

Nonvoters: Doing Nothing to Change the Government They Hate

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Abstract. The sporadic and often dismal voter turnout of the American public is often regarded as a hole in the democratic model. This research examines the influence of an individual's attitude about their government and how it affects their voting habits. Literature in the past has isolated demographic makeup as the reason for nonvoting, i.e. education or income. However, the nonvoter's state of mind in relation to their general feelings toward government and the social contract has been broadly overlooked. A new measure of an individual's attitude toward government was created using a collection of survey questions centered on a person's feelings toward their government and legislators. The survey questions come from the American National Election Study (ANES) and stretch from the year 2000 to 2008. The dependent variable describing the voting habits of those respondents is based on their voting participation in general elections and primary caucuses from the same period. The research will show that poorer governmental attitudes in individuals are associated with a lower voting turnout. Individuals with the most grievances about government are doing the least to change it.

Keywords: Nonvoters, dissatisfied-index, turnout, election study

Introduction. The people's power to change government is central to a working democracy. If a citizen does not like how the country is being run, then is it a rational choice to vote for something different and help change what they do not approve of—or—is it better to show an overall dissatisfaction with the government as a whole by not voting. The answer to this question will reveal a mind-set common to some nonvoters. The past research surrounding voting habits have been concerned with either: what issues and which candidates people are interested in and vote for—or— what inhibitions and/or hindrances those that choose not to vote have, that might explain their inaction. But, this approach leaves an unanswered question. What, if any, is the emotional connection between citizen and government? To put it another way: Does a person's attitude toward their government, play a role in their decision to vote? If a person is generally dissatisfied with their government, the people in it, and how it works, there are many ways to react inside a democracy. One could be total apathy or ignorant bliss. But most humans make active choices, and so one reaction is voting to change the people and/or the way things are done and the other is to view the act of voting as support for the system as a whole, and to actively refrain from voting in silent protest.

If the more frequent voters are found to be generally disappointed with their government, then voting for change is an acceptable reaction. If the more frequent voters are in-fact, happy with the government then perhaps they are voting for it to stay the same and might even have a reactionary point of view. Conversely, if the nonvoters are happy with the government, then they put their trust in the voters not voting for change. But, most interesting and probable based on human nature, is that it is the nonvoters who are most dissatisfied with the government and have chosen apathetic inaction or silent

protest as an improbable means to an end. The problem with this course of inaction is that it leaves a gap in our democracy, one in which representatives are being elected by a minority to pass legislation on the majority. The big problem is of course that nonvoters are also non survey respondents, as evident of the low 300 out of 15, 000 in the ANES and so cannot be questioned as to why they do not vote.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are 206 million eligible (18+, a citizen, and not incarcerated) voters in America. Only 146 million are actually registered and of those, a respectable 90% actually do vote. From those numbers we can gather that 60 million Americans are not registered and the other 14.6 million just did not show up to the polls. That makes 74.6 million un-cast votes. If those citizens were somehow of like-mind and voted for a third candidate, they would have easily elected him or her to the Presidency. Obama won in 2008 with just over 64.5 million votes.

Remarkably in 2008, the Democrats dominated the elections for every branch of government; this was partly because of the large increase in newly registered voters. Nevertheless, in the 2010 elections there was a decrease in the turnout percentage overall and consequently the Republicans took back a historic number of House seats and some in the Senate. One obvious theory to test would be if the sporadic voters have more liberal or left-leaning views. If only a small percent of sporadic voters became more consistent for either the conservative cause or the liberal, the elections might not be such a horse race.

Literature. It is the issues that touch people emotionally in a clear and direct way, that motivate political action most effectively; a key factor in getting people to the polls on Election Day. This is under the assumption that people are more likely to take

action when there is an issue that affects them personally and is foreseeable in the near future (Kinder, & Kieweit, 1979). This assumption means a person's overall attitude toward government would play an important role in their decision to vote. In these terms nonvoters, judging by lack of political action, are not motivated to choose sides on the key issues of today, but might be affected by how the government is dealing with those discrepancies. Personal grievances like these are described in Kinder and Kieweit's research, which determines that the changes in national economic conditions are more likely to influence voters directly. More importantly, their research concludes with the idea of "sociotropic" voting; that voters are appropriately unbiased on the correct level despite partisan predispositions. In other words, voters will leave those personal grievances at the door when voting for congressional seats and instead, are in tune with the national economic conditions when making their decisions. Again, past research is pointing to an un-segmented view a person has of the government, as the basis for voting choices.

