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Voter Turnout in the United States

This report discusses current and potential electoral system reforms to increase voter turnout in the United States. To understand voting behavior, Political Scientists have taken two main approaches. One approach is to focus on the costs and benefits of voting. The costs of voting include time commitments (including the time to become informed) and financial costs. The benefits of voting can include concrete benefits like tax cuts or enhanced social programs, and more abstract benefits, such as personal freedoms and a government that promotes the values you hold. If the costs of voting exceed the perceived benefits of voting, citizens are unlikely to vote. The other approach taken by Political Scientists is to focus on the public attitudes that are related to participation, such as partisanship, engagement in politics, and cynicism. Based on these two approaches, scholars have identified a number of causes of low voter turnout and system reforms to address those causes.¹ As will quickly become evident, the discussion that follows is informed by both these approaches.

Scholars highlight a number of factors that affect voter turnout. These include an electoral structure that requires voting in a relatively high number of elections as well as the use of complex and often incomprehensible ballot designs. Additionally, more fundamental issues exist, contributing to an apathetic, disengaged, and politically under-informed populace. According to scholars, multiple factors impact voter turnout. Therefore no single remedy can increase it. Rather, a mix of strategies and structural reforms must be employed.²

Reform has historically been implemented through two avenues: structural changes and convenience voting initiatives. Structural changes address the underlying attitudes of the electorate, while convenience voting initiatives seek to reduce the costs of voting.³

Context of United States Electoral System

Elections in the United States differ substantially from other established democracies. Two areas of significant divergence are the structure of elections and the degree of voter turnout in the American system. First, American citizens have many more opportunities to vote than citizens in most other democracies. In addition to presidential elections occurring every four years, midterm congressional

¹ Anthony Gierzynski, *Saving American Elections: A Diagnosis and Prescription for a Healthier Democracy* (Cambria Press, 2011).

² Kelly Born, "Increasing Voter Turnout: What, If Anything, Can Be Done?" *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, (April 25, 2016), accessed April 2, 2019, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/increasing_voter_turnout_what_if_anything_can_be_done.

³ Kelly Born, "Increasing Voter Turnout."

elections occur in the middle of a presidential term, and state level elections occur annually.⁴ Studies have found a negative correlation exists between the number of elections and voter turnout, particularly among marginalized groups.⁵ An oversaturation of elections may lead voters to focus only on elections perceived to be of greater importance.⁶

Voter turnout in presidential elections is significantly higher than turnout in congressional and local elections. Voter turnout is defined as a measurement of either the voting-age (everyone residing in the United States eighteen or older) or the voting-eligible population (excluding noncitizens, felons, and the mentally incapacitated).⁷ In the 2016 presidential election, 60.1 percent of the voting-eligible population voted.⁸ Conversely, the 2018 midterm election had a turnout rate of only around 50.3 percent, a record turnout that was still around 10 points lower than the presidential election.⁹ For local and primary elections, turnout often lags behind midterm turnout. In 2012, for example, 129.1 million voters (around 53.6 percent of the voting-age population) cast ballots in the presidential election, compared to only 28 million voters in that year's primaries.¹⁰

There are several explanations for why voter turnout varies between national and local elections. Local contests are often less compelling to voters than those held on a national stage.¹¹ Local campaigns cannot muster the same level of media coverage, advertisement, and exposure that accompany presidential elections.¹² Furthermore, if local elections do not coincide with national elections, the cost of voting increases. Not only do voters make more decisions, they must also attend the polls multiple times a year for full civic participation.¹³

Vermont's Electoral System

Vermont permits no-excuse early voting and no-excuse absentee voting. In accordance with these laws, a voter is not required to provide an excuse for being unable to vote on Election Day.¹⁴ Consequently, all voters are eligible to vote absentee (by mail) in Vermont.¹⁵ In 2016, Vermont also passed Automatic Voter Registration laws, which register eligible voters upon receipt or renewal of a driver's license, unless the individual requests otherwise.¹⁶ Finally, Vermont only requires identification at the polls from

⁴ USA.gov, "Midterm Congressional, State, and Local Elections" (USA.gov, February 10, 2019), accessed April 15, 2019, <https://www.usa.gov/midterm-state-and-local-elections>.

