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Source: *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Aug., 1969), pp. 682-699

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#) on behalf of the [Southern Political Science Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2128492>

Accessed: 04/02/2014 13:27

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IMPACT OF THE POLL TAX ON VOTER  
PARTICIPATION:  
THE HOUSTON METROPOLITAN AREA IN 1966\*

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In February 1966, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld rulings of lower federal courts that state election codes making payment of a poll tax a prerequisite to voting contravened the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.<sup>1</sup> That decision brought an end to one of the most widely discussed, frequently criticized, and solidly established institutions in American politics. Although the poll tax as a prerequisite to voting was initially regarded as a device for liberalizing the franchise,<sup>2</sup> the abandonment of more restrictive measures in time converted it into an instrument for limiting suffrage. It came to be especially utilized for this purpose in the South around the turn of the century, and by 1908 it was a prerequisite to voting in all 11 states of the old Confederacy. Beginning with North Carolina in 1920, seven states eventually repealed the poll tax by their own processes, but the final judicial

\*The authors wish to acknowledge financial support from the University of Houston and the University of Texas at Austin for supplies and data processing. In addition, we express appreciation to the University of Houston for finances that made it possible for one of the authors to undertake research on the project during the summer of 1967 through its program of grants for faculty research.

<sup>1</sup>*Harper v. Virginia State Board of Elections et al.*, 303 U.S. 663 (1966).

<sup>2</sup>Substitution of a poll-tax payment for the customary free-hold requirement for voting occurred as early as 1715 in North Carolina, according to Albert Edward McKinley, *The Suffrage Franchise in the Thirteen English Colonies in America* (Philadelphia and Boston: Ginn & Co., 1905), 91-93. The Pennsylvania constitution of 1776 replaced the free-hold requirement with a provision allowing the vote to persons who had "paid public taxes," a poll tax being among those levied. The New Hampshire constitution of 1784 explicitly specified the poll tax as a prerequisite instead of more stringent property qualifications. See Chilton Williamson, *American Suffrage From Property to Democracy, 1760-1860* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 94-97; 105-106; Dudley O. McGovney, *The American Suffrage Medley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 11-16.

decree in 1966 found it still a prerequisite to voting in Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, and Virginia.<sup>3</sup>

During decades of argument over the poll tax requirement, there was never very solid evidence available as to its impact on voter participation. While the ultimate resort of its proponents was the lofty principle that any person who was unwilling to pay a small fee in order to enjoy such a precious privilege did not deserve the franchise, many supported it on the grounds that it discouraged participation by minority groups (usually this meant Negroes, but in Texas it included Mexican-Americans as well). Its opponents usually accepted this assessment and carried the analysis further by declaring that it discouraged participation by the lower economic classes generally—poor whites as well as Negroes and Mexican-Americans.

Although the impact of the poll tax was of greatest concern to political and civic activists, a number of scholars attempted to get a more accurate picture of its consequences. The most frequently employed technique involved comparisons of aggregate data on voter turnout, either just before and just after the inauguration of a poll-tax requirement, or before and after its abandonment. Interstate and intercounty comparisons of the level of poll-tax payments and socio-economic measures derived from census materials were also employed. These efforts did much to illuminate the general contours of the problem, but the data and the techniques set inherent limits to what can be done. As a result, we are left with generalizations of an order and precision illustrated by Ogden's conclusion that in Texas "urbanism, concentration of population, a large Negro population, and a large Mexican-American population reduces the rate of payment,"<sup>4</sup> and by Key's reckoning that "if other things remain equal (and they rarely do), elimination of the poll tax alone would increase voting in most southern states by no more than from 5 to 10 percent of the potential number of white voters."<sup>5</sup>

It is somewhat remarkable that the poll tax has not been subjected to more rigorous analysis, since it is closely bound up with a

<sup>3</sup>Frederic D. Ogden, *The Poll Tax in the South* (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1958).