In 1976, Wolfinger and Rosenstone conducted a study in which education became the most determining factor of voter turnout. They found that the "transcendent effect of education is the bases for voting behaviors" (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). Therefore, by process of elimination the group left out is the less educated nonvoters. Additionally, the study suggests that age or "life experience" could be a substitute for education when predicting voting behavior. Since it is commonly known that 18-25 year olds are notorious nonvoters, this conclusion holds weight. Coincidentally, the younger educated population is also notorious for another behavior, government protests and rebellions. The 1968 protests against Dow Chemical Company directly after the TET offensive, was

comprised of New York University students and the Youth International Party had led part of the protest during the Democratic National Convention that year. The students of Kent State University were protesting of the invasion of Cambodia which turned bloody as did the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 that also had heavy student involvement. In 1999 there was an Iranian student protest that ended with blood on the government's hands. And more recently, United Kingdom students protested the government's spending cuts to higher education. The question remains, is this group defiantly not voting as another form of protest against the system?

In 1983 Feldman & Conover outlined political perception and pointed to an overemphasis of projection and persuasion in each legislative candidate's issue positions. Their research finds that the more important factor in a voter's perception of a candidate is the inference of the candidate's issue positions from party's position, this is in addition to the candidate's ideological stance and the impact of candidate ambiguity on those things (Feldman & Conover, 1983). The uninformed voter choosing via ideological stances is not uncommon; however, Feldman & Conover's inference findings are uncommon. Voters' perceptions of party issue positions are influenced by the candidate's stance on those issues, making it so that the leading party figures have the ability to generate expectations about where the party itself stands. Similar to what Ronald Reagan did for the Republican Party in the 1980s. Successively those perceptions are used to judge new candidates from that party. If the mere perception or opinion of a party platform is formed by the front-running candidate, like this study suggests, then other candidates under the party are being group into that highly ideological brand.

Party platforms were never developed from a general public opinion. They have grown from national conventions that used to be run by political bosses and privileged party members. But, yet they are presented as the popular view. They were made from and continue to be: the common beliefs of elite groups. Their acceptance comes from a public addiction to joining the “bandwagon” or the argument by consensus. The question is: just how far from public opinion are the party platforms? But first, do the platforms even represent the opinion of the majority within a party or are they more similar to the extreme factions that parties are often depicted as being? The widespread disparities between the beliefs of those involved in politics and the general public might exaggerate the differences in the conservative and liberal split in ideologies; leading the public to believe in a “for-us or against-us” game of political power, correctness and morality. This would make the game of politics two dimensional when it is of course multi-faceted with a lot more gray that comes in-between winning and losing the legislature. If party ideology is not a product of the majority within the party and it is not from public opinion then it cannot be representative of it and the perceived public opinion is again being crafted by a small division of a party’s inner circle (Coffey, 2005). Moreover, a “follow the leader” approach is taken by voters in support of some issues in which only the party’s endorsement of the issue is known; which essentially overrides policy details in the decision making process (Perkins and Lavine, 2009). Additionally, the Coffey research identifies two characteristics that differentiate between two majorities in American politics: one is passive and the other is highly ideological. If it is assumed that the nonvoters are apathetic then they can be linked to the passive group. My hypothesis is questioning whether this non-vote is actually a result of dissatisfaction with

government and possibly an act of defiance against the whole system. The nonvoter is being written off in the political world as a non-activist and/or uninterested; but they very well could be interested, just not in taking sides. It is improbable for someone not to hold an opinion on their authoritative body, in-fact human nature to compare and contrast, to choose one idea over another. We must look more in-depth at the mind-set of nonvoters and not just the demographics of them. This could be essential to casting 70 million votes.

