Public Wise

Research & Education Fund

The Unheard Third

Why voting-eligible citizens sat out the 2020 election

publicwise.org

Table of Contents

Lead Researchers:
Jessica Kalbfeld, PhD
Sara Moore, PhD

With research support from:
Maddie Covino
Ella Wind
Carolyn Reyes

Executive Summary

Relative to previous elections in the United States, turnout soared in 2020. Yet, despite this record high turnout, nearly a third of the voting-eligible population still did not cast a ballot. Why, in an election with record-breaking turnout, did so many eligible Americans not vote? Conventional wisdom says that some nonvoters are unable to vote due to barriers that keep them from casting their ballots, but many are just apathetic. At Public Wise, we were skeptical of the apathy narrative and decided to go right to the source and ask nonvoters to tell us why they chose not to participate.

From late November 2020 through February of 2021, we conducted 23 focus groups across 5 states with 148 Americans who were eligible but did not vote in the 2020 election. We asked various questions – about their relationship to democracy, trust in the voting system, and media consumption – to understand more about why so many eligible people do not vote in the United States.

One issue came up repeatedly: they do not trust the government or the people running it. Some described situations when an elected official let them down by failing to follow through on a promise. Others pointed to problems with money in politics, arguing that politicians are corrupt and only work on behalf of the wealthy. For these reasons, they do not feel like politicians are looking out for people like them.

Participants also described difficulties finding and evaluating information about current events, elections, and politics more generally. Many described a desire for independent sources because they perceive that virtually all news sources, from social media to mainstream newspaper and tv stations, are biased. For some, the challenges around finding a source of information that they perceived to be accurate and reliable undermined their confidence in themselves to make decisions in the voting booth.

Another theme that emerged consistently was a lack of trust in the voting system. In no small part due to difficulties finding and evaluating information, many did not have the information they needed to understand processes related to elections and voting, which undermined their confidence in those processes. Some described concerns about voter fraud and election security. But concerns were not limited to voting processes. Many also described issues with the electoral system, noting the inherent unfairness of the electoral college and issues with voter suppression.

While barriers to voting did not come up frequently as the main reason for not voting in 2020, some participants did cite difficulties getting registered, especially after a move, as well as concerns about COVID, the potential for long lines, and childcare issues. These difficulties only added to existing frustration and made them even more suspicious of the voting system.

Taken together, these themes point to high levels of disillusionment regarding the voting system and government. The overwhelming majority of nonvoters are not apathetic; they are disappointed and frustrated due to a lack of trust, transparency, and accountability in the government, voting systems, and media environment. Our conversations suggest that they are unlikely to trust the system, and therefore vote, until they see substantial shifts in the level of accountability and transparency in government and our voting systems.

Assuming that nonvoters are apathetic makes it easy for voter-oriented programs and organizations to ignore nonvoters. If they are apathetic, what is the point in trying to reach them? The knowledge that many of them are disillusioned due to a lack of trust in a system that is not transparent and does not seem to value accountability requires reframing what is possible and who is responsible. The apathy narrative of nonvoters implicates individuals abdicating their civic responsibilities. The disillusionment narrative of nonvoters implicates institutions that have failed in their social responsibilities.

Key Takeaways

- Nonvoters do not trust the government or those affiliated with it due to a lack of follow-through and accountability among elected officials.
- Many nonvoters cite low trust in our voting system stemming from concerns about the fairness of our electoral system, as well as voter fraud and election security.
- Difficulty finding and evaluating information about current events and elections is a pervasive issue that undermines trust in our voting system and government.
- Social and structural barriers to casting a ballot did not emerge as a key issue for the vast majority of nonvoters, but they did heighten concerns about the fairness and transparency of the voting system and whether or not it can be trusted.
- Due to deficits of trust, transparency, and accountability, nonvoters described high levels of disillusionment toward our voting system and government.
- We found virtually no evidence that apathy is driving (non)voting behavior. Instead, nonvoters choose not to vote because they are frustrated and disappointed with the existing system and the lack of trust, transparency, and accountability that defines it in their eyes.
- Reframing our understanding of nonvoters as disillusioned rather than apathetic shifts the responsibility of democracy-focused organizations to address the roots of disillusionment in the electorate, and to engage with potential voters who are experiencing disillusionment, rather than assuming they are unreachable.

Introduction

Relative to other democracies, voter turnout in the United States is low. In 2020, a year in which voter turnout was higher than it had been at any point since 1980,[1] more than a third (~38 percent) of the voting age population still did not cast a ballot.[2] In 2016, nearly half (~45 percent) did not vote. Midterm turnout is typically even lower, with about 54 percent of the voting age population not casting a ballot in 2018 and roughly two-thirds not voting in 2014. U.S. turnout in the 2016 election ranked 30th out of the 35 countries for which data are available.[3] While some of the voting age population cannot vote due to felony disenfranchisement[4] and guardianship/conservatorship laws,[5] ineligibility only accounts for a small share of the nonvoting population in the United States. Roughly 33 percent of those eligible did not vote in 2020, and 40 percent did not vote in 2016.

Existing explanations for the low turnout of voting-eligible citizens in the U.S. usually point to two issues. First, we know that some Americans face barriers to casting a ballot due to widespread (and growing) voter suppression efforts and social and structural inequalities that make it harder to vote.[6] But there are also many Americans that choose not to vote, despite being both eligible and able. Their abstention is usually attributed to apathy. It is difficult to say what constitutes apathy because it usually encompasses every reason for not voting that is not a barrier, but it does imply some level of indifference or disinterest. Whether or not this is an accurate characterization, however, remains unclear. Existing data do show that nonvoters are, on average, less engaged with news, less informed about current events, and less interested in politics.[7] However, evidence also shows that they are highly dissatisfied with government and skeptical that voting can make a difference.[8] This suggests that, at least for some, sentiments other than apathy may underlie their unwillingness to participate.

Given these outstanding questions, we wanted to understand more about Americans who do not vote even though they are eligible to do so. In the months following the 2020 election, we conducted a series of focus groups where we spoke to 148 people who did not vote in the 2020 election. Contrary to conventional wisdom, we did not find evidence of widespread apathy.

