

# **Everything we know about voter turnout** **(and why it matters)**

**Will Terry**

*University of California, San Diego*

# **Introduction**

**I. How much does voter turnout vary?**

**II. What determines voter turnout rates?**

**III. Should we be concerned about low turnout?**

**IV. Post script: My dissertation research.**

# There is substantial variation in voter participation across US states

## States with highest voter turnout rates

Minnesota*	79.2 percent
Wisconsin*	76.6
Oregon	74.0
Maine*	73.1
New Hampshire*	71.5

\*States with election-day registration

## States with lowest voter turnout rates

West Virginia	57.2
Texas	57.1
Georgia	56.8
Tennessee	54.6
Hawaii	50.8

## There is substantial cross-national variation in voter participation rates

Australia	95%
Malta	94%
Austria	92%
Belgium	91%
Italy	90%
Luxembourg	90%
Iceland	89%

Spain	73%
Japan	71%
Estonia	69%
Hungary	66%
Russia	61%
India	58%
United States	54%
Switzerland	54%
Poland	51%

# **Introduction**

**I. How much does voter turnout vary?**

**II. What determines voter turnout rates?**

**III. Should we be concerned about low turnout?**

**IV. Post script: My dissertation research.**

# What determines voter turnout rates?

## At the individual level:

Education, income, ethnicity, ease of registration, ease of voting, partisan mobilization...

## *Structural* versus *Non-structural* changes in turnout

*Structural* changes in turnout: participation rates changed because the laws governing elections changed.

- (e.g., The Voting Rights Act of 1965)

*Non-structural* changes in turnout: participation rates changed for a reason other than a change in the law.

- (e.g., The Presidential Election of 2008)

# **The Presidential Election of 2008**

## **(A *Non-structural* change in voter turnout)**

### **Why happened?**

62% turnout rate, third consecutive increase in presidential turnout since the modern low of 52% in 1996.

- Obama captured 52.9% of the vote, McCain 45.7%
- Among whites, Obama captured 43%; among Blacks 95%; among Hispanics 67%

### **Why did it happen?**

High profile candidates, the Bush legacy, a faltering economy...

### **What does it portend?**

An excellent question indeed!

# **The Voting Rights Act of 1965**

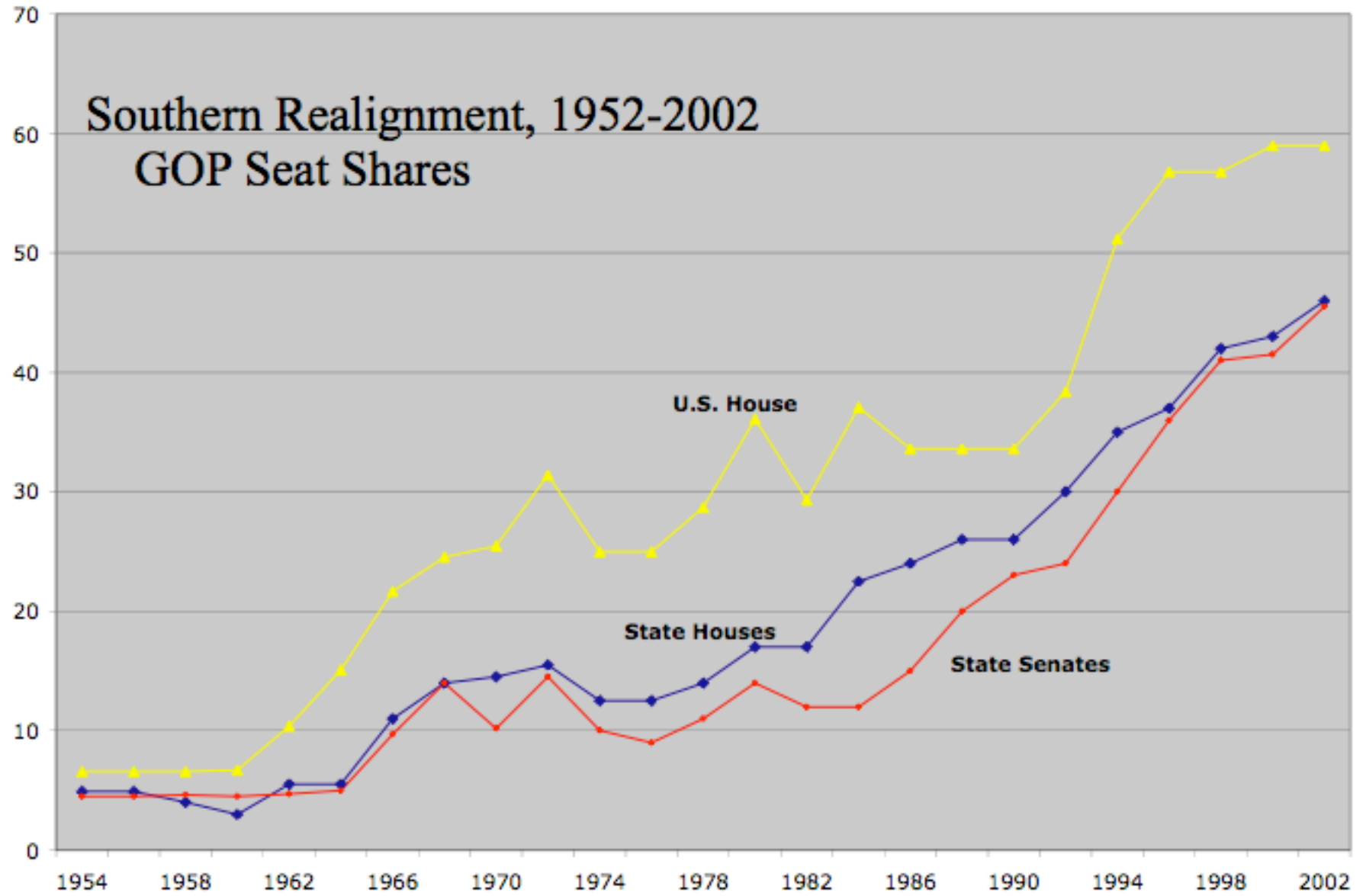
**(A *Structural* change in voter turnout)**

