the likelihood of obstructed abstaining

Any institutional barriers are unlikely to affect the other types of nonvoters. The incapable nonvoter does not make it to the polling place due to personal reasons. For different reasons, conditional and apathetic nonvoters simply avoid the polling place altogether.

Another contextual variable, the competitiveness of elections, may influence the likelihood of conditional nonvoting. The comparative literature suggests that electoral environments that produce a greater number of viable, ideologically-distinct candidates are more likely to generate interest amongst would-be voters who prefer having a genuine choice in elections (Jackman 1987). In the United States, closer political races with more uncertain outcomes similarly motivate greater political interest (Ragsdale and Rusk 2017). In presidential races, such competitiveness may emerge as a closer margin of error between the two candidates in a given state particularly if the race is close at a national level.

The conditional nonvoter remains broadly interested in politics but does not view a particular election as offering a genuine and/or worthwhile choice of candidates. Increasing competitiveness may decrease the likelihood of such nonvoting, as competitive elections may prompt candidates to increasingly distinguish themselves from the opposition (thus offering more of a choice between genuinely-different candidates) and/or mitigate the sense of malaise around an election by interjecting greater energy and a sense of urgency into the act of voting. Additionally, more competitive elections may reduce the likelihood of obstructed abstaining. Such individuals may be more willing to push through institutional obstacles in order to cast a ballot when and where the outcome is perceived as more consequential.

H2: Electoral competitiveness has a negative relationship with the likelihood of conditional and obstructed voting

The other two types are less likely to be influenced by any contextual variables. The incapable nonvoter does not show up for idiosyncratic reasons that are unrelated to the broader political and institutional environment and the apathetic nonvoter is simply disinvested in the political process.

The different types of nonvoter are also likely to exhibit varying levels of political interest. The obstructed nonvoters should possess higher levels of interest in the political process. Such individuals are, in fact, interested in politics and did attempt to vote. In the data analysis, political interest should then have a counter-intuitive effect on this type of nonvoting. Higher levels of interest should correspond with an increased likelihood of abstaining; these individuals held the necessary interest to attempt casting a ballot and only became nonvoters when prevented from doing so at the polling place.

H3: Political interest has a positive relationship with the likelihood of obstructed abstaining

In contrast, the apathetic nonvoter fits the profile constructed in the turnover literature. This individual abstains precisely because they have low interest in the process.

H4: Political interest has a negative relationship with the likelihood of apathetic abstaining

The conditional nonvoter holds a broad interest in the political system but has disengaged from a particular election. The incapable nonvoter presumably also holds political interest but has abstained in this election due to personal reasons. As such, the conditional and incapable nonvoters should exhibit higher levels of political interest, but their decision to abstain is less likely to be affected by that political interest.

## Data and methods

### *Data sources and sample*

This paper relies on several data sources to investigate the relationships between abstaining behaviors and the broader political and institutional context in US elections. Survey data is drawn from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES).[2] YouGov/Polimetrix recruits between 30,000 and 60,000 respondents in each US federal election and administers to them a two-wave survey. It is a nationally representative sample. The first wave occurs before the election and includes questions about political attitudes, political information, and candidate opinions. The second wave is fielded after the election and focuses on voting behavior. This paper relies on CCES

[2]For further details about the sampling methodology, weighting, and sample sizes of the CCES and the questions included in each survey wave, see Ansolabehere and Schaffner (2017).

data collected around the 2016 election, as the contextual data we incorporate in our models is only available for that year.

The primary source of contextual data on election integrity and election practices is from the Electoral Integrity Project (EIP), a joint research effort between the University of Sydney and Harvard University (Norris, Nai, and Grömping 2017). The EIP seeks to document when elections meet international standards of electoral integrity. The 2016 US presidential election was the first in which the EIP produced electoral integrity scores for each of the 50 US states and the District of Columbia, in addition to the election integrity scores it has generated for other countries since 2012. The EIP assigns these scores based upon survey responses from 726 US-based political scientists who are experts on elections in their state.[3] These experts were surveyed about electoral integrity in their state of residence two weeks after the polling day.

