

## “LIKE THEY’VE NEVER, EVER SEEN IN THIS COUNTRY”? POLITICAL INTEREST AND VOTER ENGAGEMENT IN 2016

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MARKUS PRIOR\*

LORI D. BOUGHER

**Abstract** Journalists and political pundits have characterized the 2016 presidential campaign as one featuring unusually high levels of political involvement among the mass public. This article subjects such claims to more systematic assessment, by comparing levels of political involvement in the 2016 presidential election campaign to those of previous election cycles. Through analyses of turnout statistics, survey questions by the Pew Research Center and the American National Election Studies measuring political interest, and Nielsen audience estimates of television viewing, the article finds that the public’s interest and engagement in the fall of 2016 were actually quite similar to those of other recent elections. (It was during the primaries that political involvement in 2016 stood out more.) Acknowledging that aggregate analyses may obscure countervailing subgroup changes, the article examines subgroups that figured prominently in accounts of the 2016 campaign or were thought to have been particularly energized by Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012: men without a college education, African Americans, and young people. Those analyses turn up limited evidence for differential political interest trends. African Americans’ campaign interest and turnout did drop compared to 2008 and 2012. But in the opposite direction of the prevailing narrative, young people showed relatively high political involvement.

MARKUS PRIOR is a professor of politics and public affairs at the Woodrow Wilson School and Department of Politics, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA. LORI D. BOUGHER is an associate research scholar at the Center for the Study of Democratic Politics, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA. The first version of this paper was written when Prior was a Joan Shorenstein Fellow at the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School in the fall of 2016. Prior wishes to acknowledge the Center’s generous support, the constructive feedback at the Monday lunches, and Adam Giorgi’s capable research assistance. \*Address correspondence to Markus Prior, Woodrow Wilson School and Department of Politics, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544-1013, USA; email: [mprior@princeton.edu](mailto:mprior@princeton.edu).

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Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election stunned many observers. It seemingly signaled a genuine shake-up of American politics, the culmination of a groundswell that pollsters and analysts had badly underestimated. One feature of this groundswell, according to these accounts, was unprecedented attention to the Trump candidacy by different groups: fervent supporters previously ignored by Washington politicians; anxious opponents alarmed by Trump's incendiary comments and controversial behavior; and usually apolitical Americans sucked in by the entertainment promise of a reality TV host. This perception was fueled by attention-seeking statements, such as the *Wall Street Journal's* headline that the "Presidential Debate Sets Viewership Record" (September 27, 2016), Reuters's claim that "U.S. Presidential Election Drives Record Ratings for Cable News" (November 9, 2016), or the National Football League's attribution of lower NFL audiences to "unprecedented interest in the Presidential election" (as reported by *WSJ*, October 6, 2016). In a speech in late September 2016, Donald Trump himself claimed that "we have a movement like they have never, ever seen in this country. And they say in terms of enthusiasm they have never had polling higher."<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this article is to subject the perception of unprecedented public interest and voter engagement to a more systematic assessment. As it turns out, the overall narrative of the 2016 election as an unambiguous and sizable outlier in terms of political involvement is off the mark. By a first approximation, interest and engagement in 2016 roughly match the recent historical average. If there are slight departures from what we are used to seeing, they occurred during the primaries, on the Republican side. By the fall, the 2016 campaign looked similar to the three preceding presidential election years on many indicators of political involvement.

This should not come as a surprise. Most Americans do not become interested when an election approaches. They are either already interested long before the campaign starts, or they have decided that politics is not for them—and not even Donald Trump can change that.

The article proceeds by first by discussing a framework for measuring political involvement over longer periods of time, a task made significantly more difficult by the proliferation of new technologies and media platforms. It then presents a series of estimates tracking different types of political involvement over time. The final empirical section focuses specifically on political involvement in several demographic segments of the population that dominated the media narrative in 2016, including white males with low levels of education, African Americans, and young people.

1. <https://transcripts.factcheck.org/donald-trump-speech-in-miami-sept-16/>.

## Measuring Long-Term Trends in Political Involvement

The concept of “political involvement” refers to a high-level aggregation of different types of behaviors and predispositions indicating participation in, cognitive engagement with, attention to, and interest in politics and governance. The goal of comparing political involvement in 2016 to the historical trend raises significant measurement problems. There is no ready-made instrument that defines, measures, and combines the different components of political involvement. Even individual components are often difficult or impossible to measure over time.

It is useful to distinguish universal and technology-specific indicators of political involvement. We focus on two universal indicators of political involvement—turnout and political interest—and three technology-specific indicators—presidential debate viewing, cable news exposure, and television audiences during conventions and on election night. In today’s media environment, it is impossible to characterize the totality of news media use. Audience measurement (of differing quality and validity) exists for many media and platforms individually, but adding up audiences across platforms currently poses an insurmountable challenge. (One feasible approach, asking people to report their media use across a variety of platforms, is unfortunately highly inaccurate; see, e.g., [Guess \[2015\]](#); [Prior \[2012, 2009\]](#).) Nielsen Media Research tracks television news exposure (imperfectly, but without relying on dubious self-reports). Newspaper circulation data and automatic tracking of web use are available, too, both at the website level and for individuals over time. However, it is not obvious how to combine these technology-specific indicators into one aggregate measure.

Technology-specific indicators themselves are tricky to interpret because they miss data on the same behavior through other technologies and because their meaning over time can shift. For example, cable news exposure by itself is a limited indicator of political involvement over time because its availability and function have changed considerably. Two decades ago, the Fox News Channel and MSNBC as well as election coverage on websites and social media had barely any presence. Changes in cable news exposure can reflect shifts to alternative forms of media consumption, capturing more than just variation in political involvement. In the absence of a universal indicator of news exposure, this study thus focuses specifically on the media narrative claiming record-breaking television viewership, which can be appropriately evaluated by examining television audiences in isolation.

Voter turnout, measured reasonably well (but not perfectly) by voter files, is a universal indicator capturing a behavioral component of political involvement, defined uniformly across the population. Political interest is another universal indicator of political involvement, albeit a more indirect one because it tracks a predisposition to get involved, not behavioral involvement itself. There are two reasons to rely heavily on it in tracking political involvement over time.