A combination of hard and soft partisan attachment is precisely what one would expect to find inside a truly free democracy. Two groups were identified in a 2009 study of these three democracies: The United States, Britain, and Canada. The first group is labeled the stable “stayer” and the other is the unstable “mover” group. The stability of individual-level party identification is evaluated by revealing a partisan attachment that “shows considerable energy at the hidden variable level in each electorate” (Clarke and McCutcheon, 2009). The research does not give an idea of how stable the first group is and how flexible is the second and how could it without having an ecological fallacy? Additionally it does not tell which group is larger; an important factor in vote counting. If there is a larger portion of citizens from the “movers,” with flexible attachment to the party, then one or two issues touched on in the right way can swing an election. If the “stayers” have the majority then political strategy should recognize there is no need for candidates to change their stance on specific issues to please segments of voters. Specific candidates do emphasize certain issues based on popular support. But, does the strategy of issue politics really work and is it a common strategy among politicians? The idea behind an issue being the highlight of someone’s candidacy was the interest of a 1996

study by John Petrocik. If true, its implication is that only a narrow scope of issues is being used comparative to the number of popular opinions. Petrocik's theory of party declaration and why it is done without full knowledge of all the issues at hand has to do with priming and framing an issue for the voters to relate. The use of single party voting is a crutch for the habitual voter who has grown lazy of researching the details of other major issues. But how can one issue be the determining factor for so many voters?

During Wattier's study of the 1980's Republican Primaries, he examined voter knowledge of candidate ideologies and how it corresponded to voting behavior. What Wattier calls the "specific-choice" rule, is normally preferred when information about a candidate is readily available; for example, a candidate's definite stance on abortion or gun-control. The "general-choice" rule is used when specific information is not available to the voter at which time he/she must rely on more general information, like Republicans who generally want more State's rights. It has also been suggested that nonvoters might be from areas where the outcome of elections is a foregone conclusion (Connelly, 1944). In the age of the internet, specific information is readily available and that is, hopefully what voters use primarily to make decisions on Election Day.

Religious affiliation has been in question as a possible reason for choosing a candidate. Basing part of one's reasoning behind voting for a politician that is known to have certain religious beliefs and therefore certain morals are not an unwise decisions but should it be a dominant factor? This is the case for some voters. Ellison McDaniel's article looked into the GOP's attempt to recruit Latino and African American evangelicals to the party solely based on their religious affiliation leaving all else behind. However, their inability to do this did not compare with their success in persuading

Caucasians. A single issue once again separates candidates, this time religion, has been used primarily by the Republican Party. Just as McDaniel's title suggests, is there a "God's Party?" And if there is, is it the Republicans? Democrats in recent years have often had to assert their beliefs all over the news during elections in an attempt to show that they in fact are religious followers too (for-us or against-us). Meanwhile Republican candidates are assumed to be "Believers" in the public eye. This particular single issue is now contested between parties. But the idea behind one issue being able to bring in voters is a reoccurring trend.

It is hard to believe that while the Country is at war, one third of Americans still do not feel the need to voice their support or their opposition. The problem with getting any substantial data is obvious. The information needed is from people who frequently do not show up on the statistical radar of political polls or surveys. A safe assumption would say that some of these same people do not fill out census information either and therefore might not be counted in another way. This might be the hardest group of people to find, let alone persuade to fill out a survey. I do not believe that the reason they are nonvoters is simply because they do not care about the present moral issues and economic concerns we have today. Either one can have an effect on them directly in some way. However, I would not be surprised to see that they are merely without care for public affairs, even if they do immediately affect them. Perhaps what is missing in the minds of nonvoters is one reason, incentive, or candidate fitting enough to warrant a vote. Maybe the dislike of government comes from the dislike of the faces that represent it. My inquiry will begin with these questions: What is the level of dislike for government in America; where do nonvoters fall on that scale; and what can be done to give a voice

to the speechless. If nonvoters turnout not to like the government, then they are going about changing it in the wrong way. If, however, they are found out to be in favor of the government then they are still standing by while it is changed by those who vote.