Electoral integrity is measured with 49 indicators, clustered across eleven stages of the electoral cycle. EIP then aggregates these indicators to produce an overall integrity score for each state; scores fall along a 100-point scale with higher scores indicating greater integrity. The scores for the 2016 election range from 53.01 (Arizona) to 75.23 (Vermont) with a mean score of 61.73 and a standard deviation of 5.17.

The Electoral Integrity Project is not the only index measure of electoral performance in current elections research. For example, MIT's Electoral Performance Index (EPI) and the Cost of Voting Index (COVI) created by Li, Pomante, and Schraufnagel (2018) are state-level measures that seek to measure the variation in laws and electoral practices in the US states. While both are interesting and viable measures, we use the Integrity index because it encompasses more dimensions of the electoral system (some of which are not enshrined in law like voter intimidation) that might lead to obstructing possible voters. Further, we make use of the EIP data because it allows us to incorporate perceptions of electoral integrity. Perceptions are vitally important in shaping behavior. Expert assessments are commonly used to address a variety of research topics in political science (for a small sampling, see Warwick 2005; Bowler, Farrell, and Pettitt 2005; Lilleker, Stetka, and Tenscher 2015).

### *Nonvoting dependent variables*

Normally, the survey data does not permit scholars to disentangle these different motivations and thus to distinguish between different types of

[3]EIP defines this by the following criteria: membership in a relevant research group, professional network, or organized section of such a group; existing publications on electoral or other country-specific topics in books, academic journals, or conference papers; and employment at a university or college as a teacher. EIP contacted at least twenty such experts in each state.

nonvoters. The CCES, however, includes a close-ended question that allows us to distinguish between different types of abstaining behaviors: "(w)hat was the main reason you did not vote?". Appendix A lists the full range of responses available to respondents, as well as the coding scheme for the four types of nonvoters. Our nonvoters are coded into binary variables for each type. For example, the *obstructed nonvoters* measure includes nonvoters who responded that they did not vote with any of the following responses: "I did not have the correct form of identification", "The line at the polls was too long", "I was not allowed to vote at the polls, even though I tried", and "I requested but did not receive an absentee ballot". Of course, any coding scheme involves a certain degree of subjectivity. For our part, we sought to distinguish obstructed non-voting from the other types based on the respondent indicating that they had taken action to vote and were actively prevented from doing so at the polls. We adopt a conservative approach to the coding of obstructed voters as some non-registered voters may have attempted to cast a ballot and been turned away at the polls. We do not code those individuals as obstructed as there is no way to verify if they attempted to vote.

Given the multi-level nature of our data and the dichotomous coding of our dependent variables, we use mixed-effects logistic regression models (using the xtmelogit command in Stata) with both individual-level and contextual predictors of abstention. The random effects are based on the respondent's state of residence.

## *Independent variables*

### *Demographics*

We include a number of individual demographics variables in our model that are well-known predictors of turnout: age, level of education, family income, race, marital status, an index of any major life changes the respondent has experienced in the prior four years and the length of their residence in their current city. Though the expectations on turnout are straightforward (i.e. higher education equals increased likelihood of voting), the expectation on the type of abstention is less clear. We expect that apathetic nonvoters are most likely to confirm the standard predictors of turnout; these individuals should be more likely to be lower in age, education, and family income. Appendix A documents the full coding for all variables.