⁵ Melissa Marschall and John Lappie, "Turnout in Local Elections: Is Timing Really Everything?," *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy* 17, no. 3 (July 2, 2018): 221–33, <https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2017.0462>.

⁶ Daniel Stockemer, "What Affects Voter Turnout? A Review Article/Meta-Analysis of Aggregate Research," *Government and Opposition* 52, no. 4 (October 2017): 698–722, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2016.30>.

⁷ Michael McDonald "What is the voting-age population (VAP) and the voting-eligible population (VEP)?" The United States Elections Project, accessed April 15, 2019, <http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/faq/denominator>

⁸ Michael McDonald, "National General Election VEP Turnout Rates, 1789-Present" (The United States Elections Project, March 29, 2019), accessed March 31, 2019, <http://www.electproject.org/national-1789-present>.

⁹ Michael McDonald, "National General Election VEP Turnout Rates, 1789-Present."

¹⁰ Drew Desilver, "Turnout in 2016 Primaries so Far Rivals 2008 Record" (Pew Research Center, March 6, 2016), accessed April 10, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/08/so-far-turnout-in-this-years-primaries-rivals-2008-record/>.

¹¹ Marschall and Lappie "Turnout in Local Elections."

¹² Marschall and Lappie "Turnout in Local Elections."

¹³ Marschall and Lappie "Turnout in Local Elections."

¹⁴ "Voting in Vermont" (Ballotpedia), accessed March 26, 2019, https://ballotpedia.org/Voting_in_Vermont.

¹⁵ Vermont Secretary of State, "Absentee Voting: Vermont's Early or Absentee Voting Process" (Vermont Secretary of State, March 28, 2019), accessed April 15, 2019, <https://www.sec.state.vt.us/>.

¹⁶ National Conference of State Legislatures, "Automatic Voter Registration," last modified on February 6, 2019, <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/automatic-voter-registration.aspx>

first-time voters who registered by mail.¹⁷ In addition to these reforms, Vermont's electoral turnout is amongst the highest in the nation with a participant rate of 55.9 percent of the voting-eligible population in the 2018 midterm election.¹⁸

Ways to Impact Voter Turnout

Nationally, many reforms focus on easing restrictions on the casting of ballots.¹⁹ Three major obstacles prevent people from voting:

1. **Time it takes to vote:** In calculating the time it takes to vote, the distance a voter must travel to reach a voting booth, is a major factor. Henry Brady and John McNulty found that, “[c]hanges in polling places and increased distances to polling places change turnout behavior due to increased inconvenience.”²⁰ Therefore the loss of time incurred traveling to the polls deters people from voting.²¹ As such, minimizing the time it takes to reach the polls is one way to increase voter turnout.
2. **Education:** Due to the complex nature of American ballots, becoming an informed voter requires a substantial amount of time and effort. As such, education plays a crucial role in voter turnout. Education “enhances political resources such as civic skills and knowledge and stimulates political interest and engagement.”²²
3. **Financial Costs of Voting:** The act of voting often incurs a financial burden related to the loss of wages and costs of transportation.²³ In studying the 2001 Atlanta mayoral election, researchers found that lack of access to vehicles greatly reduced the likelihood of voting.²⁴ Furthermore, for citizens without paid time off, leaving work to vote means losing wages. Therefore, “the higher the costs of voting are, the greater the likelihood that the benefits of voting will be outweighed by those costs, and the less likely citizens will be to vote.”²⁵

Most of these obstacles can be addressed through allowing convenience voting, a short-term fix designed to make voting more accessible.

Increasing the Convenience of Voting

Absentee and early voting are two reforms to make voting more convenient that have already been instituted in Vermont. Yet, studies show that these changes only make voting easier for those who would vote regardless of these reforms.²⁶ According to experts, the key to improving voter turnout is increasing political interest among unengaged voters, a solution that points to a societal intervention rather than a political one. In other words, despite efforts to make voting more accessible, some

¹⁷ Ballotpedia, “Voting in Vermont.”

¹⁸ George Pillsbury, “America Goes to the Polls 2018” (Cambridge, MA: Nonprofit VOTE, March 2019), accessed April 15, 2019, <https://www.nonprofitvote.org/documents/2019/03/america-goes-polls-2018.pdf>.

¹⁹ Berkinsky, “Making Voting Easier Doesn’t Increase Turnout.”

