

# Determinants of Voter Turnout and Vote Choice: A Multidisciplinary Review

Voter turnout and vote choice are influenced by a complex mix of structural, cognitive, and social factors. The literature in political science, behavioral economics, and social psychology identifies many determinants of whether people vote at all and whom they vote for. Turnout depends not only on institutional rules and individual resources (age, income, education) but also on psychological benefits and social pressures. Similarly, vote choice reflects party cues and policy alignment **and** perceptions of candidate attributes (e.g. competence, honesty, charisma). The following sections review key findings, with illustrative examples and citations.

## 1. Turnout (Decision to Vote or Abstain)

**Rational-choice paradox:** Classical models (Downs 1957) predict near-universal abstention because the probability a vote affects the outcome is nearly zero. Indeed, the basic calculation  $R = pB - C$  (probability  $\times$  benefit minus cost) implies  $R < 0$  for almost any election <sup>1</sup>. Yet most democracies see substantial turnout, forming the “paradox of voting” <sup>1</sup>. To resolve this, theorists have added non-material motives: *civic duty* or “psychic” benefits (Downs; Riker & Ordeshook 1968), altruism towards others (Feddersen 2004), or social-group benefits <sup>2</sup>. Experimentally, even minor social cues dramatically raise turnout: for example, Gerber, Green and Larimer (2008) showed that telling voters their voting records would be made public boosted turnout by ~8 percentage points <sup>3</sup>. In short, many people vote partly due to norms and social utility, not just instrumental gain <sup>3</sup> <sup>1</sup>.

**Socioeconomic and demographic factors:** Richer, better-educated, and middle-aged citizens tend to vote at higher rates. Studies consistently find that higher income and education correlate with greater political participation <sup>4</sup>. By contrast, young adults and the very old vote less <sup>4</sup>. In survey data, strong partisans (and women) are also more likely to vote than independents or men <sup>4</sup>. These gaps reflect resources, engagement, and group identity: wealthier or educated individuals have more skills/information and are more embedded in civic networks. Conversely, those who feel **alienated** or under-represented (“no party represents my views”) often abstain <sup>5</sup>. Many scholars note that **inequalities in turnout** persist: turnout tends to rise with SES, and politically engaged demographics dominate the voting pool <sup>6</sup> <sup>7</sup>.

**Institutional and electoral context:** Turnout varies greatly by context. First-order elections (national/parliamentary) draw significantly higher turnout than second-order or local elections <sup>8</sup>. For example, midterm or local races often see sharp drop-offs. Proportional electoral systems also tend to yield higher turnout than plurality/majoritarian systems <sup>9</sup>. Notably, **compulsory voting** laws virtually guarantee high participation. Countries with mandatory voting (e.g. Australia, Belgium, Luxembourg) achieve turnout around 90% <sup>10</sup>, compared to ~50–60% in voluntary systems like the U.S. or India. Compulsory voting not only raises overall turnout, it also pulls in typically low-participation groups (the poor, the young) <sup>11</sup> <sup>10</sup>. In practice, the legal enforcement (fines) of mandatory voting strongly tilts the cost-benefit calculation in favor of voting <sup>12</sup> <sup>13</sup>.

**Social and behavioral influences:** Beyond material factors, turnout is shaped by social norms and psychology. When voting is viewed as a **civic duty**, people derive an emotional or reputational benefit from participating <sup>14</sup>. For instance, interventions emphasizing that “others expect you to vote” can substantially raise turnout <sup>3</sup>. Descriptive norms also matter: reminding someone that their neighbors usually vote increases their own likelihood of voting. Conversely, cues of low expected turnout may *discourage* voting (the “descriptive norm” effect). In general, scholars find that **social pressure is a powerful turnout motivator** <sup>3</sup> <sup>2</sup>. Experimental and survey studies show that individuals who perceive voting as a community obligation (or see their peers voting) tend to cast ballots. The one-vote paradox notwithstanding, many people get non-zero “return” from voting by signaling group loyalty or self-concept as a good citizen <sup>15</sup>.

