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Who Votes, Who Doesn't, and Why

Regular Voters, Intermittent Voters, and Those Who Don't

Summary of Findings

	A Spectrum of Voters and Non-Voters: How They Differ			
	----- Voting Frequency -----			
	Regular	Inter- mittent	Registered, but rare	Not registered
	%	%	%	%
Total	35	20	23	22=100
<i>Agree with each statement...</i>				
Interested in local politics	91	76	57	45
Duty as citizen to always vote*	88	80	60	39
This election matters more	83	74	67	67
Feel guilty when I don't vote	72	70	57	45
Know little about candidates	44	60	76	68
Bored by what goes on in DC	25	38	42	43
Angry with government	24	15	14	22
Issues in DC don't affect me	15	25	32	27
Voting doesn't change things	13	18	30	33
Sometimes too busy	8	12	29	43
Difficult to get to polls	8	8	19	30

*Based only on those who 'completely agree.'

They vote but not always. Compared with Americans who regularly cast ballots, they are less engaged in politics. They are more likely to be bored with the political process and admit they often do not know enough about candidates to cast ballots. But they are crucial to Republican and Democratic fortunes in the Nov. 7 midterm elections.

They are the intermittent voters: Americans who are registered to vote but do not always make it to the polls. They differ significantly from those who vote regularly. For one thing, they're less likely to be married than are regular voters. Intermittent voters also are more mistrustful of people compared with those who vote regularly. They also are

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less angry with government, though no less dissatisfied with President Bush than are regular voters, according to a survey conducted Sept. 21-Oct. 4 among 1,804 adults by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press in collaboration with the Associated Press.

The survey also finds large differences between Americans who are not registered to vote or vote only rarely, and intermittent or regular voters. The two groups at the bottom of the voting participation scale are much less likely than regular or intermittent voters to believe that voting will make much of a difference. They also are less likely to agree with the statement: "I feel guilty when I don't get a chance to vote."

To understand who votes and who doesn't, survey respondents were divided into four groups based on their voting history, attitudes about voting, and interest in the current campaign. Together, these groups span the breadth of political participation, from regular voters to democracy's bystanders(1):

Regular voters. These are adults who are currently registered to vote. Nearly all regular voters cast ballots in the 2004 presidential election; most say they "always" vote and that they are certain to vote in the upcoming congressional election. Together, they constitute roughly a third (35%) of the adult population.

Intermittent voters. All intermittent voters say they are registered to vote, but fewer acknowledge always voting. They report less certainty of voting in the upcoming election and less interest in the campaign compared with regular voters. Intermittent voters make up 20% of the population.

Registered but rare voters. About a quarter of Americans say they are registered to vote, but acknowledge that they rarely make it to the polls (23%). Fully three-quarters (76%) say they sometimes feel they don't know enough about the candidates to vote.

Unregistered adults. These are Americans who say they are not registered to vote, or indicate their registration may have lapsed. They comprise 22% of the population.

Regular and Intermittent Voters

Turnout estimates suggest that more Americans than usual for an off-year election will go to the polls next month. Still, even the most optimistic of these models suggest that fewer than half of eligible Americans may vote, well below turnout in the 2004 presidential election. A key for both Republicans and Democrats is convincing the intermittent voters in their respective ranks to vote on Nov. 7.

These intermittent voters are the most important "swing" group in politics distinguished not by their partisan leanings but by their voting behavior. They swing in and out of the electorate from election to election.

The Pew analysis identifies basic attitudes and lifestyles that keep these intermittent voters less engaged in politics and the political process. Political knowledge is key: Six-in-ten intermittent voters say they sometimes don't know enough about candidates to vote compared with 44% of regular voters the single most important attitudinal difference between intermittent and regular voters identified in the survey. Intermittent voters also are characterized by feelings of boredom with politics. They are more likely than regular voters to agree with the statement: "I'm generally bored by what goes on in Washington" (38% intermittent vs. 25% regular).

	----- Voting Frequency -----			
	Regular	Inter- mittent	but rare	Not registered
	%	%	%	%
Married	65	59	54	44
Most people can be trusted	52	40	35	27
Lived in neighborhood less than one year	3	5	10	23
Know hardly any people in your neighborhood	5	8	14	21
Approve of Bush	40	37	33	36
Satisfied with country	27	32	33	29

Intermittent voters also are more mistrustful of other people than are regular voters. According to the survey, 40% of intermittent voters say that in general most people can be trusted, compared with 52% of all regular voters. This is another factor that may prevent intermittent voters from building the kinds of community and interpersonal connections that directly lead to political participation.

One other key difference: Regular voters are more likely than intermittent voters to say they have been contacted by a candidate or political group encouraging them to vote, underscoring the value of get-out-to-vote campaigns and other forms of party outreach for encouraging political participation.

The survey also finds that the demographic factors that distinguish non-voters from voters also differentiate regular from intermittent voters. Intermittent voters are somewhat less well educated and less affluent than are regular voters.

What keeps them voting, at least occasionally? Intermittent voters share two critical characteristics with those who have the voting habit, the survey found. Unlike those who are not registered to vote, big majorities of regular and intermittent voters acknowledge they feel guilty when they don't vote. And both of these groups are less likely to accept the assertion that "voting doesn't really change things" than are those who rarely cast ballots or are not registered.