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>5</sup>V. O. Key, Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Random House, 1949), 617.

larger question that political scientists have persistently puzzled over, viz., the determinants of political participation. This neglect may be partially due to the greater inclination of students of political behavior to focus on the social and psychological variables associated with voter registration and turnout, although the influence of formal and legal arrangements has never been entirely disregarded.<sup>6</sup> Another factor in the neglect of the poll tax may well be its limited distribution in more recent years, thus making it difficult to utilize data from the national cross-section surveys that underpin so much of the research into other dimensions of political participation. But whatever the explanation, there has been very little systematic inquiry into voter participation under the poll-tax system.

Although aggregate data can be utilized in attempting to remedy this shortcoming, the need is especially great for data based on the behavior of particular, identifiable subjects. Surveys ordinarily relied upon to meet such needs unfortunately have not been undertaken, but we can obtain discrete data on a limited number of important variables by resorting to poll-tax, registration, and poll lists. The analysis reported here is based on such data, drawn from a larger, longitudinal study of voter qualification and turnout in the South's largest city—Houston (Harris County), Texas. By comparing the sex, age, racial and ethnic, and occupational characteristics of the potential electorate in Harris County with those of the electorates that qualified either under the poll-tax system or under the system of free registration that replaced it, we can at least measure with precision certain aspects of the influence of the poll tax on voter qualification. Similarly, by comparing the voting turnout in the primaries and general election of those who qualified under the

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes, *The American Voter* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1960), ch. 11; Stanley Kelley, Jr., Richard E. Ayres, and William G. Bowen, "Registration and Voting: Putting First Things First," *The American Political Science Review*, LXI (June 1967), 359-377; Lester Milbrath, *Political Participation* (Chicago: Rand, McNally and Co., 1965), 90-95; Donald R. Matthews and James R. Prothro, *Negroes and the New Southern Politics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1966), 148-156; Richard M. Scammon, "Electoral Participation," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 371 (May 1967), 59-71; Douglas Rae, *The Political Consequences of Electoral Laws* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); Key, *Southern Politics*, chs. 25-28; Ogden, *The Poll Tax*, chs. 5 and 6.

poll-tax system with those who qualified under free registration, we can measure as well the influence of the poll tax on the composition of the actual electorate. Our data shed no light, however, on the *direction* of voters' choices, and hence we can only infer the consequences of the poll-tax system for election outcomes.

#### THE DESIGN AND CONTEXT OF STUDY

Under Texas statutes the universe of potentially eligible voters consists of those U. S. citizens 21 years of age or older who have been residents of the state for one year and of their county for six months, and who are not deprived of the franchise by reason of felony conviction or mental illness. The aggregate characteristics of potential voters in the qualifying period for the 1966 elections were derived by projecting figures on the population 21 years of age and older from the 1960 census reports for Harris County to the mid-decade year of 1965. The resulting profile of the *potential electorate* appears in the first column of Table 1.

When the poll tax was abolished as a prerequisite to voting in February 1966, the normal period for qualifying to vote in that year had already ended (January 31). There existed, then, a *qualified electorate* composed of the following classes: (1) Those who had paid the \$1.50 poll tax; (2) those who were legally exempt from the poll tax (persons 60 years of age or older, and those whose residence and age made them temporarily eligible to vote before they became liable for the poll tax); and (3) those who qualified to vote only in federal elections under the provisions of the Twenty-Fourth Amendment to the U. S. Constitution. Approximately 377,375 persons in Harris County qualified to vote in 1966 in one of these three ways; of this number more than 78 percent were paid and 21 percent were exemptees (only 747 persons qualified under the Twenty-Fourth Amendment).

Since the poll tax and exempt lists constituted the only record of qualified voters in Texas at that time, the invalidation of the poll-tax requirement necessitated a special session of the Texas Legislature to enact the state's first registration law. The result was a fifteen-day period in mid-March for the free registration of those potential voters who had not qualified under the poll-tax system. The number of free registrants in Harris County totaled 96,405. Thus, there were in 1966 two lists of qualified voters in Texas—those qualifying under the old poll-tax system in the period October 1, 1965 to

January 31, 1966 (henceforth referred to as the "poll-tax," "paid," or "taxed" electorate, even if some were exemptees), and those qualifying through free registration in March, 1966 (henceforth termed the "free" electorate).