**Summary of turnout factors:** Table 1 below outlines typical determinants of turnout identified in the literature. Institutional features (compulsory laws, electoral system, election type) and *individual resources* (education, income, age) create the baseline turnout level <sup>8</sup> <sup>11</sup>. Social-psychological factors (civic duty, peer pressure, political mobilization) then modulate actual participation <sup>3</sup> <sup>5</sup>.

Factor (Category)	Effect on Turnout	Example Findings
<b>Compulsory voting (Institutional)</b>	Strongly increases turnout (near-universal voting). Compulsory laws reduce socioeconomic turnout gaps.	Australia/Belgium ~90% turnout <sup>10</sup> ; “penalty” creates incentive <sup>12</sup> .
<b>Voluntary voting (Institutional)</b>	Turnout lower and more unequal. Low-propensity groups often abstain.	US (~55–65% in national elections) – SES gaps persist <sup>4</sup> .
<b>Election importance</b>	National/“first-order” elections yield higher turnout than local/second-order elections.	<b>Reif &amp; Schmitt (1980):</b> Parliament > local turnout <sup>8</sup> .
<b>Electoral system</b>	Proportional systems tend to produce higher turnout than winner-take-all.	<b>Geys (2006):</b> PR systems boost participation <sup>9</sup> .
<b>Socioeconomic status</b>	Higher income and education → higher turnout.	<b>Verba et al. (1995):</b> rich/educated vote more <sup>4</sup> .
<b>Age</b>	Middle-aged citizens vote most. Young and elderly tend to abstain at higher rates.	<b>Lijphart (1997):</b> 18–29 and 70+ have low turnout <sup>4</sup> .
<b>Partisanship and Identity</b>	Strong party identifiers (or group membership) are more likely to vote; alienation reduces turnout.	“Partisans and women more likely; younger, alienated less” <sup>6</sup> .
<b>Electoral competitiveness</b>	Closer or high-stakes races mobilize more voters; “safe” elections depress turnout.	Tight races (e.g. swing states) boost turnout <sup>9</sup> .
<b>Civic norms (Psych/ Beh.)</b>	Feeling that voting is a civic duty increases turnout; public commitment invokes conformity.	Norm salience (“duty to vote”) raised turnout in experiments <sup>3</sup> .

Factor (Category)	Effect on Turnout	Example Findings
<b>Social pressure (Psych/Beh.)</b>	Public accountability (neighbors watching) dramatically increases turnout compared to control.	Gerber et al.: Mail predicting public posting of voting raised turnout by ~8% <sup>3</sup> .
<b>Psychological benefits</b>	Expressive benefits (e.g. "I did my duty", self-esteem) motivate voting despite low p.	Extrinsic vs intrinsic "voter duty" utility discussed <sup>14</sup> <sup>1</sup> .

## 2. Vote Choice (Deciding *Whom* to Vote For)

Even conditional on voting, individuals must decide *which* candidate or party to support. Political science models highlight **partisanship and ideology** as dominant cues: individuals tend to vote for the party that matches their long-term ideological orientation <sup>16</sup> <sup>17</sup>. A clear party ID serves as a mental shortcut: voters attach to a party label and then support its candidates almost by habit <sup>16</sup>. Party cues even help infer candidates' issue stances <sup>18</sup>. In this way, partisanship simplifies choice: for strong Democrats or Republicans, candidate identity often trumps personal traits or policy detail. Conversely, weak partisans or independents may be more swayed by short-term factors.

**Policy and context:** Issue preferences also shape vote choice. Voters tend to favor candidates whose **policy positions** align with their own values <sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup>. For example, a voter who cares most about economic policy will support the candidate promising favorable tax or spending policies. The credibility and feasibility of a candidate's proposals matter: voters are more likely to support candidates perceived as "competent" in handling the issues they prioritize <sup>21</sup>. Economic conditions often operate retrospectively: in good economic times voters tend to reward incumbents, whereas in crises they favor challengers <sup>22</sup>. Media coverage and campaign debates strongly influence voters' perceptions of candidates' policies <sup>23</sup>. In sum, political context and issue congruence remain central: ideological fit and current events (e.g. economic performance, wars) often determine vote choice.