We spoke with a diverse group of people from five different states with different racial/ethnic backgrounds, priorities, and social locations. But we found that they all had one thing in common: disillusionment. They had many different reasons for not voting, but a lack of trust, transparency, and accountability when it comes to our voting system and government were central to them all. Not voting is a choice they make either because they do not feel that voting will make a difference or because they feel that not voting is the better option given the choices that the system offers. By not voting, they are sending a message. The problem is that no one is hearing it.

---

[1] Drew Desilver, "Turnout soared in 2020 as nearly two-thirds of eligible U.S. voters cast ballots for president," Pew Research, 2020
[2] All turnout estimates for both the voting age and voting-eligible populations come from Michael P. McDonald's United States Elections Project at electproject.org, accessed on March 1, 2022.
[3] Drew Desilver, "In past elections, U.S. trailed most developed countries in voter turnout," Pew Research, 2020.
[4] See the Public Wise piece on felony disenfranchisement
[5] See the Public Wise piece on guardianship/conservatorship laws and voting rights
[6] See the Public Wise piece on social and structural barriers to voting
[7] "The 100 Million Project: The Untold Story of American Non-Voters"
[8] "Topline and Methodology," Medill School of Journalism/Ipsos

Background: Existing Explanations for Nonvoters

Two explanations are usually assumed for why so many eligible Americans do not vote. First, some eligible Americans are unable to vote because of barriers that prevent them from voting or that at least make it prohibitively difficult to do so. What constitutes a barrier will vary from survey to survey. However, they generally include provisions like voter ID requirements, restrictions on vote by mail, and reductions in the availability of drop boxes, alongside social and structural inequalities that can make it harder for some to vote. Nonvoters that choose not to vote, despite being eligible and able to vote without a barrier, are often assumed to be apathetic. For example, describing their findings from a survey conducted with NPR, the Medill School of Journalism[9] wrote "apathy prevails for nonvoters – it just doesn't matter." They go on to point out that "only about one in five nonvoters said that something prevented them from voting in 2020, such as fear of exposure to COVID-19, having to work or confusion about the voting process, while over 80% said they simply chose to sit this one out," adding that nonvoters are "alienated from the political process and isolated from active voters, creating a sort of echo chamber of apathy."

This narrative has been widely adopted in articles and discussions about nonvoters,[10] but the extent to which it captures why some choose not to vote is unclear. We know of no standard definition that outlines the concept of apathy as it relates to civic participation. And in practice, it is used in reference to many different reasons for not voting – including, but not limited to disengagement, not liking politics, or even laziness – that shift from article to article. Indeed, essentially any reason for not voting that cannot be considered a tangible barrier to casting a ballot is usually attributed to the broad umbrella term of apathy. Rather than being a useful concept to describe a particular type of nonvoter, apathy has become a catchall for anyone that is eligible to vote, but chooses not to do so, regardless of the reason.

Beyond the ambiguities surrounding the meaning of apathy, the evidence that nonvoters who choose not to vote are apathetic is thin. The term apathy usually implies some level of indifference or disinterest. It suggests that this group of nonvoters does not care about the outcome of elections or that they are fine with the status quo.

Surveys of nonvoters do show that they are slightly less engaged with the news,[11] are less informed, and, for younger nonvoters specifically, a little less interested in politics.[12] However, they also show that nonvoters are highly dissatisfied with government. For example, when the Medill/NPR poll cited above asked 2020 nonvoters if they feel things in this country are going in the right direction or if they feel things have gotten off on the wrong track, only 25 percent of nonvoters said things are going in the right direction while 73 percent said they are on the wrong track. Their sentiments are not that different from those of voters; 31 percent of voters feel things are going in the right direction and 68 percent say they are on the wrong track.

---

[9] "Nonvoters 2020: Counted Out," Medill School of Journalism, NPR, and Ipsos
[10] See the Public Wise piece on apathy
[11] "Topline and Methodology," Medill School of Journalism/Ipsos
[12] "The 100 Million Project: The Untold Story of American Non-Voters"

Likewise, when they asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement "I'm basically satisfied with the way the country is going so I don't need to vote," only 15 percent of nonvoters agreed, while 79 percent disagreed. The term apathy also does not resonate among nonvoters when asked to describe themselves. When the Knight Foundation[13] asked 2016 nonvoters "when you don't vote, what would you say is your main reason for not voting?," only 1% selected the answer "lazy/apathy".

While there are almost certainly some truly apathetic nonvoters, the evidence has not yet settled if it is as widespread as conventional wisdom suggests. Because there is no standard definition of apathy, it has been used to explain a range of reasons for not voting. And even with a widely agreed upon meaning, existing data generally do not provide the context necessary to determine whether a reason such as disengagement from current events or not liking politics is due to apathy or something else. Poll data suggest that it might be something else, given that the majority of nonvoters are unsatisfied with where we are and where we are going as a country. But with existing data, there is no way to be sure.

[13] "100 Million Project, Full Topline Results," Knight Foundation

Data and Methods

Given these outstanding questions, we wanted to contribute to our understanding of nonvoters and why they do not vote by letting them tell us in their own words in a series of focus groups. Unlike surveys, whose topics and question responses are limited to a predefined list, focus groups allowed us to discuss several pre-selected relevant topics in-depth as well as any new ones that emerged throughout the interview. Focus groups offer more opportunity to ask "why?," ask about emotions, and ask follow-up questions to better understand responses.

There are several limitations to focus group research. First, focus groups are not representative samples – the group is biased towards those willing to participate in the research. In the case of this project, this bias actually worked in our favor. We were interested in what would keep people from the polls in the context of the highly charged election of 2020, especially in states where the outcome was not well predicted. The participants we recruited were people who are engaged enough to agree to spend two hours talking about politics in a room with other people, but still did not come out to vote.

The second limitation is that focus groups, by virtue of being groups, may hamper full and open expression on the part of the participants. We tried to mitigate this by using highly skilled moderators who could foster a comfortable participatory atmosphere and by grouping participants based on salient cultural characteristics such as race/ethnicity, age, and ideology in the hopes that they would feel more comfortable being candid.

