

The Impact of Election Laws on the Turnout of Young People: An analysis of the relationship between election laws and youth turnout across the United States in the 2020 election

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ABSTRACT

The twenty sixth amendment of the United States Constitution says that no citizen over the age of 18 years old shall be denied the right to vote. Despite this constitutional amendment, there are many barriers that hinder this act of voting. Multiple types of barriers exist such as location, time, money, and most important to this research, legislative barriers. Based on the voter turnout of all Americans across the country, it appears that these barriers seem to disproportionately affect young people and minorities. The low turnout rates among youth and minorities are a serious threat to the effectiveness of our representative democracy in the United States. Since the raw data for the turnout of minorities does not exist, the effects laws have on their turnout will not be determined in this paper. Minorities, however, will still be discussed in the review of literature because of their importance in regard to voter turnout.

Review of Literature

Addressing the barriers that plague the young people and minorities is not as easy as it seems, partly because there are so many different ways of doing so. Some advocate for institutional reforms, while others argue that our focus should shift away from legislation and more towards things such as increased civic education or mobilization efforts. Currently there is no “right” answer when it comes to depleting voting barriers, and nearly every state in the US takes a unique approach. The goal of this research is to find the hypothetical “right” answer in regards to which legislation is the most effective when it comes to increasing the turnout of youth, ages 18-29. Along the way, this study will also determine which laws have the most depressing effects on youth turnout.

Cost of Voting

A large topic of discussion in regard to voter turnout is the cost of voting. Scholars define the cost of voting in a few different ways, but for the purpose of this research we will be focusing on the cost of voting as the opportunity cost of casting a ballot. For many, the act of casting a ballot is not worth the time or loss of money, through sacrificed work time. Throughout the years, politicians and citizens have pushed for various laws that make voting easier; laws such as no excuse absentee voting, early voting, and same day registration are meant to make voting more convenient for voters. On the other side of this argument, however, some worry that making voting too easy can dismantle the integrity of our electoral system. These same people push for laws that would require voter ID and less widespread use of absentee ballots.

As mentioned above, every state takes a unique approach when it comes to election legislation, mostly because there is no national standard, so Scot Schraufnagel, Quan Li, and Michael Pomante created a cost of voting index (COVI), which takes into account every single piece of voting legislation in every US state (2018). The goal of

the index is to provide scholars with a comprehensive list of election laws, in order to examine the effects of legislation on various dependent variables; in this paper we will focus exclusively on youth turnout.

Voter Turnout of Youth and Racial Minorities

Although barriers have affected Americans across the country, turnout data historically implies that these barriers most heavily affect young people (ages 18-29) and racial minorities. A study conducted in 2022 looking at the turnout differences of various groups across multiple elections using the data trust voter file, found that there are extreme racial and age disparities between minorities and whites and young people versus older people, when it comes to voting (Barber and Holbein, 2022). Youth tend to vote more than 10 percent **less** than their older counterparts. Similarly, minorities vote about 10 percent less than white people. Both minorities and youth are less likely to be targeted by mobilization efforts, however, when looking into the effects of mobilization efforts, including canvassing and phone calls, on black communities, little to no impact was found (Scott et al, 2021). Considering the fact that minority groups face the most burdens when voting in person, their routine low turnout is unsurprising (Foley et al, 2021).

Young people are less likely to be engaged for various reasons. First, voting is a habit formed over time, and many young people don't think the opportunity cost of casting a vote is worth it (Plutzer, 2004). In the *New York Times* article, "Why Don't Young People Vote, and What Can Be Done About It?," the author presents Professor Mark Franklin's idea that young people also face more time burdens than their older counterparts; they are less likely to be able to take time off work, get out of class, etcetera (2020). This is why things like early voting, extended poll hours, or election day being a holiday may positively impact young people and need to be specifically investigated.

Election Laws

There are various types of election laws all across the United States. As mentioned above, some laws are meant to make voting easier, in order to boost turnout, while others are meant to secure elections and safeguard against voter fraud. On the other hand, some laws are meant to target specific groups, especially those with low turnout. One example of this is the adoption of preregistration: the ability to register prior to turning 18. Holbein and Hillygus looked into the effects of preregistration on youth turnout, and more specifically minority youth turnout. Overall, they found that pre-registration can boost turnout by around 8% per election (2016). The goal of preregistration is to get students civically engaged ahead of time, and by being registered to vote they are much more likely to be reached by mobilization efforts. Another study conducted on how online registration affected college students' turnout found that sending students a direct link can increase turnout by half a percentage point (Bennion and Nickerson, 2022). Despite the small numbers, a half of a percentage point in terms of turnout can be considered significant.