The past studies of nonvoters have included demographics, religion, party identification, and issue voting; and have left out the emotional mindset. Emotions can dictate many decisions, especially in politics; nonvoters might be avoiding the vote to make a point, the very same emotion that would make go out and vote. Because of their unwillingness to participate it has kept them away from the watchful eyes of public relations specialists counting votes on the campaign trail. Political scientists however might be interested to know what lies behind the shadow of all their studies on voting behavior.

Hypothesis. Frequent nonvoters are more likely to be dissatisfied with their own government. Citizens who vote more frequently will have a more positive outlook on the government.

Method. To start my research I created an index from a group of questions conducted in the American National Election Survey (ANES). The questions were centered on the respondent's feelings about their current government. All of the questions making up the index list are provided in *Table 1*. The answers to those questions were given a numerical code, whereas the more negative response was coded with a higher number. For example, to the question "Does the respondent approve or disapprove of how Congress is handling its job?" An answer of approve was coded '0' and an answer of disapprove was given a '1'. This was done for every question and

compiled to make an interval variable called “Dissatisfied with the Government” which has a point scale of 0-25; again the higher points indicate more dissatisfied respondents.

Table 1 about here

In order to measure this variable against a citizen’s frequency of voting, my dependent variable, I used a variable included in the ANES. The question asked of the respondent for that was simply, “how often do they vote?” Their answer was taken in the form of four responses: “always, nearly always, sometimes, or seldom;” and were coded ‘1’ through ‘4’ respectively. Once again the more negative response was given a higher numerical code.

In order to run a clear crosstabs with this data the “dissatisfied with government” variable was split it into a four category ordinal variable group of dissatisfaction. They were labeled “fully approve, approve, dissatisfied, and most dissatisfied.” The crosstabs showed promising results. A survey size of 1475 respondents produced a .202 Gamma score, indicating a weak relationship; however it was positive in the direction of: infrequent voting associated with more dissatisfaction. Additionally, the Chi-square test shows that this relationship is significant at the appropriate ‘.05’ level.

Table 2 about here

Figure 1 is a bar chart with the dependent variable “how often respondent votes” on the ‘y’ axis, or up the left side. The independent variable index “dissatisfied with government” is along the bottom ‘x’ axis. Looking at the “always votes” bar (colored in green) as a reference; it can be seen dropping steeply moving left to right, less to more, along the dissatisfied scale. The lowest percent of “always” voters are at the “most

dissatisfied” level providing support of the stated hypothesis, more dissatisfaction leads to lower voter turnout.

Figure 1 about here

To control for income level another variable from the ANES survey was used that splits household income into three categories: low, middle, and high. The pie-chart shows again in green, the “always” votes. The columns represent income level and the level of dissatisfaction is shown on the right. Looking down each column the “always” vote’s respondents percentage shrinks in every income level when moving toward the most dissatisfied.

Figure 2 about here

The line chart is a visual to show another control variable, race. This was taken into account because of the high percentage differences in the amount of American Caucasian, African, and Latino voters. However, as shown, the lines representing race again move in a positive direction associated with seldom voting and dissatisfaction with the government.

Figure 3 about here

When controlling for education, which Wolfinger & Rosenstone said in 1980 was the most important factor in determining if someone would vote; respondents with below a high school education had some intriguing results. The next pie-chart shows a heavier association between voting and dissatisfaction among those without a high school diploma. The effect of the independent variable on voter turnout is greater for those individuals without a high school education. It would seem that the less educated individuals are more likely *not* to turn-out to the polls if they are dissatisfied with the

government than would an equally dissatisfied person with a high school degree or higher.

Figure 4 about here

Discussion. These results can be interpreted in several ways. Most notably, individuals who are dissatisfied with the government seem to be displaying this by not participating, by not voicing their vote in government. This could be for a list of reasons that would not fit on such few pages. Still, it has been said to be a lack of understanding about democracy and politics, understanding how easily unproductive parties in power can be upset and replaced by something or someone new—or—could it be a full understanding of the way in which things should work: a pseudo-vote of no-confidence if you will. That question is left to the nonvoters, who notoriously do not fill out surveys and so are very hard to group and gain any statistical data on. Nevertheless, those that do approve of the government are flocking to the polls to see change or show support. They are the ones governing the elections and legislature in a “common people” democracy. Nonvoters are dissatisfied with the government, they might even hate it; but they are sitting idle and just watching as those that do vote “change” the channel back and forth from MSNBC to Fox News. But the voters love them for it.

