

The silent near-majority

Republicans owe much of their success to liberals who don't vote

CLOSE OBSERVERS of America know that the rules of its democracy often favour Republicans. But the party's biggest advantage may be one that is rarely discussed: turnout is just 60%, low for a rich country. Polls show that non-voters—both people uninterested in voting and those blocked by legal or economic hurdles—mainly belong to groups that tend to back Democrats.

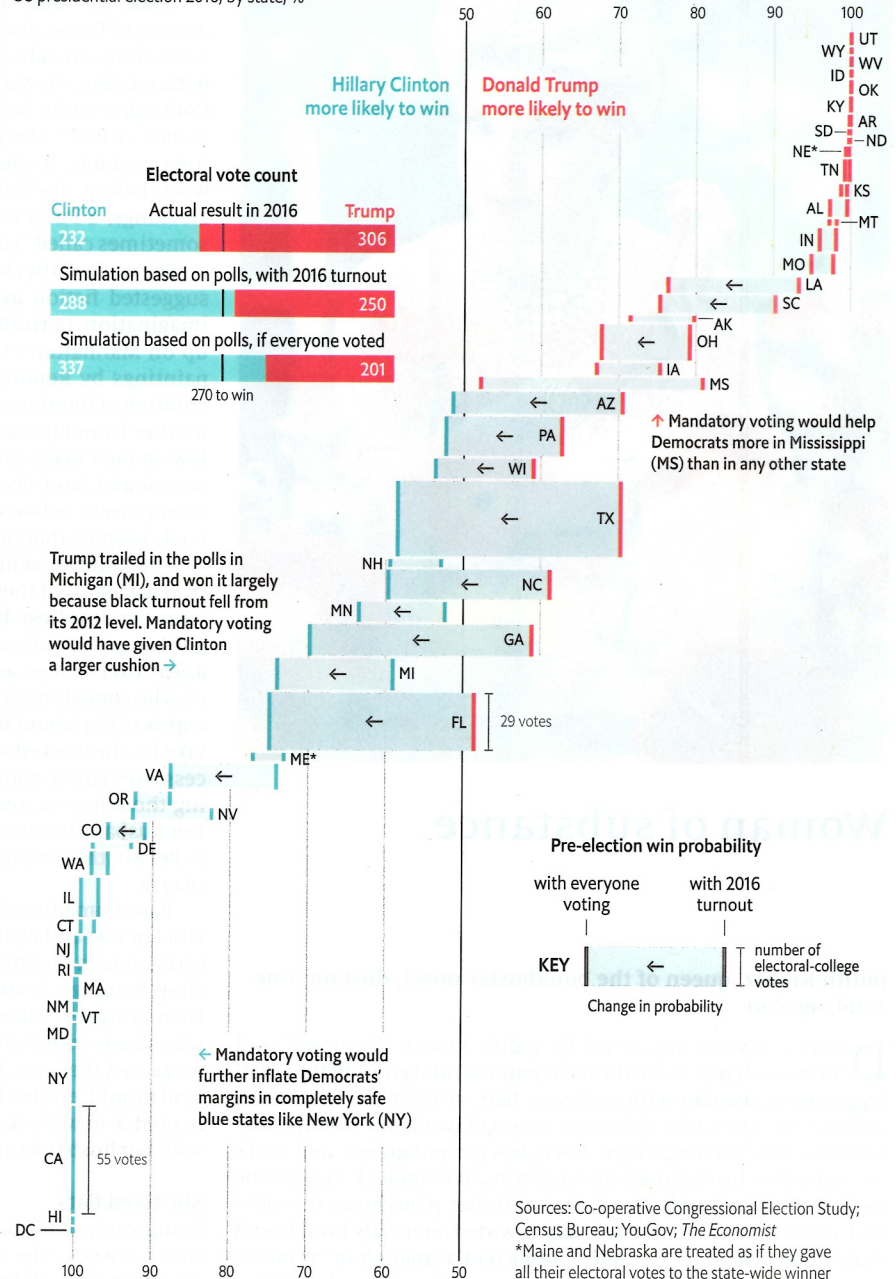
What would change if America became the 22nd country to make voting mandatory? To estimate non-voters' views, *The Economist* used the Co-operative Congressional Election Study (CCES), a 64,600-person poll led by Harvard University. The survey includes demographic data such as race and age, as well as participants' recollections of whom they voted for and verified records of whether they voted. In general, voters and non-voters from similar backgrounds had similar opinions. Using a method called "multilevel regression and post-stratification", the relationships between demography and vote choices can be used to project state-level election results—and to estimate what might have happened in the past under different rules.

Non-voters are relatively uneducated, young and non-white. The first of these traits predicts conservatism, but the others point to liberalism. If everyone voted, 30% of voters in the 21 most competitive states would not be white, up from the actual figure of 25%. As a result, in a typical cycle Democrats would add 50 electoral-college votes—enough to reverse the result in 2016.

If voting were universal, parties would not benefit from whipping their bases into a frenzy. Instead, they would need to court swing voters, pushing policies towards the centre. That centre, however, would sit to the left of its current position, putting the brunt of the adjustment on Republicans. ■

If everyone in America had voted in 2016, Hillary Clinton would probably be president

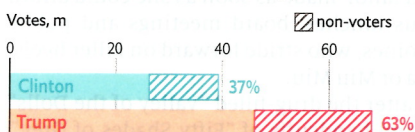
Change in pre-election win probability if everyone voted
US presidential election 2016, by state, %



If America made voting mandatory, Republicans would have to adapt their message

Whites without a college degree

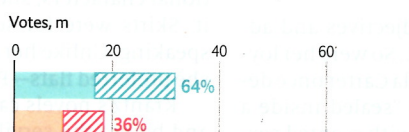
52% of 2016 voters → 48% if everyone voted



Universal turnout would make working-class whites less electorally important, but they would still make up 48% of voters. By focusing on culture-war issues like immigration, Republicans might expand their margin in this group—at the cost of alienating others.

Young people (under 30)

18% of 2016 voters → 22% if everyone voted



Adults under 30 turn out at low rates, but tend to lean left. If voting were universal, Democrats would win nearly twice as many new supporters as their rivals would. Republicans could try to shrink this gap by moderating their stance on, say, climate change.

Hispanics

8% of 2016 voters → 11% if everyone voted



Under universal voting, Hispanics' share of the electorate would rise sharply. Surprisingly, they do not list immigration among their ten most important issues. Republicans could court them most effectively by ending the campaign against Obamacare.