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## Introduction

After every presidential election, commentators lament the low voter turnout rate in the United States, suggesting that there is something wrong with a democracy in which only about 60 percent of its citizens vote. Yet there is little public consternation over the fact that those who do show up at the polls are disproportionately wealthy: while nearly 80 percent of high-income citizens vote, barely 50 percent of low-income citizens do.<sup>1</sup> Given the dramatic increase in economic inequality in the United States over the past thirty years, the silence on this point is all the more striking: apparently the important question for pundits and journalists is not *who votes* but *how many* vote.

Contrast this silence with the strident debates regarding voter identification laws passed after the 2008 presidential election. Low voter turnout aside, many state legislatures passed laws requiring individuals to provide positive identification when voting on election day. While supporters of these laws argued they were intended to protect the integrity of elections, opponents countered that the laws were partisan efforts to depress the turnout of liberal-leaning citizens who also happen to be least likely to already have identification documents—that is, the poor, and racial and ethnic minorities. The common assumption in this debate, whatever the legislative intent, is: *who votes* matters.

The intensity of this debate even up to a month prior to election day in 2012 was likely fueled by pollsters' predictions that the presidential race seemed to be too close to call. In September, media reports and political junkies were claiming that the election would be all about

1. We refer to the higher turnout rate of the wealthy compared to the poor as *income bias*.

turnout: Would the Obama campaign deliver the same record-high turnout that it did in 2008? And would the Republican base turn out to support a candidate who had an inconsistent record on many issues important to the base? If, as the pundits suggested, turnout was pivotal to the election outcome, both campaigns were ready: they both raised and spent more money than any previous presidential campaign, and spent a substantial amount of those dollars to mobilize supporters.<sup>2</sup> While we now know that overall turnout in 2012 was lower than in 2008, what we do not know is whether who was mobilized to vote led to Obama's victory or, more specifically, whether the presence of these new voters would influence the policies he would later produce.

If nonvoters preferred the same policies as voters, we might not care very much about who votes: however many or few citizens cast ballots on election day, the same preferences would be expressed. Yet we show in later chapters that this is not the case. Voters and nonvoters do not prefer the same policies. Our conclusions thus challenge the conventional wisdom regarding voter turnout and policy preferences in the United States. In a now classic study of voter turnout in the United States, Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) claimed that who votes does *not* matter, arguing that because the political preferences of voters and nonvoters are similar, there are few representational inequalities introduced by the failure of all eligible voters to participate in the electoral process. Similarly, most simulations of the effects of turnout in presidential and senatorial elections suggest that the same candidate would win even if all eligible citizens voted.<sup>3</sup>

But these studies focus exclusively on the differences in *partisan* and *candidate* preference between voters and nonvoters, and consider these two differences as the only relevant consequence of changes in turnout. They do not consider whether any *policy* consequences would result should all eligible voters cast ballots. We argue that in determining whether who votes matters it is important to compare preferences of voters and nonvoters *over issues*, not just preferences *across candidates or parties*. A growing body of political science evidence supports this common sense conclusion: that policy makers cater more to the wishes of voters than nonvoters.<sup>4</sup> If we accept that elected officials pay attention to what voters want, then comparing the preferences of voters and nonvoters over issues, not just candidates or parties, matters. The question is straightforward: do nonvoters support the same policies that voters support?

2. "The 2012 Money Race: Compare the candidates"; <http://elections.nytimes.com/2012/campaign-finance>; accessed December 3, 2012.

3. See Citrin, Schickler, & Sides (2003); Highton & Wolfinger (2001); Martinez & Gill (2005); and Sides, Schickler, & Citrin (2008).

4. See Griffin (2005) and Martin (2003) for evidence on this point.

A simple example illustrates why preferences on policy issues, not just candidates, or parties, matter. We might observe that both 55 percent of nonvoters and 55 percent of voters prefer the Democratic candidate to the Republican candidate. But if voters' preferences for the Democrat are based on the promise of liberal social policies, and nonvoters' preferences for the Democrat are based on the promise of liberal economic policies, then the nonvoters are going to suffer for staying home. Once elected, the Democrat is likely to respond to the social policy wishes of the voters, and be more likely to ignore the economic preferences of the nonvoting supporters who would like redistributive economic policies. As a result, who votes matters for the most basic outcome of politics: who gets what.