*Table 1.***Variables included with "Dissatisfied with Government" Variable**

V083027	A13. Are things in the country on right track	1 TO 5/ wrong
V083034	A15. Care who wins House election	1/very 2/pretty 3/not very much
V083035	A16. Approval of Congress handling its job	0 TO 1/disapprove
V083045	C1a. Is there anything R likes about Democratic Party	0 TO 1/no
V083049	C2a. Is there anything R likes about Republican Party	0 TO 1/no
V085150	M1d. How many in government are crooked	1/not many TO 3/ quite a few
V085182	Q4. Does/doesn't make a difference who is in power	1/big difference TO 5/ doesn't
V085184	Q6. How good a job gov't in Washington has done past 4 yrs	1/very good TO 5/very bad
V085194	Q13. How satisfied with way democracy works in the U.S.	1/very sat TO 4/not satisfied
V085206	R6b. Hopeful about what federal gov't has done during last 4 yrs	1/ Extremely TO 5/not at all
V085208	R6d. Proud about what federal gov't has done during last 4 yrs	1/Extremely TO 5/not at all
V085062	C10. Is R optimistic or pessimistic about the U.S.	0/ TO 1/pessimistic

Table 2.
How Often Respondent Votes & Dissatisfied with Government Cross-tabulation

			Dissatisfied with Government				Total	
			Fully Approve	Approve	Dissatisfied	Most Dissatisfied		
How Often Respondent Votes	Always	Count	191	203	93	72	559	
		Percent	50%	38%	30%	31%	38%	
	Nearly Always	Count	101	164	99	61	425	
		Percent	26%	30%	31%	26%	29%	
	Sometimes	Count	35	59	44	32	170	
		Percent	9%	11%	14%	14%	12%	
	Seldom	Count	56	115	79	71	321	
		Percent	15%	21%	25%	30%	22%	
	Total		Count	383	541	315	236	1475
				100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Symmetric Measures

		Value	Asymp. Std. Error	Approx. Tb	Approx. Sig.
Ordinal by Ordinal	Gamma	.202	.030	6.685	.000
N of Valid Cases		1475			

