

Voter Turnout in Texas Constitutional Amendment Elections Across Five Decades

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Abstract

This paper examines voter turnout in Texas constitutional amendment elections in 1975 and in 2025 to better understand the county-level factors that explain variation in participation rates. Texas holds frequent constitutional amendment elections, yet these elections typically generate lower turnout than candidate elections. Understanding participation patterns over fifty years provides insight into the evolution of civic engagement and the factors that drive or suppress amendment voting. This study analyzes county-level voter turnout data from Texas constitutional amendment elections in 1975 and 2025. The dataset includes demographic characteristics and political variables for all 254 counties in Texas. Regression analysis identifies predictors of turnout while controlling for structural changes in Texas' electorate over time.

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Elections are an integral part of the American system of government. Voters in the United States are asked to elect representatives to serve in various legislative, executive, and judicial offices at the national, state, and local levels of government. In Texas, “the people must ultimately resolve basic constitutional questions at the ballot box. The Texas Constitution cannot be formally amended without the consent of the voters” (May, 1972, p. 3). Considering the importance of voter participation in constitutional amendment elections, voter turnout is regularly very low. “Over the past decade, constitutional amendment elections have typically drawn 6-15 percent of registered voters, compared with far higher participation in even-year presidential and gubernatorial primary and general elections (Wat, 2025). This recent observation contrasts unfavorably with earlier research indicating “only about one-third of the registered voters vote on amendments” (May, 1972, p. 20). However, May (1972, p. 20) continues with the observation, “in special elections without the pulling power of a race for President or for Governor, the percentage of registered voters participating drops precipitously to only 16 percent.”

This paper assesses county-level voter turnout at two special elections called to approve constitutional amendments in the state of Texas. A special election was held on November 4, 1975, for voters to consider eight amendments to implement a new Texas Constitution (Sterba, 1975). The turnout at that election was “far heavier than predicted . . . boosted by a Houston city election that brought out some 45 per cent (sic) of the registered voters” (Wood, 1975, p. 3). The second special election was held 50 years later, on November 4, 2025. At this election, Texas voters considered seventeen amendments, “one of the most amendment-packed ballots in state

history” (Vasquez & Gainey, 2025). “Statewide turnout reached just under 16 percent” (TPR Staff, 2025).

The question driving this research is simple: Who votes in Texas constitutional amendment elections? Have the factors driving voter turnout changed in the past fifty years? Texas constitutional amendment elections provide a rigorous test of what we know about voter turnout, since they require more effort to vote.

Comparing Voter Turnout in 1975 and 2025

The current research investigates the voter turnout in two constitutional amendments separated by 50 years. The 1975 election was significant because voters were asked to consider implementing a new Texas constitution. In addition, it is difficult to obtain voter registration and voter turnout figures from elections held before 1975. In 1971, the 62nd Texas Legislature changed the voter registration system, creating a year-round system “wherein voters can register at any time up to 30 days prior to election day” (Harlan, 1978, p. 5). In addition to the importance of the 1975 constitutional amendment election, the data are more up-to-date than those from previous constitutional amendment elections.

The 2025 election is important in understanding voter turnout in constitutional amendment elections because it is the most recent election at which constitutional amendments were considered. Voters faced 17 amendments, including one to enshrine parental rights in the Texas Constitution (Rausch & Rausch, 2026). All 17 amendments were approved in 2025.

There is no constitutional provision governing the timing of amendment elections. The fact that almost all elections are held in November of odd-numbered years is related to the legislative calendar. Under Article 17 of the Texas Constitution, only the legislature can propose amendments, and it takes a two-thirds vote of both chambers in a single session to send one to

voters. Texas's legislature holds regular sessions only in odd-numbered years (convening in January, adjourning by late May), so amendments can technically be referred to the ballot in either odd or even years. Because the legislature only convenes regular sessions in odd-numbered years, the vast majority of amendments end up on odd-year ballots — between 1995 and 2025, about 98% of statewide ballot measures appeared on odd-year ballots.