In this book we examine voter turnout in every U.S. presidential election from 1972 through 2008.<sup>5</sup> We address four questions regarding the changing political context of turnout. First, how have the demographics of turnout in presidential elections changed or remained the same since 1972? Second, what have been the consequences of the broad set of election reforms designed to make registration or voting easier that have been adopted over the past several decades? Third, what is the impact of the policy choices that candidates offer voters on who votes? And fourth, is Wolfinger and Rosenstone's conclusion that voters are representative of nonvoters on policy issues accurate, and therefore, who votes does not really matter?

Our findings on these four questions advance our understanding of turnout and its consequences for representation in fundamental ways. Our empirical evidence on the demographics of turnout shows that over a period of increasing economic inequality, the income bias of voters has remained the same. The rich continue to vote at substantially higher rates than the poor. While this difference is very large, it has not increased substantially.

A second finding of note is that, contrary to the claims of many reformers that making voting easier would dramatically change who votes and how many vote, some electoral reforms modestly increase turnout but by no means produce changes in turnout anywhere near large enough to close the gap in turnout rates between the United States and many of the other industrialized democracies. Reforms intended to make voting easier have led to increases in turnout, and in competitive elections this 2 or 3 percentage-point increase *could* change the outcome of any given election.

Third, we find that politics matters: when candidates offer distinct choices, eligible voters are more likely to turnout. Though we are

5. Our choice of 1972 as the first election we study is largely practical, based on the availability of data.

interested in the demographics of turnout, and believe that it is important to study demographic representation, we also believe that turnout is inherently political. On this point the intellectual debt is owed to Key (1966), who rightly observed that voters are not fools: they cannot vote as a reflection of their self-interest if they are not offered relevant choices. For Key as well as many scholars of party politics, elections are choices about policies, or candidates, or parties; they are not determined solely by demographics. We demonstrate how the policy choices offered by candidates influence whether individuals choose to cast ballots. If citizens see no differences in what candidates are offering, then, there really is very little reason to show up at the polls. We underscore the politics of turnout in this regard, for we believe that candidates offering distinct choices to citizens constitutes another mechanism by which voter turnout might be increased, and could also lower the income bias of voters.

Finally, and contrary to the conclusions of Wolfinger and Rosenstone, our empirical evidence demonstrates that voters are *not* representative of nonvoters on economic issues. Voters and nonvoters had different policy views in 1972 and have had different policy views in every election since then. This difference is substantial, and results in consistent overrepresentation of conservative views among voters compared to nonvoters. That these differences are reflected primarily in citizens' views on economic issues is a distinctive feature of this finding. That these policy differences have been ignored over several decades of increasing economic inequality make our finding all the more important. Our evidence on these differences is clear, and we hope that it is sufficiently persuasive to change the conventional wisdom among scholars and journalists alike.

We believe that the study of who votes is made all the more important by the dramatic increase in economic inequality that has occurred in the United States since 1972. We are today a country in which fewer people have a greater proportion of the wealth than in 1972. For this reason alone, documenting that voters are significantly wealthier than nonvoters and voters are *not* representative of nonvoters on redistributive issues is critical information for evaluating the nature of electoral democracy in the United States. To paraphrase Vice President Joe Biden, this is a big deal.

### 1.1 Economic Inequality, Income Bias, and Turnout

The potential importance of economic issues suggested by our example above seemed to be realized in the 2012 presidential campaign, with much of the campaign rhetoric, advertising, and debates focused on

government programs whose impact varies across economic groups, programs intended to increase job creation, and access to health care. Prior to the 2012 election economists and sociologists had identified a dramatic increase in income inequality as a distinguishing feature of American life over the past several decades (Danziger & Gottschalk 1995; Farley 1996; Gottschalk & Danziger 2005). Between 1972 and 2008, for example, the share of household income going to the bottom fifth of the distribution decreased from 4.1 percent in 1972 to 3.4 percent of income by 2008. During that same time the share of income going to the wealthiest fifth of the population *increased* from 43.9 percent of income to 50 percent of income, and the share of income going to the top 5 percent of households *increased* from 17.0 percent to 21.5 percent.<sup>6</sup>