### *Political identification and interest*

Beyond these demographic variables, we also control for political attitudes that influence the decision to abstain. Political interest is a classic and substantial predictor of the decision to participate. In the CCES, an individual's level of political interest is measured with the question:

> Some people seem to follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. Would you say you follow what's going on in government and public affairs hardly at all (1), only now and then (2), some of the time (3), or most of the time (4).[4]

Because of the centrality of partisanship (PID) to political behavior, we control for partisan attitudes. Because straight PID might not be as influential in turnout as it is in vote choice, we include strength of partisanship variable that captures the intensity of partisan attitudes rather than direction. Strength of partisanship and political interest generally increase the likelihood of turning out to vote. In our models, individuals who are stronger partisans or more politically interested should be less likely to be apathetic nonvoters, but may still be more likely to be obstructed abstainers (H2).

### *Institutional and contextual*

The following analyses include two measures of electoral context. First, we include the EIP's integrity score for each state. Second, we include a measure of electoral competitiveness that identifies the battleground status of each state in the 2016 election. Defining whether a state is a battleground state is deceptively difficult. Many measures of electoral competitiveness are post-hoc (i.e. vote margin in the state) and do not reflect the sentiment that voters should be more energized. Moreover, states like Ohio which had high media exposure and candidate visits can end up with a fairly large margin of victory in 2016. For our measure, we create a dichotomous variable based on whether the presidential candidates visited the state for rallies in the final week of the election. While imperfect, the measure captures whether the candidates focused on the states as key battlegrounds regardless of the post-election vote margin.

## Results

There were 7365 CCES respondents in 2016 who reported not to have voted and responded to the questions asking them why they did not vote. Table 1 displays the reasons why these respondents did not participate. By far the most common reason reported for abstaining was being incapable in some way (40%). This category covers nonvoters who were not registered, were out of town, were sick or disabled on election day, experienced bad weather, did not know where to vote, or did not feel they knew enough about the choices in the election. The second most common reason was conditional which is associated with not liking the candidates in the election

[4]In our analysis, the coding of political interest has been reversed from the order in which the options are presented in the CCES question.

**Table 1.** Reasons for Not Voting in 2016 CCES.

| Nonvoting Category | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Apathetic | 15.59 |
| Obstructed | 5.80 |
| Incapable | 40.04 |
| Conditional | 26.48 |
| Other | 12.2 |
| *N* | 7365 |

Note: Over 7365 respondents reported a reason for not voting in 2016. "Other" responses made up 12% of reasons and could not be sorted into nonvoting types.

(26%). Apathy, which included forgetting to vote, not being interested, or being too busy, was the third most common reason (15%). While voter obstruction tends to receive a lot of attention in research and in popular media, only five percent of CCES respondents said that they did not vote because they did not have the correct identification, the lines at the polling place were too long, they were not allowed to vote, or they did not receive an absentee ballot. While a relatively small percentage of this sample, 5% of nonvoters would represent a sizeable number of Americans.

Next, we turn to examining the results of the mixed-effect logistic regression models described earlier in the paper. These models help us determine what factors drive respondents to identify as an apathetic, obstructed, incapable, or conditional nonvoter. Because the analysis only contains self-reported nonvoters, all comparisons are between the types of nonvoters (i.e. obstructed nonvoter estimates are in comparison to all other nonvoters). Table 2 presents the models for our four nonvoter types. Model 1 presents the results for obstructed nonvoters.

As expected, the institutional and contextual variables are significant in this model. The Integrity index is significant and has a negative coefficient, indicating that respondents who live in states with higher election integrity scores are less likely to identify as obstructed. Figure 1 displays the marginal effect of the Integrity index on the likelihood of obstructed nonvoting. The predicted mean of obstructed abstention decreases as the integrity score of the state increases with wider variation in the estimates at high and low integrity scores.

This result supports the first hypothesis and confirms the validity of the Integrity index – those states ranked lower by political experts are the same ones in which we are more likely to find obstructed nonvoters. While many observers are unlikely to be surprised by this finding, we are unaware of any prior research that confirms this intuitive expectation. Perhaps more importantly, the Integrity index does not register an effect on the other categories of nonvoters, suggesting that it is indeed problematic to group together different types of abstaining behavior.

