

Politically Invisible in America

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Abstract

Campaigns, parties, interest groups, pollsters and political scientists rely on voter registration lists and consumer files to identify people as targets for registration drives, persuasion and mobilization, and to be included in sampling frames for surveys. Matching a high-quality, random sample of the U.S. population to multiple lists reveals that at least 11% of the adult citizenry is unlisted. An additional 12% are mislisted (not living at their recorded address). These groups are invisible to list-based campaigns and research. 2 in 5 Blacks and (citizen) Hispanics are unreachable, but just 18% of Whites. The unreachable are poorer than the reachable population, have markedly lower levels of political engagement and are much less likely to report contact with candidates and campaigns. They are heavily Democratic in party identification and vote intention, favoring Obama over Romney 73-27, with just 16% identifying as Republicans.

Lists in contemporary American politics. Lists of registered voters — augmented by data from consumer files — are the *sine qua non* of micro-targeting and data analytics in contemporary political campaigns. These lists are vitally important to parties, campaigns and interest groups. In political science, lists of registered voters were essential to the development of GOTV field experiments, list-based sampling for surveys and advanced “likely-voter” screens in pre-election surveys (Green and Gerber 2006).

The databases maintained by partisan organizations such as Catalist, Targetsmart or the GOP Data Trust aggregate information from state voter files and commercial data vendors. These lists can reasonably purport to include every registered voter in the United States (since registration information is a matter of public record), plus millions of unregistered people found by aggregating data from commercial data vendors. Because these voter registration lists offer good residential information for so many Americans, the U.S. Census Bureau is considering using the lists to identify vacant housing units and to enumerate some households ahead of the 2020 Census.

As these commercial voter files have come to play a larger part in political science and political practice, researchers have begun to not merely use them as a tool for studying political behavior or as a lens through which to understand campaigns, but also as a subject of study unto themselves (Hersh 2015). This reflects an understanding that while they are a useful research tool, they can also provide a view of American voters that is subject to biases. In this sense, voter files are not unlike surveys: they are a useful tool for understanding American politics, but come at the cost of imperfections that are endogenous to the research tool itself.

Campaigns use voter files to choose who should be contacted for registration, mobilization and persuasion activities, and to find the best contact information for these prospective contacts. The use of commercial voter files, and the analytics technologies they enabled, became such a central part of Hillary Clinton’s 2016 election that journalists conjectured that the overuse of this data was a factor in Clinton’s loss, a critique unimaginable for a Presidential campaign just 12 years before. As voter files now play an important role in campaigns, the biases inherent to the use of voter files will become manifest in political action.

We define four categories of people: (1) **registered** voters listed at their correct address; (2) **unregistered** people appearing on consumer files at their correct address; (3) **mislisted** people,

who appear on the files at an address other than the address at which they live and (4) **unlisted** people, who do not appear in databases of registered voters or on consumer files. Categories 1, 2 and 3 are “listed” persons. Categories 1 and 2 are “reachable” persons, people that can be contacted by mail or in person, the two mainstays of political outreach, using information from the files.

Two-thirds of mislisted people are registered to vote, but at an address where they do not reside. Much of the machinery of political mobilization misses these voters entirely, which is reflected in their low contact rates in figure 3. Further, because their current address is not recorded on the files, voter registration operations that target recent movers will also miss these people.

Moving from the entire citizenry to registered voters, the electorate becomes less racially diverse, richer, more likely to report being contacted by a campaign and less supportive of the Democratic Party. An electorate that encompasses just listed persons has policy preferences that are more conservative than that of the entire citizenry. In this way the reliance on lists in contemporary American politics diminishes the visibility and political power of minorities and the poor, tilting policy and election outcomes in a more conservative, more Republican direction.

Data and Methodology. The 2012 American National Election Studies (ANES) face-to-face survey was based on a random sample of households drawn from the postal service’s list of active addresses in the United States. The interview takes place at the respondent’s home, where the respondent should be listed by voter files and commercial vendors.

