

RESEARCH ROUNDUP

50 STATES, 50 RATES: VOTING LAWS DIFFERS FROM STATE TO STATE

Youth voter turnout is influenced by a host of factors including the dynamics of local elections, the effectiveness of outreach efforts, local culture and beliefs, and as new research reveals, state laws. States have implemented a variety of rules and procedures for registering and voting, and CIRCLE-sponsored research shows that these differences matter. Recent CIRCLE research by Dr. Mary Fitzgerald and Dr. Ray Wolfinger examined the impact on youth turnout of allowing citizens to register to vote on Election Day, mailing information to registered voters about the location of their polling place, and other reforms. A summary of the findings can be found in the CIRCLE Fact Sheet “State Voter Registration and Election Day Laws.”

For Today’s Busy Young People Convenience Matters

The voting and registration process can be prohibitively complicated for young people. Several states have implemented new voter registration and voting laws, making it easier for people to vote. According to Dr. Fitzgerald, “Alternative voting methods such as unrestricted absentee voting, in-person early voting, Election Day registration, and mail-balloting are becoming increasingly popular throughout the nation.”

Dr. Mary Fitzgerald’s research suggests that while not all voting reforms are effective, some do have the potential to encourage more young people to vote. Election Day registration—allowing

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voters to register to vote on the same day that they go to the polls to cast a vote— is one reform that holds great promise. Dr. Fitzgerald found that youth turnout was higher by an average of 14 percentage points in Presidential years in states with Election Day registration, and by four percentage points in mid-term election years. Minnesota, Maine, Idaho, New Hampshire, Wisconsin and Wyoming are the only states that allow citizens to register on Election Day (North Dakota does not require voter registration). Election Day registration also increases the likelihood that young voters will be contacted by a political party in Presidential elections by 11 percentage points on average and 18 percentage

points in mid-term elections. Other CIRCLE-funded research has shown that personal appeals can improve voter turnout.

Another promising reform is unrestricted absentee voting, which allows voters to use an absentee ballot without providing an excuse. On average, if states were to allow unrestricted absentee voting, turnout among 18 to 24 year olds would likely increase by four percentage points in mid-term election years. Currently, about two dozen states allow citizens to vote by unrestricted absentee ballot (see Table 1 for a listing of the states that offer unrestricted absentee voting).

Extra Time and Information Helps— Especially for Young and Less Educated

Once a young person is registered to vote, there are several things states can do to increase the chances they will cast a ballot. Some mail information on polling place location along with sample ballots to registered voters. Others keep their polling places open late, and still others require employers to offer time off to vote. A CIRCLE study by Dr. Ray Wolfinger examined the impact that postregistration laws have on young people.



Student Empowerment Training Project

A new report examines the contributions State Students Associations (SSAs)—networks of college and university student governments— have made to the field of youth civic engagement. In addition, the report identifies characteristics of highly successful associations, and provides recommended ways that SSAs may be used to engage more students in future years.

A companion report, “Guide to State Student Associations” catalogues and describes the SSAs that are currently in operation as well as provides contact information for key staff. Both reports received funding from CIRCLE and were written by the Student Empowerment Training Project. They can be downloaded from www.civicyouth.org.

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TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF KEY STATE ELECTION LAWS

State	Election Day Registration	Mail Sample Ballots	Unrestricted Absentee Voting	Mails Information on Poll Location	Extended Voting Hours***	Time Off to Vote***	In-Person Early Voting***
Alabama							
Alaska		■	■	■	■	■	■
Arizona		■	■	■	■		■
Arkansas			■			■	■
California		■	■	■	■	■	
Colorado		■	■	■		■	■
Connecticut					■		
Delaware				■		■	
Florida		■	■	■		■	■
Georgia					■		■
Hawaii			■	■		■	■
Idaho	■		■				■
Illinois						■	
Indiana					■		
Iowa			■			■	■
Kansas			■		■	■	■
Kentucky				■	■	■	
Louisiana						■	
Maine	■		■		■		■
Maryland		■		■	■	■	
Massachusetts					■		
Michigan				■	■		
Minnesota	■				■	■	
Mississippi		■			■		
Missouri				■		■	
Montana			■		■	■	
Nebraska			■		■	■	■
Nevada		■	■	■		■	■
New Hampshire	■						
New Jersey		■		■		■	
New Mexico			■			■	■
New York				■	■	■	■
North Carolina			■	■	■		■
North Dakota*			■				
Ohio					■	■	
Oklahoma			■			■	■
Oregon**			■				
Pennsylvania					■		
Rhode Island					■		
South Carolina							
South Dakota						■	
Tennessee						■	■
Texas						■	■
Utah			■		■	■	
Vermont			■		■		■
Virginia					■		
Washington			■		■	■	
West Virginia					■	■	
Wisconsin	■		■			■	
Wyoming	■		■			■	

* North Dakota does not require voter registration.