Figure 1
Chart Representing Effect of “Dissatisfied with Government” on Voting

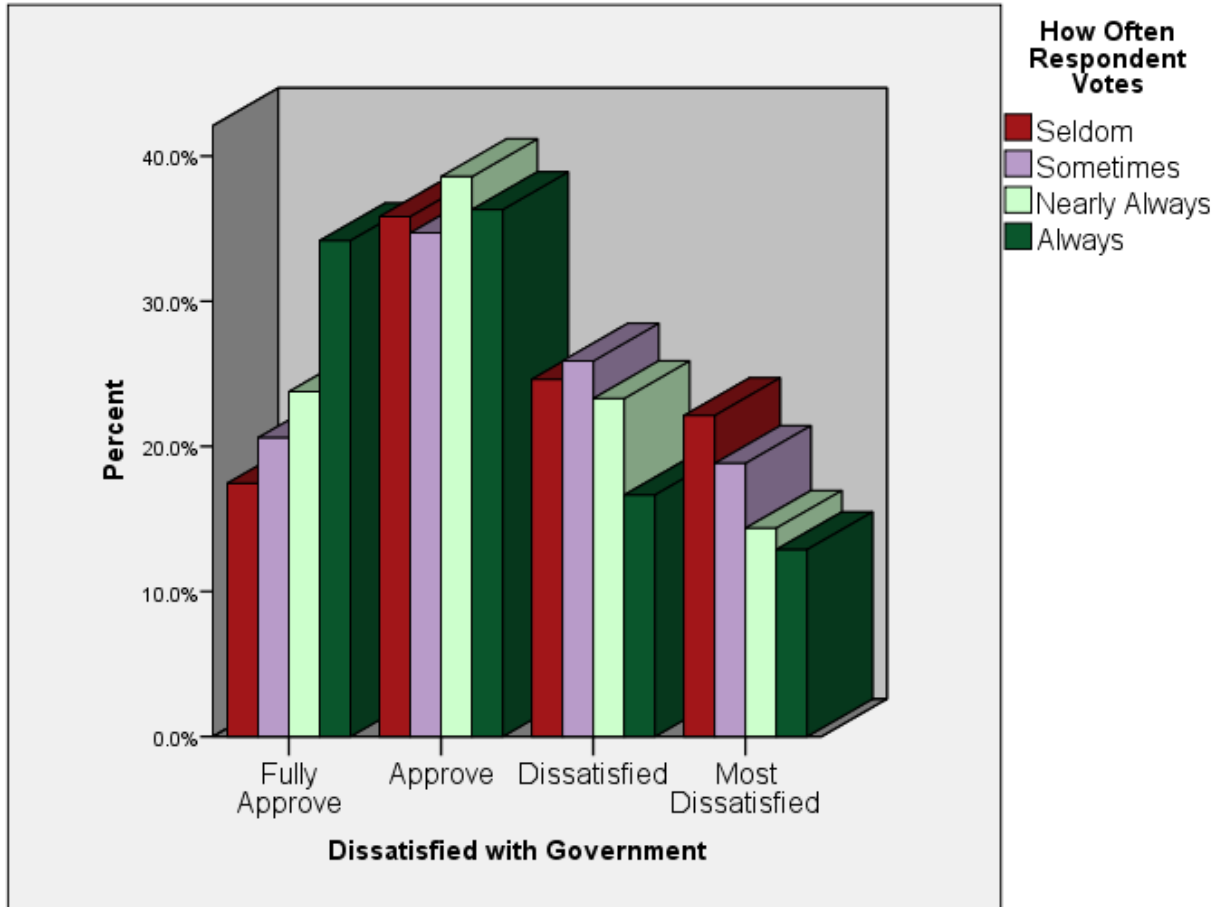


Figure 2.