**Table 2.** Mixed Effects Logistic Regression Models for Nonvoter Types.

| Dependent Variable | Model 1 Obstructed | Model 2 Apathetic | Model 3 Incapable | Model 4 Conditional |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Electoral Integrity | −0.025** | 0.0035 | 0.0012 | −0.0005 |
| | (0.012) | (0.008) | (0.0064) | (0.006) |
| Age | −0.018*** | −0.018*** | 0.0069*** | 0.0004 |
| | (0.004) | (0.0029) | (0.002) | (0.002) |
| Education | 0.0095 | −0.059* | −0.04* | 0.016 |
| | (0.044) | (0.031) | (0.022) | (0.024) |
| Race (White) | 0.085 | 0.017 | −0.009 | 0.049 |
| | (0.12) | (0.086) | (0.063) | (0.068) |
| Family Income | −0.008 | −0.021 | −0.063*** | 0.0495*** |
| | (0.035) | (0.025) | (0.018) | (0.019) |
| Partisanship (strength) | 0.303*** | −0.109*** | 0.12*** | −0.12*** |
| | (0.051) | (0.034) | (0.024) | (0.027) |
| Political Interest | 0.28*** | −0.33*** | −0.0035 | −0.0017 |
| | (0.060) | (0.039) | (0.028) | (0.031) |
| Female | −0.12 | −0.30*** | 0.159*** | −0.044 |
| | (0.12) | (0.083) | (0.06) | (0.065) |
| Life Changes (index) | 0.079** | −0.045 | −0.0505** | 0.033 |
| | (0.04) | (0.029) | (0.022) | (0.023) |
| Residence Length | −0.022 | 0.069 | −0.094*** | 0.139*** |
| | (0.058) | (0.043) | (0.03) | (0.034) |
| Married | −0.027 | 0.11 | 0.041 | −0.14** |
| | (0.12) | (0.081) | (0.058) | (0.063) |
| Battleground State | −0.11 | −0.077 | −0.135* | 0.176*** |
| | (0.13) | (0.089) | (0.074) | (0.068) |
| Constant | −1.68* | −0.038 | −0.33 | −1.526*** |
| | (0.87) | (0.57) | (0.44) | (0.45) |
| Observations | 5734 | 5734 | 5734 | 5734 |
| Number of groups | 51 | 51 | 51 | 51 |

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Coefficients generated using mixed effects logistic regression with random effects by state.
Dependent Variables = types of nonvoters.
***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.1$.

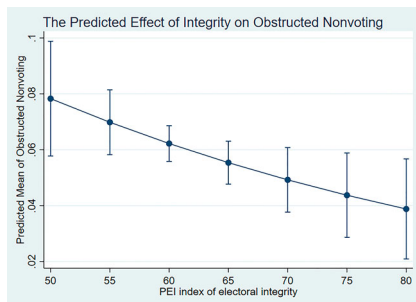


**Figure 1.** The Marginal Effect of Integrity on Obstructed Abstaining.

In addition to the Integrity index, these findings offer tentative support for the second hypothesis – more politically-interested voters were more likely to self-identify as an obstructed voter. Moreover, there are several significant demographic variables. Older respondents were less likely to be obstructed,

while strong partisans and respondents who had experienced higher numbers of life changes in recent years were more likely to be obstructed. While the finding on age is to be expected, given previous literature and the fact that older voters are more experienced and familiar with voting and know how to navigate institutional hurdles, the findings on respondents' political characteristics are less intuitive.

In the apathetic nonvoter model, the primary demographic correlates among this nonvoter group are age, education, strength of partisanship, political interest, and female, and in all cases the coefficients are negative. These results are very much in line with decades' worth of literature on voter turnout, which has found that younger, less-educated, less partisan, less interested, and men are less likely to participate in elections. As expected by the first and third hypotheses, the institutional and contextual variables are insignificant in this model.