First, political interest is a strong predictor of many forms of behavioral and cognitive political involvement. Politically interested individuals are, in a variety of ways, more politically involved than people who lack interest. Political interest often stands out as the strongest predictor of political engagement (for details, see [Prior \[2018\]](#)), so “[t]he importance of citizens’ political interest for explaining democratic politics can hardly be overrated” ([Shani 2009](#), p. 152). Second, political interest is the only universal indicator of political involvement other than turnout that is available over more than a few recent election cycles.<sup>2</sup>

## Turnout

There was nothing record-breaking about turnout in the 2016 presidential election. Just over 60 percent of Americans eligible to vote cast a ballot in the 2016 general election, according to authoritative accounting by Michael McDonald’s United States Election Project (USEP). The turnout rate (60.2) was noticeably lower than in 2008, the recent high-water mark, with 62.2 percent turnout, almost as high as in 2004 (60.7), and higher than in 2012 (58.6).<sup>3</sup>

Primary turnout, too, remained below 2008 levels. As a share of the voting-eligible population, 25.7 percent cast a primary or caucus ballot in 2016, compared to 27.2 percent in 2008.<sup>4</sup>

The two parties featured very different nomination contests in 2016: The Democratic nomination quickly boiled down to a two-person race between Clinton and Sanders. On the Republican side, more than a dozen candidates initially ran, and the winnowing took longer. Republicans did indeed experience somewhat higher primary turnout: 12.7 percent, compared to 7.8 percent in 2012 (when Romney received the nomination) and 9.7 percent in 2008 (McCain). But the 2016 Democratic primaries also had a 12.6 percent turnout rate. And all of these numbers are dwarfed by the 16.9 percent turnout in the 2008 Democratic primaries.

2. Campaign donations are tracked by the Federal Election Commission (FEC) and equivalent state authorities. The FEC, however, only requires disclosure on donations exceeding \$200 in federal elections, and thresholds for state elections vary. Donations fail as a universal indicator because behavioral data systematically miss involvement among Americans with limited means or reflect state-level variation ([Bonica 2014](#); [Barber 2016](#)). Survey-based self-reports of donations suffer from similar validity problems as self-reported media exposure.

3. State-specific comparisons for some of the most prominent swing states lead to a very similar conclusion. In Iowa, North Carolina, Ohio, and Virginia, 2016 turnout was lower than both 2008 and 2012 turnout. In Florida and Michigan, 2016 turnout was lower than in 2008, but higher than in 2012. In New Hampshire, 2016 turnout was about the same as in 2008 and higher than in 2012.

4. Calculations are by USEP, which calculates primary turnout estimates by dividing the votes cast (across parties or in each party contest separately) by the voting-eligible population. Using data from the Current Population Survey to estimate the number of eligible voters, [Pew \(2016\)](#) came up with higher overall turnout estimates, but very similar differences by year and party.

Because primaries and caucuses happen over the course of several months, comparing turnout rates over the entire nomination period can skew the comparison, as turnout often drops after it is clear who the nominee will be. Focusing on subsets of comparable states confirms the conclusion of moderately higher Republican engagement in the 2016 nomination period. In the first four states with caucuses or primaries in 2016 (Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, and South Carolina), Republican turnout was two to three points higher than in 2012 (or, for the most part, 2008). Two other states, Michigan and Florida, held their 2016 primaries later than in 2012 and 2008—and still managed to draw more Republican voters. Turnout was five points higher in Michigan, and two points higher in Florida, than the 2008–2012 average. In two other large battleground states that voted in the first half of the calendar year, Virginia and Ohio, the 2016 increase over 2008–2012 was bigger, amounting to roughly 10 percentage points.

Turnout is a concise, relatively precise indicator of the public's political engagement. In the 2016 Republican primaries, it was several points higher than in the recent past. General election turnout, however, was unexceptional and significantly below 2008's recent record. Since turnout comes at the very end of a campaign, it is a blunt gauge that is only somewhat revealing of the intensity of engagement among voters. Maybe what made 2016 remarkable was not turnout, but the public's interest in the campaign.

## Political Interest

Political interest is the “relatively enduring predisposition to reengage” with political content over time. This definition is derived from psychological research on interest (Hidi and Renninger 2006, p. 113). This general psychological model applies well to interest in politics specifically. Political interest starts with situational interest when something in the environment triggers an affective reaction. In some cases, *situational* political interest develops into *dispositional* political interest, a predisposition that can sustain itself even when the initial environmental stimulus has disappeared. Dispositional political interest entails an expectation that engaging with political content again in the future will turn out to be gratifying. It is not primarily motivated by the expectation of material rewards, nor is it purely instrumental.

Whether political interest is situational or dispositional cannot be determined directly by one measurement. At any given moment, an observation of interest—for example, a survey response reporting interest in politics or the upcoming election—could indicate either situational or dispositional interest. What distinguishes the two is the endurance of the latter, but not the former. Endurance of political interest can be assessed by asking people repeatedly or by following a population over time to see if “situations” generate peaks of political interest (see Prior [2018]).

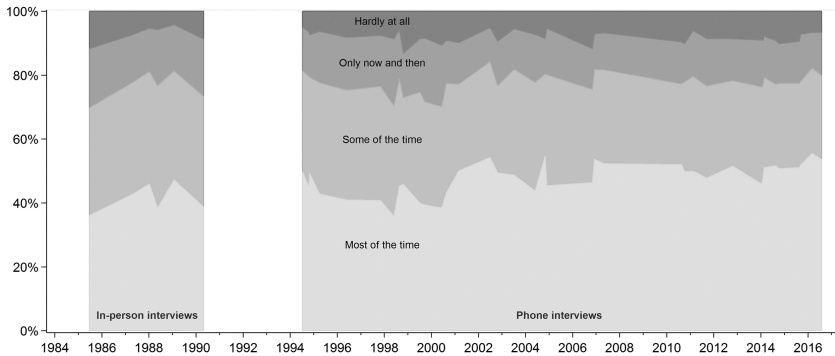
Few time series of political interest questions are publicly available, cover 2016, and sample the US voting-age population. The Pew Research Center has asked respondents for the past 30 years: “Would you say you follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?” This Pew question constitutes the longest-running time series of general political interest in the US population. (The American National Election Studies [ANES] discontinued this question in 2008, after using it for over 40 years.)

The ANES in 2016 included one question about interest specifically in the campaign that was repeated from past years: “Some people don’t pay much attention to political campaigns. How about you? Would you say that you have been very much interested, somewhat interested or not much interested in the political campaigns so far this year?” Finally, Pew has also frequently used a question that measures cognitive involvement rather than the broader concept of interest: “How much thought have you given to the coming November elections—quite a lot, or only a little?” Even though both of these questions refer to a specific election and may pick up some more situational political interest, they still mostly measure dispositional interest and correlate strongly with the first Pew measure (Prior 2018).

