

HOW DO STATE ELECTION POLICIES AFFECT YOUTH VOTING?

Several state legislatures are considering various reforms to their election laws in advance of the 2012 elections. CIRCLE has reviewed several studies that examine how state policies affect youth voting rates. Below is a summary of what we have found.

GIVING YOUNG PEOPLE INFORMATION LOWERS BARRIERS TO VOTING

Several states are considering policies designed to educate young people about the political process. Every state currently requires its public schools to include some form of civic education in their curricula.¹ New research by Jennifer Bachner suggests that students who complete a year of American government or civics are 3-6 percentage points more likely to vote than peers without such a course, and 7-11 percentage points more likely to vote than peers who do not discuss politics at home.²

RAYMOND E. WOLFINGER, BENJAMIN HIGHTON, AND MEGAN MULLIN FOUND THAT MAILING SAMPLE BALLOTS TO REGISTERED VOTERS AGED 18 TO 24 WHO HAVE LEFT HOME INCREASES THEIR TURNOUT BY MORE THAN EIGHT PERCENTAGE POINTS.

States can also provide information about elections directly to young people by mailing them sample ballots or the location of their polling place. Raymond E. Wolfinger, Benjamin Highton, and Megan Mullin found that mailing sample ballots to registered voters aged 18 to 24 who have left home increases their turnout by more than eight percentage points.³ This suggests that a lack of information could be a barrier to first-time voting – an obstacle that can be overcome by helping young people familiarize themselves with the voting process.

ELECTION-DAY REGISTRATION CAN HELP BRING YOUNG PEOPLE TO THE POLLS

Policies designed to ease the process of voter registration also hold promise for increasing youth turnout. One of the biggest barriers to youth voting is the registration process. Registration often involves more time and information than voting itself, and in many states, registration is closed weeks before the Election Day. In fact, in the 2008 presidential election, 21% of 18- to 29-year-olds who did not register to vote stated that they had not met the registration deadlines in their states. An additional six percent stated that they did not know where or how to register and four percent said that they did not meet the residency requirement for registration. Election Day Registration laws (EDR) allow voters to avoid the inconvenience and pressure of registration deadlines.

Research shows that states that have policies supporting EDR, on average, have higher youth voter turnout. Mary Fitzgerald found that allowing voters to register on election day boosts turnout among young people, on average, by an estimated 14 points in presidential years and four points in midterm elections.⁴ Research by Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, Amanda Nover, and Emily Hoban Kirby found that the effect is greatest for young people with no college experience, suggesting that EDR could help remedy the turnout gap for low-socioeconomic status citizens.⁵ Other reforms, such as “convenience voting” – for example, allowing voters to mail in their ballots or opening the polls for in-person early voting – are less certain to boost voting rates. Fitzgerald did not find that allowing early voting significantly increases turnout, while Kawashima-Ginsberg et al. found that early voting and absentee voting were generally used by young people who would have voted in any case – not the most disengaged youth.

MIXED EVIDENCE ON VOTER ID LAWS AND REGISTRATION REQUIREMENTS

Other state policies seek to make registration and voting less vulnerable to fraud. All states must require voters who register by mail to provide identification with their name and address, but 28 states require some additional proof of identity. Voters in Indiana and Georgia, for instance, must show a photo ID to cast a ballot.

Continued on Page 7



TIMOTHY VERCELLOTTI AND DAVID ANDERSON, ON THE OTHER HAND, FOUND THAT REQUIRING A PHOTO ID DECREASED TURNOUT BY 2.9%, WITH MORE PRONOUNCED EFFECTS FOR MINORITIES (WHO ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY LIKELY TO BE YOUNG).

Evidence about whether such requirements disenfranchise legitimate voters is mixed, but studies generally agree that their effects are not large. Stephen Ansolabehere found that only a fraction of a percent of voters were turned away for lack of proper ID;⁶ Timothy Vercellotti and David Anderson, on the other hand, found that requiring a photo ID decreased turnout by 2.9%, with more pronounced effects for minorities (who are disproportionately likely to be young).⁷ Alternatively, states can make registration (rather than voting) more restrictive – a special concern for young people, who are more likely to be mobile and registering for the first time. Jesse Richman and Andrew Pate found that students who live away from home are approximately ten percentage points less likely to vote in states that place “special burdens” on students seeking to register.⁸ Moreover, R. Michael Alvarez, Morgan Llewellyn, and Thad E. Hall claim that restrictions of this kind send an “implicit message” about who is expected to engage in politics, perhaps discouraging young voters from even attempting to participate.⁹ ★

ENDNOTES

- 1 Tiffani Lennon, “ECS Policy Brief: Citizenship Education” (National Center for Learning and Citizenship, 2006), retrieved from <http://www.ecs.org/clearing-house/71/30/7130.pdf>
- 2 Jennifer Bachner, “From Classroom to Voting Booth: The Effect of High School Civic Education on Turnout,” in press, preprint available via www.gov.harvard.edu.
- 3 Raymond E. Wolfinger, Benjamin Highton, and Megan Mullin, “How Postregistration Laws Affect the Turnout of Registrants,” CIRCLE Working Paper #15 (June 2004), retrieved from <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP15Wolfinger.pdf>
- 4 Mary Fitzgerald, “Easier Voting Methods Boost Youth Turnout,” CIRCLE Working Paper #1 (February 2003), retrieved from <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP01Fitzgerald.pdf>
- 5 Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, Amanda Nover, and Emily Hoban Kirby, “State Election Law Reform and Youth Voter Turnout,” CIRCLE fact sheet (July 2009), retrieved from http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/State_Law_and_youth_turnout_Final.pdf
- 6 Stephen Ansolabehere, “Access Versus Integrity in Voter Identification Requirements,” Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project Working Paper #58 (February 2007), retrieved from http://www.vote.caltech.edu/drupal/files/working_paper/vtp_wp58.pdf
- 7 Timothy Vercellotti and David Anderson, “Protecting the Franchise, or Restricting It? The Effects of Voter Identification Requirements on Turnout,” prepared for the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting (2006), DOI: 10.1.1.123.2549.
- 8 Jesse Richman and Andrew Pate, “Can the College Vote Turn Out? Evidence from the U.S. States, 2000-08,” *State Politics and Policy Quarterly* 10:1 (2010), retrieved from spa.sagepub.com/content/10/1/51.full.pdf
- 9 R. Michael Alvarez, Morgan Llewellyn, and Thad E. Hall, “How Hard Can It Be: Do Citizens Think It Is Difficult to Register to Vote?” Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project Working Paper #48 (July 2006), retrieved from http://www.vote.caltech.edu/drupal/files/working_paper/vtp_wp48.pdf



NEW CIVIC MISSION OF SCHOOLS REPORT TO BE RELEASED IN SEPTEMBER:

CIRCLE has joined with the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, the National Conference on Citizenship, and the Lenore Annenberg Institute for Civics at the Annenberg Public Policy Center to update and re-release the groundbreaking Civic Mission of Schools Report. The original report, released by CIRCLE and the Carnegie Corporation of New York in 2003, highlighted the problems confronting civic learning and offered practical solutions to strengthen civic learning for every student. The new report will highlight new research, lessons learned and best practices developed since 2003. The report will be released September 16th in conjunction with the annual National Conference on Citizenship at the Constitution Center in Philadelphia.