We also believe that the remote nature of our focus groups helped because people were in the comfort of their own homes rather than sitting in a room with strangers. Finally, any research where you ask respondents about their actions and motivations – such as interviews, focus groups, or even surveys – are necessarily only measuring what the respondent perceives their actions and motivations to have been in retrospect, or what they want the interviewer and other respondents to think their actions and motivations were.[14] For this project, we were trying to measure attitudes more so than actions and the focus group was the best way to hear from a large group of nonvoters to get a sense of their attitudes towards a number of topics without assuming motivation ahead of time.

From the end of November 2020 through February 2021, we conducted 23 focus groups with 148 people that did not vote in the 2020 election.[15] In addition to stratifying by state, we stratified groups by race/ethnicity, partisan affiliation,[16] and age. Table 5.1 provides a summary of this breakdown. All

[14] For a discussion of the limitations of certain qualitative methods of research, see Jerolmack, C., & Khan, S. (2014). Talk Is Cheap: Ethnography and the Attitudinal Fallacy. Sociological Methods & Research, 43(2), 178–209.

[15] We spoke to 149 respondents in total, however one respondent turns out to have voted in the 2020 election. This respondent was in our group of Hispanic nonvoters in Nevada. Although he made it past the screening process, it became apparent that he had voted about half way through the focus group. We excluded his responses from coding and do not include them in any of our analysis. In addition, we considered whether the responses from the rest of that group should be discarded, but they were not outliers compared to what we heard from the rest of the groups. In fact, they touched on all the same themes, with many of the same sentiments that we heard from other respondents in our other groups. Therefore, we have retained responses from the other members of that focus group in our analysis.

[16] Given that they shared similarly conservative views, we ultimately combined the Republican and Independent/Unaffiliated focus groups following our focus groups in Georgia.

focus group participants were eligible to vote in 2020 and around 81% said that they were registered to vote.[17]

Our focus groups were held in five states: Arizona, Georgia,[18] Nevada, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. We chose these states because they were all states with close election results, some of which were unexpected, in which eligible nonvoters would have been under the most pressure to participate because of the influence they could have had on the outcome of the election. Additionally, we were curious to hear from eligible nonvoters who did not participate despite the focused get out the vote and voter influence campaigns directed at their states. In addition, Georgia had a runoff election and we were interested to see how 2020 general election nonvoters were feeling about the upcoming runoff and if they thought they might participate given the result of the general election.

Due to the timing of the runoff election in Georgia, we conducted the focus groups in that state in late 2020, while the rest of the states were conducted in early 2021. The different timing also necessitated that we use two external research firms to aid in recruiting and logistical support for the focus groups. We partnered with Decision Point Research to conduct the Georgia focus groups and with Schlesinger Group to conduct the groups in Arizona, Nevada, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania.

Public Wise provided both Decision Point Research and Schlesinger Group with a screener to recruit appropriate participants for the study. Participants were required to be citizens, live in the state of interest, fit the demographic profile for the groups we were trying to fill, and not have voted in the 2020 election. Both firms recruited participants using online advertisements, as well as soliciting from lists, and targeted recruitment via affinity groups where necessary. Participants were offered an incentive for their time and the research firms each paid participants on completion of their focus group.[19] Each group was scheduled to last two hours.

We wrote detailed discussion guides for the focus groups to ensure that topics of interest were covered while allowing for discovery over the course of the conversation. We asked questions about a variety of topics that might affect the decision to vote or not vote, including their relationship to democracy and to their communities, their trust in our voting system, their past voting behavior, why they chose not to vote in 2020, what they think would have been necessary for them to vote in 2020, how they get information about current events and elections, what kind of outreach they experienced related to the 2020 elections, and how that outreach made them feel.

The discussion guides for all states were substantially the same, although there were some marked differences between the guide for Georgia and the guide for the rest of the states. The Georgia discussion guide included a section on the runoff elections, which was not included for the other states. For the other states, that section was replaced with questions about terminology in political

[17] While this was not a representative sample, 81% registration is not that far off from the registration rate in the general population. Estimates of voting age American adults who are registered to vote range from 72 to 86%. According to the Medill School of Journalism, about 70% of the voting age citizens in the US who did not vote in 2020 were registered to vote (See the report from Medill). That makes our respondents a little more likely to be registered to vote than the average nonvoter but approximately as likely to be registered to vote as any other adult citizen.

[18] All Georgia focus groups were conducted prior to their Senate runoff elections on January 5, 2021.

[19] Scheduled participants were paid if the group was canceled or moved on behalf of Public Wise. Participants were only not paid if they confirmed for a group and then failed to show up.

outreach, specifically group-specific descriptors that politicians might use to connect with different demographic groups. Additionally, the groups outside of Georgia were scheduled to begin on January 10th, 2021. Following the events at the Capitol on January 6th, we added a section to the beginning of the discussion guide to ask about reactions to January 6th. The reasons for this were two-fold: we were interested in reactions to those events and we felt that, given the political nature of our discussion, it would be important to get that topic out of the way and clear the air to allow for an open discussion of voting.

We hired professional moderators to lead the focus groups. Moderators were matched to the demographics of the group they were leading.[20] Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, all focus groups took place remotely over zoom. Technical services were provided by both external research firms we worked with for the groups they recruited. They set up the zoom rooms, provided links to the participants and observers, managed technical issues that arose during the groups, recorded the groups, and managed the participant compensation. All groups were observed by Public Wise staff. In addition, we invited observers from nonprofit groups in each of the states. Observers kept their cameras off and were identified only with initials. This was the best digital mimic of observers behind a two-way mirror intended to keep the observers from influencing the groups in any way.

Public Wise staff watched all the focus groups in real time to take note of recurring themes and ensure that the moderators were eliciting high-quality data. We were provided with a video recording and a written transcript for all focus groups. At the conclusion of all the focus groups, we began open-coding the transcripts and creating a codebook. Once the codebook was created and we met as a team to make sure that it was consistent with the themes observed during the recording of the focus groups, the codebook was used to code the remaining transcripts. Throughout the coding process, we met to discuss themes from the transcripts and revise the codebook to account for new themes as they emerged or refine previous codes as necessary and to ensure the codes were being applied consistently across transcripts. Once the transcripts were all coded, we went back to see how often we encountered each of the codes, noting those that appeared repeatedly or in a substantial majority of the focus groups. We then went back and looked at the quotes to which these codes were assigned in the transcripts. This gave us a better sense of the topics to which they applied, which allowed us to refine our understanding of certain codes and collapse other codes that were redundant.