**Candidate characteristics:** Beyond abstract issues, **candidate attributes and persona** have a growing influence on voting decisions (the "personalization of politics" thesis). Voters evaluate candidates on dimensions like competence, integrity, and charisma <sup>24</sup> <sup>25</sup>. Studies find that candidates perceived as intelligent, experienced, and effective leaders gain more support <sup>25</sup> <sup>24</sup>. Likewise, *character traits* matter: perceived honesty, moral character and empathy increase voter trust <sup>26</sup> <sup>24</sup>. These traits can differ in impact across contexts: for instance, one study of U.S. presidential races (1980–2020) found that higher perceived competence of Democratic candidates and higher perceived character of Republican candidates significantly increased turnout among supportive voters <sup>24</sup> (implying such traits also boost vote share).

Physical **appearance and affect** also play a role. Voters often use visual cues heuristically. A well-cited review notes that good-looking candidates enjoy an "electoral advantage" globally <sup>27</sup>: attractiveness leads voters to infer greater competence or persuasiveness. Indeed, ratings of candidate beauty (by uninformed observers) predict real election outcomes <sup>27</sup>. Similarly, charismatic manner (enthusiasm, forcefulness) can sway voters – extraverts especially prefer energetic leaders <sup>28</sup>. In tight races, small differences in facial competence or gender presentation can tip undecided voters. Ethnic, racial, or gender identity of candidates can also influence supporters: some voters prefer candidates who share their identity or who represent a desired form of representation <sup>29</sup>.

**Personality and psychology of the voter:** Voters' own traits interact with candidate traits. Research shows that voters tend to choose candidates who match their psychological profile (the "personality matching" idea) <sup>30</sup> . For example, conscientious voters lean towards cautious, rule-abiding candidates; open-minded voters prefer innovative candidates. Big Five personality correlates also align with politics: openness predicts support for progressive candidates, while conscientiousness predicts conservative support <sup>31</sup> . In short, both voter personality and candidate personality jointly affect outcomes (a congruence effect).

**Campaign and media influences:** Finally, campaign strategies, advertising and media framing shape vote choice <sup>32</sup> . Targeted messaging can mobilize certain groups, while negative ads can depress support for opponents <sup>33</sup> . These effects interact with the above factors: a positive campaign emphasizing a candidate's qualifications reinforces perceptions of competence, whereas fear appeals might exploit group anxieties. In an information-poor environment, voters rely on heuristic cues (party label, endorsements, "horse race" media coverage) to make decisions <sup>23</sup> .

**Summary of choice factors:** Table 2 summarizes key candidate and contextual factors that influence vote choice. At a high level, **party/ideology** and **issue alignment** remain dominant predictors. However, candidate-specific features – personality traits, appearance, demographics – also guide many voters, especially in personalized politics <sup>24</sup> <sup>27</sup> .

Factor	Effect on Vote Choice	Representative Findings
<b>Party identification</b>	Strongly predicts vote for party's candidate; provides cue for other attributes.	Voters align with party platform when ID is clear <sup>16</sup> .
<b>Ideological congruence</b>	Voters prefer candidates whose positions match their values (liberal vs conservative).	Ideology is a reliable predictor of candidate preference <sup>17</sup> .
<b>Policy positions</b>	Closer alignment on key issues increases support.	Alignment of policies (economy, healthcare, etc.) strongly affects choice <sup>19</sup> .
<b>Incumbency/performance</b>	Incumbents gain if performance (economy) is good; lose if poor.	Economic prosperity under incumbents boosts their vote share <sup>22</sup> .
<b>Candidate competence</b>	Perceived competence/experience boosts voters' trust and support.	Higher perceived competence → significantly higher turnout/support <sup>24</sup> .
<b>Candidate integrity</b>	Trustworthiness and honesty increase vote support.	Candidates seen as honest garner more votes <sup>26</sup> .
<b>Attractiveness/appearance</b>	Attractive, confident appearance yields electoral "beauty premium."	Attractive candidates win more votes globally <sup>27</sup> .
<b>Charisma/empathy</b>	Charismatic style and warmth engage voters; especially valued by extraverted voters.	Extraverts prefer energetic, charismatic candidates <sup>28</sup> .