Estimates of differential income changes over time are even greater when considering persons in the top 1 percent of the income distribution. Between 1979 and 2007 this group's after-tax household income increased by 275 percent, while the after-tax household income of others in the top quintile (those in the 81st through 99th percentile of the distribution) increased by 65 percent. The corresponding figure for the bottom quintile is a mere 18 percent (Congressional Budget Office 2011).<sup>7</sup> Whatever measures are used, the bottom line is clear: Americans live in a more unequal economic society today than they did in 1972.<sup>8</sup>

Popular and journalistic attention to the politics of inequality increased after the 2008 housing collapse and subsequent recession, fueled by the Occupy Wall Street movement as well as economic issues abroad. So, too, in the last decade has scholarly attention to issues of inequality and the potential conflicts among equality, representation, and wealth increased (American Political Science Association 2004; Beramendi & Anderson 2008; Hacker 2006; McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal 2008; Page & Jacobs 2009). The conclusions drawn in most of these studies are rather pessimistic with regard to the maintenance of *political* equality in the face of increasing *economic* inequality. With empirical evidence documenting that elected officials respond more to the preferences of the wealthy than to the preferences of the poor, democratic equality is doubtful.<sup>9</sup>

6. U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements. Table H3, accessed November 7, 2011, from <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/inequality/index.html>.

7. See Jones and Weinberg (2000) for a comparison of different measures of income inequality for the period 1967–2001.

8. See also Piketty & Saez (2006, 2003).

9. See Bartels (2008); and Gilens (2012).

But this tension between economic and political inequality is not new. In fact, political inequality in voter turnout is not new at all. Since 1972 the wealthy have always voted more than the poor, and hence have always been overrepresented at the polls (in both presidential and congressional elections). But now the income and wealth gap between the wealthy and poor is much greater than it was in 1972.

What existing research does not address is whether the difference in turnout between the wealthy and poor has increased over the past thirty years. In fact, our earlier research on this point suggested that this income bias had been relatively stable from 1972 through 1984. But what has happened since then? Are the wealthy overrepresented even *more* today than they were in the 1970s, the 1980s, or 1990s?<sup>10</sup> We show that there has been remarkable stability in income bias in turnout despite the remarkable changes in income inequality since 1972.

## 1.2 Policy Choices and Turnout

The overrepresentation of the wealthy in voting or other forms of political participation is often understood to reflect that wealthy individuals also tend to have other resources (e.g., education, political interest, or stronger social and political networks) that make it easier for them to vote, or more likely to be targets of candidate and campaign mobilization efforts. But we argue that to understand income bias in turnout we must explicitly address the important role of the issue positions offered by candidates to citizens in each election. This theoretical argument is grounded in the very basic observation that elections are about choices—not just choices about parties or candidates but also choices about policies. To the extent that candidate issue positions appeal differentially to the wealthy and the poor, we would expect to see differences in how these individuals assess the value of voting.

We begin with the notion of the turnout decision as a cost-benefit calculation: citizens will vote when the costs of voting are perceived to be less than the benefits of doing so (Downs 1957). We argue that when citizens are offered distinctive choices on public policies, they are more likely to vote because these policy choices are a component of the benefits offered those who vote. Our account of turnout includes not just the choices made by voters but the choices made by candidates as to what

10. Schlozman, Verba, and Brady's (2012) finding that there is substantial education and income inequality in access to and use of new, electronic forms of participation makes revisiting this question for the most common form of participation in democratic politics in the United States today—voting—all the more important.

issue positions to take. We know that turnout is not constant over time—it rises and falls from one election to the next. Recognizing the critical role of candidates and the policy positions they take can help to explain this variation in turnout across elections. An important focus of our analysis thus includes the choices offered to the voters by the candidates.

