

## Issue Brief: Voting Behavior based On Socioeconomic Status - Christopher Ryan Brown

**Key Words:** Socioeconomic status, education, income, voting behavior

**Description:** This brief will focus on how an individual's voting behavior is influenced their socioeconomic status and how these two variables are correlated with one another.

**Key Points:**

- Socioeconomic status is a measurement used by social scientists to measure a person's economic and social position relative to others
- Income, education, and occupation make up the main components of socioeconomic status
- Voting registration and turnout is positively correlated with socioeconomic status
- Individuals of a lower socioeconomic status tend to vote for Democratic party candidates while individuals of a higher socioeconomic status tend to vote for Republican party candidates

**Issue Brief:**

For social scientists, studies show that a person's socioeconomic status, a measurement which factors in a person's education, occupation, and income, will directly influence their behavior. This measurement is used to predict health, spending habits, and other factors related to a person's quality of life, including a person's voting behavior, or whether they register and vote in elections. Statistics tend to show that higher socioeconomic status is positively correlated with more active voting behavior. In other words, the higher a person's education, occupation status, and income levels, the more likely they are to vote.

Generally, people of a lower socioeconomic status are more apathetic towards politics, have a low level of political efficacy, and participate less in the voting process. A lower level of educational attainment ending in high school may not stress the importance of civic engagement. People with a low occupational status working jobs that pay at or close to the minimum wage are often forced to spend a larger portion of their time and limited resources on sustaining a sufficient income than individuals in higher income brackets.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, individuals with a higher level of socioeconomic status generally tend to participate more often in the political process in terms of their voting behavior. Generally, they

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census, 2008 <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/index.html>

have achieved higher education at the undergraduate or postgraduate level that often stress a greater importance of civic activity. Because they have higher incomes, there is likely a lower cost on the time they must forego to vote in comparison to the poor. Individuals of higher socioeconomic status also tend to receive more pressure from their peers about the importance of voting.<sup>2</sup>

In the 2008 presidential elections, the US Census counted 8,833,000 persons whose income amounted to less than 10,000 dollars a year. Just 5,459,000 or 62 percent registered to vote. In contrast, for persons making an income over 150,000 dollars a year, citizens registered at a 75 percent rate, regardless of age group.<sup>3</sup>

While it is readily recognized that a lower socioeconomic status generally results in lower voter registration and turnout, it is also of interest to not how voting patterns across partisan lines change based on socioeconomic status. Do different socioeconomic groups vote for the candidates and policies that best support their interests?

In America's two party systems, the Democrats are usually associated as the party that promotes policies that benefit lower socioeconomic groups such as universal health care, and welfare. The Republican Party has traditionally advocated policies geared toward individuals of a higher socioeconomic status with initiatives focused on cutting government spending on social programs and taxes to promote economic growth. Assuming that people vote based on their socioeconomic status, those of a lower income would prefer a Democratic candidate that caters policy towards the lower and middle class while those with a higher income would vote for the policies advocated by a Republican candidate.

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census, 2008 <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census, 2008 <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/index.html>

For example, in the 1956 presidential election, the distribution of votes for by income is shown for a precinct in Tallahassee, Florida. The Republican candidate, Dwight D. Eisenhower, received 53.8 percent (57) of the vote for individuals making over 8,000 dollars a year, 33 percent (35) from individuals making between 4,000 and 7,999 dollars a year, and just 13.2 percent (14) of the vote from those making less than 4,000 a year from the 106 votes cast.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, of the 114 votes cast for the Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson, only 36.8 percent (42) of the votes came from persons making over 8,000 a year while 50.9 percent (58) of the votes came from persons making between 4,000 and 7,999 dollars. Stevenson received the same number of raw votes (14) as Eisenhower, or 12.3 percent of his supporters. Further statistical analysis indicates that 43 percent of the Eisenhower voters had attended college, compared to just 28 percent of the Stevenson supporters. These findings help to demonstrate the importance of socioeconomic status and the influence it has on individual voting behavior.

### Images:

#### U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES / NATIONAL / EXIT POLL

##### VOTE BY INCOME

TOTAL	Democrat	Republican
Less Than \$100,000 (78%)	55%	43%
\$100,000 or More (22%)	47%	52%

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<sup>4</sup> Muarry, Richard <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2129944>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2006/pages/results/states/US/H/00/epolls.0.html>

TABLE I. DISTRIBUTION BY FAMILY INCOME OF DEMOCRATS VOTING IN 1956 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION FROM A SELECTED PRECINCT, TALLAHASSEE, FLORIDA

Family Income	Eisenhower (Republican)	Stevenson (Democrat)
	Number (Percent)	Number (Percent)
<b>Under \$ 4,000</b>	14 (13.2%)	14 (12.3%)
<b>\$4,000 to &amp;7,999</b>	35 (33.0 %)	58 (50.8%)
<b>\$8,000 and over</b>	57 (53.8%)	42 (36.8%)

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US Census data: <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/index.html>

### Relevant Websites:

US Census (voting and registration in the November 2008 election)  
<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/index.html>  
<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/p20/2008/tables.html>

CNN.com  
<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2006/pages/results/states/US/H/00/epolls.0.html>

<sup>6</sup> Muarry, Richard <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2129944>