One of the biggest controversies regarding minority turnout and election laws is the implementation of voter identification requirements. In 2017, Hajnal et al. found that voter ID requirements negatively affect minorities, more than any other group; however, there were a few red flags in their method, which were addressed by Grimmer in 2018. In their readdressing of the topic, Grimmer et al. found that voter ID requirements did not have a negative impact on voter turnout. To add to the conversation further, Barry Burden analyzed both studies and found major red flags within the methods of **both** studies (2018). These red flags are addressed further in the method section, but clearly, there is disagreement in the field regarding how to study the turnout of specific groups because methodological choices can create large disparities in results. It is also noteworthy to mention that an extreme problem with studying minority voters is that voter registration does not take race into account; therefore, minority turnout can only be based on estimates (Cruz and Hayes, 2009).

Many laws are created with the goal of making voting more convenient: same day registration, early voting, or no excuse absentee voting. Policy makers tend to advocate for these laws, because without further analysis it could be implied that these voting laws would be effective at increasing turnout; however, when scholars have taken a deeper

dive, they have realized that convenience voting laws produce insignificant differences in turnout, especially of underrepresented groups. In 2016, Ashok et al. found that early voting laws had no effects on turnout and only increased the convenience of voting for habitual voters, who will vote no matter the inconvenience. Adam Berinsky, a professor of political science at MIT, states that, “reforms designed to make voting ‘easier’ magnify the existing socioeconomic biases in the composition of the electorate,” (2005). It is clear, then, that laws have distinct effects based on which other laws they are combined with. For example, when early voting is implemented by itself it can actually depress voter turnout, but when it is paired with election day and same day registration the effects are positive (Burden et al, 2014).

Although convenience laws do make voting easier, scholars agree that other reforms need to be implemented alongside these laws for them to have their intended effects. For example, Gronke notes that convenience laws must be accompanied by increased mobilization efforts (2008). Other scholars suggest that civic education reform needs to be a priority as well as integrated voter outreach (Root and Kennady, 2018). Another recommendation is that focus should shift away from institutional reforms, and instead on engaging new voters with a lower likelihood to vote, such as young people, minorities, and people of lower socioeconomic status (Berinsky, 2005). Although election laws are not the only important aspect involved with voting, they are extremely influential on the voting process for citizens all across America; thus, an important topic for research.

Gap

This study will combine different aspects of multiple studies. It will use the cost of voting index created by Schraufnagel et al. in 2020 and cross reference it to turnout rates of youth. This study's focus is the 2020 presidential election rather than any other year because it is the most recent presidential election. The *Pew Research Center* explains that, “Voter turnout regularly drops in midterm elections, and has done so since the 1840s,” indicating that presidential elections, therefore, provide a broader representation of the electorate (2014). Moreover, the 2020 presidential election, in particular, saw the greatest turnout of the 21st century, according to the *Census Bureau* (2021). Many authors, when studying the effects of election laws, choose to look at the differences in turnout over different elections. In doing this, researchers are unable to account for confounding variables such as election type and political climate. Another important aspect scholars leave out when studying across elections is the fact that each election is a different group of young people with different priorities and motivations. Rather than using all 41 laws taken into consideration by Schraufnagel et al, this study condenses categories and only considers the laws that directly affect turnout.

Methods

As mentioned above, the goal of this study is to understand which election laws have the greatest impact on young people and minorities. This study uses both descriptive statistics as well as a correlational analysis in order to best understand the relationship between state election laws and the turnout of youth in each of the fifty states.

There is a large debate surrounding the use of sampled/survey data versus voter files to make conclusions on electoral behaviors. For example, in 2017 Hajnal et al. used election survey data in order to determine whether or not minorities are negatively impacted by voter ID requirements; in which the authors found that minorities were negatively impacted. Although, in 2018, Grimmer et al. was skeptical of the method used in the 2017 study, and replicated the study using voter file data, which led to completely different results. The authors of the 2018 study blamed this difference on many data inaccuracies in the sampled data, while also making it clear that national surveys are not suited for estimating the effect of state election laws on voter turnout (Grimmer et al, 2018). In attempts to resolve this debate, Barry Burden dissected both articles, and came across some significant methodological problems. He made it clear that one of the largest methodological problems was that neither study differentiated between presidential and midterm elections, which have completely different turnout rates. In order to avoid data inaccuracies, this study

uses turnout data exclusively from the 2020 presidential election, generated by the *Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE)*. CIRCLE was chosen as the data source for this study because they focus specifically on young people and retrieve their data from a reliable voter file, *Catalist LLC*.