ANES collects detailed identifying data and interviews respondents in their homes, bolstering our confidence in the matches of respondents to the lists; details of the matching procedure appear elsewhere ([American National Election Studies 2016](#)).¹ Of the 333 mislisted respondents, 223 matched with a full name and birth date to a commercial voter file record with an address other than address at which they were interviewed. A further 59 respondents matched on birth year or age when full birth date information was incomplete. 51 cases were treated as mislisted matches where the commercial voter file record was missing birth date information. In 40% of these missing birth date cases, the match was made to a record with an address in the same city as the respondent’s residence, leading us to believe that this mislisting was due to a real error in the file, rather than

¹48 respondents who did not provide a full name were excluded from this analysis.

an erroneous match to another person with the same name. In 31 cases, comprising just under 10% of the total mislisted cases, a match was made to a record missing birth date and age information, with an address outside the respondent’s city or town. In these cases, we use the vendor’s match, though it is possible that some of these mislisted individuals should have been classified as unlisted. Some misclassifications surely occurred, but any misclassifications would attenuate differences between groups, leading us to observe smaller differences between categories than truly exist in the American public. The results reported here are highly unlikely to be an artifact of errors in the matching process.

After applying weights to make the ANES data representative of the sampling frame, correctly listed persons comprise 78% of the sample, with the mislisted accounting for an additional 12%. Accordingly, 23% of the weighted sample is unlisted or mislisted in the databases available to political parties and campaigns ahead of the 2012 general election. We regard this estimate of the unreachable population to be a lower bound on the true proportion, since nonresponse bias makes it less likely for people that have not registered to vote at their current address to take a long political survey.

We identified 310 questions on the ANES that we expected to display interesting variation across the four citizen types and examined differences on each variable across the four groups via weighted one-way ANOVA. We guard type-I errors with the Benjamini-Hochberg multiple testing procedure, adjusting the critical p -value to the .035 level, so as to hold the expected proportion of false discoveries in our analysis to 5%. We reject 219 of the 310 null hypotheses we tested and limit discussion to these statistically significant results.

Race and ethnicity. People of color are considerably less likely to be correctly registered than Whites. Table 1 shows that just 18% of Whites are unreachable, compared to roughly 40% for Blacks and Hispanics. Among Blacks and Hispanics, about 20% are unlisted (not appearing on either voter or consumer files) and another 20% are mislisted (listed at an address other than their current residence). Near-majorities of the minority population can not be targeted for contact with direct mailers or in-person canvasses.

Only a small proportion of minorities not registered at their current address can be found using

consumer information. Of the 42% of Blacks not registered to vote at their current address (those in the unregistered, mislisted and unlisted categories), just 6% have a record with a correct address. For Hispanics, the comparable number is 13%. Among Whites, 29% of those without a current voter registration have a consumer record with an accurate address. Consumer files have low penetration into the unregistered minority population but cover almost a third of unregistered Whites. Thus, consumer files are a viable tool for the political incorporation of Whites who have not registered to vote, but are much less useful for other racial and ethnic groups.

| | Total | White | Black | Hispanic | Other |
|--------------|-------|-------|-------|----------|-------|
| Registered | 70 | 75 | 58 | 53 | 59 |
| Unregistered | 8 | 7 | 3 | 6 | 12 |
| Mislisted | 12 | 10 | 18 | 20 | 13 |
| Unlisted | 11 | 8 | 21 | 21 | 16 |

Table 1: Distribution of citizen types (percentages), by race and ethnicity, ANES 2012 face-to-face respondents (weighted), $p < .01$, $n = 2,006$.

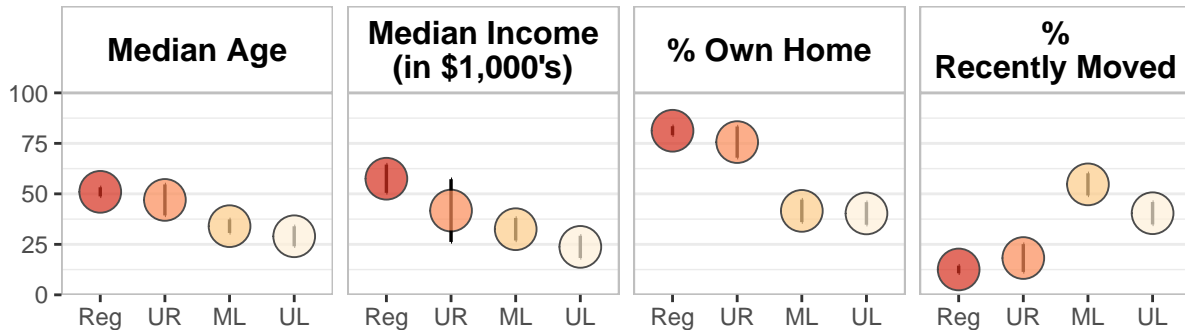


Figure 1: Percentage of citizen type with listed attribute (error bars for proportions are \pm two standard errors), ANES 2012 face-to-face respondents (weighted). Voters have consistently higher socioeconomic status than non-voters. Of the four groups, unlisted people have the lowest income and are least likely to own their home. Recently moved refers to people that have lived at their current address for less than a year.