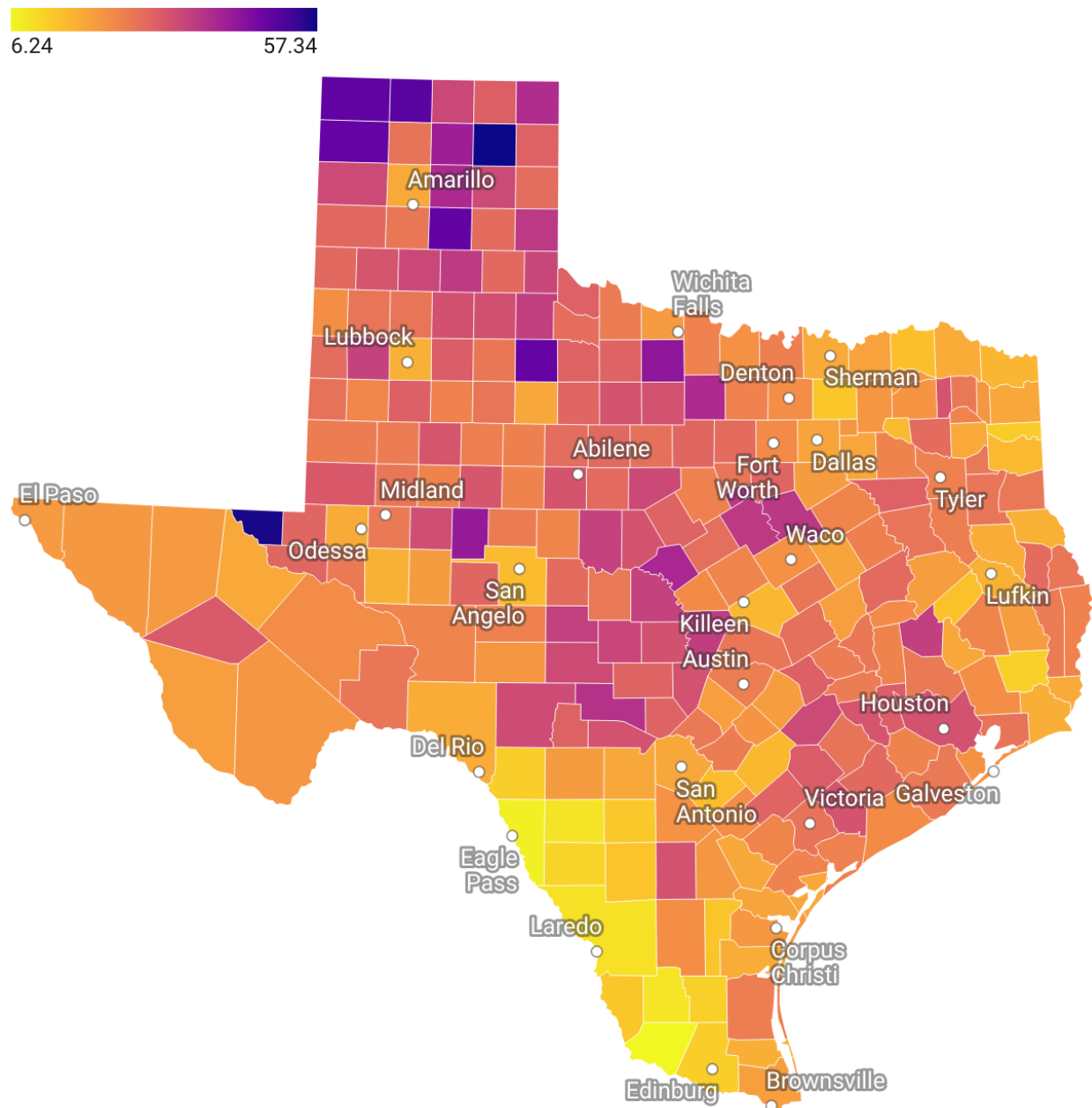
The legislature can technically call the election for any date, as long as election officials have enough lead time to provide notice to voters and print ballots. However, almost all proposals have gone to voters at the November general election in odd-numbered years — it is the natural "off-year" general election date already on the calendar, so it is administratively convenient to just put amendments there rather than call a separate special election.

A special session can pass a joint resolution that lands on an even-year ballot instead (Texas Secretary of State, 2022). There has been legislative interest in changing the timing of constitutional amendment elections. Representative Terry Meza (D-105th District) introduced House Joint Resolution in the regular session of the 88th Legislature in 2023. The joint resolution was filed to amend Article 17 so that amendment elections would be moved to November of even-numbered years. A provision of the bill required that the proposed amendment be presented to voters on November 5, 2024, the same date as the 2024 presidential election. The proposal was referred to the Committee on State Affairs, where it died in committee. Scheduling amendment elections for November of odd-numbered years results in decisions on amendments being made by a small pool of voters (May, 1996).

The following maps illustrate the distribution of county-level voter turnout in the 1975 and 2025 elections. The details of how turnout was measured are discussed below.

