

FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE, A COLUMN DEDICATED TO RECOGNIZING SUCCESSFUL “BRIDGES” BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND PRACTITIONERS, REPORTS ON RESEARCH WITH PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH CIVIC

PRACTITIONER EXPERIENCES OF ELECTION DAY / SAME DAY REGISTRATION AND THE YOUTH VOTE

Conversations about “the youth vote” often focus on the individual motivations of youth much more than other influential factors. Research shows, however, that several factors influence the likelihood that a young person will vote. There are individual and familial factors, environmental factors and institutional factors.

In 2003, CIRCLE released its first publication on state voting policies (an institutional factor) and their influence on the youth vote.¹ CIRCLE has been tracking these policies since 2003 and in July 2009 released an updated Fact Sheet, “State Election Law Reform and Youth Voter Turnout.”² This analysis found that in 2008, on average, 59% of young Americans whose home state offered Election-Day registration (EDR) voted, nine percentage points higher than those who did not live in EDR states.

THIS ANALYSIS FINDS THAT IN 2008, ON AVERAGE, 59% OF YOUNG AMERICANS WHOSE HOME STATE OFFERED EDR VOTED; NINE PERCENTAGE POINTS HIGHER THAN THOSE WHO DID NOT LIVE IN EDR STATES.

This article uses CIRCLE’s recent fact sheet on state election laws to approach the topic from a different angle: the experience of Election-Day registration on the ground.

Election-Day registration, now offered in nine states, does not drastically change how the organizers interviewed for this article approach an election. Organizers from the New Voters Project (NVP) and Democracy North Carolina said that election-day registration is not a complete game-changer.

Samantha Gibb headed up the New Voters Project at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2008. The New Voters Project, a project of the Student PIRGs, “is a nonpartisan effort to register young people and get them to the polls on Election Day.”³ She says that they did not do much differently from her colleagues in states without Election-Day registration.⁴ In fact, Gibb said that they

acted as if they had a deadline, trying to register as many people by Wisconsin’s registration deadline as possible, even though students could register at the polls. While over 400 students registered in just the last 30 minutes before the pre-registration deadline, Gibb said that get-out-the-vote efforts continued since the non-registered were still eligible.

“Same-day registration provided an extra tool to tell youth about when talking about the voting process,” said Adam Sotak, Organizing Director at Democracy North Carolina, who seemed to use a similar approach to Gibb.⁵ (NC offers same-day registration, a similar concept to Election-Day registration.) Democracy North Carolina “is a nonpartisan organization working statewide to fulfill the promise of ‘one person, one vote,’ the bedrock principle of equal rights and self-determination.”⁶ “To most youth, it seems like a common sense approach,” said Sotak about same-day registration. In NC voters can register and vote on the same day during the early voting period. “Many other aspects of youth voter education remained the same,” added Sotak, “Youth are in need of information on candidates and are often intimidated by the voting process.”

State Boards of Elections and County Clerks also interact with young voters and say it is easier to provide youth with information about an election when EDR is involved. Iowa is the most recent state to pass EDR, approving it in 2008. “We have found that public education is easier for all age groups in the sense that, no matter when a voter contacts our office regarding what he or she must do in order to be able to register to vote and cast a ballot, there is an option for him or her to do so,” said Jack Beeson, Assistant to the Elections Director in the Iowa Secretary of State’s Office. “It’s our experience that it takes the same amount of time - or longer - to explain to someone why he or she can’t vote as it does to explain how he or she can register and vote.”⁷ Vickie Zeier is the Clerk of Missoula County, where the University of Montana-Missoula is located. She shared a similar sentiment saying that public education “was easier because our message was that you could register to vote up until 8:00 pm on Election Day.”⁸





Linda McCulloch, Montana Secretary of State, shared data with CIRCLE that indicated that 18-to-24 year-olds were more likely to use Election-Day registration in 2008 than in 2006.⁹ She said, “Youth voters embraced EDR even further in 2008, with 18-to-24 year-olds making up about 32% of the Election-Day registrants.” Specifically in Missoula County, Zeier estimated that “more than 85% of my EDR [voters] are 18-to-29 year-olds. This age bracket definitely uses late registration and EDR more than the other age brackets.” In Iowa in 2008, “34% [of election-day registrants] were between the ages of 18 and 24. 31% were between 25 and 34,” said Beeson. “So, people under 35 made up about two-thirds of the Election-Day registrants, though we also found that Election-Day registration was used by people of all ages.”