Income, Residential Tenure and Home Ownership Differences across citizen types with respect to three indicators of socioeconomic status are shown in Figure 1. In particular, the unlisted are more financially vulnerable than their listed peers. The median annual income of the unlisted are just \$24,000, rising to \$41,000 among the unregistered and \$57,000 among accurately registered respondents. Unlisted and mislisted people are about half as likely to report owning their homes as

the correctly listed citizenry (40% versus 75%) and are more than twice as likely to report living at their current address for less than one year. High rates of residential mobility and low rates of home ownership can explain much of the absence of correct address data for the unlisted and mislisted. Their frequent movements mean that the contact information available on commercial voter files reflects a previous address, making them mislisted or absent from the files altogether. Unlisted and mislisted generally have lower incomes, generating less commercial activity for consumer vendors to use to update their addresses, allowing a lapse in contact information to occur. Though the United States Postal Service National Change of Address database facilitates the revision of outdated contact information, not everyone registers their moves with the postal service. Indeed, the unlisted have no commercial or voter registration records to update.

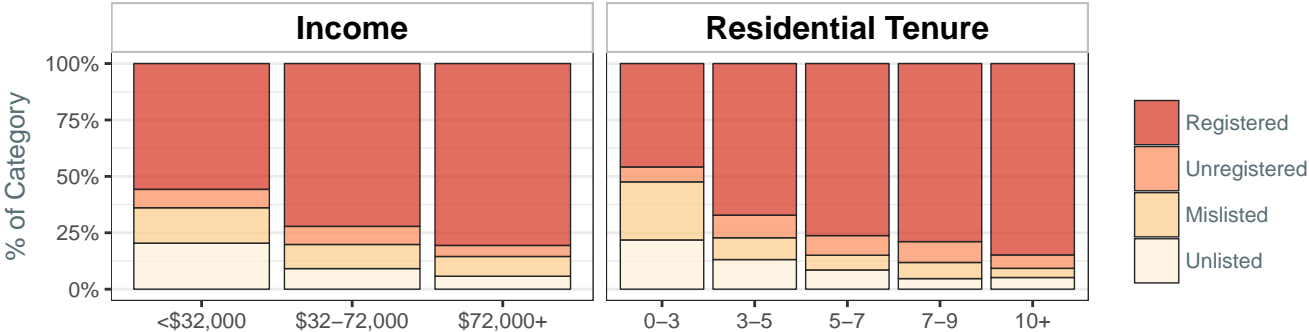


Figure 2: Distribution of citizen types, by income tercile (annual household income) and residential tenure (years at current residence), $p < .01$.

Residential mobility. Voter registration is tied to an individual living at a certain *address*, rather than to individuals themselves. An affirmative act by the citizen is required to re-register each time they move (Squire, Wolfinger and Glass 1987). The National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (“Motor Voter”) lowered the costs of re-registration, but our data confirm a pattern long noted in the literature: moving results in many citizens falling off voter rolls; we show this applies to commercial databases as well.

Residential mobility is concentrated among the poor and urban dwelling. In turn, this helps explain why non-Whites are less likely to be listed than minorities. Figure 2 demonstrates that duration of residential tenure is associated with political visibility. Majorities of Blacks (59%) and

Hispanics (52%) report residing at their current address for less than five years; among Whites the corresponding figure is 36%. 48% of Whites but just 1 in 3 Blacks and Hispanics report residing at their current address for 10 years or more.

Income powerfully shapes the relationship between residential mobility and being listed. Figure 2 shows that people with higher incomes are more likely to be politically visible, consistent with a resource model of political participation, in which civic knowledge, time and money are three key resources for political participation (Brady, Verba and Schlozman 1995). Our analysis points to a fourth element, closely associated with wealth: being *listed*. Since unregistered records are sourced from commercial voter files, the probability of being listed increases with wealth. Figure 2 demonstrates that the poorest respondents are dramatically more likely to be unlisted and dramatically less likely to be registered. Residential mobility elevates the risk of becoming (or remaining) unreachable, even for the wealthy.