Variables

Young people have historically turned out at much lower rates than their older counterparts, which makes them a population of importance when it comes to studying elections. With that being said, the dependent variable of this study is the turnout of young people in 41 US states. 9 states were excluded from this analysis due to a lack of representative data within the voter file used by the CIRCLE (AK, HI, MD, MS, NH, ND, UT, WI, WY). The independent variables being studied are the election laws in each state. This study will be analyzing 17 specific laws: same day registration, polling place registration, online registration, mental competency requirements, pre-registration, automatic registration, election day considered a state holiday, early voting, alternate voting locations, time off to vote, no time off pay, no excuse absentee voting, voter ID requirement (separate categories for flexible and strict), all mail voting, registration drives, and average hours of polling locations. The entire list of election laws included in the COVI created by Schrafnagel et al can be found at this [link](#), under the Master 1996 2022 Election voting requirements tab.

Election Law Data

As mentioned in the review of literature, this study draws from a comprehensive list of 41 election laws included in the cost of voting index (COVI), and for the purpose of this study some laws were excluded or condensed into one section. For example, the original COVI had 7 categories having to do with pre registration, and in this study they were condensed to only consider if a state did or did not allow people under the age of 18 to pre-register. Laws surrounding automatic registration, polling hours, early voting, and registration drives were also condensed in the same way. Laws having to do with felons' ability to vote are also not being considered because according to Schrafnagel et al. "There is some way to have [voting] rights restored in all 50 states." There were other various laws left out due to their lack of relationship with youth voter turnout, such as allowing food or drink at polling places or who is allowed to return absentee ballots.

Recreation of the Cost of Voting Index

To recreate a new cost of voting index adhering specifically to the needs of this study each of the 41 states were either given a 1 or 2 in all 17 categories (laws). A 1 indicated that a law increased the cost of voting, for example if states require voter identification they were given a 1. There are also instances where a law did not necessarily raise the direct cost of voting, for example not allowing early voting, yet the state was still given a 1, because when compared to states that do allow early voting, the cost of voting is higher. On the other hand, laws that decreased the cost of voting were given a 2. The states with the highest rankings were states with the lowest cost of voting, and vice versa. California, Illinois, South Carolina, and West Virginia all had the greatest values indicating the lowest cost of voting, and Alabama, Indiana, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin had the lowest values meaning they have the highest cost of voting. The entire spreadsheet of laws can be found at the link, [here](#).

In order to first measure the validity of my condensed version of the COVI, I compared the relationship of my COVI and youth turnout with Shrafnagel et al. study's relationship between COVI and nationwide turnout. The r value of Shrafnagel's et al's study was -0.27 , and the r value pertaining to this study was -0.33 . These values being close indicates that the trimmed down list of laws does not heavily influence the relationship between turnout and cost of voting. In order to further justify the choice of using voter file data rather than survey data, I also tested the relationship between the original COVI and sampled data and found nearly no statistically significant relationship ($r > 1$).

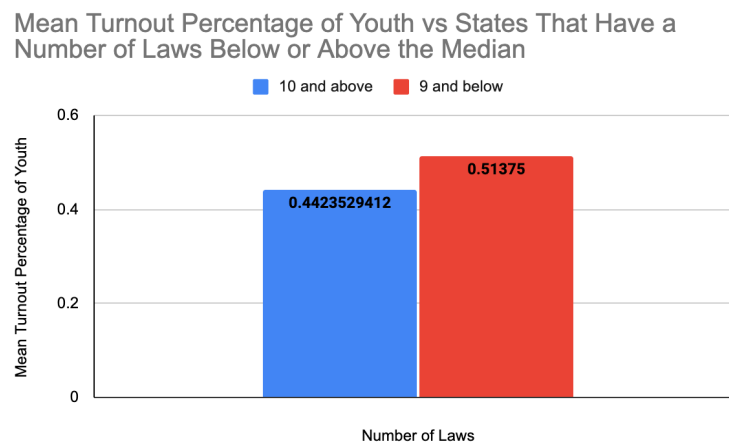
Data Analysis

I then proceeded and began completing a correlational analysis of the 17 laws in relation to the youth turnout in each of the 41 states. The r value provides a value to describe the extent of the relationship between a law and turnout in that state. Although an r value does not indicate causation, it still allows us to evaluate predictive relationships. For every specific law, I calculated the Pearson correlation coefficient between the turnout in each of the states versus whether or not the state had the law.

A difference in mean turnout was also taken into account for every law being considered, in order to understand the effect each specific law may have on turnout. This allowed me to understand if any laws relate to a significant difference in turnout within the states that implemented it. If this study were using survey data, hypothesis testing would have been the most appropriate, however, it was not necessary because this study uses a voter file that takes into account the entire population. It is important to investigate this, in addition to using a correlational analysis, because a law may not have a specific relationship with turnout, but it may still have a noticeable effect on turnout across the board. This study used a difference in means to uncover whether or not there was a difference in turnout in states with greater than the median amount of turnout depressing laws versus those with less than the median amount.