[20] Qualitative Research best practices generally involve matching the race and ethnicity of interviewers to respondents when possible. This is based on the finding that respondents are generally more likely to share their unvarnished feelings with an interviewer who they perceive to be part of their group. See Burlew, et al., for empirically validated best practices for researching diverse groups. For this project, we had an African American male moderator for all of our groups with African American nonvoters; an Asian American female moderator for our focus group with AAPI nonvoters in Georgia; a Hispanic, Spanish-English bilingual female moderator for all of our focus groups with Hispanic nonvoters; a white female moderator with a southern accent for our groups with white nonvoters in Georgia; and a white female moderator with a subtle northeastern accent for the rest of our white nonvoter groups.

Findings and Discussion

Nonvoters in our focus groups described various reasons for not voting, but most of them came down to a lack of trust, transparency, and accountability. They do not trust the government, our voting system, or the media, largely because they do not feel there is enough transparency and accountability in any of them. One of the biggest takeaways from our data is that nonvoters are not apathetic, but what we would describe as disillusioned. They are frustrated and disappointed by a system that does not work the way they feel it should. They choose not to vote not out of apathy, but because they feel like their participation makes no difference or because they do not want to participate in any system they do not believe in.

Deficits of Trust and Accountability

A major theme we encountered among nonvoters was a lack of trust. They do not trust our current system of government or any of the people in it. One of the main reasons is that they do not believe that politicians tell the truth. Among the nonvoters we talked to, the belief that politicians lie was pervasive. Like this Puerto Rican nonvoter from Pennsylvania,[21] many believe that politicians will say whatever it takes to get elected without following through once they get in office.

> "I just don't feel that they're really being truthful. Their purpose, what they really want out of their term. I just feel they have their own agenda. That's what keeps me from not trying to even learn, because it's like, they can tell you what you want to hear, but is it really going to follow through?"

This sentiment is echoed by a young Black nonvoter from North Carolina. When we asked what would have helped them vote in the last election, they did not bring up issues with voting accessibility. Instead, they said they need more trust, which, in their eyes, comes from elected officials following through on promises.

> "Just trust. More trust in the government, and them being more truthful about what they say. Not even just saying it. Just about action. You got, when you say you're going to do something, like the government, we're going to help the people, we're going to give them stimulus, you got to be on time. You can't, there's no delay. That's what's killing me, the trust. Trust issue."

[21] All descriptions that accompany quotes from nonvoters are intended to identify the focus group from which the quote comes. They will not all include the same descriptors because the focus groups were not stratified by the same characteristics every time.

Another reason that the nonvoters in our focus groups do not trust the system is because they believe wealthy people and corporations have an outsized influence on it. For example, many participants expressed the belief that elections are decided by the wealthy. From the perspective of this White Democrat from Nevada, the power and resources of the wealthiest people cannot be overcome by voting.

> "I don't like Trump, but I didn't necessarily like Biden either. I couldn't get behind a candidate. Sometimes I feel like the wealthiest in this country are running everything anyway. My vote doesn't matter. It's a matter of special interests, where the money is, and matter of fact, an election, most of the time to me is determined by who spends the most money on their campaign."

For some participants, the issue goes beyond campaigns. This White Republican from Georgia explained that they believe campaign funding is essentially transactional. As they see it, elected officials use their positions to reward donors and enrich themselves.

> "OK. [Laughs] I just feel like it's, you know like you said, it has become kind of a joke. When we've had the last couple of elections, I feel like other countries look at us and kind of laugh and wonder what's going on. And it just feels like you've got these congress and senate races. It's – and that there's no term limits. And I feel like, you know you see all this money – I've mentioned this – where all the money is thrown into it. **I feel like there's a reason all that money is being thrown in. There's some kind of gain to be had by someone who's putting that kind of backing into something. And, you know you see most of these people go in. They don't have, you know they're – in a lot of cases they're well-off. But when they come out, they're millionaires or multi-millionaires because of the access they have to things.** And it just feels very, I guess – I don't want to say rigged – but just very one-sided. I don't think when the country was created that these positions were made to be life-long positions. I don't think a guy that's 83 years old and has been in politics his whole life and had a silver spoon his whole life, has any idea of what the real people are like and has no desire to get those people to better things, I guess, other than themselves." [emphasis added]

Mistrust due to false promises and the perception of corruption among elected officials made many participants feel unrepresented in government. Like the participant above, some pointed to a disconnect between elected officials and those they represent. They do not feel like elected officials understand or care about them or people like them because they are out of touch with the way their constituents live. A nonvoter from one of our focus groups with Hispanic nonvoters in Pennsylvania summed it up like this:

> "Yes, similarly, I just don't feel advocated for by U.S. democracy. Just by politicians who claim to represent that. It's just like for somebody, this is just – I'm not necessarily as close with my family, but component members of my family are immigrants, and felons, and I feel like, a large majority of my life, but they haven't really felt advocated for, and they've struggled under laws and regulations that keep them the way that they are. I just always have kind of felt disengaged from that. Also again, I'm a lesbian, I can't really – I don't – especially after this year, I have not felt very advocated for in terms of that aspect of my identity. Again, even if we're talking about class, I could definitely see that through other family members in my life who had it harder. I haven't – people who have had similar stories to them, I just have never – just through that, and through experience that I had, I've never really felt advocated for."

Some might say that nonvoters can address these issues by voting for candidates that follow through on their promises and work on behalf of the public instead of wealthy donors. The problem is that they do not see any evidence that voting is an effective way to hold elected officials accountable. As this young Black nonvoter from Georgia explains, voting is a "gamble" because even when your preferred candidate wins, there is no way to hold elected officials to the platforms on which they campaigned.