In order to obtain information on the socio-demographic character of the 473,780 persons who eventually qualified to vote in 1966, a simple random sample of 1,013 names was drawn by strict probability methods from the two lists of eligibles. It was possible to obtain for each qualified elector in our sample the following data directly from the lists: place of residence; age; sex; length of residence in the state, city, and county; state (or country) of birth; occupation; voting precinct; and mode of qualification. Since critical information on race and ethnicity were missing from the lists, we utilized admittedly imperfect indicators. Mexican-Americans were identified through use of the list of Spanish surnames developed by the U. S. Census Bureau for its census of the Spanish-speaking population of the Southwest. For specifying Negro electors we first identified a number of voting precincts as "Negro" on the basis of (1) demographic data on Houston precincts utilizing the Shevky-Bell technique;<sup>7</sup> (2) designations from the County Clerk's office; and (3) precinct voting records in elections where there had been pronounced Negro bloc voting. All electors in these precincts were classified as "Negro" unless previously designated as "Mexican-Americans." In accordance with Texas usage, all those in our sample who were not identified as Negroes or Mexican-Americans were classified as "Anglos."

To ascertain the characteristics of the *actual electorate* each name in our sample of the qualified electorate was checked against the poll list used by election officials to verify voters entering the polls. In this way it was possible to determine which eligibles participated in the Democratic and Republican primaries and in the general election.<sup>8</sup>

Since there is good reason to suppose that the composition of the qualified and the actual electorates is affected by the salience

<sup>7</sup>See Eshref Shevky and Wendell Bell, *Social Area Analysis* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1959).

<sup>8</sup>For a discussion of the problems inherent in using the lists of registered voters as the basis for computing turnout rates see Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel Lang, *Voting and Nonvoting* (Waltham, Mass.: Blaisdell Publishing Co., 1968), 73-80.

and the competitiveness of the elections involved, brief mention should be made of the political context in Houston in 1966. There was little competition for the office of governor, for incumbent John Connally easily won renomination in the Democratic primary and had only token opposition from Republicans in the general election. The spirited contest for the U. S. Senate seat was almost entirely a general election affair, for incumbent John Tower had no opposition in the Republican primary, and his challenger, State Attorney-General Waggoner Carr, won the Democratic primary without serious difficulty (78.3 percent of the statewide vote went to Carr in the party primary). Tower defeated Carr in Harris County with 60 percent of the vote, compared with the statewide figure of 57 percent.

In Harris County's 7th Congressional district the situation was akin to that in the Senate race, with the principal contest coming in the general election between conservative Democrat Frank Briscoe and Republican George Bush (Bush won with 57 percent of the vote). In the 8th Congressional district the Republicans did not enter a candidate, and hence the only activity occurred in the Democratic primary when liberal leader Bob Eckhardt won over deceased Congressman Albert Thomas whose name remained on the ballot despite his death. In the 22nd Congressional District the Republicans also failed to mount a campaign, but the Democratic primary saw a sharp fight between the conservative incumbent Bob Casey and the liberal Bill Kilgarlin, who was former county party chairman (Casey was re-nominated with 55.6 percent of the vote). There were a number of close primary and general-election races for the state legislature and for local offices, but none attracted wide public notice. Other than these local and district contests, the only significant battle in the second Democratic primary was between liberal and moderate-conservative candidates for the office of state attorney general.

To sum it up, no election fight in Harris County in 1966 produced the excitement and the interest of a presidential campaign, or even past gubernatorial and senatorial campaigns. Most of the competition in the primaries involved offices with low to medium salience such as attorney general, congressman, or state legislator; most of the attention in the general election focused on the race for U. S. Senator.

## POTENTIAL AND QUALIFIED ELECTORATES

The first concern in analyzing our data is to determine the extent to which the electorate produced by the poll-tax system differed from the potential electorate, i.e., who—if anyone—was screened out. A comparison of the columns for the potential and “taxed” electorates of Table 1 reveals that there were indeed noteworthy differences in the two groups with respect to the four variables available to us. Thus men were overrepresented in the “taxed” electorate, constituting a majority of that group despite the fact that women were more numerous in the potential electorate. The youngest age brackets (especially adults under 30) were distinctly underrepresented in the qualified electorate, while the older brackets (especially those over 60) were over-represented there.