²⁰ Henry Brady and John McNulty, “Turning out the vote: The costs of finding and getting to the polling place,” *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 1, (2011): 115-134.

²¹ Brady and McNulty, “Turning out the vote.”

²² Mary Fitzgerald, “Greater Convenience but Not Greater Turnout.”

²³ Moshe Haspel and H. Gibbs Knotts, “Where We Vote” in *Voting in America*, edited by Morgan E. Felchner, 73-80, Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2008.

²⁴ Haspel and Knotts, “Where We Vote,” 75.

²⁵ Haspel and Knotts, “Where We Vote,” 74.

²⁶ Adam Berinsky, “Making Voting Easier Doesn’t Increase Turnout” (Stanford Social Innovation Review, February 8, 2016), accessed April 4, 2019, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/making_voting_easier_doesnt_increase_turnout.

political reforms fail to engage and increase turnout among nonvoters.²⁷ There are other reforms that have been shown to marginally increase voter turnout, but the efficacy of those reforms depend on the local context.²⁸

Ballot Reform

In addition to the costs associated with a greater number of elections, ballots in the United States are frequently quite complicated, a further disincentive to voting. Research emphasizes the impact of ballot readability, or the wording of measures as they appear on a ballot. Complex wording may actually reduce voting because people tend to skip measures they do not understand. Instead, poor wording can cause voters to focus on higher offices, which typically receive more media attention and are therefore better understood.²⁹ Some states have acknowledged the issue of readability. Florida, for example, suggests that its ballot questions be easy-to-read, although no state enforces this notion through official policy.³⁰

Similar issues exist for long ballots, or ballots with more choices or a higher word count. The increased length of the ballot causes voter fatigue, leading voters to skip over terms.³¹ Additionally, the way each state designs its ballot varies significantly. Constructing a ballot in a more complicated manner increases the likelihood of voter error, resulting in blank, spoiled or otherwise null ballots.³² An example of this occurred in Palm Beach County, Florida during the 2000 presidential election. The so-called “butterfly ballot” featured a central column with candidate names staggered on each side. The confusing layout resulted in more than 2,000 Democratic voters mistakenly voting for reform candidate Pat Buchanan instead of Al Gore (Gore lost the state by 537 votes).³³

Online Voting

Online voting in the United States first began in 2000 in Arizona and Alaska’s presidential primary elections.³⁴ That same year, military personnel and overseas civilians voted online for the November general election.³⁵ A report was later published by four American computer scientists detailing significant security concerns for online voting.³⁶ Soon after, the Federal Voting Assistance Program canceled the Secure Electronic Registration and Voting Experiment, therefore effectively ending any U.S. interest in online voting.³⁷

²⁷ Berkinsky, “Making Voting Easier Doesn’t Increase Turnout.”

²⁸ Mary Fitzgerald, “Greater Convenience but Not Greater Turnout: The Impact of Alternative Voting Methods on Electoral Participation in the United States,” *American Politics Research* 33, no. 6 (November 1, 2005): 842–67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X04274066>.

²⁹ Shauna Reilly and Sean Richey, “Ballot Question Readability and Roll-Off: The Impact of Language Complexity,” *Political Research Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2011): 59–67, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41058322>.

³⁰ Reily and Richie, “Ballot Question Readability.”

³¹ Reily and Richie, “Ballot Question Readability.”

³² Reily and Richie, “Ballot Question Readability.”

³³ Jonathan N. Wand et al., “The Butterfly Did It: The Aberrant Vote for Buchanan in Palm Beach County, Florida,” *The American Political Science Review* 95, no. 4 (December, 2001): 793–810, accessed April 10, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3117714>.

³⁴ Thad E. Hall, “Voting Online around the World,” in *Voting in America*, ed. R. Michael Alvarez and Morgan E. Felchner, vol. 3, 3 vols. (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2008).

³⁵ Thad E. Hall, and Michael Alvarez, “Voting Online around the World.”

³⁶ Thad E. Hall, and Michael Alvarez, “Voting Online around the World.”

³⁷ Thad E. Hall, and Michael Alvarez, “Voting Online around the World.”