> "I think it's just like a way to engage, but it's so fleeting, because like, you could vote and, you know the elections can go in your favor as far as who you voted for. But those individuals have two-to-four-year terms. They can get in office and just act the A-S-S. And a lot of times, a lot of them do. They'll run on one platform. They'll get in office. And you'll be, like what in the world? And just like, what is the purpose of me even voting, if I have to hold you accountable? Like, I have a job. I like to sleep. I like to do everything. It's like, you know it's not a guarantee. It's just like, it's still a gamble even if you do vote, as far as what the results would be. Because, you know humans are humans. They're going to eventually do what they want to do."

In fact, as this exchange between three nonvoters in the Pennsylvania White Republican, Independent or unaffiliated focus group illustrates, they seem resigned to the idea that there is no mechanism for ensuring that elected officials do their job effectively.

> Participant 1: "But what they stand for and what they do is two different things…"
>
> Participant 2: "That's right and what happens if you don't do what you're supposed to at your job? You get fired…"
>
> Participant 3: "They don't."

They choose not to vote because they see no evidence that voting – or anything else – is an effective strategy to ensure that elected officials will follow through and deliver for their constituents. As one White nonvoter in the Pennsylvania Republican, Independent, or unaffiliated focus group explains, they do not care to vote if elected officials cannot follow through on their promises.

> "I personally wanted to vote. I didn't actually vote in the election for our state representative, but I wanted to because of what he was promising us with the internet that was supposed to come to the rural areas that was supposed to be better. That was supposed to give us more opportunities. And guess what never happened? So, now I'm going to be less likely to want to vote in the local election also. If they can't bring what they promised, I don't care."

Lack of Candidate Choice

Largely because of their distrust in the system and the people in it, many participants also expressed that one of the major reasons they chose to sit out was because they did not like the candidates on the ballot in 2020. Similar to some of the sentiments expressed above, they did not believe that either of the candidates were looking out for people like them. Importantly, this sentiment did not stem from any specific policy or position expressed by Biden or Trump. Instead, they saw no evidence that the average person is the priority for them or the parties they represent. As one White Independent nonvoter from Georgia explained:

> "You had the coronavirus outbreak stuff and then you had Black Lives Matter and then you just had, you know, the stuff that Trump does, which is just, you know, does weird things for himself and it just kind of really made me feel very uncomfortable on both ends… I feel like everybody had their own agenda and not [America's] agenda. It just drove me away based on all the stuff revolving around politics and unfortunately it persuaded me not to vote again."

Although they may have different perspectives on what is in the best interest of the public, the sense that politicians are not paying attention to what citizens want or need was shared by many different participants. For example, a Black nonvoter from Georgia explained that Democrats and Republicans are not that different because neither are going to do what is best for the people:

> "Neither one of them really have your best interest at heart… it's kind of like they say… one is the right-wing, one is the left-wing, but it's still all the same bird."

Some participants expressed frustration with the way the system constrains their choices. Talking about their preference for other candidates, especially candidates from the primaries, many said that they did not support or feel represented by either Biden or Trump and would have liked to vote for someone else. However, they knew that voting third party or writing someone in would have no meaningful impact on the outcome of the election. As one White Democrat from Arizona put it, it is "kind of the same thing as just not voting in the first place." Many feel like the system creates the illusion of choice where it does not actually exist.

Information Uncertainty

Outside of their distrust of government, we also frequently encountered a theme that we refer to as "information uncertainty." We use information uncertainty to refer to a range of issues related to finding and evaluating credible information about current events, politics, candidates, and voting. One of the main ways that focus group participants experienced information uncertainty was through difficulty finding independent and unbiased sources and/or evaluating the quality of information from sources. People do not trust the mainstream media because they perceive it all to be biased in one way or another. At the same time, many also acknowledge that the information they encounter on social media is biased and claim that this adds to difficulties evaluating the information they encounter. This leaves them unsure of what they should or should not believe when they are trying to find trustworthy information about current events. A participant from our focus group with White Republicans, Independents, and unaffiliated nonvoters in Pennsylvania explained it this way:

> "I think with the social media and the regular media, you just do not know what to believe anymore. You could read 100 percent one way, 100 percent the other way. Whatever you're looking to find, you're going to be able to find. It's very hard to know what to believe."

While his concern was primarily about finding unbiased information regarding current events, some participants also had trouble finding reliable information about elected officials' records and candidate platforms, especially at the local level, as well as specific information about how our electoral system works and how to vote, as this quote from a Black nonvoter in North Carolina shows:

> "This is the thing too, that I was thinking… The electoral college, because I Googled these, and I tried to find these – it is nowhere on the internet at all, this information. Who is in the electoral college? Who chooses the electoral college, and what is the process of who's in it? You Google that, it does not give you [a] defined answer. That is the problem. That electoral college, whatever that means, that's the secret. Because you cannot find that information nowhere. Can you tell me? Do you know?"

For some, like this White Democrat from Georgia, difficulties finding and evaluating information leaves them feeling like they do not have the information they need to vote.

> "I guess this is really a barrier I've probably created for myself, but maybe feeling uneducated about everything on the ballot. Because I feel like in this recent election, like there's a lot out there about the presidential election, but there's so much more on the ballot than that. And I feel like it can be a little bit overwhelming if you feel like you don't know about all the different issues and how you want to vote for everything."

For others, difficulties finding information about how certain processes work undermined their trust in those processes. For example, this nonvoter from the focus group with Republicans, Independents, and unaffiliated nonvoters in Pennsylvania did not want to register to vote because they did not know enough about it:

> "Yes, I figured I'd at least register. I probably should have a long time ago. I just never knew anything about it. My whole family has been on my case for years about it, but I just didn't feel right doing it because I didn't know what was going on."

Likewise, some nonvoters mentioned skepticism or downright disbelief about the time it took some states to count the votes in 2020. Recall that due to the influx of vote by mail ballots and different practices for counting them from state to state,[22] some states took longer to count their ballots than others. With no evidence to back it up, many politicians on the political right, including former President Trump, insisted that this was evidence of election rigging.[23] And because many people do not understand how this process works and why it was different from previous elections, these lies were effective at eroding the public's trust in the ballot counting process, especially when it comes to voting by mail. Several nonvoters mentioned the time it took to count the votes and how it was suspicious as they were talking about their lack of trust in voting.

