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Polling News & Notes

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Estimating Partisan Turnout Rates: Conventional wisdom says Republican voters were energized to turn out in 2010, while the Obama campaign's organizing in 2008 gave Democrats a turnout edge that election. But what do the numbers say about how successfully the parties have turned out their own voters?

Brent Seaborn of TargetPoint Consulting suggests the relevant measurement of voter mobilization should be the percent of each party's eligible voters who went to the polls. For example, for the 2010 midterm, since Gallup polling over the course of the year[1] estimated 29% of Americans were Republicans and there were 218.1 million eligible voters nationwide, we can assume that there were 63.2 million Republicans voters. Since 90.7 million votes were cast on Election Day, and the national exit poll found that 35% of voters were Republican, there were 31.7 million Republicans who turned out to vote—or just over 50% of all Republicans nationwide. By the same calculation, 47% of Democrats turned out in 2010.

Percent of Eligible Voters Turned Out by Party
(Presidential Elections)
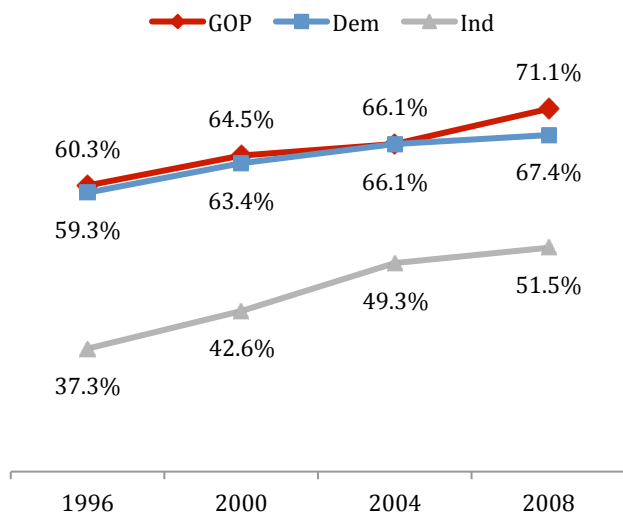
Percent of Eligible Voters Turned Out by Party
(Midterm Elections)
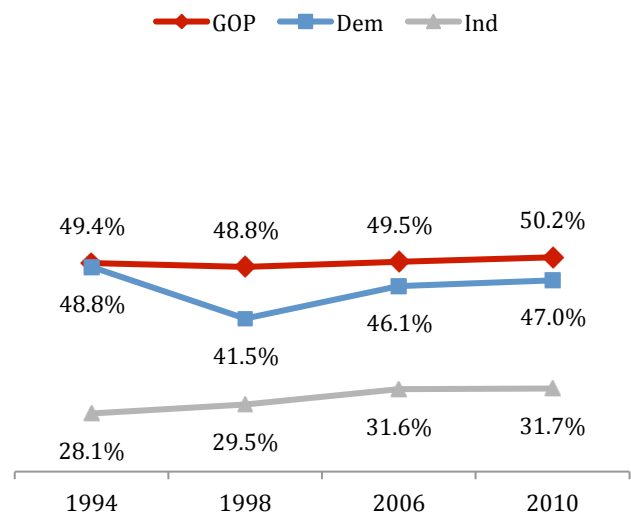
Carrying this analysis back to 1994 shows a steady upward trend in the percent of each party's turn out in presidential elections, likely caused by increased voter interest as well as both parties' improved voter mobilization. By this measurement, Republicans actually turned out more of their vote than Democrats did in 2008, a product of the increase in Democratic self-identification that year (at 36% the highest since 1988), and the decrease in GOP affiliation (at 28% the lowest since 1999). Republicans turned out more of their base but that base was smaller. Likewise, the small difference between the percent of Republicans who voted in 2010 and the percent of Democrats is a sign that while the base may have been energized, it was independent voters who carried the day for Republicans. They supported GOP Congressional candidates by a 59% to 38% margin.

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[1] We have largely adopted Seaborn's analytic technique, but with one minor alteration. We have used Gallup's yearly average for partisan affiliation, rather than the monthly average of the October of the election year as he does. The yearly average is a more appropriate measurement because it is (1) based on a significantly larger sample size of interviews, especially in years when Gallup did not perform daily tracking surveys, and (2) the voting-eligible population figures are calculated using Census figures from July 1, rather than October.