Despite the concerns of U.S. officials, global interest in online voting has not diminished. In 2016, Canada began researching online voting.³⁸ In Canadian municipalities, internet voting increased voter turnout by 3 percent, an impact similar to other types of convenience.³⁹

Voter Identification Laws

Research on voter identification laws and their effect on voter turnout varies greatly. Some studies conclude that voter ID laws have no effect on turnout;⁴⁰ others see a substantial increase in the gap between white and nonwhite turnout in states with strict voter identification laws.⁴¹ The varying results occur for a few reasons: First, older studies focus on the effect of ID laws from the early 2000s. Most of these early laws did not require voters to present photo identification and are mild in comparison to laws that have recently been introduced. Because strict voter ID laws are relatively new, little data on their impact currently exists, making it challenging to assess their influence on voter turnout. In addition, many of the studies conducted used online surveys which required participants to have access to a computer, limiting their pool of respondents. Furthermore, low socioeconomic citizens are less likely to be registered to vote and respond to surveys.⁴²

Efficacy of Convenience Voting Initiatives

Unfortunately, many sources show that voting reforms only retain current voters and fail to recruit new voters.⁴³ From this, and other research, Mary Fitzgerald concludes that focusing on convenience and costs may not be an effective way of increasing new voter participation.⁴⁴ Some of the more effective tactics, such as same day registration, which has been shown to increase voter turnout in municipal elections by 3 percentage points, are already in effect in Vermont.⁴⁵

Structural Reforms and Voter Inequality

Research has highlighted that low voter turnout is symptomatic of larger problems in the electoral system.⁴⁶ Multiple underlying issues exist which reduce voter equality, diminish the competitiveness of elections, and effectively alienate a large percentage of eligible voters. Leading factors include the high frequency of elections, the large number of decisions voters face, a mass media culture driven by entertainment and profit, and violations of the “one person, one vote” principle.⁴⁷

³⁸ Nicole Goodman, “Online Voting: A Path Forward for Federal Elections” (Government of Canada, August 21, 2017), accessed April 10, 2019, <https://www.canada.ca/en/democratic-institutions/services/reports/online-voting-path-forward-federal-elections.html#toc14>.

³⁹ Nicole Goodman, “Online Voting: A Path Forward for Federal Elections.”

⁴⁰ Stephen Ansolabehere, “Effects of Identification Requirements on Voting: Evidence from the Experiences of Voters on Election Day,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 42, no. 1 (January 2009): 127–30, accessed April 10, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096509090313>.

⁴¹ Zoltan Hajnal, Nazita Lajevardi, and Lindsay Nielson, “Voter Identification Laws and the Suppression of Minority Votes,” *The Journal of Politics* 79, no. 2 (January 5, 2017): 363–79, accessed April 10, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1086/688343>.

⁴² Justin Grimmer et al., “Obstacles to Estimating Voter ID Laws’ Effect on Turnout,” *The Journal of Politics* 80, no. 3 (April 18, 2018): 1045–51, accessed April 10, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1086/696618>.

⁴³ Mary Fitzgerald, “Greater Convenience but Not Greater Turnout.”

⁴⁴ Mary Fitzgerald, “Greater Convenience but Not Greater Turnout.”

⁴⁵ Mary Fitzgerald, “Greater Convenience but Not Greater Turnout.”

⁴⁶ Anthony Gierzynski, *Saving American Elections: A Diagnosis and Prescription for a Healthier Democracy* (Cambria Press, 2011).

⁴⁷ Anthony Gierzynski, *Saving American Elections*.

The high frequency of elections and the number of ballot questions presented to voters are burdens compounded by the overwhelming amount of options within each question. Additionally, the complexity of voting in the U.S. makes it difficult for voters to see the impact of their vote, obscuring the link between their many voting decisions and government action.

The current mass media environment in the U.S. puts a premium on presenting spectacle rather than informing the public. Placing requirements on broadcasting organizations to fulfill a public service mandate through dedicated coverage of local elections and free television time for state and local candidates could initiate a reversal of the trend.