** Oregon is a "vote by mail" state.

*** Extended voting hours were shown to have an effect on turnout when offered in combination with mailing sample ballots and mailing information on poll location.

****Except where noted, requires time off for state government and private sector employees. Delaware, Florida, Indiana, Louisiana, Montana, and New Jersey require time off only for state government employees. Georgia only requires private employees.

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Looking specifically at the young registered voters in the 2000 presidential election, Dr. Wolfinger's research tested whether providing longer polling hours and sending information about the voting process would help to increase turnout. Extending voting hours does not seem to have an impact on youth voting, but it does have a positive impact when combined with laws requiring sample ballots and polling place location information to be mailed to voters. In fact, in states that had this combination of laws, voter turnout among 18 to 24 year olds was ten percentage points higher. Simply mailing sample ballots to registered voters also increased turnout among young people by seven percentage points. Requiring employers to provide time off for their employees to vote does not appear to have a significant impact on youth turnout.

TABLE 2: EFFECTS OF ELECTION DAY LAWS ON TURNOUT AMONG YOUNG AND LESS EDUCATED

ELECTION DAY LAW	TURNOUT EFFECT
In states that mailed sample ballots before the 2000 election, turnout was...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ 7 percentage points higher among 18 to 24 year old registered voters ≡ 4 percentage points higher among registrants without a high school diploma
In states that mailed polling place information before the 2000 election, turnout was...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ 3 percentage points higher among registrants without a high school diploma
In states that mailed sample ballots and polling place location information AND offered extended polling hours on Election Day, turnout was...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ 10 percentage points higher in 2000 among 18 to 24 year old registered voters

According to Mark Hugo Lopez, CIRCLE's Research Director, "Many states are taking positive steps to make voting easier and provide more information." However, there are numerous factors that influence how many young people will vote in any given election. The cited research uses statistical models to estimate the effects of voting laws if all other factors are held constant. Dr. Lopez reminds that although these models cannot predict actual turnout levels in a given state, "they do suggest that specific reforms can have a significant impact on turnout." 

Both reports, "CIRCLE Working Paper 15: How Postregistration Laws Affect the Turnout of Registrants" and "CIRCLE Working Paper 01: Easier Voting Methods Boost Youth Turnout," can be downloaded from CIRCLE's Web site at http://www.civicyouth.org/research/products/working_papers.htm

LOCAL POLITICAL PARTIES SEE YOUNG VOTERS AS A LOW PRIORITY

Young people hoping to connect to their local political party may have trouble doing so. According to a CIRCLE study, local political party chairs are not paying attention to young people, and they do not see young people as important to the long term success of their parties. The Republican and Democratic party chairs who responded to the survey say the reasons for weak youth participation lie in deficient high school preparation, negative campaigning, and the media.

These are among the findings of a new CIRCLE Working Paper — "Throwing a Better Party: Local Mobilizing Institutions and the Youth Vote." The researchers, Dr. Daniel M. Shea of Allegheny College and Dr. John C. Green of the University of Akron, sought to determine how local parties are connecting with young voters and to find which methods have been effective in doing so. In October of 2003, they surveyed over 805 local party chairs who represent counties containing 87 percent of the nation's population.

Young People Not Viewed as Important to the Long Term Success of the Party

Only eight percent of the party chairs identified young people as the most important demographic for the "long-term success of their party," compared to 21 percent who named senior citizens. Only 12 percent listed young people second, and 18 percent listed them third.

"A key indicator of how far off the radar screen young people are is that few party chairs see them as important for the long-term success of their party," said Shea, who is Director of the Allegheny College Center for Political Participation. "By comparison, senior citizens were mentioned nearly three times as often as the most important group over the long term. Winning the current election is clearly overwhelming any focus on developing a long-term, broad-based following."

Local political party chairs do not seem to be spending their resources on creative get-out-the-vote programs for young voters. Among the 41 percent of party leaders who claimed to have developed specific get-out-the-vote programs for young voters, the vast majority of programs they cited as examples might be dubbed "modest" and "traditional." A common example of a response given was "some people in our party have spoken at area schools." According to the researchers, "only a handful mentioned programs that might be considered significant."