Campaign contact. Being reachable — and especially being registered — greatly facilitates contact with campaigns. As Figure 3 illustrates, registered voters with accurate contact information were dramatically more likely to report being contacted by a campaign in 2012. Unregistered and the politically invisible reported less than half the rate of contact as registered respondents. Only 33% of registered mislisteds that voted in 2008 report being contacted in 2012, less than the 46% contact rate for correctly listed registered respondents overall, or the 52% contact rate among correctly listed registered respondents that voted in 2008. The 20 point gap between mislisted respondents and registered voters confirms the importance of accurate address information for contact with campaigns. When address information is inaccurate, the campaign’s outreach will often fail to reach its intended target.

The situation is even more stark for the unlisted. Both unregistered and unlisted respondents are not registered to vote, but nearly 20% of unregistered respondents report contact from a campaign or political organization in 2012, while only 10% of unlisted respondents only report contact. Unregistered-but-listed respondents report twice as much attention from campaigns as the unlisted. Since direct contact between candidates and citizens is an important avenue through which politicians learn about citizen preferences and make policy decisions, the extra attentiveness of politicians

to the listed over the unlisted reinforces economic and social inequality.

By expending less political resources on the unlisted, politicians and politically engaged volunteers never come into contact with this group, and policy issues of particular importance to the unlisted receive less attention. The 11% of the population that is unlisted are mostly people of color, have low median incomes and have high rates of residential mobility, all traits that distinguish them from the more white, richer and residentially stable registered population. The median income among those reporting contact from a campaign is \$62,500, while the median income among those not reporting contact is just \$37,500, a gap partly explained by the differences in listed status between low and high earners.

The effect of being listed dwarfs the effect of income, explaining over three times as much variance in contact rates than income alone. Once poorer people become listed (and especially when they start voting) they can be contacted for continued mobilization efforts (Nickerson 2015). This suggests that voter registration efforts may have important secondary effects, exposing the newly listed to contact opportunities from a variety of political organizations using lists to to identify targets for mobilization efforts.

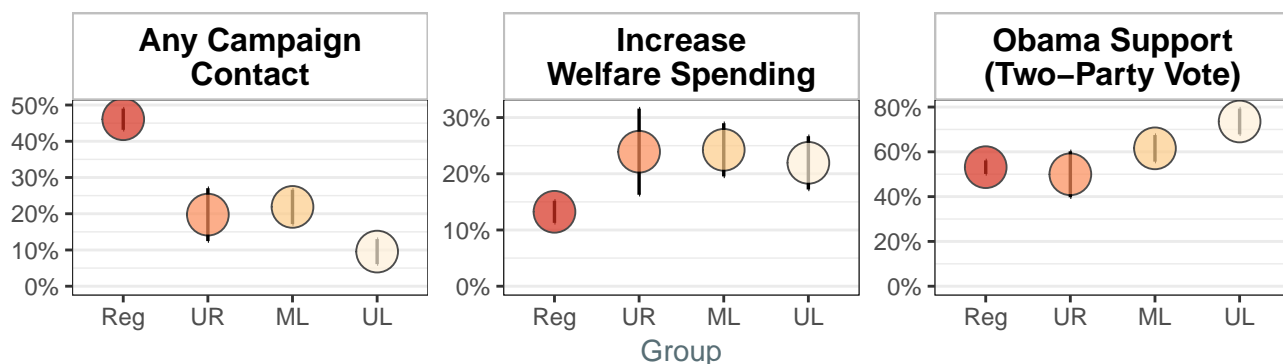


Figure 3: Percentage of each citizen type reporting contact by campaigns and parties, expressing support for more federal welfare spending and expressing support for President Obama in the 2012 Presidential election. ANES 2012 face-to-face respondents (weighted). All $p < .01$.

Political Attitudes. If registration and mobilization activities truly do affect the composition of the electorate, how would the political views of the electorate change if everyone was listed, registered and turned out to vote? In general, the policy positions of the unreachable groups in our analysis are more liberal than those of general election voters. For example, the middle panel of

Figure 3 displays variation in preferences toward federal welfare spending. Just 13% of registereds think that spending should increase, compared to 22-25% for the unregistered and unreachable.