In addition to these issues, scholars have identified a number of other legal and structural characteristics of U.S. elections that work to reduce turnout, including the subversion of the “one person, one vote” principle through:⁴⁸

- weak and ineffective campaign finance laws;
- uncompetitive electoral districts; and
- poor funding for election administration and appropriately secure, well-designed vote processing technology.⁴⁹

Compulsory Voting

Compulsory voting has been adopted by a number of democracies worldwide, ranging from Europe to Australia to Latin America.⁵⁰ As suggested by the name, compulsory voting laws mandate public participation in elections. Penalties for not complying with these laws vary nation by nation, generally ranging from fines to the loss of voting rights.⁵¹ Compulsory voting does increase voter turnout, particularly in places where an individual can be certain that abstaining from voting will be met with punishment. Globally, countries with compulsory voting average a turnout 7.37 percent higher than countries without compulsory voting.⁵² In short, making abstention costly reduces the relative costs of voting and consequently encourages participation.

Compulsory rules vary greatly in their application. In South American nations such as Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru, the compulsory mandate is dropped for senior citizens. As a result, turnout rates tend to drop off as citizens reach this age threshold.⁵³ Other places, including Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic require voting by law, but assess no penalty on abstainers. In nations that do impose actual fines, the rates vary from around one or two dollars in Brazil and Switzerland to around 800 dollars in Luxembourg.⁵⁴ Other nations impose penalties beyond fines. Brazil, for example, bars those who do not vote from working in the public sector, obtaining admission to public schools, and from acquiring a passport.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ Cornell Law School, “one-person, one-vote rule,” accessed April 15, 2019, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/one-person_one-vote_rule

⁴⁹ For a review of the literature on this, see Anthony Gierzynski, *Saving American Elections*.

⁵⁰ Shane P. Singh, “Beyond Turnout: The Consequences of Compulsory Voting,” *Political Insight* 5, no. 2 (2014): 22–25, accessed April 10, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1111/2041-9066.12058>.

⁵¹ Shane P. Singh, “Beyond Turnout: The Consequences of Compulsory Voting.”

⁵² International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, “Compulsory Voting” (International IDEA, 2019), accessed March 22, 2019, <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout/compulsory-voting>.

⁵³ Shane P. Singh, “Beyond Turnout: The Consequences of Compulsory Voting.”

⁵⁴ Shane P. Singh, “Beyond Turnout: The Consequences of Compulsory Voting.”

⁵⁵ Shane P. Singh, “Beyond Turnout: The Consequences of Compulsory Voting.”

Although compulsory voting does significantly increase voter turnout, it does not do so uniformly across populations. Instead, compulsory voting tends to increase turnout more dramatically for underrepresented social groups, including the young, the uneducated, and the poor.⁵⁶ These groups begin to vote at rates approaching more mainstream groups. Simply increasing participation, however, does not necessarily improve the representativeness of an election. Forcing participation from unknowledgeable or simply apathetic voters may increase the incidence of voting at random or skipping sections of a ballot.⁵⁷ An opposing view is that forced participation will compel individuals to take up an interest in civic matters; however, empirical research on this matter has so far been mixed.⁵⁸ Therefore, compulsory voting does increase voter turnout, but it does not necessarily result in more representative elections or a more knowledgeable electorate.

Conclusion

Democratic institutions function poorly when electoral structures fail to facilitate meaningful participation for the citizenry. Rather than providing the means for popular control of the government which empowers all participants equally, a poorly-structured election system favors some and marginalizes many. The most salient recommendations for improving the efficacy of democratic elections in the United States call for reductions in the cost of voting through simplification of the system. This can be accomplished by both holding election events less frequently and reducing the number of positions filled by voting, thereby effectively lowering the amount of decisions voters must make. Beyond the frequency and complexity of US elections, a number of structural factors exist that discourage or obstruct voting. These structural factors contribute to the spread of political apathy amongst voters who are disillusioned with or uninformed about the electoral system. Resolving these problems requires more than just reform to increase the convenience of voting. Such minor changes will only have marginal impact on voter turnout if the cause of electoral ills is left untreated. Instead what is needed are “elections that matter, public understanding of how and why these elections matter, and assistance in achieving this understanding.”⁵⁹

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Disclaimer: The material contained in the report does not reflect the official policy of the University of Vermont.

⁵⁶ Shane P. Singh, “Beyond Turnout: The Consequences of Compulsory Voting.”

⁵⁷ Shane P. Singh, “Beyond Turnout: The Consequences of Compulsory Voting.”

⁵⁸ Shane P. Singh, “Beyond Turnout: The Consequences of Compulsory Voting.”

⁵⁹Anthony Gierzynski, *Saving American Elections*.