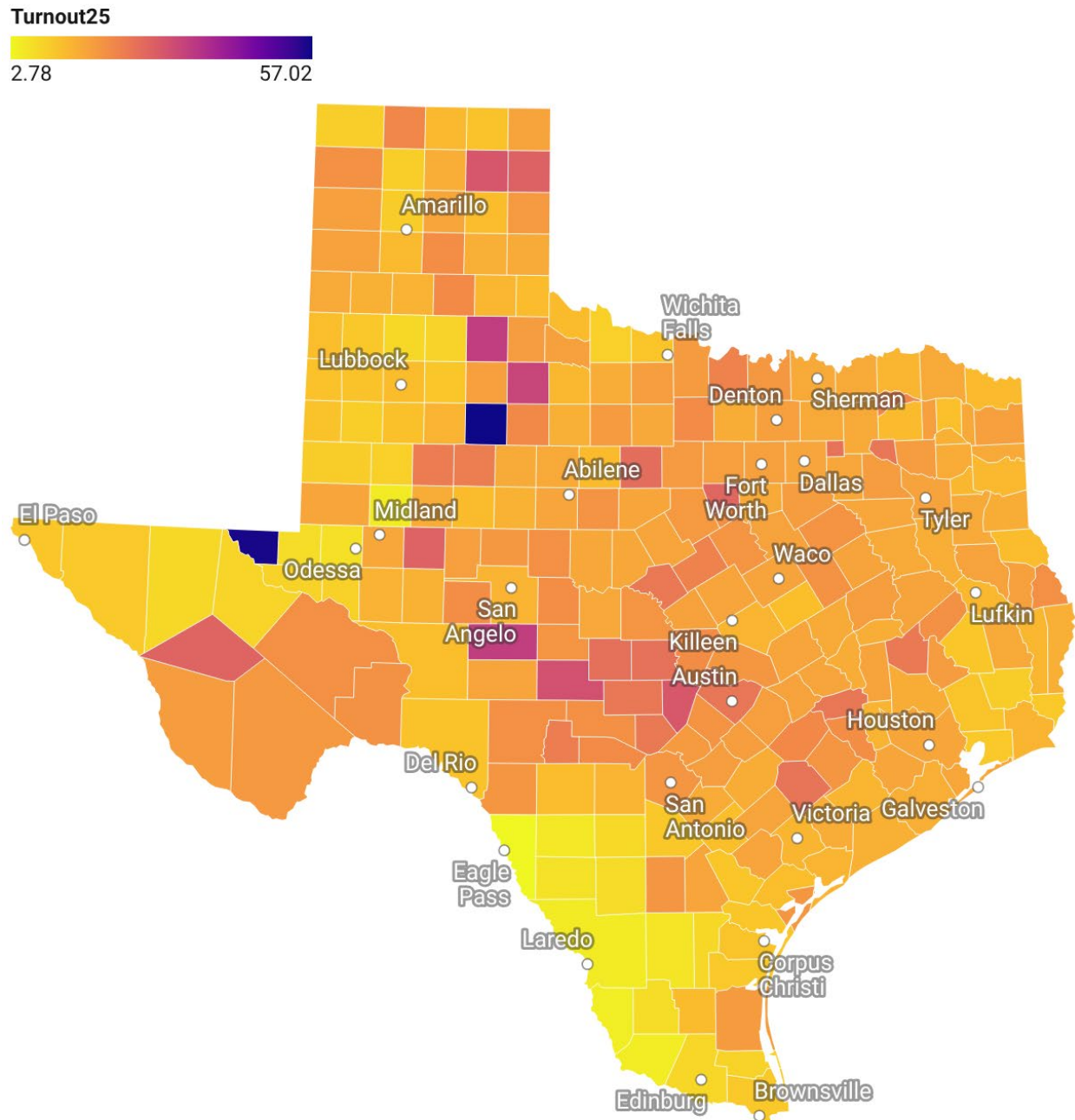
The maps reveal that the turnout in 1975 was higher than in 2025. Rural areas appear to exhibit more turnout. The Rio Grande Valley seems to have the lowest turnout on constitutional amendments.

Turnout for the 1975 Constitutional Amendments



Map: Mary S. Rausch • Source: Harlan, D.S. (1978). *TexaStat '74 & '76: County and Precinct Election Returns*. Trinity University Press. • Created with Datawrapper

Turnout for 2025 Constitutional Amendments



Map: Mary S. Rausch • Source: Texas Secretary of State, 2025 • Created with Datawrapper

The present research seeks to better understand the factors driving voter turnout in Texas constitutional amendment elections.

Who votes?

Voting is an integral part of the American political system. It is through voting that people are able to participate in the policy-making process. Voting on constitutional amendments allows people to have a direct voice in which policy changes are enacted. “The people must ultimately resolve basic constitutional questions at the ballot box. The Texas Constitution cannot be formally amended without the consent of the voters” (May, 1972, p. 3). The present research plumbs the important question of who votes on Texas constitutional amendments. Has the type of voter changed over the fifty years from 1975 to 2025?