Factor	Effect on Vote Choice	Representative Findings
<b>Shared identity</b>	Voters often favor candidates sharing race, gender, or background.	Candidates matching voters' demographic identity can gain support <sup>29</sup> .
<b>Campaign/Media</b>	Effective messaging, advertising and cues influence undecided voters.	Media framing and targeted campaigns shape perceptions and votes <sup>32</sup> .

### 3. Conclusion

In sum, voter participation and choice emerge from both **structural incentives** and **human psychology**. Institutional factors (registration laws, mandatory voting, electoral competitiveness) and personal resources (income, education, age) set the baseline propensity to vote <sup>11</sup> <sup>4</sup>. Rational-choice models must be enriched with social preferences, civic norms and group influences to explain why many still vote <sup>1</sup> <sup>3</sup>. Meanwhile, once a person decides to vote, long-standing identity (party ID, ideology) heavily steers their choice. But contemporary research shows that candidate-centered factors – perceived traits, charisma, attractiveness – also sway elections <sup>24</sup> <sup>27</sup>. Ultimately, empirical studies underscore that *no single factor* dominates: turnout and choice result from the interplay of demographics, institutions, social context, and individual psychology.

**Sources:** Key findings above are drawn from political behavior studies and experiments <sup>1</sup> <sup>3</sup> <sup>24</sup> <sup>27</sup>. The tables cite representative academic analyses (listed inline) for each factor. This synthesis covers cross-disciplinary insights from recent literature in political science, behavioral economics, and social psychology.

<sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup> <sup>4</sup> <sup>5</sup> <sup>6</sup> <sup>8</sup> <sup>9</sup> psr\_34

[https://www.uh.edu/hobby/eitm/\\_docs/past-lectures/2014-Lectures/Jeremy-Gilmore/Rational-Theories-of-Voter-Turnout.pdf](https://www.uh.edu/hobby/eitm/_docs/past-lectures/2014-Lectures/Jeremy-Gilmore/Rational-Theories-of-Voter-Turnout.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <sup>14</sup> <sup>15</sup> Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment

<https://isps.yale.edu/sites/default/files/publication/2012/12/ISPS08-001.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <sup>10</sup> <sup>11</sup> <sup>12</sup> <sup>13</sup> Compulsory Voting - Center for Effective Government

<https://effectivegov.uchicago.edu/primers/compulsory-voting>

<sup>16</sup> <sup>17</sup> <sup>18</sup> <sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup> <sup>21</sup> <sup>22</sup> <sup>23</sup> <sup>25</sup> <sup>26</sup> <sup>28</sup> <sup>29</sup> <sup>31</sup> <sup>32</sup> <sup>33</sup> Factors Influencing Voting Decision: A Comprehensive Literature Review

<https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/12/9/469>

<sup>24</sup> The Personalization of Electoral Participation? The Relationship Between Trait Evaluations of Presidential Candidates and Turnout Decisions in American Presidential Elections 1980–2020

<https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s11109-024-09949-3.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> IZA World of Labor - How do candidates' looks affect their election chances?

<https://wol.iza.org/articles/how-do-candidates-looks-affect-their-election-chances/long>

<sup>30</sup> We vote for the person, not the policies: a systematic review on how personality traits influence voting behaviour | Discover Psychology

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s44202-022-00057-z>