Chart Controlling for Income Variable

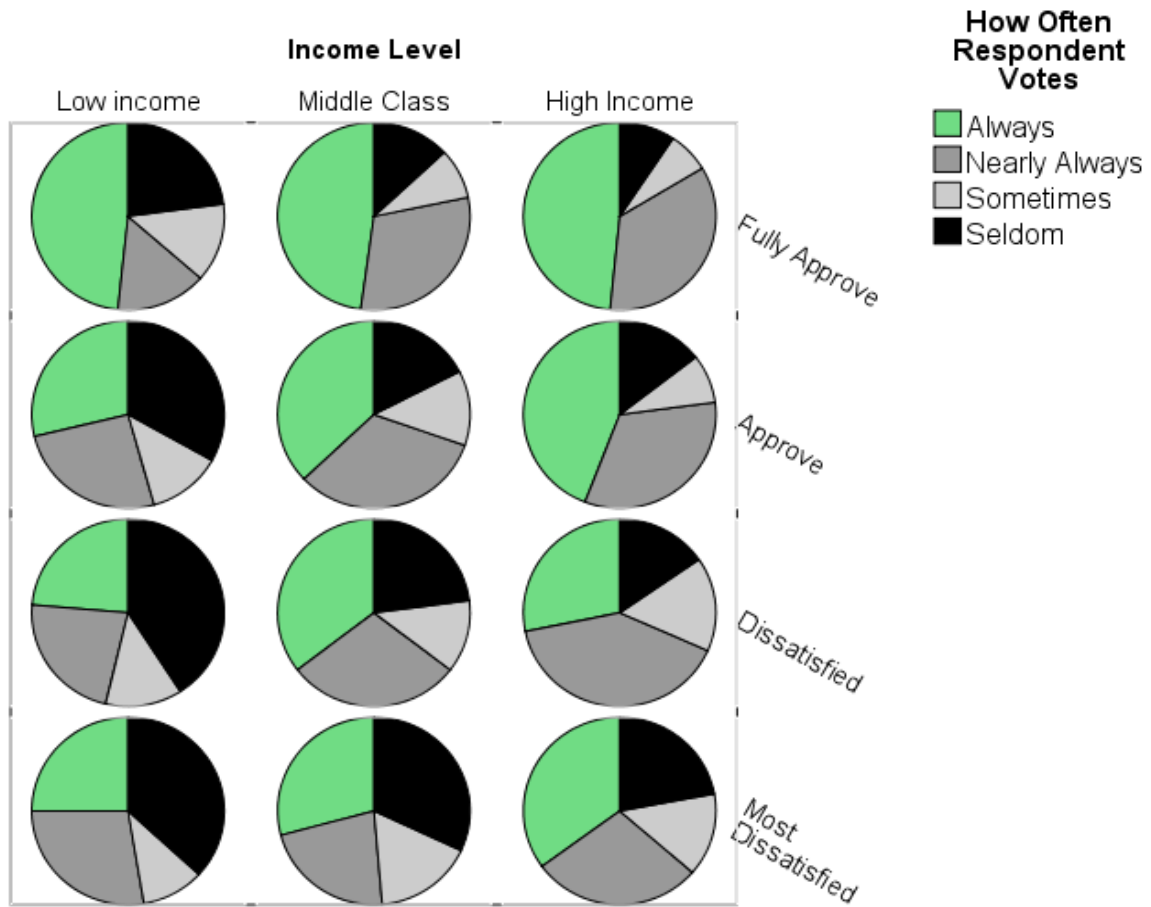


Figure 3
Chart Controlling for Race Variable

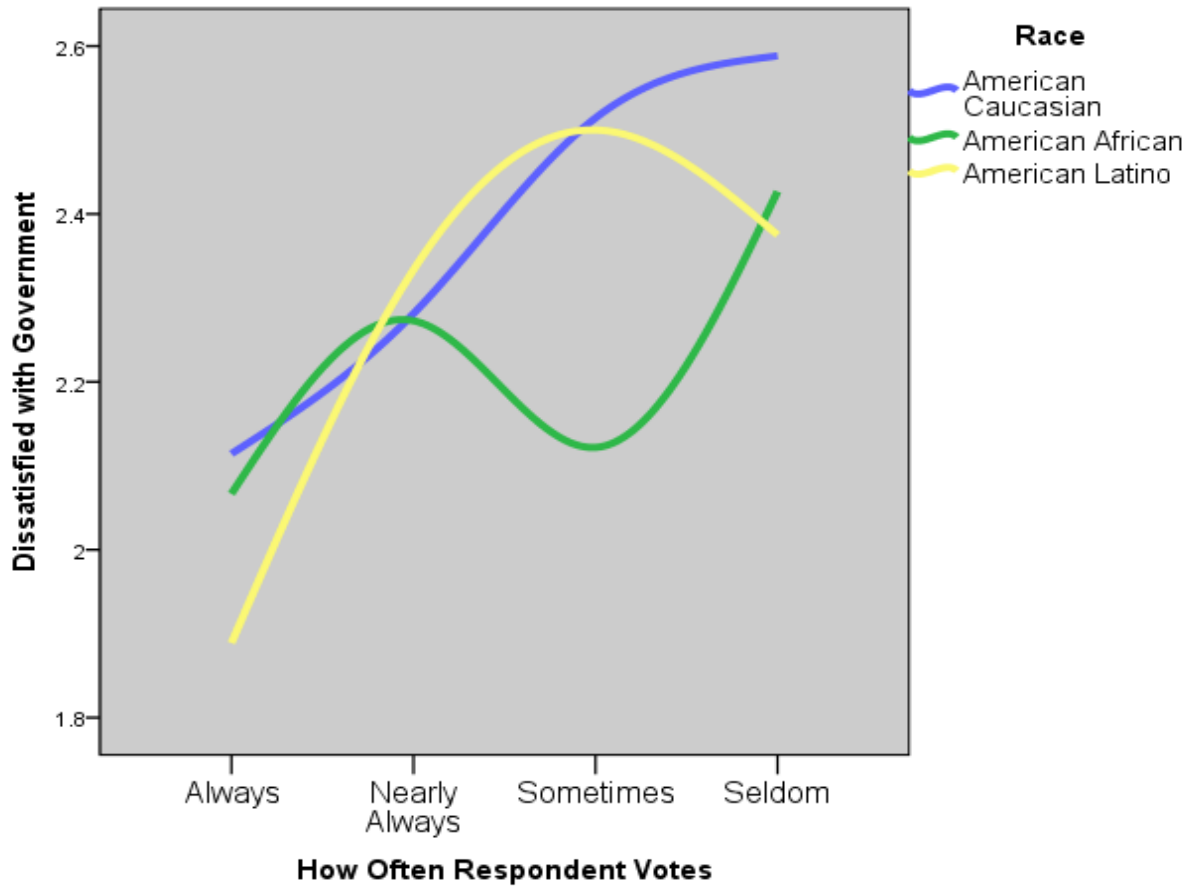