Voter turnout is “one of the most studied topics in the discipline” of political science (Frank & Martinez i Coma, 2021, p. 607). Voter turnout has been studied at the national level (Hansen, 2025; Leighley & Nagler, 2014; Verba & Nie, 1972; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). Voter turnout has been studied thoroughly in direct democracy (Goldberg & Sciarini, 2023). This large body of research indicates that “citizens of higher social and economic status participate more in politics. This generalization... holds true whether one uses level of education, income, or occupation as the measure of social status” (Verba & Nie, 1972, p. 125). Wolfinger & Rosenstone (1980, p. 13) put a fine point on the findings: “College graduates vote more than blue-collar workers; and the rich vote more than the poor.”

Texas constitutional amendments are a form of ballot measure, but not direct democracy. In direct democracy, citizens can enact statutes or amend the state constitution by bypassing the legislature, using the citizen initiative process. Texas constitutional amendments are a form of referendum: legislatively referred constitutional amendments, to be precise. Legislatures in 49 states are “required to seek voter approval to amend their state constitutions” (“Legislatively referred constitutional amendment,” n.d.). Delaware is the only state that does not require voter

approval to amend the state constitution. There has been no research on who votes on Texas constitutional amendments. May (1972, p. 20) surmises that voters are not particularly enthusiastic about amendments or that “amendments draw voters to the polls.” Who votes in Texas constitutional amendment elections? Have the demographics of who votes changed over time?

Method

The goal of this research is to understand county-level voter turnout in Texas constitutional amendment elections at two time points. Previous research suggests that voter turnout may be predicted by voters' education and income. The age of voters may also affect who votes.

We identify several hypotheses to explain voter turnout. The first hypothesis is that voters' educational attainment may be a key indicator of turnout. Constitutional amendments are challenging to understand. There is also usually little information provided about the amendments. Usually, most amendments are not controversial and, thus, do not attract significant media attention.

A second hypothesis proposes that income may be a key predictor of voter turnout. The present research does not include data on home ownership. This may need to be addressed in future research. Many constitutional amendments deal with taxes, primarily property taxes or the income tax.

Age may also play a key role, as indicated by previous research on voter turnout.

Using data from a variety of sources, the present research assesses the hypotheses and tests alternative explanations for voter turnout in constitutional amendment elections. Data was collected on each of the 254 counties in Texas.

While collecting data on individual voters may provide more insights into voter turnout in constitutional amendment elections, such data is challenging to collect. The data may also not exist from 1975. The present research employs aggregate county-level data. While individual-level survey data would be preferable to county-level data, the chosen level of aggregation is more practical and will allow for future comparisons across time. County-level data are useful for examining the political, economic, and social environment in which voters make their decisions on referenda (Giles, 1977; Hero, 1998; Key 1950; Morgan & Meier, 1980; Oliver & Mendelberg, 2000; Rausch, 1994a; Satterthwaite, 2005a; Satterthwaite, 2005b; Smith, DeSantis, & Kassel, 2005; Tolbert & Hero, 2001). County-level data may also provide insights into who voted on constitutional amendments in Texas.

Election data for the 1975 election were collected from the archives of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission's Archives and Information Services Division (Texas Secretary of State Elections Division, 1975). Voter registration data from 1975 were collected in Harlan (1978). Turnout data from 2025 are found on the Texas Secretary of State's website (<https://www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/historical/index.shtml>). Demographic data is from the United States Census. As we describe below, religious affiliation is a control variable. The data on religious adherents were compiled by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (ASARB) and published in the 2020 U.S. Religious Census (Grammich et al., 2023). The religious census is available online at the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) website (<https://www.thearda.com/>).

Measures

VOTER TURNOUT IN TEXAS CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT ELECTIONS

The dependent variable, voter turnout in constitutional amendment elections, is measured as the percentage of registered voters who turned out in November 1975 and November 2025.

Voter turnout is estimated for November 1975 by dividing the number of votes cast for Proposition 1 by the total county-level registered voters reported by Harlan (1987, p. 7-11) and multiplying by 100 to obtain a percentage. The highest voter turnout, 57.34%, was reported in Roberts County in the Texas Panhandle. The lowest turnout, 6.24%, occurred in Starr County in the Rio Grande Valley. The mean county voter turnout was 26.19% with a standard deviation of 8.21%.

Voter turnout for 2025 is reported with the election results published on the Texas Secretary of State's website. The turnout for Proposition 1 was selected to mirror the 1975 data. Kent County, southeast of Lubbock, reported the highest voter turnout at 27.02%, while Maverick County, in southwest Texas along the Rio Grande, reported the lowest at 2.78%. The mean county voter turnout on Proposition 1 was 16.13% with a standard deviation of 6.47%.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Educational attainment is measured as the percentage of county residents with college degrees as reported by the United States Census. The 1975 analyses used 1972 educational attainment. Brazos County, the home of Texas A&M University, recorded the largest population of college-educated residents with 22.80%, while Loving County reported 0.00%. Loving County is a sparsely populated rural county in far west Texas. In the 1970s, the county had a population of around 100 people. The mean percentage of college graduates in Texas counties in 1975 is 7.32% with a standard deviation of 3.23%.