Next, Model 3 shows the results of a model for incapable nonvoters. Much like the model for apathetic nonvoters, none of the institutional contextual variables are significant. In other words, neither the Integrity index or battleground state variables are significant. Instead, demographics are much stronger predictors of this type of abstention. As expected, a person's income, education, strength of partisanship, and residency length are all negatively related to being an incapable nonvoter. Individuals with greater socio-economic resources and more stable residencies are less likely to face the barriers that fall into the incapable category. Strength of partisanship, being female, and age positively affect the likelihood of reporting as incapable. In regards to age, the positive relationship makes sense because reporting as an incapable nonvoter can be due to health and lack of transportation reasons.

Finally, model 4 shows the results for conditional nonvoters. Here again, this type of nonvoting is largely driven by demographic factors, not by institutional factors. People with higher family incomes are more likely to identify as conditional nonvoters – that is, to decline to vote because they did not like the candidates in the race – while Republicans and strong partisans were less likely to be conditional nonvoters. However, in line with our third hypothesis, residents of battleground states were more likely to self-report as a conditional nonvoter. This is an interesting finding because it implies that individuals in battleground states (where candidates were visiting in the heat of the campaign) were more likely to report nonvoting because the candidates didn't appeal to them.

One of the most interesting effects is that political interest is significantly related to the obstructed and apathetic abstention which lends support to H2. Figure 2 displays the marginal effects for political interest on each type of abstention. Specifically, political interest corresponds to a higher likelihood of being an obstructed nonvoter and a lower likelihood of

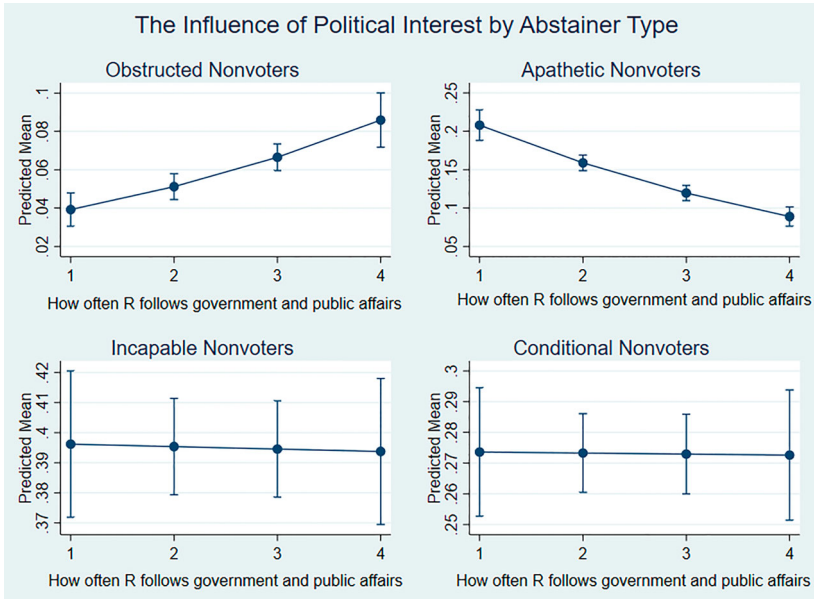


**Figure 2.** Marginal Effects of Political Interest on Type of Nonvoting.

being an apathetic nonvoter as the respondent increases in levels of interest. In other words, as interest increases, respondents were significantly more likely to report obstructed abstention and significantly less likely to report apathy.

### *Robustness checks*

To further verify the above findings, we conducted a series of robustness checks to explore whether specific institutional laws and practices might be more predictive of obstructed non-voting. The EIP Integrity Index takes into account state-level variation in election law as one component of integrity. However, it is possible that a specific institutional law (voter ID laws or access to early voting) could be directly driving the index results. To test this possibility, we conducted an analysis controlling for specific institutional barriers that might influence non-voting. Specifically, we integrated into the model measures for whether each state offers same-day registration, voter ID laws, or early voting in 2016. These institutional measures were gathered from the National Conference of State Legislatures. The states with same-day registration and early voting are coded as 1, all others as 0. The use of voter ID laws are coding from 0 (no ID requested) to 3 (strict photo ID required).