The poll tax in the South has always involved racial issues in one way or another. Yet, in Houston political organizations dating back to the 1920s have endeavored to blunt the disfranchising effects of the tax by stimulating Negro registration and voting. It is particularly interesting therefore to note that Negroes were still somewhat less likely than Anglos to qualify under the poll-tax system; almost 19 percent of the potential electorate was Negro but only 15.6 percent of the paid electorate was of that race. Similarly, Anglos constituted only 75.5 percent of the potential voters but 82.5 percent of those who paid the poll tax or secured exemptions. The most striking feature, however, was the exclusion of the Mexican-Americans by the poll-tax system, for they constituted 5.6 percent of the potential voters but only 1.6 percent of poll-tax payers.

The difficulties encountered in coding the reported occupations require caution in comparing the two electorates along that dimension, but it is clear that the professional, managerial, and technical workers in the paid electorate were grossly overrepresented in proportion to their strength in the adult population. This finding squares well with other findings regarding political participation,<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Milbrath, *Political Participation*, 124-128. The occupational coding is based on the Census Bureau's Classified Index of Occupations and Industries; it is subject to error owing to the peculiarities of the occupational listings on the poll-tax and registration lists. The nine occupational categories of Table 1 are collapsed in subsequent tables into the conventional categories of professional/managerial; white-collar; blue-collar; and miscellaneous (the latter including housewives who are not otherwise reported).

TABLE I  
 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE POTENTIAL AND QUALIFIED ELECTORATES IN HARRIS COUNTY, 1964 AND 1966, INCLUDING POLL TAX AND FREE REGISTRATION SYSTEMS

Characteristics	Potential Electorate*	1966 Combined Sample (N=1013)	1966—Poll Tax & Exempt (N=777)	1966—Free Registration (N=236)	1964 Sample (N=4123)
<b>Sex:</b>					
Male	47.6%	53.1%	53.0%	53.4%	51.3%
Female	52.4	46.9	47.0	46.6	48.7
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
<b>Age:</b>					
21-29	18.5	20.2	15.6	35.2	18.7
30-39	27.0	23.3	22.5	25.8	25.4
40-49	21.5	21.1	21.1	21.0	23.2
50-59	17.1	17.8	19.6	12.0	16.4
60+	15.9	17.6	21.2	6.0	16.3
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
<b>Ethnicity:</b>					
Anglo	75.5	82.5	82.8	81.8	81.5
Negro Precincts	18.9	14.5	15.6	11.0	15.4
Spanish Speaking	5.6	3.0	1.6	7.2	3.1
Surname	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

TABLE I  
(Continued)

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE POTENTIAL AND QUALIFIED ELECTORATES IN HARRIS COUNTY, 1964 AND 1966, INCLUDING POLL TAX AND FREE REGISTRATION SYSTEMS

Characteristics	Potential Electorate <sup>a</sup>	1966 Combined Sample (N=1013)	1966—Poll Tax & Exempt (N=777)	1966—Free Registration (N=236)	1964 Sample (N=4123)
Occupation: <sup>b</sup>					
Prof. & Tech.	7.9	17.8	18.1	16.5	17.0
Managerial	6.3	9.2	9.3	8.9	11.2
Clerical & Sales	14.0	14.3	13.8	16.1	15.9
Skilled Workers	17.4	17.0	15.2	22.9	11.9
Pvt. Household Wkrs.		1.1	1.3	.4	1.4
Service Workers	5.3	6.2	6.3	5.9	8.4
Unskilled Workers	3.4	5.6	6.0	4.2	7.1
Miscellaneous	43.4	28.8	30.0	25.1	27.1
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

<sup>a</sup>Based on projections of 1960 census data for each sex, age, and racial-ethnic category, using a multiplier based on growth rates from 1950 to 1960.