## **Why study the VRA?**

- (1.)** The VRA is commonly viewed as one of the main causes of Southern realignment.
  
- (2.)** The VRA gives us insight into a broader debate about the political implications of voter turnout.
  - Does policy react the way a straightforward Downsian model predicts?

# Southern Realignment, 1952-2002

## GOP Seat Shares



## **The U.S. Voting Rights Act of 1965**

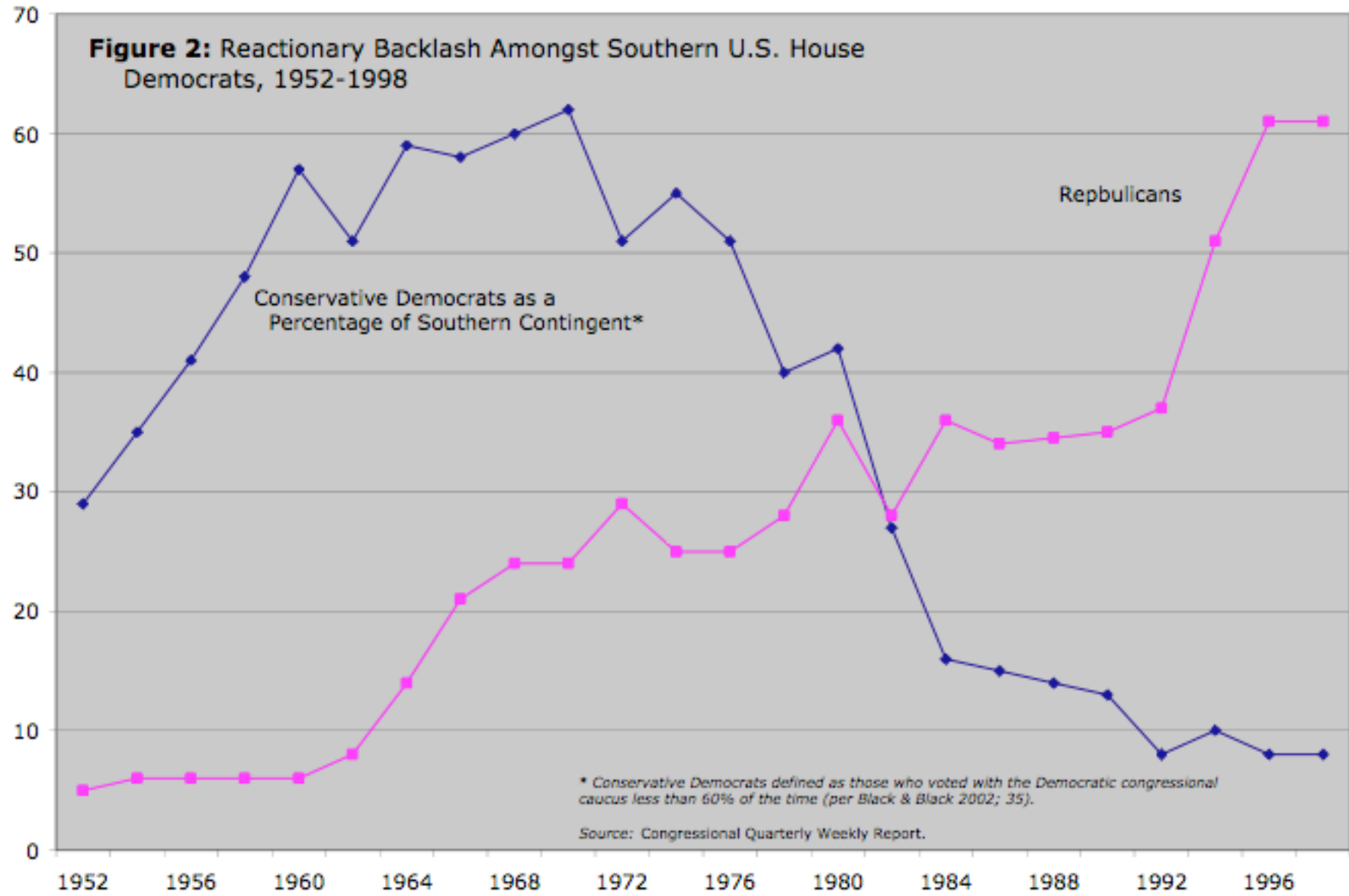
- Signed by LBJ; enforces the Fifteenth Amendment.
- States cannot “deny or abridge the right of any citizen of the United States to vote on account of race or color.”  
Effectively, increased federal government’s role in voter registration.
- In the 1960s the VRA affected each of the 11 former Confederate states. Non-southern states were only slightly affected, if at all.