Using 2024 data from the United States Census, we found that Travis County (Austin) had the largest college-graduate population at 35.00%. Loving County, with about 50 people, again, reported 0.00 college graduates. The mean county-level percentage was 15.09% with a standard deviation of 5.67%.

INCOME

This research measures income as the median household income reported by the Census. In the mid-1970s, residents of Loving County reported the highest median income at \$12,000. The lowest median income was found in Starr County, \$3,593. The mean county median income was \$6,706 with a standard deviation of \$1,484. In the mid-2020s, residents of Rockwall County, east of Dallas, had a median household income of \$127,981, with the lowest median income reported in Swisher County, in the Panhandle between Lubbock and Amarillo, at \$36,165. The mean county median income was \$66,482 with a standard deviation of \$15,537.

AGE

In the mid-1970s, the oldest county, based on median age, was Llano County in the Texas Hill Country northwest of Austin. The median age was 50.4 years. The youngest county was Maverick County at 19.4 years. The mean county median age was 32.02 years with a standard deviation of 7.08 years.

By the mid-2020s, the oldest county was Loving County at 86.2 years of age. This number should not be accepted at face value because the small population may influence the median age (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Other sources, such as the Permian Basin Regional Planning Commission (2026), report the county's median age as 35. The second-oldest county is Kent County, at 60 years of age. The youngest county was Jim Hogg County, southeast of Laredo

in south Texas, with a median age of 26.1 years. The mean county median age was 40.9 years with a standard deviation of 6.86 years.

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

One intriguing alternative theory is that Texas voters do not go to the polls because of their religious beliefs. Prior to the 1970s, social science researchers found that mainline Protestant denominations tended to be active in political and social affairs, while more conservative Protestants were not (Winter, 1973). Scholars noted that evangelical publications such as *Christianity Today* avoided discussing political issues except when admonishing readers to eschew politics (Wuthnow, 1983, p. 172). Members of conservative Protestant denominations often were directed to the example of Christ:

He refused to enmesh himself or his followers in the economic, social and political problems of his day – problems certainly as serious as those we face today. ... He made it crystal clear that we are to seek ‘first the kingdom of God and his righteousness’ – carefully pointing out that ‘the kingdom is within you. (Pew, 1966, p. 53).

Since the late 1970s, research had provided evidence that evangelical Protestants are taking more active roles in politics (Rausch, 1994b). While evangelical Protestants may have avoided the polls in November 1975, they were likely not actively discouraged in 2025. For this reason, religious affiliation serves as a control variable.

This paper incorporates one variable for religious affiliation: evangelical Protestants. Denominations included in the category “Evangelical Protestants,” or Conservative Protestants, were identified by the authors of the Religious Congregations & Membership Study 2020 as follows:

Evangelical Protestant denominations and churches emphasize conversion and evangelism, hold biblical authority in high regard, and tend to seek more separation from the broader culture. Evangelical Protestantism is usually seen as more theologically and socially conservative than mainline Protestantism, although there is obviously variation among evangelical denominations, congregations, and individuals. Evangelical Protestant denominations include the Southern Baptist Convention, Assemblies of God, and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church (<https://thearda.com/us-religion/group-profiles/traditions?T=1>).

The proportion of Texas county residents who are Evangelical Protestant is derived from data published in *Churches and Church Membership in the United States, 1980*. The percentage ranged from 102.53% in Throckmorton County to 3.49% in Webb County. Two issues emerge with this data. The first is that membership numbers are self-reported and it is possible a person attends a church in one county, but lives in a neighboring county. The second issue is that no data were collected from Loving County and Kenedy County. The mean was 36.9% with a standard deviation of 17.08.

Data used in the 2025 model is calculated from Grammich et al. (2023). The percentage ranged from 452.5% in King County (not a typo) to 0.0% in Loving County and Kenedy County.. The King County number is affected by the number of churches related to the number of people attending those churches who live in neighboring counties. The mean was 34.4% with a standard deviation of 31.7.

The Evangelical Protestant variable should have an influence on the model from 1975, but less of an influence on the 2025 model.

VOTERS IN RURAL AREAS

The present research uses population density as a measure of a county's rurality (Gimpel, Lovin, May, and Reeves, 2020). This measure is one way to examine the rural/urban divide, providing a continuous variable for use in regression equations. The data are drawn from the United States Census. This variable is a control variable.