Lack of Trust and Transparency in the Voting and Electoral System

Many of the nonvoters we spoke with also expressed that they do not trust voting or our electoral system. For some, this lack of trust was related to information uncertainty, as some did not understand how voting processes work and therefore did not fully trust them. But that was not the only reason people do not trust our voting system. Some offered little to no elaboration on why they do not trust the system. For example, this White Democrat from Georgia alluded to some vague suspicions, but ultimately conceded that they do not really know how everything works – even though it is clear to them that not everything is working well:

> "I mean, I just agree with some of the other points made. I think that there's, I don't know, I think there's a lot that goes into the process that isn't always like, maybe monitored fairly, or I don't know exactly what all goes down. But it's become clear, I think, with time that there are some issues with our like election processes in America."

[22] For example, Pennsylvania law does not allow election administrators to process vote-by-mail ballots until the morning of the election, while some other states process them as they receive them.
[23] See section on "ballot dumping".

Others provided more specific explanations for their lack of trust in the voting system. Outside of the more general distrust described above, these explanations fell into one of two groups. First, many explained that they do not trust voting because of how our electoral system works from a more macro level; things like the electoral college, redistricting practices and gerrymandering, and voter suppression. They see our system as unfair because of these characteristics. Although not everyone understood what the electoral college is or how it works (as the participant that talked about not being able to find information about it showed), they do know that it creates circumstances under which candidates can win the presidency without winning the popular vote. They see this as unfair. For example, this White Democrat from Georgia brought up how the electoral college incentivizes gerrymandering, and said that getting rid of it would ultimately make them trust the voting system more:

> "I think one of the things that would make me feel better about it is getting rid of the Electoral College…Because the original intent of the Electoral College no longer exists and with gerrymandering and redistricting and all kinds of things that people who want to stay in office for life do to maintain the system. I think that the Electoral College just helps them to continue maintaining the system rather than allowing the popular vote to be what's recorded and wins the election."

It is not clear why they think the electoral college incentivizes gerrymandering, given that states (with the exception of Maine and Nebraska) award all their electoral votes based on who wins their popular vote. Nevertheless, they know that winning the electoral college, and therefore the presidency, is not necessarily contingent on winning the nationwide popular vote. And they see that as related to the processes through which parties attempt to maintain power through gerrymandering. And this makes them trust the process less.

Concerns about the fairness of the voting system were a big part of why some do not feel like their vote counts. Some specifically cited the electoral college as the reason, but some also talked about how they have never felt like their vote mattered or counted because they were from a so-called red or blue state where the outcome of any election was easily predicted. For example, this White Democrat from Georgia mentions both the electoral college and how Georgia's elections have historically been Republican dominated.

> "As far as like presidential elections, I guess this is the second presidential election I could have even voted in. And I guess I don't know, I think actually, this election kind of has changed my opinion some because in the past, I've maybe felt like I couldn't see that my vote counted. But then, like with this election seeing how close Georgia was and kind of what those results look like kind of changed my opinion on that. But I know in the past, I've I guess felt like my vote didn't really count with the way the Electoral College works and kind of how Georgia is historically."

A young Black nonvoter from North Carolina had a similar sentiment about being from a state historically known as Republican.

> "North Carolina is kind of known as a Republican state, so what's the point in me voting if North Carolina's labeled as something already."

The second source of distrust in the voting system came from concerns about issues with the voting process. While the concerns above were related to how the electoral system is structured and how that creates unfairness in the voting system, issues with the voting process were related to things like voter fraud, faulty technology, and other conspiracy theories related to the distribution, receipt, and counting of ballots. Importantly, issues with our electoral system (e.g., the electoral college and voter suppression) emerged primarily in non-Republican/Independent/unaffiliated identifying focus groups.[24] In contrast, low trust in the voting process emerged in all groups, but in different ways. Non-Republican/Independent/unaffiliated participants were far more likely to express some level of uncertainty about issues with the voting process rather than being confident that fraud occurs. They would say things like "you just don't know for sure" or express that there is probably some level of fraud on both sides. However, consistent with the evidence,[25] some would also add that even though voter fraud occurs, it is not at a level that would change the outcome of any election.

[24] Recall that all groups stratified by partisan identity included only White participants, while other groups were stratified only by race/ethnicity (Black, Hispanic, and AAPI), except for focus groups with Black voters, which were stratified by age (18-35 and 35+) as well. This was due to recruitment challenges and finite resources and not an assumption that racial/ethnic groups are ideologically homogeneous. For the most part non-white respondents and white Democrats gave similar responses across most topics, in comparison to white Republicans and Independents. The major exception was among Hispanic nonvoters in Nevada and Arizona, some of whom patterned with non-white and white Democratic respondents and some of whom patterned with white Republicans.

[25] See our 2021 piece on Voter Fraud.

In contrast, White Republican, Independent, and unaffiliated nonvoters were more likely to insist that some level of fraud or deception occurred and that it affected the results and therefore their trust in the voting system. Some repeated conspiracy theories pushed by the far right, mentioning things like dead people voting, SD cards full of votes, and late-night vote drops during the ballot counting. Others provided unverified anecdotes such as how they or someone they know received "three ballots in the mail"[26] or they saw people "forge documents." Several also pointed to lax voter ID requirements and how they provide the opportunity for people to engage in voter fraud. Beyond their issues with voter fraud, some also pointed to issues with election technology. They believe that voting machines are outdated and can be manipulated to change votes. They also do not understand why the machines take so long, given that they are electronic, or why vote counts sometimes vary when recounts are done.

Not trusting the voting process or electoral system led many to express a desire for greater transparency in the voting process. More specifically, multiple people mentioned that they would trust the system more if they could see where their vote was going. As this White Democrat from Georgia put it:

> "I wish there's a way that you could see that your vote actually went to the right person and wasn't miscounted or got counted how you wanted it to. There seems to be a lot of confusion in the air about votes, all these recounts, and I would think it would be a more straightforward process where you vote for who you want to vote and it was counted accurately."