Figure 1 plots the relatively consistent distribution of responses to the Pew general interest question over time.<sup>5</sup> The most noticeable change is an increase in the share of respondents who report following politics in late 2000. For example, the percentage of respondents who say they “follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time” increased by about 10 percentage points in early 2001 and another few points by mid-2002. This turns out to be a local peak, as the percentage falls again for periods after. For about the past 10 years, however, the share of the public who report following politics “most of the time” has been about 10 points higher than in the first half of the time series.

With respect to comparisons of 2016 to previous election years, figure 1 is hampered by inconsistent timing of the surveys. The last time Pew used the question in 2016 was in August, the summer period that often sees a slight ebbing of interest. Compared to surveys conducted in the summers of 2000 (August to September) and 2004 (June), mean interest in August 2016 was five and four points higher, respectively. Pew did not use this question in the summers of 2008 or 2012. Two surveys conducted even farther removed from presidential election dates (in July to August 2002 and May to August 2007) generated about the same, if not marginally higher, levels of interest than the August 2016 poll. In sum, general political interest in the summer of

5. Survey responses are weighted based on age, sex, race, education, and region, using post-stratification weights provided by Pew and ANES. ANES analyses include face-to-face, pre-election samples only.



**Figure 1. Trends in general political interest, United States (Times Mirror/Pew).** The Pew Research Center began as the Times Mirror Center for the People & the Press in the 1990s, which in turn emerged from the Times Mirror newspaper company. Polling for Times Mirror was conducted by Gallup and, starting in 1990, Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA). Almost all polls since then were also done by PSRA. Polls in the second half of the 1980s were conducted as in-person interviews before Pew turned to phone surveys in the 1990s. To mark this change, the graph does not connect the two series. Until 2010, Pew used the following two opening sentences before the question: “Some people seem to follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there’s an election or not. Others aren’t that interested.” Their August 2010 survey compared both wordings in a split-half design. The frequency distributions are statistically indistinguishable ( $N = 3,490$ ).

2016 was a little higher than in the summers of 2000 and 2004, but not generally unprecedented even for non-election years. Furthermore, the peak of 2016 interest occurring in March did not notably deviate from the historical average or break the record set in the summer of 2002.

The ANES campaign interest question appeared in the pre-election wave of the survey, conducted between September 7 and November 7 in 2016. Graphed in [figure 2](#), it reveals a clear increase in 2016 in the percentage of respondents who said they were “very much interested” compared to the previous three elections. By this measure, interest did indeed set a record in 2016.

Finally, [figure 3](#) presents the Pew series that asks respondents how much they have thought about the presidential election. The graph connects estimates for the same election cycle (and illustrates that midterm elections generally spark less cognitive engagement than presidential elections). On this measure, the last survey before the election, in late October 2016, indicates

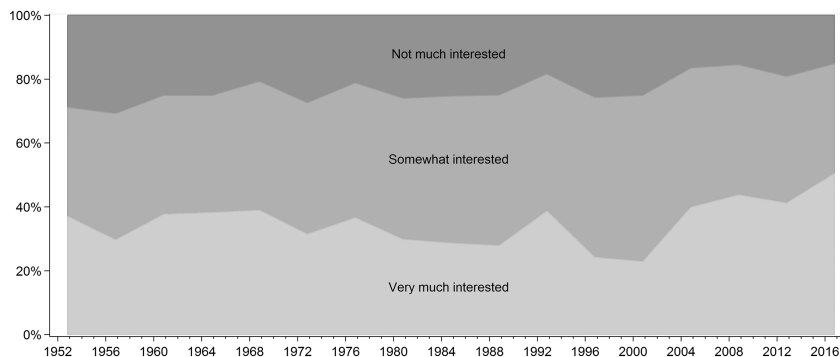


Figure 2. Trends in campaign interest, United States (ANES).

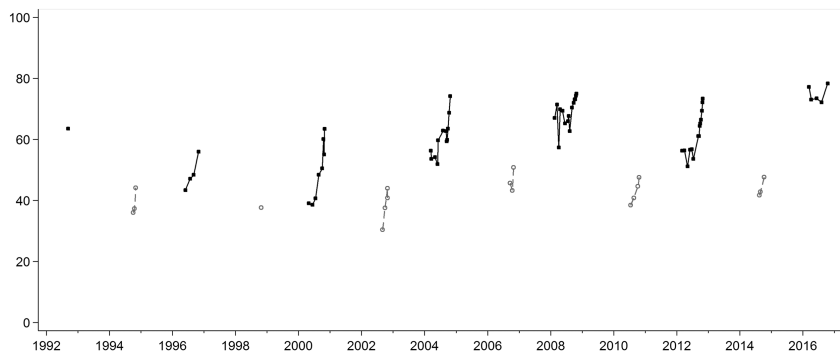


Figure 3. Trends in self-reported thinking about the election, United States (Times Mirror/Pew). Pew typically starts to ask this question in the spring of each presidential election year (with initial field dates ranging from February 20 [2008] to May 31 [1996]). Wording changes to thought about “the coming presidential election” in presidential election years and to “next Tuesday’s election” when asked the week preceding an election.

slightly greater involvement than in the previous three elections.<sup>6</sup> The more pronounced departure occurs early in the election year, however. Whereas the share of people who report giving thought to the election rises quite steeply over the course of the election cycle, by a little over 20 points, in all other presidential elections since 2000, cognitive involvement had already reached

6. Fielding ended within two to three days of the election in 2004, 2008, and 2012 (October 27–30, 2004; October 29–November 1, 2008; November 1–4, 2012), but about two weeks before the 2016 election (October 20–25, 2016).



peak levels the first time Pew used the question in 2016. (The mean in the first survey, conducted March 17–27, is statistically indistinguishable from the mean in the last survey before the election.) This finding matches the general interest trend in [figure 1](#), which also showed one of the highest estimates of the decade in March 2016, followed by a marginal decline in August. Like turnout, the 2016 primaries also raised interest and cognitive engagement to levels not normally seen so early in an election year.