Regina Eaton is the Deputy Director of the Democracy Program at Demos, a non-partisan public policy research and advocacy organization.¹⁰ Her job is to focus “on policy issues aimed at increasing voter registration and turn out.”¹¹ Demos has published numerous resources about EDR/SDR. Through their work Eaton says their sense is that young people have tended to use EDR more than other age groups when it’s available.¹² Demos reported that in Wisconsin young voters took advantage of the opportunity to register on primary day in 2008 as “voters under 25 years old made up 74,846 of Wisconsin’s primary day registrants, accounting for over 35 percent of the total.”¹³

These results may be impressive, but there are still challenges to work out with Election-Day registration. Based on his experience in North Carolina, Sotak said that “because we do not have EDR and SDR is only available during the early voting period, that causes some confusion across all age groups.”

Additionally, laws surrounding identification seem to provide a challenge. “The biggest challenge for young people seems to be not having the proper documentation to prove identity and residence,” said Beeson, of the IA Secretary of State’s office. “Particularly, we have found that student IDs don’t usually satisfy the requirements of our law because they don’t typically contain an expiration date. Under our law, all photo IDs must contain an expiration date that has not passed.” This is also an issue that Sotak faced in NC. “In addition to student ID cards, most college students needed additional verification of ID from their universities or colleges (like a list of all students living on a campus provided by a school and sent to the county board of elections office). This was because most college IDs do not include current address information and that information is required by law in order to use SDR in NC. Some colleges were more likely to provide these lists than others.”

On another side of the situation, Missoula County Clerk, Vickie Zeier reflected that “EDR is difficult because you do not know how many individuals will appear to register and vote. The challenge is having enough staff and space for the number of people who appear on Election Day.” As a result, Ms. Zeier shared that she will be “consolidating precincts to reduce the number of election judges needed so that I can put more emphasis on EDR.”

What do these practitioners think needs to be done in the future? MT Secretary of State McCulloch is working on two pieces of legislation that she says “would involve our youth in this important component of our democracy.” One would permit “17 year olds to vote in the primary election, if they would turn 18 by general Election Day.” The other focuses on recruiting “16 and 17 year olds as student election judges.”

In North Carolina Sotak suggests that educating people about existing policy is important. “Continued expansion and promotion of early voting as a GOTV tool is needed,” Sotak said. He added, “we need to put a larger emphasis on reaching non-college educated youth.”

“CONTINUED EXPANSION AND PROMOTION OF EARLY VOTING AS A GOTV TOOL IS NEEDED,” SOTAK SAYS.

Samantha Gibb and Sarah Clader, New Voters Project organizers in WI and NJ, respectively, say that EDR does not replace peer-to-peer outreach.¹⁴ Clader suggests that it’s the peer-to-peer experience that gets students to the polls. “With any sort of option you have to talk to people individually...just having SDR or making it easy to register doesn’t get them out to vote,” Gibb says. “In the end of it all, you still have to do tons of outreach.” ★

ENDNOTES

- 1 Fitzgerald, Mary. CIRCLE Working Paper #1: Easier Voting Methods Boost Turnout. February 2003.
- 2 Kawashima-Ginsberg, K., Nover, A., Kirby, E.H. (2009). State Election Law Reform and Youth Voter Turnout. (CIRCLE Fact Sheet). Medford, MA: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). Retrieved from <http://www.civicyouth.org/?p=349>.
- 3 <http://www.newvotersproject.org/about-us>
- 4 Phone conversation with Samantha Gibb (November 18, 2009).
- 5 Email from Adam Sotak, Organizing Director, Democracy North Carolina (November 10, 2009).
- 6 <http://www.democracy-nc.org/AboutUs.shtml>
- 7 Email from Jack Beeson, Assistant to the Elections Director, Iowa Secretary of State Michael Mauro (November 4, 2009).
- 8 Email from Vickie Zeier, Missoula County Clerk & Recorder/Treasurer (November 10, 2009).
- 9 Email from Linda McCulloch, Montana Secretary of State (November 9, 2009).
- 10 <http://demos.org/about.cfm>
- 11 <http://demos.org/people.cfm?currentpersonnelid=2784EBBF-3FF4-6C82-563F3174DC96A204>
- 12 Phone conversation with Regina Eaton (November 2, 2009).
- 13 Comstock-Gay, Stuart. “Same Day Registration Delivers Over 300,000 Primary Votes” July 24, 2008. Reprinted in “Voters Win with Election Day Registration” http://www.demos.org/pubs/voterswin_09.pdf. Updated Summer 2009.
- 14 Phone conversation with Samantha Gibb and Sarah Clader, Campus Organizers with the New Voters Project in WI and NJ, respectively (November 18, 2009).