Of course, it is hard to ignore the broader context in which this lack of trust and desire for vote confirmation exist. This participant, and many others noted the "confusion in the air" and "all these recounts," which came out of continuous attempts by former President Trump and others on the right to erode confidence in the election and advance what is now being called The Big Lie. One reason that they were effective is because, as we described above, many people do not really understand election processes; and this lack of awareness was exacerbated by several unprecedented features of the 2020 election. For example, COVID-19 loomed large over this election. And while it did keep people from voting (as we describe in more detail below), it also introduced a great deal of chaos, unpredictability, and uncertainty into the election. Many states temporarily changed their voting processes to make sure that voting remained accessible during the pandemic.[27]

[26] There were reports during the lead up to the 2020 election of people receiving multiple ballot applications and multiple official ballots. There is no indication, however, that anyone successfully voted twice due to duplicate ballots.

[27] See work by the Voting Rights Lab documenting COVID-19 related state-by-state changes to voting laws.

For the first time, these changes made some Americans aware of the substantial differences in election administration not just from state to state, but even between precincts in the same state. For some, this became a source of confusion and ultimately distrust. And it was not just due to COVID. Many nonvoters expressed a sense of confusion due to "everything going on," including the unconventional nature of the Trump presidency and campaign, economic issues caused by the pandemic, and Trump's repeated attempts to undermine the election. Over and over we heard some variant of how this made it even more difficult to make sense of information and understand what was going on. As a White Democrat from Nevada expressed:

> "Just this whole year with the candidates and everything, it's just been so confusing. I don't know what to believe, who to believe. What's going on. What's a conspiracy, what's real."

Barriers to Voting

Some of the nonvoters in our focus groups did experience barriers to voting, but these barriers came up far less frequently than issues of trust, accountability, and transparency that we describe above. When barriers to participation did come up, it was usually when we explicitly asked why participants did not vote in 2020 and/or what would have helped them vote in 2020. Those who experienced a barrier to voting described a variety of things that kept them from voting.

Fear of contracting COVID-19 while voting in person was one of the more common reasons for this group. Difficulties with registration, especially following a recent move, also came up. Although registration is not typically thought of as a barrier to participation in most surveys, registration deadlines and requirements (such as specific forms of ID) can make it harder for anyone to vote, but they may especially be a problem for people moving around election time - who cannot vote where they used to live but may not move in time to get registered at their new address. Other issues that people described were (the potential for) long lines, a lack of transportation or childcare, and even difficulties finding polling locations, which is closely tied to difficulties finding information that we described above. Some of our respondents also reported that they requested mail-in or absentee ballots, but never received them. While most could have pivoted to voting in-person with little to no logistical difficulty, the failure of the voting system to deliver on its promises coupled with the inconvenience of the in-person voting was the final straw piled on top of their lack of trust and general disillusionment. For all the respondents who experienced tangible barriers to voting, the difficulties they experienced added to the frustrations that we described above, which only exacerbated existing mistrust.

Disillusionment

Contrary to the dominant narrative about nonvoters, we found virtually no evidence of apathy among the participants in our focus groups. Rather than being apathetic, we would describe them as disillusioned. Many from our focus groups had enthusiastically voted in the past but were let down by promises that were not kept. They also see few, if any, improvements in their lives or the lives of people like them, regardless of who is in office. This has made them reluctant to trust elected officials and anyone running to be one. One young Black nonvoter in Georgia told us:

> "I don't feel engaged in [US democracy] at all … Because it's like, if someone's going on that – to the point it's like, sometimes, I feel like, we're not going to get heard. It's not – nothing is ever going to change. And being a mom with a special needs child, I try to stay focused and positive, so he won't see the sadness of it. But I don't – I don't feel connected, in no kind of way."

This sentiment was echoed by a White Democrat in Pennsylvania who said that:

> "It won't make a difference who you vote for. It'll all be the same. They don't really care about the average American, regular person. That's it."

Further eroding their willingness to participate, they also have difficulties getting information that they feel like they can trust because they do not think the media reports on current events or elections transparently or accurately. These difficulties, combined with the way our voting system is structured and operates, have also made them suspicious of voting.

This disillusionment appeared, in some cases, to be connected to a disconnect between democratic ideals and the reality that they saw on the ground. Many participants talked about how democracy is supposed to be, or about how what they saw in reality was not the way the system was supposed to work. For example, one Hispanic nonvoter in Pennsylvania said about U.S. democracy:

> "History dictates that it's never going to happen. There's never been a time where it has truly been a democracy that worked in all aspects. It's impossible. Just like [other participant] said, it's a lie. It's a great idea, but I don't think it'll ever happen."

For the Black and Hispanic nonvoters, in particular, there is a sense that the system was not built for them and is often biased against them. A young Black nonvoter in Georgia said:

> "And then leading up to elections when you learn like certain counties are, you know removing voting or polling locations. And then you do the racial analysis and it's mostly in black and brown neighborhoods. And so, it's like this active, you know disenfranchisement. And again, like I just be wanting to live my life. Like I don't want everything to have to be a struggle. I don't want to have to struggle to vote. Struggle to buy fresh fruits and vegetables. Struggle to just walk down the street without being harassed. And it's just like, I'm just kind of disillusioned with that process."

These nonvoters were not uninformed. They were aware of recent changes to the voting systems in their areas. They were aware of voter suppression efforts at the state level. For some it was a general sense of what was happening, and others had very detailed knowledge of current events that fed into their decisions around voting.

Another young Black nonvoter in Georgia told us:

> "I just feel my connection to the democracy is just being tolerated for a vote, like but not necessarily like sincerely being listened to and having my needs taken care of via the political process."

This feeling of the transactional nature of political outreach was also expressed by several members of our AAPI nonvoter group in Georgia. Instead of engaging, the political outreach many of our respondents experienced felt transactional and manipulative, further alienating them from our electoral process.

While disillusionment can look a lot like apathy, they are not the same. Apathy implies a certain level of passivity. It suggests that eligible Americans are not voting because they are not paying attention or do not really care. This is not what we heard from the participants in our focus groups. Many of them are actively engaged in their communities in other ways. One Hispanic nonvoter in Pennsylvania said:

> "I do what I need to do to be a good citizen. I pay my taxes, I follow the laws and regulations of the land where I live. A good neighbor, as good as I can be, to my neighbors. I try to do things for other people, try to do volunteer work for people. But as far as the political scene, it was not created for me, or people like me, and so to support it would be to not support myself."