## Presidential Debate Viewing

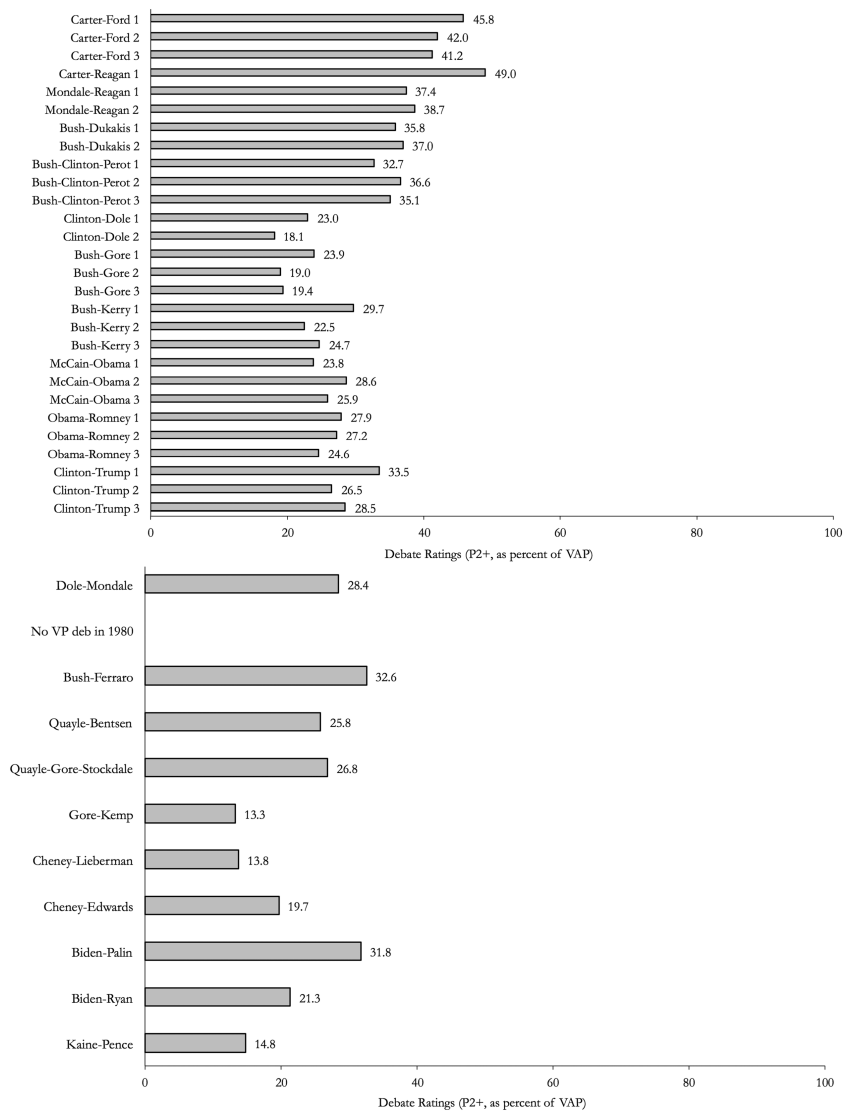
As best as we can tell, debate viewing was nowhere near the record-breaking audiences it was made out to be in media reports. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that “Presidential Debate Sets Viewership Record.” According to a headline on [money.cnn.com](#), “Debate Breaks Record as Most-Watched in U.S. History” (September 29, 2016). These characterizations are based on Nielsen’s estimate that the average per-minute audience for the first presidential debate in 2016 was 84 million, higher than the previously largest value of 81 million for the Carter–Reagan debate in 1980. Yet, since 1980, the US population has increased by about 100 million people. On a per capita basis, the television audiences of the first 2016 debate were far from setting a new record.

[Figure 4](#) provides ratings for all presidential debates. The most commonly reported audience metric is the Nielsen rating: the average per-minute audience of a program or channel, expressed as a percentage of all households with television, or of all persons in those households. The data in [figure 4](#) are person-level ratings.<sup>7</sup>

The historical ratings data document that the 2016 presidential debate audiences continued a slight upward trend that started in the 1990s. Debate audiences were relatively low in the 1996 and 2000 elections. Yet one only has to go back to 1992 to find larger per capita debate audiences than in 2016. And the Carter–Reagan audience exceeded the first 2016 debate by a full 45 percent on this metric. As usual, many fewer Americans watched the vice presidential debate in 2016. In fact, the debate between Kaine and Pence has trouble clearing even the low audiences of the late 1990s.

The cavalier way in which journalists, pundits, and even Nielsen itself (!) report these television audience estimates is remarkable. The headline of the

7. [Figure 4](#) plots Nielsen estimates of the per-minute average of viewers aged two and older divided by the voting-age population from Michael McDonald’s United States Election Project. PBS audiences are included starting in 2000. The denominator is chosen for comparison with turnout rates. Including minors in the numerator results in a small overestimate of the per capita adult audience, but Nielsen estimates of viewers aged 18 and older are not consistently available. (For debates with available data in 2012 and 2016, the P2+ average audience was consistently between 6.3 and 7.1 percent larger than the P18+ audience.)



**Figure 4. Presidential and vice presidential debate audiences (Nielsen estimates).**

press release on nielsen.com claims that “First Presidential Debate of 2016 Draws 84 Million Viewers” (September 27, 2016). By Nielsen’s own definition, this statement is incorrect. Eighty-four million is the *average* per-minute audience over the 90 minutes of the debate. Unless all viewers watch the entire

debate, this average audience is lower than the number of people who watch some part of the debate. Multiplying the length of the debate (let's say, 90 minutes) by the audience size in the average minute (84 million) thus provides an estimate of how many minutes were watched by the American public combined. It does *not* tell us how many different Americans tuned in to contribute some viewing minutes to this total. In other words, it does not tell us how many viewers the debate had.<sup>8</sup>

Nielsen actually collects estimates of the number of different viewers of a program and has a name for it: "reach" or "cumulative audience." For the first time, Nielsen released cumulative audience estimates in 2008 for the first presidential and vice presidential debates (Nielsen 2008). Of individuals aged 18 and older, 29 percent watched at least six minutes of the first presidential debate on September 26, 2008, on a commercial network. The average audience for this debate in the same population was 22 percent. The vice presidential debate drew a cumulative audience of 36 percent and an average audience of 29 percent. The cumulative audience, in other words, was 21 and 31 percent larger than the average audience, respectively (see Prior [2012] for further details). For 2016, no cumulative audience estimates have yet been reported by Nielsen.

Even though Nielsen and the media routinely garble the meaning of the audience estimates, ratings such as those in figure 4 are a defensible metric to compare collective debate viewing on television over time. Learning about the candidates and the quality of decision-making may be roughly proportional to the overall minutes of debate watched per capita. But we should be clear about the assumptions underlying this comparison. The metric makes no distinction between, one, me watching the full debate and you not tuning in at all and, two, both of us watching half the debate. Under some conceptions of learning and decision-making, democratic enlightenment might be greater in the second scenario because watching twice as long does not enlighten us twice as much.