We expect incapable non-voting to be less prevalent in states with early voting and same-day registration; the greater flexibility permitted

by these laws should enable voting for individuals with more restrictive schedules. The presence of voter ID laws, in turn, should increase the prevalence of obstructed voting as some would-be voters will be turned away at the polls. After including these three measures, the models behave in a similar fashion and electoral integrity remains a significant predictor of obstructed non-voting. The specific institutional variables are largely insignificant in differentiating between non-voting reasons. The exception is same-day registration which is significant in predicting incapable abstention. These robustness check models are presented in Appendix B.[5]

## Discussion

In our analysis of nonvoting in the 2016 election, we find evidence that non-voters are not all alike; there is a diversity of reasons for abstaining from elections in American politics. Other scholars have studied non-voting (Doppelt and Shearer 1999; Ragsdale and Rusk 2017), but the typologies in those contributions do not capture obstructed nonvoting. Given the current discussion about efforts to impede voters at the polls, non-voting typologies should account for the potential of obstructed non-voting. In our view, it is likely that the dominant focus on nonvoting research will be on voter obstruction in the coming decades.

While some individuals abstain due to a lack of political interest, others are obstructed by institutional barriers. These obstructed nonvoters are interested in the political process and fairly partisan, in contrast with conventional assumptions about those who do not participate in the voting process. Indeed, the demographic background and political attitudes of obstructed non-voters suggest they would participate if given the opportunity. Notably, such individuals are more likely to push beyond institutional barriers when the race is more competitive and the stakes may thus be perceived as higher. We expect that such individuals may engage in the sort of cost–benefit analysis anticipated by Downs (1957), whereby the expected benefit from voting increases enough to justify the higher costs involved in overcoming institutional barriers. Moreover, we find evidence that electoral integrity is related to the type of abstention; obstructed nonvoters are more likely in states with low integrity, even among individuals who would otherwise be expected to vote. This paper does not directly address the potential effect of laws that hinder participation, but our results indicate that one drawback

[5]As an additional robustness check, we conducted an analysis using the CCES voter validation measure to consider the behavior of respondents who did not vote but reported voting. Though the CCES does not ask these respondents their reason for not voting (our primary dependent variable), we constructed a dichotomous dependent variable for lying nonvoters using the voter validation (1 for lying nonvoters, 0 for nonvoters of our other categories). The results from the analysis are presented in Appendix B.

is to minimize the degree to which individuals are able to participate in the electoral process.

There are limitations inherent in our study. First, the CCES uses voter validation to discern between reported and actual voters in the data. Unfortunately, we cannot leverage the voter validation data because respondents who falsely reported voting were not asked the non-voting question. In other words, there are non-voters in the CCES data not taken into account in this analysis. Secondly, the EIP was first fielded in the United States with the 2016 election, limiting this study to a single election cycle. As the EIP project progresses, future research will be able to test the effects of integrity over time and across variation in the type of election.

Taken as a whole, the findings presented here make a strong case that non-voters are not simply the opposite of voters and should not be lumped into a single category in turnout research. Just as there are diverse explanations for a person's decision to vote or to support a particular candidate, there are different motivations for why people do not vote. If the implicit assumption in research and political discourse is that more turnout is better, then our research illuminates some of the reasons why people do not vote and also suggests ways to increase turnout.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

***Nicholas Clark*** is Associate Professor of Political Science at Susquehanna University. His work on public opinion and political behavior has been published in *Political Studies; the Journal of Elections, Public Opinion, and Parties; European Union Politics*, and *the Journal of European Integration*. He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Indiana University.

***Rolfe Peterson*** is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Susquehanna University. His recent research on political behavior has been published in the *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, *Politics and the Life Sciences*, and *American Politics Research*. He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of California at Davis.