<sup>b</sup>All except the "miscellaneous" category represent percentages of the *employed* labor force 20 years of age and over. The "miscellaneous" category is the difference between the raw totals for the other occupational categories and the total population 20 years of age and over; its principal components are housewives, unemployed, retired, and unclassifiables. See *U.S. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Census of Population: 1960. Vol. I. Characteristics of the Population, Part 45, Texas.* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office), 909-911.

but it is somewhat surprising that the pattern of qualification did not vary greatly among the various classes of blue-collar workers. In fact, the skilled workers appeared to be underrepresented in the "paid" electorate and the unskilled overrepresented.

It is to be expected, of course, that these differences in the two electorates being compared were somewhat greater in 1966 than in a presidential election year when the level of popular interest rises higher and earlier. The data for the "paid" electorate in 1964 are presented in the last column of Table 1. Generally speaking, the same variations are found but with reduced amplitudes.

Ordinarily it would be impossible to determine the extent to which the differences were due to the necessity of paying \$1.50 to qualify, and the extent to which they were due to the necessity of going through the process of qualifying to vote (presumably any registration system, no matter how liberal, has at least *some* discriminating tendency). In this case, however, we can bring into our comparison the characteristics of those who qualified under conditions that were almost identical except that the poll tax no longer had to be paid.<sup>10</sup> By bringing the fourth column of Table 1 (the "free" electorate) into the comparison we can gauge the impact of the poll-tax requirement alone.

Although there is very little difference in sex between the paid and the free electorates, we do find major variations with respect to age. Younger voters were far more likely to qualify under the free system; in fact, the proportion of those under 30 years of age more than doubled. Older voters, on the other hand, were more likely to qualify under the poll-tax system (already free for those 60 years of age and older, it will be recalled).

As compared with the paid electorate, the proportion of Anglos qualifying under the free system is only slightly lower, while the proportion of Negroes in the free electorate declines noticeably (from 15.6 percent to 11 percent). There was, however, a very

<sup>10</sup>There were these differences in conditions: The free registration period was limited to fifteen days, compared with the four months open for poll-tax payment; the free registration period was closer to the May primary elections, and campaigning for them had already commenced; the end of the poll-tax requirement was given a considerable amount of attention by the mass media. The latter two alterations in conditions probably stimulated more registration than would have occurred if the invalidation of the poll tax had come earlier in the year.

spectacular increase in Mexican-American registration from 1.6 percent of total paid registrants to 7.2 percent of the free registrants. As a result, the proportion of the total electorate in 1966 represented by Mexican-Americans climbed to about the level of 1964.

In the occupational category, the most striking increase brought by free registration was in the proportion of skilled workers (from 15.2 percent of the paid to 22.9 percent of the free electorate). The rate of qualification of professional and managerial types was slightly lower under the free system, and the proportion of clerical and sales workers somewhat higher. The remaining occupational groups (household, service, and unskilled workers) declined in proportion as a result of free registration.

In summary, free registration brought little change in the proportion of qualified voters who were male, age 40-49, Anglos, and employed in professional, managerial, or service-worker categories. Free registration did increase noticeably the proportion of younger persons, Spanish-speaking registrants, and clerical, sales, and skilled workers. However, it brought a marked decline in the proportion of older persons, Negroes, and private-household, unskilled, and miscellaneous occupational categories. Clearly, the racial, ethnic, and class responses to the end of the poll-tax system apparently contemplated by its opponents did not materialize at the registration stage—some groups that had been under-qualified improved their rate of qualification with free registration, but others did not. We can only speculate as to why free registration should produce a marked increase for Mexican-Americans and skilled workers but a decline for Negroes and service workers; quite possibly the explanation involves different patterns of political leadership, mobilization, and communications.

But even though the end of the poll tax did not bring the *qualified* electorate into alignment with the *potential* electorate, did it redress substantially the character of the *actual* electorate?