There is one reason why even an appropriate interpretation of Nielsen metrics leads to a biased comparison over time. The metrics only capture exposure through television. We do not know how much online streaming this misses. Sporadic reports provide some sense of magnitude. In 2008, 285,000 live streams of the vice presidential debate (which drew the biggest television audience of all debates that year) were initiated on MSNBC.com, and "CNN reported 2.1 million streams of live video from 9 p.m. to 11 p.m." (Stelter 2008). In 2012, YouTube counted between 1 and 2 million views in the

8. Some journalists do better than others. In 2016, *variety.com* reported that "according to Nielsen national estimates, the last Republican debate before the key South Carolina primary averaged 13.51 million viewers" (Rick Kissell, 2016, "Ratings Update: GOP Debate on CBS Edges Last Week's as Highest of 2016," *Variety*, February 14, <http://variety.com/2016/tv/news/ratings-gop-debate-cbs-south-carolina-1201706027>).

United States per debate (Jamieson, Holz, and Akin 2016). For the first debate in 2016, “various live streams on YouTube together registered more than 2.5 million simultaneous viewers. Live streams on other sites also reached millions of people.”<sup>9</sup> As vague as these estimates are, the Carter–Reagan high mark is probably safe: About 40 million Americans would have had to watch the complete Clinton–Trump debate online in order to match the per capita audience of Carter–Reagan.

The historically middling debate audiences in the fall of 2016 contrast with unusually high primary debate audiences, especially early in the calendar year on the Republican side. Nielsen averages for two of them, the GOP debates in August and September 2015, exceeded 20 million people. As a share of the population, the top five Republican debates in 2015–2016 had average audiences of 10, 9, 7, 7, and 6 percent. These estimates are about double the Democratic debate audiences for 2015–2016 (6, 4, 3, 3, and 3 percent) and 2007–2008 (5, 4, 4, 3, and 3 percent) and close to three times the 2011–2012 Republican numbers (each of the top five debates drew 3 percent).

## Cable News Audiences

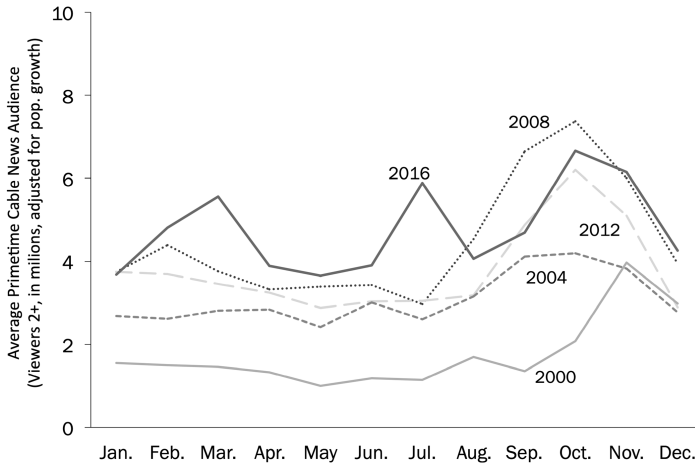
Cable networks and journalists made very specific claims about the prominence of cable news viewing in the 2016 campaign. Politico, for example, reported that “Fox News and CNN smash their all time ratings records, thanks in large part to Trump.”<sup>10</sup> And CNN president Jeff Zucker said that “2016 was the biggest year in the history of cable news...Cable news networks...are as important and as strong as anything in television.”<sup>11</sup>

Figure 5 graphs the combined Nielsen primetime (8–11 p.m.) ratings for the three main cable news channels (CNN, FNC, MSNBC) by month. Audiences are measured by the average number of persons (aged two and older) viewing one of the three channels (not counting streaming on computers or mobile devices). In October 2016, about 6.7 million people watched the average minute of prime-time cable news. For earlier election years, figure 5 adjusts for population growth by multiplying average audience estimates by the ratio of Nielsen’s 2016 audience universe estimate to the same estimate for the respective election year. The average cable news audience was larger in October 2008 than in October 2016 (with or without adjustment for population growth). The

9. Brian Stelter, 2016, “Debate Breaks Record as Most-Watched in U.S. History,” CNN, September 27, <http://money.cnn.com/2016/09/27/media/debate-ratings-record-viewership/>.

10. Alex Weprin, 2016, “2016 Gives Cable News Channels a Year for the Record Books,” Politico, December 29, <http://www.politico.com/media/story/2016/12/2016-gives-cable-news-channels-a-year-for-the-record-books-004902>.

11. Stephen Battaglio, 2017, “Trump’s Attacks on CNN Aren’t Hurting It One Bit,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 16, <http://www.latimes.com/business/hollywood/la-fi-ct-cnn-zucker-20170216-story.html>.



**Figure 5. Combined cable news viewership (Nielsen estimates).**

difference between 2008 and 2016 (and other elections since 2000, for that matter) is particularly large in the month of September.

While 2016 clearly misses the record audiences of 2008 during the fall campaign, in the primary season (especially March) and the convention period (July), 2016 does surpass previous election years. Just like the universal indicators of turnout and political interest, the technology-specific indicators of debate and cable news viewing also reveal that it was the nomination period that made 2016 stand out in terms of political involvement.

### Convention and Election Night Viewing (Television)

A third (technology-specific) indicator of political involvement tracks both cable and broadcast television audiences at key moments of the campaign, the conventions and election night. According to Nielsen, audiences on the final night of the two 2016 nominating conventions were substantially lower than in 2008. The average audience on the night Donald Trump accepted the Republican nomination was 32.2 million (a rating of 10.8). That is 2.4 million more than the night of Hillary Clinton's acceptance speech, but 6.7 million less than Obama in 2008 (13.4 rating) and 3.5 million less than Obama in 2012 (12.3 rating). Even the final night of the 2008 Republican convention drew a larger audience than Trump in 2016 (average of 38.4 million viewers for a rating of 13.4).

Nielsen has also published estimates of election night viewing, averaged over the period between 8 and 11 p.m. ET. Combined person ratings of commercial broadcast and cable networks for 2000 through 2016 were 24, 21, 25, 23, and 24; 2016 looks just like the previous four elections on this metric.

