

Voting Viva Voce

UNLOCKING THE SOCIAL LOGIC OF PAST POLITICS

Turnout in the Election of May 26, 1859 in Alexandria

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Public Voting

Turnout in the Election of May 26, 1859 in Alexandria

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Evidence from the poll books challenges our perception—and the insistence of textbooks—that political participation was much higher in the past than in the present. Indeed the prevailing textbook view is that the highest rates of political participation in America’s history came in the mid-nineteenth century. This conclusion, however, rests upon the decennial US census records and their enumeration, which from the 1850 census onwards named and provided socio-economic information for every free individual, and from 1870 all individuals, present when the enumeration occurred.

The problem is that nineteenth century census takers, who were patronage appointees with no particular interest in an accurate count of the population (there were no federal grants tied to a state’s or city’s population back then!), missed a significant proportion of the population. As many other historians have long noted, at the mid-point of the nineteenth century, the “missing” from the census manuscript could amount to upwards of twenty percent of those actually present ([link to literature](#)). The earlier one looks, the poorer is the census count.

Not surprisingly, the “missing” from the census records were those least well-connected to a place: they were the transient, the poor, the new immigrants, and those who lived in boarding houses. The best-represented groups in nineteenth century censuses were those with the opposite characteristics: long-term residents, the well-off, the long-established, and homeowners. They were also the groups from which the voting population was drawn. Perhaps predictably, 82 percent of the voters in 1859 were caught in the census of 1860 and even those who did not appear to have shared many of the social characteristics of the voter profile.

The absence of individual registration records from the Commissioner of Revenue complicates the search for precise measures of turnout as does the



Cover and above

Taking the Census, Francis William Edmonds, 1854. While this is a satirical depiction of a father trying to recall all of his children as he counts them out on his fingers, this may have been an actual occurrence at some households as the 1850 US census was the first to require detailed individual information. It asked heads of household to list the names of each of their dependents, their ages, places of birth, occupation, as well as questions about literacy and school attendance.

Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History



Stump Speaking, George Caleb Bingham, 1853–1854. This painting is part of Bingham's Election Series, which documents the process of a *viva voce* election in four stages: from small group canvassing to stump speeches to Election Day and finally to announcing the results. The paintings in Bingham's Election Series depict a wide swath of American citizens participating in the election process, including women and children who witnessed stump speeches and the election itself even though they were not allowed to vote. With very few exceptions, native born African-Americans were excluded from citizenship.

George Caleb Bingham, American, 1811–1879; *Stump Speaking*, 1853–54; oil on canvas; 42½ x 58 in. (108 x 147.3 cm); Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Bank of America 43:2001

absence of knowledge of who was actually in town on May 26, 1859, this being a time when absentee voting was unknown.

However, combining the individual level information from the poll books with other social inventories allows a far better picture of the voting-eligible population likely to have been in Alexandria for the 1859 election. Included are, of course, the voters (1406) and then, in descending order of probability, those whose records indicate both eligibility and presence. Using this approach



Election Scene, Catonsville, Baltimore County, Alfred Jacob Miller, c.1860. An oil painting of Election Day in nearby Catonsville, Maryland. Like Bingham's *County Election*, Miller's painting depicts animated and enthusiastic discussion among the voters. The depiction of African-Americans gathered at the polling station in the background was perhaps designed to identify this as the presidential election of 1860. The scene in Alexandria on Election Day 1859 may have been equally spirited.

Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art

we can calculate a range of possible turnout figures for the May 1859 election as a percentage of the eligible electorate.

- Maximum: 58%
- **Most Likely: 56%**
- Minimum: 50%

A likely participation rate of 56 percent is certainly higher than the percentage of the eligible electorate estimated to have voted in the 2014 mid-terms

(36 percent). This is a lower figure than the average mid-term turnout since the Second World War (43 percent). The likely Alexandria higher than the contemporary average, but is also an important corrective to the generally promoted estimates of turnout in mid-term elections in the late 1850s of nearly 70 percent. Indeed the 56 percent estimate for Alexandria falls almost precisely halfway between the promoted historical figures and the average turnout in mid-terms since 1945.

Political participation was higher in the past than it is today (and, of course, limited to a smaller segment of the community), but it is important to have that differential correctly measured. Careful research provides us with a reliable measure of one of the most important concomitants of the enthusiasms and excitement associated with America's age of open voting: a significantly higher rate of political engagement. ■

Young America Rising at the Ballot Box and Strangling the Serpents Disunion and Secession, Harper's Weekly, September 1, 1860. The caption reads: "Columbia—'well done, Sonny! Go it while you're young, for when you're old you can't.'" The cartoon is encouraging voters to support unionist views at the ballot box—a sentiment that was popular, if not quite so vociferously expressed, a year earlier in Alexandria when most men voted by voice for Opposition Party candidates. But when the vote came to ratify Virginia's secession from the Union on May 23, 1861, Alexandria's vote was 1089–106 in favor of leaving the Union.

Courtesy of Harpweek.com



*YOUNG AMERICA RISING AT THE BALLOT-BOX AND STRANGLING THE SERPENTS
DISUNION AND SECESSION.*

COLUMBIA.—“Well done, Sonny! ‘Go it while you’re young, for when you’re old you can’t.’”

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Two mid-nineteenth century cities—Alexandria, Virginia and Newport, Kentucky—shared a common voting arrangement: both states required all votes in all elections to be cast in public by voice (viva voce). The poll books provided an official written record of every voter's spoken declaration. Professor Don DeBats presents and analyses this data on the website.

Public Voting. This project reveals the world of American politics at a time when every citizen's vote was public knowledge, and shows how social identity influenced votes.

Alexandria, Virginia | 1850s. On the Potomac just opposite Washington DC, Alexandria was a thriving commercial city based on slave labor in the late 1850's as the secession crisis loomed.

Newport, Kentucky | 1870. On the Ohio just opposite Cincinnati, Newport was, as the Panic of 1873 crashed down, a thriving industrial city based on immigrant labor.

Colophon

Text | Donald A. DeBats

Design | Anne Chesnut

Published by The Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities

In conjunction with the generous support of: Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, Flinders University, National Endowment for the Humanities, Australian Research Council, and Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities

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