#### THE ACTUAL ELECTORATE

Table 2 is a breakdown of the characteristics of persons in our 1966 sample who not only qualified to participate, but actually voted in either of the first party primaries and/or in the general election. Examining first the participants in the party primaries, we find that females, persons in age categories 21-29 and 30-39,

those with Spanish surnames, and workers in blue-collar occupations comprised a larger part of the free electorate than they did of the taxed electorate. Of particular interest here is the race-ethnicity variable. Note, for example, that in the party primaries both Anglos and the Spanish-surnamed comprised greater portions of the actual free electorate than they did of the actual taxed electorate, while the proportion of Negroes in the actual electorate drops substantially when we compare the taxed with the free registrants. One-fifth of the poll-tax voters in the party primaries were from Negro precincts, but only 7 percent of the free registrants participating in the primaries were so classified.

Differences in the characteristics of taxed and free registrants voting in the general election of 1966 are less marked. Females, persons 21-29 years of age, and the Spanish-surnamed who qualified under the free system constituted a larger part of the actual free voters than of the actual paid voters. On the other hand, free registration operated to reduce the proportion of Negroes and older persons among those actually voting in the general election, while having relatively little impact on the proportion of Anglos, those in age categories 30-39 and 40-49 years, and most of the occupational categories.

While the data thus far tell us something about the changes in the contours of the actual electorate wrought by the demise of the poll-tax requirement, they do not enlighten us about the consequences for the size of the actual electorate. Table 3 is designed to help with that question. It reveals that 12.3 percent of the voters in the first Democratic primary were free registrants, as were about 5.8 percent of the participants in the second Democratic primary. Only 4.4 percent of those who voted in the first Republican primary qualified under the free system. The highest turnout of free registrants, both relatively and absolutely, came in the general election, where they accounted for 16.7 percent of the total vote.<sup>11</sup>

Since free registrants represented over 23 percent of all sampled qualified voters, these figures leave no doubt that turnout among them was well below that for the taxed electorate. This differential is clarified by the first three columns of Table 3. Almost

<sup>11</sup>These small percentages can be misleading unless one keeps in mind the size of the base. Without free registration, 17,472 persons who voted in the first Democratic primary and 36,152 persons who voted in the general election would have been excluded from participation.

TABLE 2  
THE ACTUAL ELECTORATES OF HARRIS COUNTY, 1966 (FOR TAXED AND FREE REGISTRANTS)

Characteristics	Voted in 1st Democratic or Republican			Sampled Actual Electorate			Voted in General Election		
	Taxed	Primary Free	Combined	Taxed	Free	Combined	Taxed	Free	Combined
<b>Sex:</b>									
Male	56.9%	51.2%	56.5%	56.7%	50.6%	55.7%			
Female	43.1	48.8	43.5	43.3	49.4	44.3			
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%			100.0%
<b>Age:</b>									
21-29	15.1	34.9	17.6	13.3	44.2	18.6			
30-39	21.2	32.6	22.8	21.7	20.9	21.6			
40-49	24.8	18.6	24.1	24.6	19.8	23.6			
50-59	22.2	9.3	20.4	21.4	10.5	19.6			
60+	16.7	4.7	15.1	19.0	4.6	16.6			
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%			100.0%
<b>Race &amp; Ethnicity:</b>									
Anglo	77.8	81.4	78.2	84.3	84.9	84.4			
Negro	20.6	7.0	19.0	13.8	4.6	12.3			
Spanish Surname	1.6	11.6	2.8	1.9	10.5	3.3			
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%			100.0%
<b>Occupation:</b>									
Prof. & Mgr.	30.9	25.6	30.3	30.9	30.2	30.8			
White Collar	13.4	13.9	13.5	14.3	17.4	14.8			
Blue Collar	29.1	34.9	26.9	26.9	30.2	27.5			
Misc.	26.6	25.6	26.4	27.9	22.1	26.9			
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	99.9%	100.0%			100.0%

TABLE 3  
PRIMARY AND GENERAL ELECTION PARTICIPATION  
OF TAXED AND FREE REGISTRANTS

Election	Percentage Turnout Among:		Percentage of Total Turnout Constituted By:	
	Taxed Registrants	Free Registrants	Taxed Registrants	Free Registrants
First Democratic Primary	32.9%	18.2%	87.7%	12.3%
First Republican Primary	3.0	0.4	95.6	4.4
Second Democratic Primary	12.8	2.6	94.2	5.8
General Election	56.7	37.5	83.3	16.7
			29.2%	
			2.4	
			10.4	
			52.3*	