We develop and test this model of turnout in light of our interest in the income bias of voters. We want to know whether, over this period of increasing inequality, the poor and wealthy believe that they have a choice to make, and whether those choices matter for individuals' decisions to vote. Given the large degree of income bias in the voting population, we also want to know whether the policy choices offered matter more for the wealthy than for the poor.

Citizens often describe why they did not vote, or do not plan to vote, as reactions to the candidates: "I don't like either of them"; "they don't represent me"; "they are not talking about what's important to me." While these self-reports as explanations of behavior may not be especially enlightening, they do suggest that citizens are aware of candidates and how they compare, at least on some dimensions. And they suggest that some citizens might see candidates as offering distinctive choices—at least some candidates, in some elections—regardless of citizens' levels of education, cognitive abilities, or interest. But if candidates do not offer distinctive policy choices, or if the choices they offer are more relevant to the rich than they are to the poor, then they effectively eliminate the ability of citizens (or poor citizens) to express their policy preferences through voting. The choices offered citizens thus become a key factor helping to explain why some citizens vote and others do not—and whether voters are representative of nonvoters.

### 1.3 Economic Inequality and Voting Inequality

To consider the importance of policy choices to turnout in the context of increasing inequality, we draw on Meltzer and Richard's (1981) argument that as the mean income of a society diverges from the income of the median voter (as it does with increasing inequality), then voters below the median have more incentive to favor redistributive government policies. The logic is straightforward: if a larger share of income is concentrated in fewer hands, then the majority of the electorate has more to gain by using the tools of government (such as the tax code) to redistribute that money to themselves. If the top income quintile has 50 percent of the income, then the other 80 percent of the electorate has substantial incentive to tax the rich. If the top income quintile only has 25 percent of the income, the incentive to support redistribution is less.

The logic of this median voter model of candidate choice implies that the importance of redistributive issues for voters' candidate choices is greater in times of increasing economic inequality. This implication was at least casually supported by political events and campaign rhetoric in the 2012 presidential election.

Two limitations of the Meltzer and Richard model, however, are that: (1) it assumes that all individuals will choose to vote; and (2) it assumes that the median voter will choose the tax rate directly rather than facing a choice of policy options offered by competing parties or candidates. Our key insight is that in deciding to vote or not, the impact of increased economic inequality on turnout will be conditioned by the nature of the political choices offered by the political parties. Individuals may not be given the option by either party to substantially redistribute income from those above the median income level to those below it. They can *only* respond to the choices offered by the candidates based on their assessment of the difference in benefits (or costs) reflected in the candidates' stated policy preferences.

We hypothesize that in calculating the benefits of the choices offered, individuals compare the policy positions of each candidate to their own position: the greater the difference between the attractiveness of the two candidates' policy positions, the more likely individuals are to vote. In addition, Zipp (1985) has hypothesized that the policy positions of candidates could influence turnout through a different mechanism. He suggests that the more alienated voters are by candidates' positions, the less likely they might be to vote. Consistent with this, we hypothesize that individuals compare their own policy preferences to the positions of both candidates: the greater the difference between individuals' preferred policy positions and the position offered by the closest candidate, the less likely they are to vote.

In the context of economic inequality, with the salience of redistributive issues heightened, what happens to turnout depends on what the poor and wealthy perceive as the policy preferences of the candidates. We propose two very different (hypothetical) scenarios, one of which leads to a decrease in income bias in the face of increased economic inequality, the other an increase in income bias in the face of increased economic inequality.

In the first hypothetical scenario, income bias is predicted to decrease when the poor believe that one candidate offers significantly more in the way of redistributive policies than the other candidate. Because they see a redistributive policy choice, the poor are thus less indifferent between candidates' or parties' policy positions than they would be if the candidates offered the same positions. Believing that they have a relevant choice to make regarding redistributive policies, the poor become *more*

likely to vote as rising inequality increases the salience of redistribution. These relevant choices are also more clear to the wealthy, so with rising inequality the wealthy also become *more* likely to vote.