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## Appendix A: variables and coding

### *Dependent variables*

- CCES Nonvoting questions: "(w)hat was the main reason you did not vote?" and "(w)as there any other reason you did not vote?"

| Closed-Ended CCES Response | Nonvoter Categorization |
|---|---|
| 1 = I forgot | Apathetic |
| 2 = I'm not interested | Apathetic |
| 3 = Too busy | Apathetic |
| 4 = Did not like the candidates | Conditional |
| 5 = I am not registered | Incapable |
| 6 = I did not have the correct form of identification | Obstructed |
| 7 = Out of town | Incapable |
| 8 = Sick or disabled | Incapable |
| 9 = Transportation | Incapable |
| 10 = Bad weather | Incapable |
| 11 = The line at the polls was too long | Obstructed |
| 12 = I was not allowed to vote at the polls, even though I tried | Obstructed |
| 13 = I requested but did not receive an absentee ballot | Obstructed |
| 14 = I did not know where to vote | Incapable |
| 15 = I did not feel that I knew enough about the choices | Incapable |
| 16 = Other [Open] | |

### *Demographic variables*

- Age: Respondent age measured in years; calculated using respondent's birth year.
- Education: Ordinal measure of levels of educational attainment. Coded as 1 for less than high school, 2 for high school graduate, 3 for some college, 4 for 2-year degree, 5 for 4-year college degree, 6 for postgraduate degree.
- White: A dummy variable for respondents who reported as "White" to the CCES race question.
- Income: Family household income measured with ordinal categories running from 1 to 8. Coded as 1 for incomes under $20,000, 2 for incomes between $20,001 and $39,999, 3 for incomes between $40,000 and $59,999, 4 for incomes between $60,000 and $79,999, 5 for incomes between $80,000 and $99,999, 6 for incomes between $100,000 and $119,999, 7 for incomes between $120,000 and $149,999, and 8 for incomes of $150,000 or more.
- Female: A dummy variable for respondents who identified as female in the CCES gender question.
- Life Changes: Index of a battery of questions about life changes the respondent has experienced in the past four years (gotten married, lost a job, finished school, retired, divorced, had a child, taken a new job, been issued a traffic ticket, been a victim of a crime, visited an emergency room, received a raise at work). Ranges from 0 to 11.
- Marital Status: Respondent's marital status. Coded as 1 if married and 0 otherwise.
- Residence Length: Ordinal measure ranging from 1 (less than a year) to 4 (5 or more years).

### *Political variables*

- Party strength: The respondent's partisan extremity created by folding the conventional 7-point measure so that 0 corresponds to "Pure Independent" and 3 to "Strong Partisan."
- Political Interest: Ordinal measure of respondent's attention to politics.

### *Contextual level variables*

- Integrity Index: A 100-point scale, using 49 indicators grouped into 11 categories, that reflect expert opinions on the level of election integrity in their state. Each of the 49 questions asked election experts to note, on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) their agreement with a statement about elections. The 11 categories are classified as pre-election, campaign, election day, or post-election. The pre-election categories include electoral laws (1), electoral procedures (2), boundaries (3), voter registration (4), and party registration (5). The campaign categories include campaign media (6) and campaign finance (7). The election day category is the voting process (8). The post-election categories include vote count (9), post-election (10), and electoral authorities (11).
- Battleground State: Dichotomous variable for whether the state was a battleground state in the presidential election. Battleground states were coded 1 for states where the candidates campaign visited in the final week of the election. The states coded 1 were Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, New Hampshire, Florida, Minnesota,

Nevada, Iowa, Virginia, and North Carolina. Source: "Hillary Clinton's and Donald Trump's Campaigns by the Numbers" (https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/hillary-clinton-donald-trumps-campaigns-numbers/story?id=43356783).