\*For purposes of evaluating the representative quality of the sample employed in this study it is appropriate to note that voting figures from the County Clerk's office indicate 50.1 percent of qualified voters participated in the general elections in November, 1966. The sampling error of +2.2 percent is well within the expected limits for a sample of this size at the 95 percent confidence level. See, for example, Charles Backstrom and Gerald Hursh, *Survey Research*, (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 33.

one-third of the poll-tax electorate voted in the first Democratic primary, compared with less than one-fifth of the free electorate. The latter showed only a 2.6 percent turnout for the second Democratic primary, compared with 12.2 percent for the poll taxpayers. Free voters did increase sharply their turnout in the general election (37.5 percent), but even so the rate of participation by the paid electorate was half again as high (56.7 percent).

#### THE CONSISTENCY OF PARTICIPATION

One final set of comparisons will heighten our understanding of the relationship of the registration system to voter turnout. Table 4 contrasts the taxed and free registrants in the consistency of their voting participation. We find that a clear majority (56.4 percent) of the free registrants fall in the category of *complete nonparticipation* (failure to vote in any primary or general election), while only a third (33.6 percent) of the poll-tax electorate was so classified. For some classes of free registrants this rate of nonparticipation is extremely high—e.g., about 81 percent of Negroes who were free registrants failed to vote in any election. At the level of *minimal participation* (voting only in either the first party primary or the general election), the participation rates of the taxed and free electorates differ only slightly. Around one-fourth of each group voted only in the general election, and another 6.8 percent voted only in the first party primary. However, at the level of *intermediate participation* (voting in the first party primary *and* the general election), the rate of participation for the taxed electorate (22.8 percent) is more than double that of the free registrants (10.6 percent). *Maximum participation*, which consists of voting in *both* party primaries and the general election (and hence is applicable only to those voting in the Democratic primaries), involves mostly the taxed electorate—about 8 percent of that group had the maximum rate, compared with only 1.3 percent of the free registrants. Thus, if one regards those in the latter two levels (intermediate and maximum participation) as constituting a kind of elite electorate that by virtue of its regularity in going to the polls exerts disproportionate influence in the electoral process over the long run, it would appear that the advent of free registration has had little initial impact indeed.

TABLE 4  
 TURNOUT OF QUALIFIED ELECTORATE AT VARYING LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION,  
 HARRIS COUNTY, 1966

Level of Participation	Taxed Electorate	Free Electorate	Combined Electorate
Complete Non-Participation (Percentage not voting in any election)	33.6%	56.4%	38.9%
Minimal Participation: <sup>a</sup> Percentage voting in general election only	22.9	24.6	23.3
Percentage voting in first party primary only	8.2	5.9	7.7
Intermediate Participation: <sup>b</sup> Percentage voting only in first party primary and general election	22.8	10.6	19.9
Maximum Participation: <sup>c</sup> Percentage voting in first and second Democratic primary and general election	8.4	1.3	6.7
	95.9%	98.8%	96.5%

<sup>a</sup>Omits a small number voting only in the second Democratic primary.

<sup>b</sup>Omits a small number voting only in the second Democratic primary and the general election, or in the first and second Democratic primaries only.

<sup>c</sup>Category based only on those voting in the first and second Democratic primaries and the general election; no second Republican primary was held in 1966.

CONCLUSIONS

Since the findings of this study are limited to a single locale in a single, non-presidential election year, the opportunities for generalizing are necessarily limited. Yet, certain observations based on the data seem warranted.

First, it can be said that the present study lends support to those who have found the registration process to be a major filtering device for determining who does and who does not participate in the electoral process.<sup>12</sup> The significant differences we found in Harris County in 1966 between the characteristics of the potential and the qualified electorates indicate that such factors as sex, age, race-ethnicity, and occupation may influence participation most directly by governing voter *qualification* rather than *turnout*.