The aggregate effect of both groups voting at higher rates might be a constant rate of differential turnout between the poor and wealthy. But if the poor initially are voting at *much* lower rates than the rich, then the aggregate turnout effect on the poor will be larger than the effect on the rich because there are more nonvoting poor to be mobilized by increasing inequality than there are nonvoting rich to be mobilized.<sup>11</sup> Thus, in this first scenario, income bias in turnout is *decreased* by a rise in economic inequality.

In the second hypothetical scenario, income bias is predicted to increase when the poor believe that neither candidate offers a relevant choice on redistributive issues, and are thus more *alienated* than the wealthy from both parties and candidates. As income inequality increases and the salience of redistributive issues rises for the poor, this alienation leads to lower levels of turnout relative to the rich as the poor believe that the political system is not responding to or representing their interests. At the same time, with a rise in inequality and neither candidate threatening to redistribute income, the wealthy would be placing greater emphasis on a *lack* of redistribution, and therefore would be less alienated and *more* likely to vote. Thus, in this scenario we see an *increase* in income bias in turnout.

In both of these scenarios, what is key in determining who votes is not just the income or socioeconomic status of individuals but the behavior of parties and candidates. If one party offers redistribution, then the poor are likely to see a difference between the parties, and both the poor and wealthy will vote more as economic inequality increases. If neither party offers redistribution, then the poor are likely to become more alienated, and their turnout will, all things equal, decrease as economic inequality increases. In these same circumstances—with neither party offering redistribution—the wealthy would likely be less alienated and vote more. All of these observations are fully consistent with formal models of voter turnout that equate the benefits that individuals receive from voting with the utility derived from candidate policy positions.

It is important to realize here that *movement* by the candidates or parties is *not* required for increasing economic inequality to lead to increased turnout of the poor. As increasing economic inequality raises the salience of redistribution, if the poor perceive *any* difference between

11. We emphasize that since the voting we are discussing is voting on *candidates*, not *policies*, the poor would only have an increased incentive to vote *if* some candidates were promising to tax the rich.

the two parties on these issues, they would be less indifferent between the two parties, and more likely to vote; with lower initial levels of turnout of the poor, the aggregate consequence is less income bias in turnout. If the poor do not see redistributive choices offered by candidates they will be more alienated and less likely to vote, resulting in greater income bias of voters. The fundamental implication of our argument is that, theoretically, increasing economic inequality could lead to higher *or* lower income bias of voters—with the actual outcome predicated on the policy choices offered by candidates.<sup>12</sup>

## 1.4 Voter Turnout and Election Laws

Since 1972, most states have passed legislation to reduce the costs of voting by making it easier to do so; many supporters of reforms such as absentee voting, early voting, and election day registration have argued that doing so would increase voter turnout. As a result, voters in many states today may cast no-excuse absentee ballots by mail, may cast in-person votes for a lengthy period before election day, or, for those not already registered, may choose to both register and vote in person on election day.

Most of these reforms have been passed with some expectation that their adoption would lead to a more representative set of voters by increasing the turnout rates of less educated, lower-income individuals. The logic is that if states lower the costs of voting, those least likely to vote—and thus most underrepresented as voters—would be more likely to cast a ballot. Recently some states have adopted more rigorous voter identification requirements that are clearly *not* designed to make it easier to vote. Opposition to these efforts has focused on how requiring positive identification at the polls actually makes it harder for everyone to vote—especially the poor, and racial and ethnic minorities.

Our focus here is on those election law reforms intended to make voting easier, reforms that have often disappointed their supporters. One observation about some of these reforms is that making it easier to vote simply makes it easier to vote for those already inclined to do so, and thus *widens* the turnout gap between rich and poor, or the more educated and less educated.<sup>13</sup> This conflicts with the traditional view, espoused

12. Again, our claim differs from the argument of Meltzer and Richard (1981) because they do not at all consider competing parties; in their model the decisive voters simply choose the amount of redistribution by the government.

13. Rigby & Springer (2011) argue that reforms making it easier for the registered to vote will increase income bias as the set of people who are registered are wealthier than the set of people who are not registered.

forcefully by Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980), that making it easier to vote allows those at the bottom of the socioeconomic status scale (those who have the hardest time clearing the administrative hurdles) to more easily meet the legal demands, and thus be more likely to cast ballots.