Non-Voters: Politically Estranged

The survey also reveals broad differences between those who are not registered to vote and regular or occasional voters. Non-voters are politically estranged: They are the least interested in local politics of the four groups and the most likely to say voting doesn't change things. They also are five times more likely to say they're too busy to vote than are regular voters (43% versus 8%).

Americans who are not registered to vote also are more socially isolated from other people: They're less likely to know people in their neighborhood. They also are more likely to be relatively recent arrivals in their current neighborhoods - more than one-in-five (23%) say they have lived in their neighborhood less than a year. People who are not registered to vote also are generally mistrustful of others; just 27% say that most people can be trusted.

Structural factors stand between some of these Americans and the ballot booth. Three-in-ten adults who are not registered to vote say it is difficult for them to get to the polls; this compares with 19% among those who vote rarely, and just 8% each among intermittent and regular voters. This suggests even with recent reforms in voter registration laws, barriers to voting still exist for some Americans. Still, 70% of those who are not registered say it is not difficult for them to vote.

So why aren't they registered? When asked to answer that question in their own words, no single dominant reason emerges. About one-in-five (19%) say they have not had time to register, while nearly as many said they had recently moved. One-in-seven (14%) say they don't care about politics, while about as many express little confidence in the government.

Voting and Demographic Factors

<i>Open-ended responses</i> *...	%
No time or just haven't done it	19
Recently moved	17
Don't care about politics	14
No confidence in government	12
Not a U.S. citizen	7
Illness or disability	4
Just turned 18	3
No point in voting	3
Religious reasons	2
Laziness	2
Don't understand politics	2
Felon/on probation	2

* Top responses listed

	----- Voting Frequency -----			
	Regular	Inter- mittent	but rare	Not registered
	%	%	%	%
Total	35	20	23	22=100
Men	36	20	21	23=100
Women	34	21	24	21=100
White	37	21	22	20=100
Black	31	23	29	17=100
Hispanic	24	16	20	40=100
18-29	22	13	25	40=100
30-49	35	21	24	20=100
50-64	42	24	20	14=100
65+	41	22	23	14=100
Married	40	21	22	17=100
Not married	29	19	24	28=100
College graduate	46	22	20	12=100
Some college	38	20	24	18=100
H.S. grad or less	28	20	24	28=100
\$75,000+	44	22	23	11=100
\$50K to \$74,999	36	21	25	18=100
\$30K to \$49,999	36	20	21	23=100
\$20K to \$29,999	31	16	18	35=100
Less than \$20K	26	20	23	31=100
<i>Attend Church...</i>				
Weekly or more	39	23	23	15=100
Monthly or yearly	35	18	21	26=100
Seldom or never	31	18	25	26=100

Not only do the rich seem to get richer, on Election Day next month they will probably get a disproportionately large say about who gets elected to Congress. So will older people, whites, college graduates and those who frequently go to church, they survey finds. Among those likely to once again stand on the sidelines on Nov.7: relatively large numbers of young people, Hispanics, and those with less education and lower incomes.

Whites continue to be disproportionately represented in the voting booth: 37% of whites are regular voters, compared with 29% of non-whites, including 31% of blacks and 24% of all Hispanics. Conversely, 40% of Hispanics and considerably smaller proportions of blacks (17%) and whites (20%) say they are not registered to vote.

Regular voters also are older than those who are not registered. More than four-in-ten of those ages 50 and older (42%) are regular voters, about double the proportion of 18-29 year-olds (22%). Among those between the ages of 30 and 49, more than a third (35%) reliably go to the polls a fact that is consistent with previous research that found voting is a habit acquired with age.

Looking at the other end of the participation scale tells the same story, but even more dramatically. Four-in-ten 18-29 year-olds are not registered to vote, double the proportion of 30-49-year-olds and nearly three times greater than those ages 50 or older.

Other factors distinguish the non-voter. Nearly half (46%) of all college graduates are regular voters, compared to 28% of adults who are high school graduates or have less education. In addition, 39% of those who say they attend religious services once a week or more are regular voters, compared with 31% of those who attend church seldom or never. But the survey also finds little gender difference in voting behavior: 36% of men and 34% of women are regular voters.

Non-Voting and Partisanship

	----- Voting Frequency -----			
	Regular	Inter- mittent	Registered, but rarely	Not registered
	%	%	%	%
Total	35	20	23	22=100
Republican	41	25	20	14=100
Democrat	39	20	21	20=100
Independent	30	17	26	27=100
<i>Ideology...</i>				
Conservative	38	22	23	17=100
Moderate	35	21	24	20=100
Liberal	34	17	20	29=100

Roughly the same proportions of self-identified Republicans and Democrats are regular voters (41% vs. 39%). But Democrats are more likely to be non-voters: 20% of Democrats say they are not registered to vote, compared with 14% of Republicans; among political independents, 27% say they are not registered to vote.

A registration gap also exists between liberals and conservatives, with 29% of self-described liberals saying they are not registered to vote compared with 20% of moderates and 17% of conservatives. However, there are only modest differences in the percentages of conservatives (38%), moderates (35%) and liberals (34%) who are regular voters.