Rather than just not caring, these nonvoters are actively deciding to sit out because they do not want to participate in a system that they do not trust or that has only let them down.

Reactions to January 6, 2021

Most of our focus groups took place after January 6th, 2021, which gave us the opportunity to ask nonvoters in North Carolina, Arizona, Nevada, and Pennsylvania about their response to the events at the Capitol in the weeks immediately following January 6th. For the most part, reactions to the events on January 6th were similar across all focus groups, regardless of ideological views, race/ethnicity, state, or age.

Nonvoters expressed a range of emotions about the events of January 6th. Some expressed shock, surprise, and horror, noting that this is the kind of event you see in a "third world country," not the United States. Or, how they never thought they would see something like that happen here in their lifetime. Others were embarrassed, disappointed, and hopeless. As one participant from the focus group with Republican, Independent, and unaffiliated nonvoters in Arizona put it,

> "It was embarrassing to be a democracy, and supposedly be the greatest country on the Earth, greatest country in the world, and to have this violence and this chaos erupt was an embarrassment to the American democracy, and I think to the American people."

However, many others said that while it was somewhat shocking, they were largely unsurprised given the current political climate and the rampant spread of misinformation. A Black nonvoter from North Carolina explained that:

> "It was definitely surprising. Not something you would – at least I was – expecting to see. At the same time, it wasn't completely unfathomable because I think that things have just been slowly getting out of control, so I think it was to be expected, but to still, of course, see it live on every network was still quite shocking at the moment."

Most participants across the groups said former President Trump was at fault for the events of January 6th. They said it was inevitable due to his inflammatory rhetoric, which only escalated with his lies about election fraud in the months before and after the 2020 election. Beyond Trump, many respondents also placed blame on the participants themselves, arguing that they were each responsible for their own actions, even if Trump incited them. Others added that other groups or people were responsible, namely the Republican party and Congress.

Respondents in the groups with Republican, Independent, and unaffiliated nonvoters had similar responses to the other groups with two notable exceptions. First, when we asked who was at fault for what happened at the Capitol, respondents in these groups were more reluctant to place blame for the events of January 6th entirely, or even at all, on Trump. Some pointed to things like the mainstream media or social media. However, even in the immediate aftermath of January 6th, conspiracy theories were beginning to take hold for others. Some suggested that it was staged, that ANTIFA was responsible, or that they were not yet sure who was responsible.

The second notable exception was that racism and white supremacy were absent from the initial reactions of participants in the Republican, Independent, and unaffiliated focus groups. However, several participants from other groups brought up the response from law enforcement and how it was different from the protests for Black lives in the summer of 2020. They explicitly stated that the response would have been different had the people participating in the events of January 6th been Black or other people of color, clearly implying that it was far less severe for January 6th participants, the vast majority of which were White. Some also noted how law enforcement kept Black Lives Matter protestors from even getting close to buildings like the Capitol during the summer protests, which clearly stands in stark contrast to those in the Capitol on January 6th.

Conclusion

Even in high turnout years like 2020, a large share of the electorate does not vote in the United States. Conventional wisdom largely attributes this low turnout to high levels of apathy among American nonvoters. We found that this is not a useful characterization. Apathy implies some level of passivity or indifference, but that is not what we heard from nonvoters in our focus groups. Instead, they described high levels of distrust resulting from a lack of transparency and accountability among elected officials, candidates for elected office, and even the media. We also heard about elected officials' lies and broken promises, concerns about the accuracy and impartiality of information, and mistrust of our voting system and processes. We would characterize nonvoters not as apathetic, but disillusioned. Unlike apathy, disillusionment captures the disappointment and frustration expressed by our focus group participants. For them, not voting is an active, not passive, choice. And they have made this choice in response to a lack of trust, transparency, and accountability when it comes to our system of voting and government.

Why does it matter whether nonvoters are characterized as disillusioned rather than apathetic? Because nonvoters in our focus groups are not choosing to sit out because they do not care. They are choosing to sit out because they see no difference regardless of who is in power or because they do not feel they can make any difference in our current electoral system. In a system that has repeatedly let them down and failed to provide any meaningful improvement in their lives, they are actively deciding to exercise the choice they feel best represents their views, and that is the choice to not vote. Our conversations suggest that this is unlikely to change without more transparency and meaningful accountability in government.

Characterizing nonvoters as apathetic shifts the blame away from those in power and onto nonvoters by justifying the failure to engage with them or work on their behalf. When nonvoters are understood to be disillusioned for legitimate reasons related to trust, transparency, and accountability, then it is harder to ascribe their lack of participation to individual shortcomings. Rather, understanding the issue of nonvoter disillusionment shifts responsibility onto the government and social institutions.

Apathetic nonvoters are an unfortunate problem with no real solution. Disillusioned nonvoters point to a social problem that requires collective action to address. Reframing our understanding of nonvoters away from the apathy narrative opens up paths of opportunity for government, nonprofits, community groups, and other socially involved organizations to attempt to fix some of the problems that lead to and exacerbate disillusionment.

Table 5.1

Description of Focus Groups

State	Race/ethnicity	Party	Age
Arizona	Hispanic		
Arizona	White	Democrats	
Arizona	White	Republicans/Independent/Unaffiliated	
Georgia	Asian and Pacific Islander		
Georgia	Black		18-35
Georgia	Black		36+
Georgia	White	Democrats	
Georgia	White	Independent/Unaffiliated	
Georgia	White	Republicans	
Nevada	Hispanic		
Nevada	White	Democrats	
Nevada	White	Republicans/Independent/Unaffiliated	
North Carolina	Black		18-35
North Carolina	Black		18-35
North Carolina	Black		36+
North Carolina	White	Democrats	
North Carolina	White	Republicans/Independent/Unaffiliated	
Pennsylvania	Black		18-35
Pennsylvania	Black		36+
Pennsylvania	Non-Puerto Rican Hispanic		
Pennsylvania	Puerto Rican		
Pennsylvania	White	Democrats	
Pennsylvania	White	Republicans/Independent/Unaffiliated	