

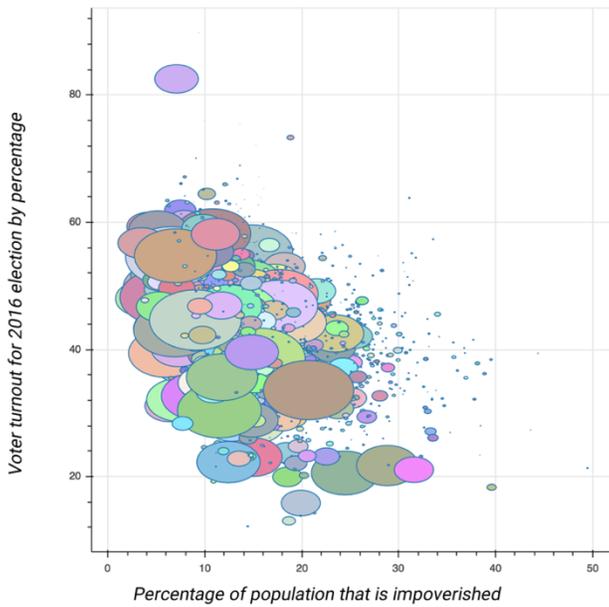


Voter Participation: How Financial Status Can Severely Impact Election Turnout



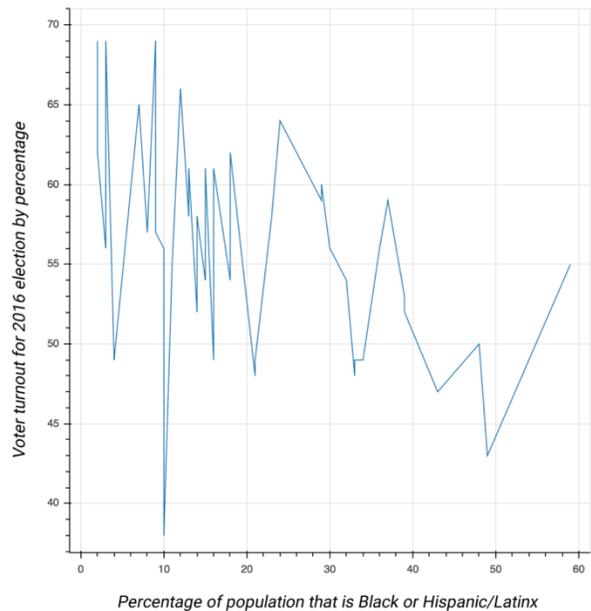
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Scatter Plot: Voter turnout (%) vs. Poverty rate (%) for every US county



Note: Ellipse size is proportional to county's overall population amount

Line Graph: Voter turnout (%) vs. Minority share (%) for every US state



According to the Pew Research Center, the 2016 presidential election in the United States was comprised of about 137.5 million votes. As a percentage of the total US population that is eligible to vote, that results in about a 61.4% share. For those who are unfamiliar with the voting system, such abysmal numbers for a developed nation are surprisingly common for US elections. The US trails countries including Belgium, Canada, Australia, and even poverty-stricken Mexico for the voting-age population (VAP) turnout, again as per Pew Research statistics.

However, it is important to note that legalizing mandatory voting would not necessarily be the best option for the States. Instead, a thorough evaluation of the US's low-income communities would be an ideal place to start in order to truly examine and discern patterns of VAP turnout as it relates to financial status and race. As someone deeply interested in computer science and programming, as well as in political science and government, I felt I ought to address the problem of such prevalent voter inequality. In order to work on this unique intersection of interests, I took advantage of the Python programming language which let me analyze and collect turnout, poverty, and population data.

While there are a multitude of resources online with data on these three characteristics, finding an updated source that would offer me credible and formatted information that matches with each county's and state's FIPS (Federal Information Processing Standard Publication) code was difficult to find. With persistence, I was able to collect poverty data from the US Department of Agriculture, The Guardian, Numeracy, the Census Bureau, and the US Elections Project. After aggregating each piece of data, I was able to develop graphs that show the percentages of people in poverty and percentages of minorities versus the 2016 turnouts in states and counties. The graphs make it easy to notice the dramatic decrease in voter turnout as poverty becomes more commonplace in each county, or as disadvantaged minorities become more prevalent in each state. These trends seem to suggest a correlation between low voter turnout and high poverty rates, and vice versa.

Still, these observations are not just correlations: they have indeed become justifications for why certain voters decide to not go through the hassle of voting. As The Atlantic reports, "Black and Hispanic citizens, for whom the poverty rate is close to three times that of whites," cite obstacles of requiring correct identification at polling places and the difficulty in finding such polling places to be among the top reasons for why they are prohibited from exercising their right to vote. "They were more than three times as likely as whites to not receive a requested absentee ballot, and roughly twice as likely to be out of town on Election Day or to have to wait in long lines" writes Daniel Weeks, the author of The Atlantic article titled "Why Are the Poor and Minorities Less Likely to Vote?"

As I thought more about voter turnout and the politics behind what could be affecting so many people's right to vote, I remembered a friend of mine who went to Milpitas High School, Kashov Sharma. Someone who is always willing to engage in a debate about every nook and cranny of the United States' government, Kashov is heavily experienced in the field of law and politics, especially for a high schooler. A radio show host and a member of Agents for Change, Kashov works for a local grassroots organization sponsored by our area's Representative, Ro Khanna. After asking Kashov if financial status makes a serious dent in voter turnout, he replied "Yes – I think it has a big effect for the extremes. If you live below the poverty line, then you

won't vote. But if you are living paycheck to paycheck, or if especially your financial status has degraded only recently, then you will still vote," providing the example of a recently laid off factory worker. I then proceeded to directly ask Kashov what he thinks is the true root cause for low average voter participation in the US. While also mentioning a lack of knowledge about politics and the frequent tainting of "politicians as greedy and politics as dirty," Kashov believes that the primary reason for low voter turnout is the culture around the voting system and how it is "outdated or old or broken."

As we examine Kashov's reasoning along with the issues that The Atlantic and the Pew Research Center provided us, we see two different sets of problems that translate to a correlation of financial status and voter turnout. The first is how those that live below the poverty line, or those that are racial minorities, often lack the resources that allow them to learn more about the voting process and what each candidate is running for. On the other hand, having the time and money to process the most basic voting documents is rare. In either case, there is a clear signal that the voting system must be fixed and modernized so that those who are interested in voting are able to do so with ease.

Currently, some interesting movements that may help the US with this issue include efforts that make voter registration easier and simpler. One such option would be to, for example, allow for online voter registration. While it is an improvement that has shown so much potential, it surprisingly has not become standardized on the federal level. To learn more about how you or someone you know can register to vote, I encourage you to visit www.vote.gov/. If you are less than 18 years old, you can also find out how to pre-register at www.usa.gov/voter-registration-age-requirements. Finally, contact your local US Representative or Senator to push for easier access to voting resources. As the more fortunate residents of the United States, it is our moral duty to ask how we can bring about voter equality to the whole nation.