<sup>12</sup>Kelley, Ayres, and Bowen, "Registration and Voting," 359-377.

Our second point, however, is that the poll-tax requirement, particularly if viewed strictly in terms of a financial burden, cannot be held accountable for any major part of those differences. Its abandonment in 1966 did increase the number of qualified voters by slightly less than 100,000, and it did improve the proportion of younger persons, those with Spanish surnames, and those in clerical, sales, and skilled occupations, but these changes fell far short of aligning the potential and qualified electorates.

We think it necessary to note, as a third point, that the end of the poll-tax system failed to revolutionize voter turnout in Harris county. Free registration enabled an estimated 36,152 persons who otherwise would have been excluded to participate in the general election, but in terms of the rate of turnout of the potential electorate, this meant roughly a 15 percent increase in participation. Although this is a significant addition to the electorate, it falls far short of the upheaval hoped for by the opponents of the poll tax and feared by its supporters. We have to conclude, then, that initially at least the consequences for turnout in the Houston area were not greatly different from those found in other states when the poll tax was abandoned.

As our fourth point, we reiterate that the shape of the actual electorate in party primaries and the general election in 1966 was not greatly altered by the end of the poll tax. Undoubtedly the most striking change was the influx of younger voters. More than one-third of all free registrants were under 30 years of age, and approximately that proportion voted in the first Democratic primary. Their turnout was even greater in the general election, for more than 44 percent of the free registrants who voted in November were under 30 years of age. Without free registration they would have comprised only 13.3 percent of the actual electorate; with it they represented 18.6 percent of the total. There was also a considerable increase in both registration and actual voting on the part of the Spanish-surnamed, and there were modest gains for females. Although registration for blue-collar workers increased their impact on the actual electorate was barely perceptible, and among Negroes the advent of free registration brought a relative decrease in both registration and actual participation.

Assuming that we are correct in concluding that the demise of the poll tax wrought no radical change in the character of the Har-

ris County electorate in 1966, what can be offered by way of explanation? It appears that both the critics and the defenders of the poll tax have overestimated its importance in relation to a number of other factors operating in Texas and Harris County to dampen political participation. Among these factors are the necessity of qualifying to vote each year long before the campaigns get under way, a lack of party competition, and weak political organizations. Given the restrictive tendencies of the legal and political environment, the elimination of any one factor could hardly be expected to revolutionize voter turnout. Too, we know from past experience that a newly enfranchised electorate responds but slowly to its opportunities; it takes time to throw off the habits and attitudes associated with nonparticipation (low levels of interest in politics, ignorance of polling procedures, lack of ties to political organizations, etc.). Finally, the results of free registration reported above may reflect a certain unevenness under the poll-tax system in efforts to overcome its tendencies. Thus, for some years considerable resources had been invested in building Negro participation in the Houston area, whereas far less effort had been exerted to mobilize the much smaller Mexican-American population.<sup>13</sup>

The clear implication of these tentatively-offered explanations is that the full consequences of abandonment of the poll tax are not likely to be felt at once. In the long run, we can expect it to bring significant gains in registration, slow but sure improvement in turnout, and an even more gradual move toward reduction of the differences reported here in the characteristics of the potential, the qualified, and the actual electorates. Unfortunately, other factors always intrude to complicate the long-range analysis (for example, other forces have been producing a trend toward a rising turnout in Texas for some time), and hence we are not likely to get a much clearer picture than has been provided by this analysis.

<sup>13</sup>In this context it should be noted that we might not expect to find in Texas that the demise of the poll tax would have the same impact it could have in the other states. Matthews and Prothro, for example, predicted on the basis of their regression analysis that, given the socio-demographic composition of the state, a mean percentage of 36.7 percent Negroes registered in Texas counties in 1958; this compared favorably with the actual figure of 36.8, a residual of only +0.1. However, for Alabama, Mississippi, and Virginia they noted discrepancies of -6.3 percent, -14.3 percent, and -10.2 percent respectively between the expected means of Negro registration and the actual findings. See Matthews and Prothro, *Negroes*, 151.