Obama Vote and Partisanship. Large disparities in socio-economic status across the four citizen groups lead to considerable variation in partisanship and vote choice. The right panel of figure 3 displays Obama’s share of the two-party vote across the four citizen types. The weighted ANES data closely reproduce the national 2012 two-party result: respondents known to have turned out in 2012 favoring Obama over Romney 52-48. Correctly listed registereds supported Obama over Romney 53 to 47, while unregistered were split 50-50 between the two candidates. The unreachables, on the other hand, broke strongly for Obama. 62% of mislisteds and 74% of unlisteds indicated support for Obama, margins that mirror the exceptionally strong support Democratic candidates earn from non-whites.

| | Dem | Ind | Rep |
|--------------|-----|-----|-----|
| Registered | 36 | 36 | 28 |
| Unregistered | 25 | 58 | 17 |
| Mislisted | 40 | 37 | 23 |
| Unlisted | 43 | 42 | 16 |

Table 2: Percent identifying with each of the two parties, or identifying as independent, by category. $p < .01$.

Table 2 shows that the unreachable population is more likely to identify with the Democratic party than their listed peers. This affiliation fits with their higher rates of support for Obama and for the welfare state, but begs a question: why do they remain unreachable when the Democrats would benefit so much from getting them registered and voting? The answer probably lies with the institution of voter registration itself. The voter registration system in America began as a tool to limit voting to landed men, and ironically, as figure 1 shows, it still serves these ends today (Cunningham 1991). The institution of voter registration is simply not designed to accommodate itinerant citizens. Even if the unreachable were to be registered — and the Democratic Party would appear to have a clear incentive to do so — the small commercial footprint of the unreachable and their high residential mobility would see them become politically invisible once again.

Political representation in the list-based era. The mislisted and the unlisted are marginalized in other domains of American life. They are poorer, more financially vulnerable, younger and more likely to be non-White than voters. They also report more liberal policy preferences and political attitudes and express less satisfaction with America’s political system.

Political parties and interest groups are often seen as brokers in American politics, connecting citizens and candidates, voters with vote seekers. That at least 23% of the citizenry is unreachable by the major parties indicates a market failure of sorts. Mislisted and unlisted people report much less contact with political parties and electoral campaigns. Parties and interest groups — the dominant agents of political mobilization — are either unaware of the large, unlisted and mislisted segments of the citizenry, or have made the calculation that mobilizing them is simply not worth the effort.

Some might see no great normative issue in large proportions of the citizenry being mislisted or unlisted. After all, American citizens are not compelled to register to vote or to turn out. For the enfranchised, being unlisted or unregistered is the result of a choice not to register to vote.

Disenfranchising any particular person is unlikely to be electorally pivotal and probably has infinitesimal direct effects on that person’s welfare. But the burdens of the voter registration system — as low as they might be — are felt disproportionately by the poor. Low SES is associated with vastly lower levels of contact with candidates, parties and interest groups. Low levels of contact between parties and candidates and the poor, coupled with their disproportionately low turnout, may explain why public policy tends to favor the rich ([Bartels 2009](#); [Gilens 2012](#)).

The inequality in political visibility we document here has parallels with inequality in other domains of American life. Economic and social disadvantage predict diminished political visibility, participation and representation. Economic disadvantage and its concomitant — high rates of residential mobility — see minorities, young people and the financially vulnerable — people more liberal than most voting Americans — less likely to cast a ballot and far less visible to list-driven campaigns.

Moreover, absent a positive, affirmative act by a citizen to become registered to vote, the way a citizen moves from being unlisted to listed is via their behavior not in the realm of politics, but in the economy, through activities such as subscribing to magazines, having active bank accounts, or

owning a home. In no small measure, political visibility is premised on one's visibility as a consumer. Inequality in economic consumption is reflected in the unequal political visibility reported here. As a formal, legal matter, political representation is a constitutional guarantee available to all citizens; as a practical matter, economic and social inequality generates inequality in political visibility.

Are lists good for American democracy? While lists surely make campaigns more efficient, they do so at the expense of unlisted and mislisted Americans. The listed electorate is whiter, older, wealthier and more conservative than the citizenry. The well-off and already-powerful are the beneficiaries of this new political institution.

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