As Wolfinger and Rosenstone showed, the date for the cutoff of registration to vote (i.e., the closing date, or the number of days before the election that registration closed) was a key factor in determining turnout in 1972. But what about more recent reforms? Election day registration lowers the cost of registration and voting, making it a one-step rather than two-step process. In-person early voting and No-excuse absentee voting have also been adopted in efforts to make voting easier. In-person early voting allows individuals to cast ballots prior to election day; in these states "election day" has often become "election two weeks." No-excuse absentee voting allows voters to request a mail-in ballot even if they will be in the state on election day and would be able to vote in person at a polling place. This form of voting also lowers the cost of voting as individuals do not have to wait in line at the polling place.

Our focus on these four reforms is motivated by the fact that they are most central to the ten presidential elections that we study, both in the number of states that have adopted them and in the number of individuals who take advantage of them.<sup>14</sup> And because most research on these reforms has been limited by its typical focus on one reform in isolation from others, and by relying on limited periods of time, the effects of these reforms deserve continued attention. We think it important to provide a definitive answer to the claim that these reforms increase turnout, and also consider whether they matter *more* for those individuals least likely to vote.

We provide robust evidence of both the efficacy and the limitations of these reforms. We show that reforms such as election day registration and absentee voting have increased turnout when adopted, but we also show that the effects are more modest than what some reformers may have hoped for.

## 1.5 Data and Chapter Outline

In the following chapters we present a wealth of empirical evidence based on several data sources. We rely heavily on the U.S. Census Bureau

14. A recent set of reforms we do *not* study are reforms requiring stricter forms of identification, such as photo ID; there is simply not enough data available at this time to evaluate their impact on turnout.

Current Population Survey (CPS) as it provides the largest samples of nationally representative data collected on the American population for the 1972–2008 period that allows us to distinguish between voters and nonvoters. The primary limitation of the CPS is that the data are limited to demographics and do not include any questions relating to the policy positions or political views of respondents. When we turn to questions regarding how party and candidate evaluations of citizens influence their turnout, or how much voters share the policy preferences of nonvoters, then, we must turn to other data, and for that we rely primarily on the well-established American National Election Studies (NES), a biennial survey of representative samples of U.S. citizens. In addition, we use the 2004 National Annenberg Election Study to assess the representativeness of voters' policy positions. The NES provides us with the advantage of using repeated questions over time, while the Annenberg study provides more contemporary, election-specific questions on which to base an assessment of the electorate's and voters' policy views.

Our analyses of the impact of election laws on turnout utilizes new data on election laws. To improve upon previous research we use data collected on state voter registration and election administration laws for each election since 1972.<sup>15</sup> Because we combine data on election laws at the state and year level with data on turnout at the state and year level, we can estimate the impact of those changes in electoral laws on turnout using standard cross-sectional time series techniques. This allows us to draw robust causal inferences as we observe the effect over time of changes in laws within a state, conditional on changes happening in all other states.

In chapter 2 we use data from the CPS to provide an extensive description and discussion of aggregate and demographic group-specific turnout rates since 1972, focusing on education, income, race, ethnicity, age, gender, and marital status. We find that turnout of *eligible* citizens has not declined since 1972, and that the overrepresentation of the wealthy versus the poor among voters has remained stable and large over time. However, we see substantial changes in the relative turnout rates of men and women, blacks and whites, and younger and older adults.

In chapter 3 we introduce the theoretical framework that guides our analyses and discussions of the determinants of voter turnout. We adopt a model of turnout that poses an individual's decision to vote as a reflection of the costs and benefits of engaging in such behavior. Then, for each presidential election year since 1972, we estimate turnout as a function of our demographic characteristics of interest. These estimates

15. This project was generously funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts in 2008 and 2009.

allow us to estimate the impact of one demographic characteristic (such as income) on turnout while holding other demographic characteristics (such as education and race) constant. We refer to these estimates as “conditional” relationships, and graphically represent how the conditional relationships among these characteristics and turnout vary over time and by election year. Our findings in this chapter, too, suggest that the conditional relationships between education and turnout, and income and turnout (i.e., “conditional income bias”) have been relatively stable (or modestly reduced) since 1972. We also find important changes in the conditional relationships between age, race, gender and turnout.