## **Summary: Did Political Involvement Break Records in 2016?**

Political involvement in the 2016 fall campaign was high, but not unprecedented. The first debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump drew a slightly larger audience than the most-viewed debate of 2008, between Joe Biden and Sarah Palin. Across all four debates, the two years look very similar. Historically, per capita debate audiences were much larger in the 1970s and 1980s, before cable television made competing entertainment available in the same time slots (Baum and Kernell 1999; Prior 2007).

Convention and election night television audiences were smaller in 2016 than in 2008. Barack Obama's acceptance speeches in 2008 and even 2012 had substantially higher ratings than Trump in 2016. Cable news audiences, too, were larger in 2008 than 2016 (even without adjustments for population growth).

All three of these measures of political involvement offer limited insights into overtime trends because they are technology-specific (tracking only television, or only cable news, exposure), and other technologies for delivering political content have proliferated, but are not figured into trend estimates. This makes the two universal indicators of political involvement, turnout and interest, particularly important. Judging by general election turnout, political involvement was lower in 2016 than in 2008 (and, just barely, 2004). Survey-based measures of interest provide more mixed evidence, with one series (ANES campaign interest) showing involvement in 2016 to be clearly higher than in past elections, and two others (Pew General Interest and Thought) showing it to be similar to 2008. In contrast to these ambiguous results about the fall campaign, turnout, political interest, cable news, and debate audiences all converge in documenting exceptionally high levels of political involvement during the primary season.

## **Subgroup Trends in Turnout and Political Interest**

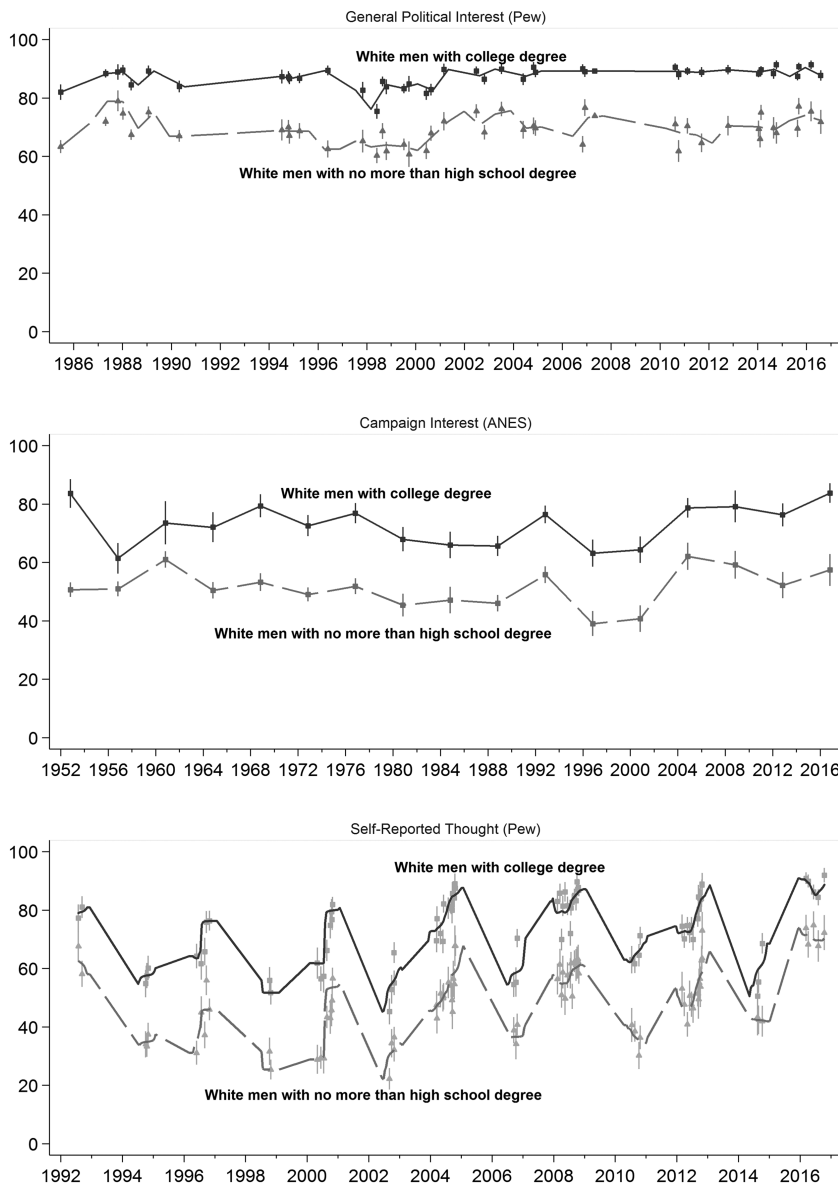
As far as population averages are concerned, political involvement in 2016 looks similar to the last open-seat election for president in 2008, and not much higher than in 2004 or 2012. Yet, perhaps largely stable averages hide significant boosts in involvement in some segments of the electorate that were canceled out in the aggregate by slumps elsewhere. According to one narrative of the 2016 election, Trump benefited from unusually high engagement among white males with low levels of education and unusually low engagement in other segments, including African Americans, who had turned out at record rates when Obama was on the ballot, and young people, who fell hard for Bernie-or-Bust. Is there any evidence for this notion of politically consequential variation in political involvement?

Figure 6 shows the three survey-based measures of political involvement separately for white males with college degrees and white males with no more than a high school education. (Respondents with “some college” are omitted from the graph.) All panels in figure 6 display survey means with 84 percent confidence intervals (so non-overlapping intervals indicate differences at  $p < .05$ ). The two Pew graphs (top and bottom) also show a smoothed trend, while the ANES graph with evenly spaced measurements simply connects the means.

There is little evidence that less educated white males were more involved than usual in the 2016 fall election. Regardless of which measure is used, more educated men are more interested in politics. This difference does not change much over time. In fact, on the ANES measure of campaign interest, college-educated white men have widened the gap in recent elections. There is a hint in both Pew series that non-college-educated white men showed relatively high interest in 2015 and early 2016. This marginal bounce occurs around the time Donald Trump announced his candidacy and began to dominate the Republican nomination contest. But it ends before the fall of 2016. Pew’s Thought series reveals a narrow gap between the two groups by historical standards in 2016, but the gap was already quite narrow in 2014, and differences in 2016 were the smallest in June (11.3 points) and grew with the approach of the general election (16.7 points in August and 19.7 points in October).