- Early Voting: Dichotomous variable for whether the state allowed any early voting in 2016.
- Voter ID: Scale variable using the Voter ID law levels from the National Conference of State Legislatures. The measure ranges from 0 (no ID required to vote) to 3 (strict photo ID to vote).
- Same Day Registration: Dichotomous variable for whether the state has same day voter registration in the 2016 election.

## *Appendix B: robustness checks*

**Table A1.** Models using Specific Electoral Laws.

| Dependent Variable | Model 1 Obstructed | Model 2 Incapable | Model 3 Conditional | Model 4 Apathetic |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Electoral Integrity | −0.03* | 0.009 | −0.011 | −0.0057 |
| | (0.016) | (0.008) | (0.008) | (0.01) |
| Early Voting | −0.091 | −0.11 | 0.036 | −0.034 |
| | (0.16) | (0.08) | (0.089) | (0.11) |
| Voter ID Laws | 0.001 | 0.0006 | 0.001 | −0.043 |
| | (0.046) | (0.023) | (0.024) | (0.031) |
| Same Day Registration | 0.101 | −0.15* | 0.21*** | 0.065 |
| | (0.15) | (0.076) | (0.076) | (0.098) |
| Age | −0.018*** | 0.006*** | 0.0018 | −0.018*** |
| | (0.004) | (0.002) | (0.002) | (0.0029) |
| Education | 0.01 | −0.036* | 0.0096 | −0.063** |
| | (0.04) | (0.02) | (0.024) | (0.031) |
| White | 0.084 | −0.02 | 0.06 | 0.026 |
| | (0.12) | (0.062) | (0.068) | (0.087) |
| Income | −0.009 | −0.064*** | 0.051*** | −0.021 |
| | (0.036) | (0.018) | (0.019) | (0.025) |
| Partisanship (Strength) | 0.30*** | 0.12*** | −0.12*** | −0.11*** |
| | (0.051) | (0.024) | (0.027) | (0.034) |
| Political Interest | 0.28*** | −0.0031 | −0.0026 | −0.33*** |
| | (0.06) | (0.028) | (0.031) | (0.04) |
| Female | −0.12 | 0.16*** | −0.044 | −0.30*** |
| | (0.12) | (0.06) | (0.065) | (0.083) |
| Life Change (Index) | 0.081** | −0.045** | 0.024 | −0.048 |
| | (0.04) | (0.02) | (0.023) | (0.0295) |
| Married | −0.02 | 0.038 | −0.14** | 0.11 |
| | (0.12) | (0.058) | (0.063) | (0.081) |
| Battleground State | −0.13 | −0.085 | 0.126* | −0.10 |
| | (0.13) | (0.068) | (0.069) | (0.092) |
| Constant | −1.49 | −1.01** | −0.52 | 0.83 |
| | (1.05) | (0.49) | (0.53) | (0.68) |
| Observations | 5734 | 5734 | 5734 | 5734 |
| Number of groups | 51 | 51 | 51 | 51 |

Notes: Estimates generated using Mixed Effects Logistic Regression. Standard errors in parentheses. ***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0$.

**Table A2.** Model using Nonvoters who Reported Voting in 2016.

| Dependent Variable | Model<br>Lying Nonvoters |
|---|---|
| Integrity | .0197** |
| | .007 |
| Age | .003* |
| | .001 |
| Education | .218*** |
| | (.016) |
| White | .101** |
| | (.045) |
| Income | .143** |
| | (.012) |
| Partisanship (Strength) | .348*** |
| | (.018) |
| Political Interest | .659*** |
| | (.022) |
| Female | −.22*** |
| | (.042) |
| Life Change (Index) | −.0201 |
| | (.016) |
| Married | .028 |
| | (.042) |
| Battleground State | .092 |
| | (.089) |
| Constant | 0.089 |
| | (0.56) |
| Observations | 12,926 |
| Number of groups | 51 |

Notes: Estimates generated using Mixed Effects Logistic Regression. Standard errors in parentheses.
***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.1$.