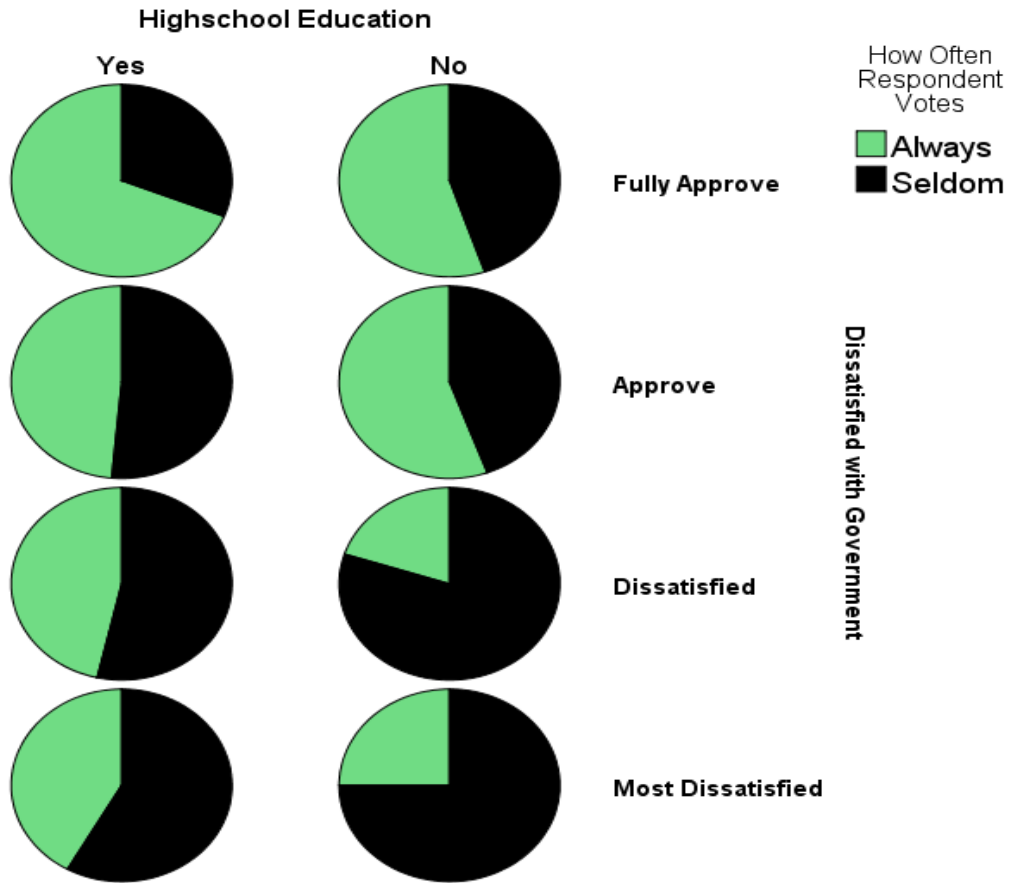


Figure 4
Chart Controlling for Education Variable



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