Analyses of turnout suggest that the relationship between political involvement and education among white men was not unusual by the fall of 2016. CPS turnout estimates among white men with no college degree increased just marginally from 2012 to 2016 (54.8 to 55.8 percent), but their 2016 turnout still trails behind both 2008 (56.8) and 2004 (58.8) turnout. Turnout among white men without a college degree is constantly 23–24 points lower than that of men with a degree in all four elections (Frey 2017).

Two demographic groups thought to be central to Barack Obama’s winning coalition in 2008 and 2012 were African Americans and young people. Without Obama on the ballot in 2016 (and in 2004), we might expect lower involvement in these subgroups. Turnout data partially support this expectation: Among African Americans, turnout dropped by between five and eight points relative to 2012 (the first estimate comes from voter files [Fraga et al. 2017], the second from CPS-based USEP estimates). African American turnout exceeded white turnout by four and six points in 2008 and 2012, respectively, but was three and five points lower in 2004 and 2016 (USEP data). Figure 7 reveals that these results are closely mirrored by the ANES Campaign Interest series, which shows significantly higher interest among African Americans than whites in 2008 and 2012, but the reverse in 2016. On Pew’s Thought item, both groups score similarly in the two Obama elections, but a noticeable race gap re-emerges in 2016.



**Figure 6.** General political interest (top panel), campaign interest (middle panel), and self-reported thought (bottom panel), by level of education (omits intermediate category, white males only).



Pew's General Interest measure in [figure 7](#) shows a relatively stable difference between white and African American respondents over the past decade. Because Pew omitted this question in 2008 and did not always ask it close to election days, a direct comparison to the other survey series is not possible. But [figure 7](#) illustrates an important limitation to Barack Obama's success in mobilizing African Americans: His draw as the first Black nominee and incumbent was strong enough to raise both turnout and campaign-specific interest among African Americans, but not more enduring general political interest—and so their amplified contribution to the Democrats' voting coalition did not outlast the Obama presidency.<sup>12</sup>

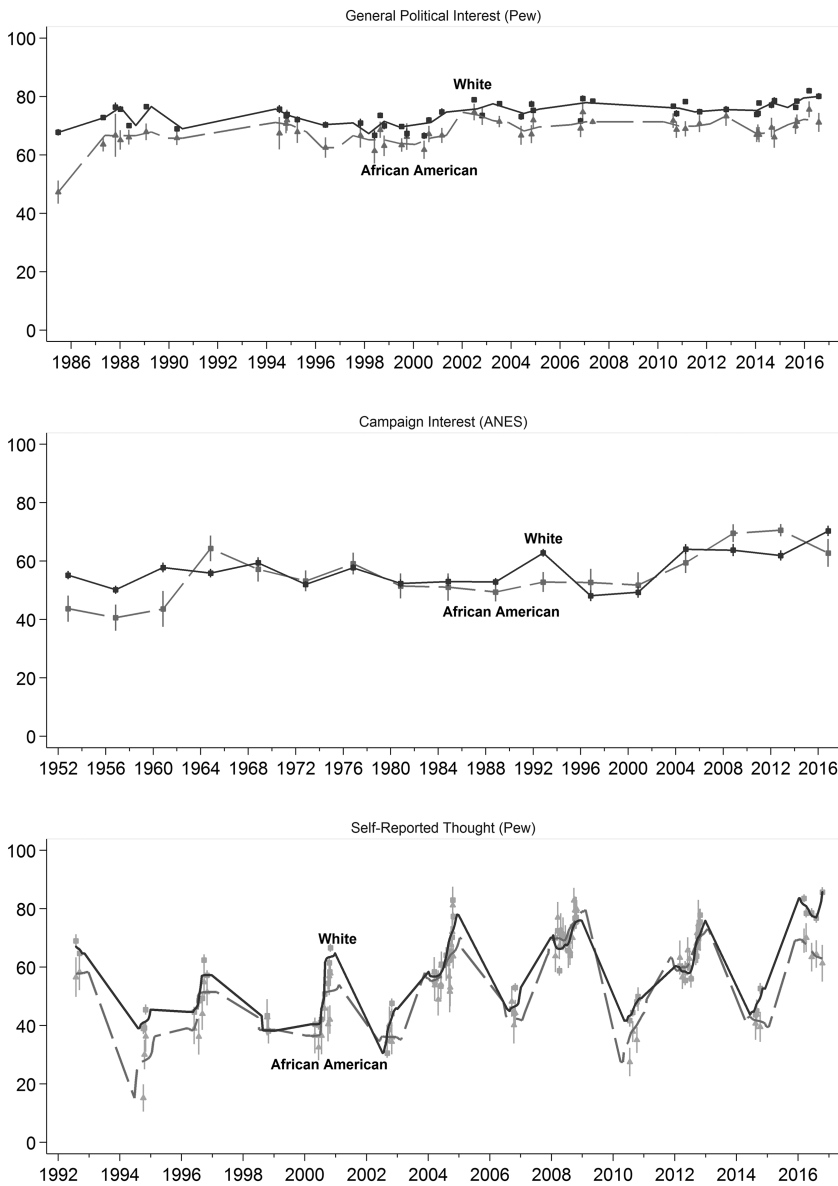
Political involvement by age also reveals evidence for differential trends—but not quite in the expected direction. [Figure 8](#) shows that young people routinely report less general interest in politics and thought about the election, but this age gap has recently narrowed, starting in the fall of 2015. The sharpest narrowing occurred in March 2016, where the gap between the 18–29 and older age groups achieved record lows. While the age gap in general interest again increased marginally over the summer, cognitive engagement among the young, already high at the start of the primary season (70.6 in March 2016), increased closer to the general election (71.4 in October).

Campaign interest was only marginally (and insignificantly) higher in 2016 in the youngest segment than in 2012 and below 2004 and 2008 levels. Older citizens, on the other hand, appear to have driven much of the increase in campaign interest in 2016. Yet, this increase is not evident in any other measure of involvement, including turnout. Turnout rates among Americans 60 years and older have been essentially flat since 2004 at 70–71 percent (using CPS-based USEP estimates). Turnout among young people, in contrast, more closely follows the ANES trends, with 2016 youth turnout exceeding that of 2012 (43.4 versus 40.9 percent), coming close to 2004 turnout (45), but falling behind 2008 (48.4). All told, youth trends in 2016 were mostly in keeping with historical averages, with the most notable deviations demonstrating more, not less, engagement relative to previous election years.