Research has shown that voters may be encouraged to vote when they know others nearby have already voted (Gerber et al., 2016). Knowing your neighbors is easier in rural areas than in urban areas. Questions remain about the amount of information available to voters in rural areas (Medina & Booth, 2025). The challenge in understanding rural and urban voters in Texas is determining whether the state is rural or urban. Some research suggests that Texas is a suburban state (Owens, Wink, & Bryant, 2022). While not a key focus of the present research, we must consider voters' locations in rural and urban areas as an influence on propensity to vote.

In 1975, population density by county ranged from 0.1 persons per square mile (Loving County) to 1,546 persons per square mile (Dallas County). The mean population density was 46.7 persons per square mile with a standard deviation of 140.5.

By 2025, county-level population density in Texas ranged from 0.1 persons per square mile (Loving County) to 3001.9 persons per square mile (Dallas County). The mean population density is 126.7 persons per square mile with a standard deviation of 367.87.

Analysis and Findings

The present research seeks to understand the factors contributing to voter turnout in Texas constitutional amendment elections. We are comparing turnout in the 1975 election with that in the 2025 election.

A theory initially motivating this research is that some counties may have voters who are more likely to turn out for constitutional amendment elections. For this reason, we calculated a Pearson correlation between the turnout in 1975 and 2025. The findings are depicted in the following figure:

Figure 1.

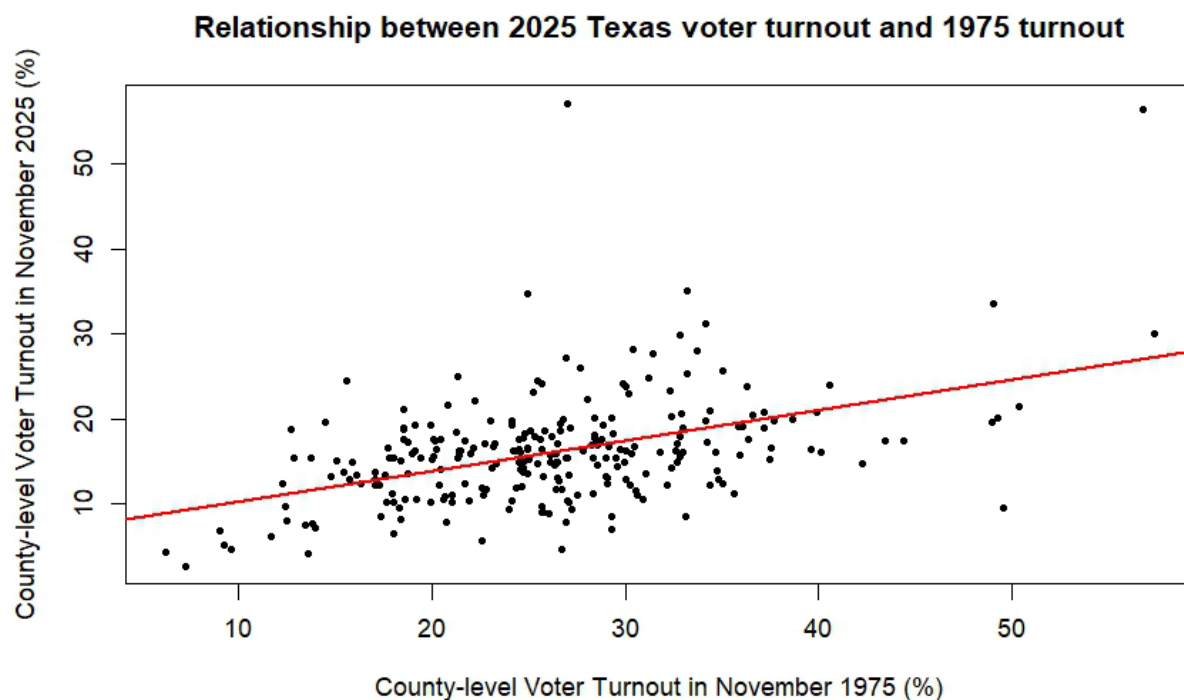


Figure 1 presents a Pearson's correlation ($r = .454$), indicating a moderate-to-strong positive linear relationship. Counties with higher turnout in 1975 have higher turnout in 2025. Future research will consider the relationships between elections that are closer in time. The present research seeks to understand the context in which voter turnout occurs.

To check multicollinearity among the independent variables, we constructed two correlation matrices, one for 1975 and one for 2025.

Table 1. Correlation between selected independent variables from 1975 (N=254)

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
(a) Median Age	1				
(b) College Graduates	-.384**	1			
(c) Median Income	-.296**	.489**	1		
(d) Evangelical Protestant	.455**	-.166**	.039	1	
(e) Population Density	-.206**	.353	.389**	-.167**	1

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2. Correlation between selected independent variables from 2025 (N=254)

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
(a) Median Age	1				
(b) College Graduates	.023	1			
(c) Median Income	-.113	.580**	1		
(d) Evangelical Protestant	.179**	.138*	-.150*	1	
(e) Population Density	-.199**	.402**	.354**	-.096	1

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

There are some bivariate correlations among the independent variables in both years. The most significant relationship is between the percentages of college graduates and median income. This is to be expected. People with college degrees tend to have more income. People with college degrees also tend to live in more densely populated areas of the state.