**With reference to the theory I laid out above re the impact of structural changes, why is the VRA a good case study?**

## The VRA was a significant *structural* change affecting turnout

- VRA (and related legislation) lowered African-American voting costs: In the South, Black registration rates increased from 3% (1940); to 24.9% (1956); 43.1% (1964); to 62% (1968).
- Blacks as a group are left-of-center (on any interesting policy area); hence the VRA is a natural case for testing the spatial model.
- **Caveat 1:** Black & Black (1987); Rohde (1992) provide evidence that Southern Democrats did not immediately become more liberal.
- **Caveat 2:** White “backlash” and/or countermobilization.

**Figure 2: Reactionary Backlash Amongst Southern U.S. House Democrats, 1952-1998**



Conservative Democrats as a Percentage of Southern Contingent\*

Republicans

\* Conservative Democrats defined as those who voted with the Democratic congressional caucus less than 60% of the time (per Black & Black 2002; 35).

Source: Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report.

# **Introduction**

**I. How much does voter turnout vary?**

**II. What determines voter turnout rates?**

**III. Should we be concerned about low turnout?**

**IV. Post script: My dissertation research.**

## Should we be concerned about low turnout rates?

Whether or not turnout “matters” is controversial.

### *Yes!* (“Turnout matters”)

To the extent that (a.) non-voters are more socio-economically disadvantaged as a group, and (b.) politicians only respond to citizens who vote, we should be concerned about low voter turnout rates.

### *No!* (“Turnout does not matter”)

Politics wouldn’t change in a meaningful way even if everyone voted.

## Empirical caveat #1

*De Nardo (1980):* Higher turnout rates do not correlate with higher left vote shares.

### *Rebuttal A*

Standard mathematical models of political competition do not predict such a correlation; but they do predict a policy change! In other words, DeNardo is looking at a different (less interesting) dependent variable.

### *Rebuttal B*

This evidence does not focus on structural changes in turnout, it focuses on mostly endogenous changes in turnout. So DeNardo's is looking at a different independent variable.

## Empirical caveat #2

***Wolfinger (1980):*** Survey evidence shows that non-voters and voters are very similar in terms of their stated preferences.

### ***Rebuttal A***

“Non-voters who are asked their opinions on policy and partisan preferences in surveys are typically citizens who have not given these questions much thought...[i]t is highly likely that, if they were mobilized to vote, their votes would be quite different from their responses in opinion polls.”

*(Lijphart 1997)*

### ***Rebuttal A'***

*Following a structural increase in turnout, parties will shift resources from mobilization to persuasion.*

*(Terry 2008)*

# **Introduction**

**I. How much does voter turnout vary?**

**II. What determines voter turnout rates?**

**III. Should we be concerned about low turnout?**

**IV. Post script: My dissertation research.**

**“Shouldn’t there be a straightforward policy response to a structural increase in turnout?”**

**Theory:**

Structural increases in turnout should generally benefit the left.

**Evidence:**

(a) Worldwide, the right generally opposes, while the left favors, structural increases in turnout.

(e.g., Przeworski 2008; *Crawford vs. Marion County*; *Acorn vs. GOP*)

(b) Numerous studies of policy outcomes suggests “turnout matters.”

(e.g., Brady 2003; Kousser 1980)

## Preliminary Retirement Findings

**Research Design 1:** Southern incumbents are more likely to exit in post-VRA years (controlling for year effects, redistricting, and incumbent vote share)

**Research Design 2:** Among Southern MCs who are redistricted, larger changes in the *percent of the district African-American* lead to higher exit rates through electoral defeat and retirement.

**Puzzle:** Why doesn't a net influx of African American voters increase the likelihood of exit amongst southern congresspersons who were *not* redistricted (in the sample of 81 districts for which I have registration data).

## **Further Dissertation Research**

### **I. The VRA's Legislative Consequences**

- (1.) MC career patterns
- (2.) Multidimensional scaling of roll-call voting
- (3.) Event count analysis of MC sponsorship

### **II. The VRA's Public Policy Consequences: The Repeal of Southern Anti-miscegenation Law**

### **III. The VRA's Distributive Consequences: Patterns in Public Educational Expenditure**