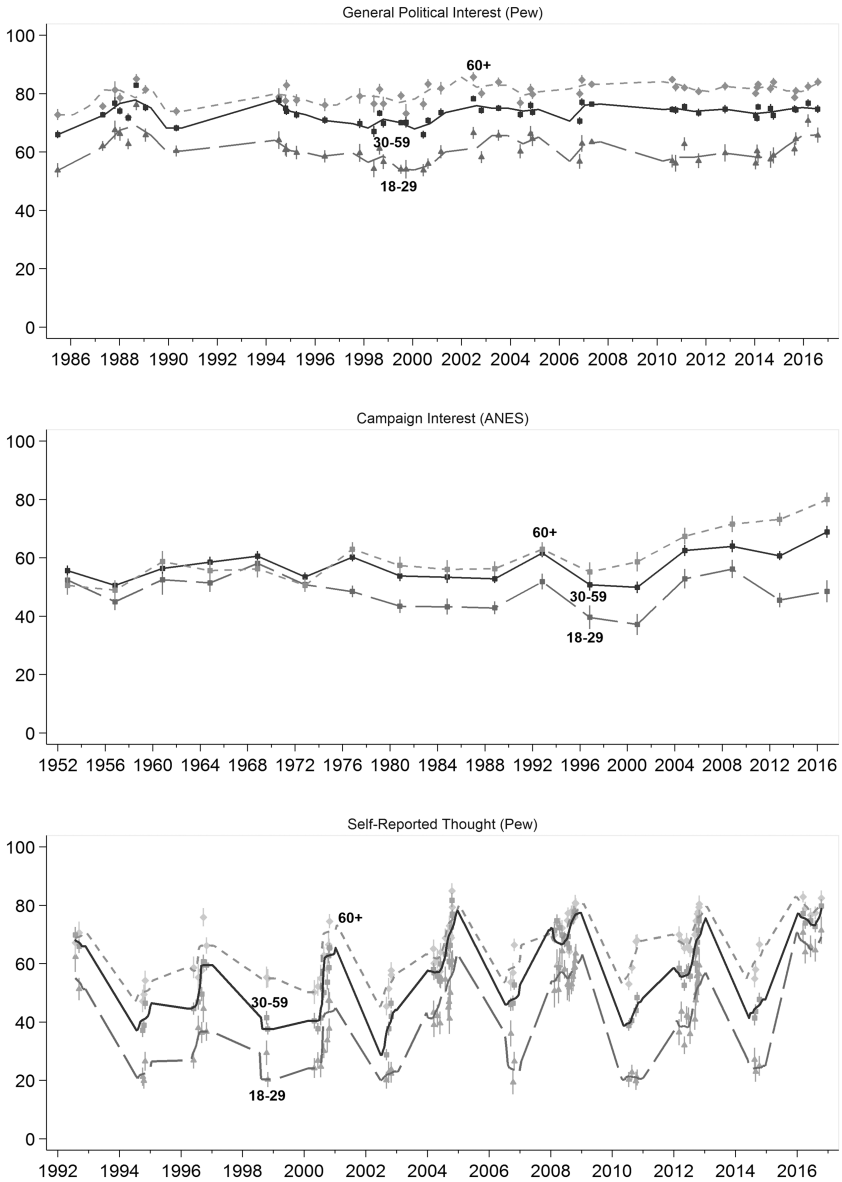
## Conclusion

Political involvement in the 2016 presidential election was fairly close to the 2008 election, the most recent open-seat election, but did not quite reach it on most metrics. And indications of increased involvement already began to fade with the close of primary season. Compared to 2012 and 2004, when

12. It is also possible that stricter voter identification laws contributed to a disproportionate turnout decline among minorities, but the evidence on this point is contested ([Hajnal, Lajevardi, and Nielson 2017](#); [Grimmer et al. 2017](#)).



**Figure 7.** General political interest (top panel), campaign interest (middle panel), and self-reported thought (bottom panel), by race (Hispanic respondents omitted).



**Figure 8.** General political interest (top panel), campaign interest (middle panel), and self-reported thought (bottom panel), by age.

incumbents ran for re-election, involvement was somewhat higher, but the magnitude of the differences is small. This conclusion is remarkably at odds with the hype of newspaper headlines and breathless public discourse during the fall of 2016. Yet, in light of what we know about the underlying factors that stimulate involvement with politics, historically similar levels of engagement in 2016 come as no surprise at all.

Political interest is typically positively related to outcomes we care about and would like to see more of. Because a person's general political interest today turns out to be very strongly related to her political interest last year or next year and because political interest is such a strong predictor of all kinds of political engagement, it provides democracies with a civic foundation. This foundation is stable: It is little affected by day-to-day politics—or even year-to-year politics. Because elections change our civic foundation modestly at best, we should not count on the foundation becoming stronger just when needed, in times of critical controversy. That is possibly bad news. The flipside is good, however: Our civic foundation, middling as it is, endures even when politics is unappealing. For the most part, it is not eroded by negative campaigns, horse-race coverage, or obfuscating candidates. Even though the 2016 presidential campaign was unusual and controversial, it should thus not be surprising that the share of Americans who expressed interest in politics, watched the presidential debates, and turned out to vote was only slightly higher than usual and about the same as in 2008.

Beyond characterizing political involvement in 2016, this article illustrates the limits of tracking involvement over time when technology and measurement approaches change. Just measuring television news exposure is challenging enough and can only be done imperfectly, as this study illustrates, but how do we combine television viewing with news exposure online and social media use? Cable and internet service providers have access to some behavioral data across platforms, but they often do not track use at work, are geographically confined, and do not make their data available to researchers. Nielsen aims to measure both television viewing and Web/mobile use, but their data collection is neither transparent nor publicly available. Even if this situation should unexpectedly change in the future, it will almost certainly not be possible to recover baseline measurements for recent years or today.

Turnout measurement has its own problems (most importantly, it is difficult to determine if the absence of a record indicates abstention or a clerical error), but it seems manageable by comparison to media exposure. Relying on trends in political interest is less direct because it captures an underlying predisposition to be politically involved, not the behavioral involvement itself. The tight link between predisposition and behavior justifies political interest as a rare trackable universal indicator of political involvement. The challenge when it comes to tracking interest is to ensure frequent enough inclusion of the same questions in high-quality surveys. Without Pew and the ANES, this article could not have been written, but both organizations made the task of tracking interest much harder by dropping a key measure after using it for four

decades (ANES) or not including it in the fall of the momentous 2008 and 2016 election years (Pew).

While combining various metrics cannot overcome their individual imperfections, we can have greater confidence if multiple measures largely support the same conclusion—in this instance, that political involvement in the 2016 general election was unexceptional.

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