To assess how the correlates of county-level voter turnout have shifted over the past half-century, we estimate identical ordinary least squares specifications for turnout in 1975 and 2025. Each model regresses turnout on median household income, the percentage of county residents who graduated from college, the county median age, population density, and the percentage of county residents who affiliate with evangelical Protestant denominations.

Voter Turnout in 1975		Voter Turnout in 2025	
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Turnout75		Turnout25
Median Household Income	0.002*** (0.0004)	Median Household Income	0.0001** (0.00002)
% College Graduates	0.180 (0.162)	% College Graduates	0.252*** (0.066)
Median Age	0.555*** (0.075)	Median Age	0.608*** (0.043)
Population Density	-0.012*** (0.003)	Population Density	0.00004 (0.001)
% Evangelical Protestants	0.027 (0.029)	% Evangelical Protestants	0.017* (0.009)
Constant	-8.264** (3.486)	Constant	-16.341*** (2.194)
Observations	254	Observations	254
R ²	0.322	R ²	0.532
Adjusted R ²	0.309	Adjusted R ²	0.522
Residual Std. Error	6.828 (df = 248)	Residual Std. Error	4.472 (df = 248)
F Statistic	23.597*** (df = 5; 248)	F Statistic	56.290*** (df = 5; 248)
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

The two models diverge substantially in explanatory power. The 1975 model accounts for roughly 32 percent of the variance in county turnout ($R^2 = 0.322$), while the 2025 model explains over half of the variance ($R^2 = 0.532$). This difference suggests that the five demographic and socioeconomic characteristics have become considerably more predictive of turnout behavior in the contemporary period.

Several individual coefficients illustrate this shift. Median age is the most stable predictor across both areas, exerting a large, positive, and highly significant effect in 1975 ($b = 0.555$, $p < 0.01$) and in 2025 ($b = 0.608$, $p < 0.01$). We see that counties with older residents consistently turn out at higher rates, regardless of decade. Median household income is likewise positive and significant in both years. However, its raw coefficient shrinks numerically in 2025 due to the scale of nominal income growth rather than a substantial weakening of the relationship. We may need to measure income differently or transform the current variable.

By contrast, educational attainment and population density show the sharpest changes. The share of college graduates shows no discernible relationship with turnout in 1975 ($b = 0.180$, n.s.) but becomes a strong, positive, and highly significant predictor by 2025 ($b = 0.252$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that education has become a substantially more important sorting variable for political participation than it was a generation ago. Conversely, population density was a significant negative predictor of turnout in 1975 ($b = -0.012$, $p < 0.01$) – consistent with a rural turnout advantage typical of the era. However, this relationship disappears entirely by 2025 ($b = 0.00004$, n.s.), indicating that the urban-rural turnout gap identified in earlier scholarship may have narrowed or dissolved. Percent evangelical Protestant follows a similar trajectory, moving from having little effect in 1975 to a marginally significant positive association in 2025 ($b = 0.017$, $p < 0.01$). Care must be exercised in this interpretation because voters encountered at least one amendment on parental rights that could be considered part of the culture war (Rausch & Rausch, 2026).

Taken together, these results point to a changing landscape of turnout determinants. While age remains a durable predictor of participation across both eras, the socioeconomic and geographic correlates of turnout have been substantially reconfigured, with education replacing population density as a key axis of differentiation in who votes.

Discussion

The present research sets out to answer a straightforward question with fifty years of separation built into the design: who votes in Texas constitutional amendment elections, and has the answer changed? The comparison of the November 1975 and November 2025 special elections offers a rare opportunity to observe how the correlates of a low-salience, high-

frequency form of electoral participation have evolved across a half-century of demographic and political change in Texas.

The most striking finding is not any single coefficient but the overall increase in explanatory power. The five-variable model accounts for roughly a third of the variance in county-level turnout in 1975 but more than half in 2025. County demographics sort turnout more efficiently today than they did a generation ago. This is consistent with a broader nationalization and sorting of the Texas electorate, in which socioeconomic characteristics have become more tightly linked to political behavior generally, not just to amendment voting specifically (Owens, Wink, & Bryant, 2022).

Age is the one predictor that changed the least. Counties with older populations turned out at high rates in both 1975 and 2025, which aligns with the resource- and habit-based explanations that dominate the turnout literature (Verba & Nie, 1972; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). Given that constitutional amendment elections ask relatively little of voters in terms of candidate evaluation but relatively more in terms of simply knowing that an election is occurring, it makes sense that the most habituated voters, who tend to be older, would be the most reliable participants across both eras.