In chapters 2 and 3 we consider two distinct aspects of income bias because they address two very different, yet equally important, questions. In chapter 2 we examine whether poor people vote less than rich people and whether these differences change between 1972 and 2008. This is important empirical evidence, for turnout differences between the poor and wealthy likely have important political consequences for the political representation of the poor and policy outcomes. This bivariate relationship is what we mean when we use the term *income bias*, referring to turnout patterns or the representativeness of voters: the poor are a smaller percentage of voters than they are of the electorate, while the wealthy are a larger proportion of voters than they are of the electorate.

In chapter 3 we want to know if poor people vote less than rich people, *once we condition on other characteristics*. We might, of course, observe that rich people vote more than poor people; but that observation does not clarify whether they vote more simply because of life cycle effects (because when people are older they have more income, and we know that they generally vote more) or because of some other reason. We refer to conditional relationships favoring the turnout of the rich regardless of this group’s differences in other demographic respects as *conditional income bias*. Similarly, we might want to ascertain whether once we know a person’s level of education, does knowing his income tell us more about the probability that he will vote? Or if we observe that Hispanics vote less than Anglos, we might want to know if that is because Hispanics, on average, have less income and education than Anglos, or because they are on average younger than Anglos.<sup>16</sup> Or could there be another explanation? To sort out these possibilities, we would want to know if Hispanics vote less than Anglos *conditional on* levels of income, education, and age. It follows that we also want to know if these conditional relationships have changed from 1972 to 2008.

16. We use the term *Anglos* to refer to non-Hispanic whites.

In chapter 4 we describe the nature and variety of changes in voter registration and election administration laws since 1972. States vary tremendously as to how easy it is to register and to vote, and previous research suggests that these laws affect who votes because they change the cost of voting (Brians & Grofman 2001; Fitzgerald 2005; Highton 1997; Karp & Banducci 2001; Knack & White 2000; Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980). Yet most of these studies rely on cross-sectional data, and usually consider the influence of one reform at a time. We provide aggregate (state-level) analyses of the effects of changes in these rules on voter turnout. These analyses help us address the question of whether overall voter turnout has increased as a result of these legal changes. We find modest effects of election day registration, of absentee voting, and of moving the closing date for registration closer to the election on overall turnout. The effect of early voting is less clear.

In chapter 5 we consider how the policy positions offered by candidates influence voter turnout. We expect that larger differences in the policy positions of candidates are associated with a higher probability of voting. Using NES data, we examine the impact of individuals' perceptions of candidates' policy positions—how they compare to each other, and how they compare to the individuals' preferences—on individuals' decisions to vote. We find that individuals are more likely to vote when they perceive a greater policy difference between the candidates. We also find that the poorest Americans have become more indifferent between candidates in recent elections—that is, they see fewer differences between candidates now when compared to wealthier Americans.

In chapter 6 we consider whether voters and nonvoters differ in their policy preferences using both NES and Annenberg data. We find, contrary to conventional wisdom, notable differences in both of these comparisons, especially on redistributive issues. We conclude that the seeming consensus that it would not matter if everyone voted is simply wrong, and has been wrong for a long time. That these differences have been ignored in political discourse as well as scholarly research is all the more striking given the increase in economic inequality experienced in the United States.

Over the next five chapters we document changes in the demographics of turnout in the United States, and the effects of changes in electoral laws on turnout. While we show distinct changes in turnout of certain groups over the time period, we mostly highlight the remarkable stability of the overall level of turnout and the stability of the relative turnout of *most* demographic groups. In 1972, U.S. turnout was relatively low compared to that of other industrial democracies, and exhibited high levels of income bias. In 2008, after decades of various electoral reforms, U.S. turnout remained relatively low compared to that of other industrial

democracies, and still exhibited high levels of income bias. We also highlight the consistency with which voters are not representative of the electorate on redistributive issues; they were not representative in 1972 nor were they representative in 2008. In chapter 7 we return to broader questions of representation and inequality in U.S. presidential elections.