Educational attainment tells a different story. It had no discernible relationship with turnout in 1975 but is one of the strongest predictors in 2025. One interpretation is that, as constitutional amendments have become more numerous and more consequential, with the seventeen-amendment 2025 ballot including a parental rights amendment to broader culture-war debates (Rausch & Rausch, 2026), the informational demands of amendment voting have grown. College-educated voters may be better equipped or more motivated to process a long,

increasingly complex ballot. This finding aligns with recent work connecting the expansion of higher education to changes in the composition of the American electorate (Hansen, 2025).

Population density moved in the opposite direction, from a significant negative predictor in 1975 to no relationship at all in 2025. The rural turnout advantage documented in earlier scholarship (Gimpel, Lovin, Moy & Reeves, 2020) appears to have faded in Texas, at least for constitutional amendments. This could reflect changes in how information circulates, since the social pressure and interpersonal cues that once gave rural voters an edge (Gerber et al., 2016) may now be less tied to physical proximity. It could also reflect the growth and diversification of Texas's suburbs, which complicates a simple rural-urban framing of the state's electorate (Owens, Wink, & Bryant, 2022).

The evangelical Protestant variable is the most difficult to interpret cleanly. Its shift from a null effect in 1975 to a marginally significant positive effect in 2025 could reflect the well-documented mobilization of evangelical Protestants into electoral politics since the late 1970s (Rausch, 1994b; Wuthnow, 1983). It could just as easily reflect the presence of the parental rights amendment on the 2025 ballot, which gave evangelical voters a more direct stake in that election than in past amendment cycles (Rausch & Rausch, 2026). Data quality concerns, including the likely cross-county commuting among church members that produced the anomalous King County figure, warrant additional caution before treating this result as a stable feature of Texas politics rather than an artifact of a single unusual ballot.

Two additional findings deserve mention. First, the moderate positive correlation between 1975 and 2025 turnout ($r = .454$) suggests that some voters in some counties have a durable propensity to participate in amendment elections that persists across generations of voters, elections, and economic conditions. Second, income remained a positive and significant

predictor in both years, consistent with the long-standing finding that participation tracks socioeconomic status (Verba & Nie, 1972), even though the raw coefficient shrank in nominal terms between 1975 and 2025, a change that likely reflects fifty years of income growth rather than any weakening of the underlying relationship.

Conclusion

This paper compared county-level voter turnout in Texas constitutional amendment elections held fifty years apart, in 1975 and 2025. The findings suggest that the same broad forces identified in the general turnout literature, age, income, and, increasingly, education, also structure participation in this low-salience form of Texas democracy. However, the relative weight of these factors has shifted substantially over time. Education and population density have essentially traded places as predictors of turnout, and the overall model has become considerably more predictive of who shows up to vote on amendments.

These results carry implications beyond Texas. Legislatively referred constitutional amendments are the dominant mechanism for constitutional change in 49 states (“Legislatively referred constitutional amendments,” n.d.), yet, as this research confirms, they remain understudied relative to candidate elections and citizen-initiated ballot measures. The Texas case, with its frequent odd-year amendment elections and chronically low turnout, offers a useful laboratory for understanding how a small and non-representative slice of the electorate ends up making binding decisions about the state’s foundational law.

Several limitations point toward future research. The reliance on county-level aggregate data, while necessary given the unavailability of individual-level data from 1975, cannot rule out ecological inference problems, and future work using more recent individual-level survey data could test whether the relationships identified here hold at the voter level. The absence of a

home-ownership measure limits what can be said about the income hypothesis, given that many amendments specifically concern property taxation. The religious affiliation variable would benefit from a research design that separates a general evangelical mobilization effect from the specific effect of the parental rights amendment. Finally, because the present research examines only two elections a half-century apart, it cannot distinguish a smooth long-term trend from an abrupt shift; future research incorporating additional amendment elections across the intervening decades would help clarify whether the changes documented here unfolded gradually or coincided with particular political moments, such as the rise of the Texan Republican Party or specific high-salience amendment cycles.

Fifty years after Texas voters rejected a wholesale rewrite of their constitution and instead approved a set of piecemeal amendments, the state continues to govern itself the same way, through frequent, low-turnout special elections that place enormous cumulative authority in the hands of a small and demographically distinct subset of the electorate. Understanding who that subset is, and how it has changed, is a necessary step toward understanding whose preferences are embedded in the modern Texas Constitution.

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AI Disclosure Statement

The authors used the Texas A&M University System institutional license of Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing tool, to improve the clarity, grammar, and style of this manuscript. All substantive content, analysis, arguments, and conclusions are solely the work of the authors. The use of Grammarly was limited to prose refinement and did not involve generating new ideas, data, or intellectual content.