Results

This study draws upon the turnout rate of youth ages 18-29 across 41 US states in the 2020 presidential election. The median number of turnout depressing election laws in each state is 9, and the mean is 8.225. In order to further understand the effect of turnout depressing laws the difference in youth turnout between states at or below the median and states above the median was calculated. The average turnout of youth in states with 9 or fewer turnout depressing laws was 0.5138, whereas in states with greater than 9 turnout depressing laws the turnout was 0.4424, which yields a difference in turnout of over 7 percent.

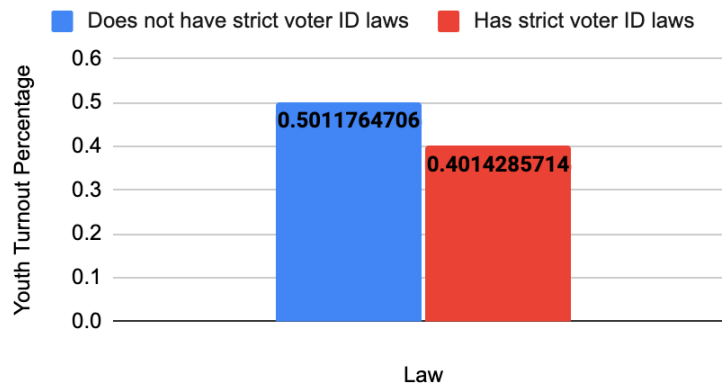


Delving deeper into the effects that specific laws had on youth turnout, the Pearson r correlation coefficient was calculated for each of the 17 laws taken into account. The relationship between all mail voting and youth turnout was found to be the most significant, with an r value of 0.4523, which indicates a high moderate correlation. Moderate correlations also existed for all of the following variables: polling place registration (0.4298), same day registration (0.4086), excuse required for absentee voting (0.4032), flexible voter ID requirements (0.3337), and automatic registration (0.3086). It is also worth noting that early voting had nearly no relationship to turnout, with a negative r value

of just -0.0066. Pre-registration and online registration also had weak relationships with youth turnout (0.2096 and 0.1738, respectively). A chart showing the Pearson correlation coefficient for each law can be found [here](#).

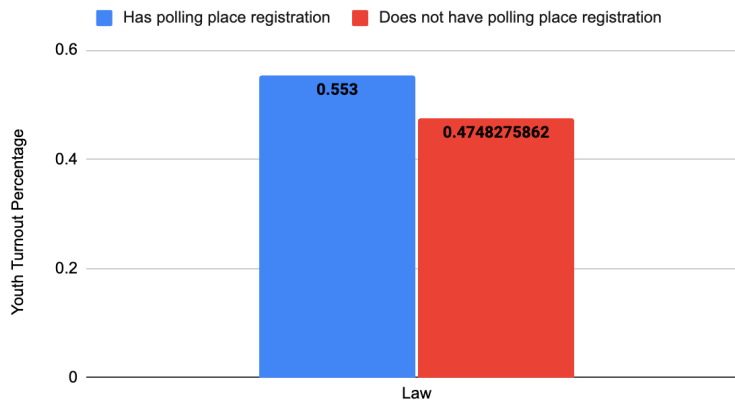
To dive deeper into how each law affects turnout, I calculated the average turnout of states with each law and states without each law, in order to take the difference. The largest difference exists between the mean turnout of states with and without strict voter ID laws, with a nearly 10 percent difference.

Difference in Turnout: Strict Voter ID Laws

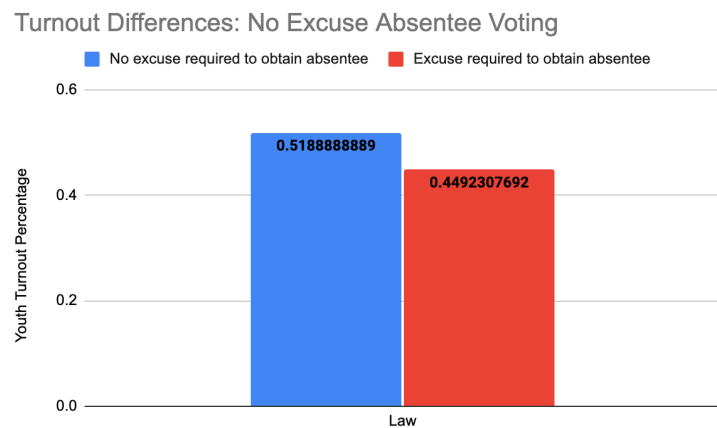
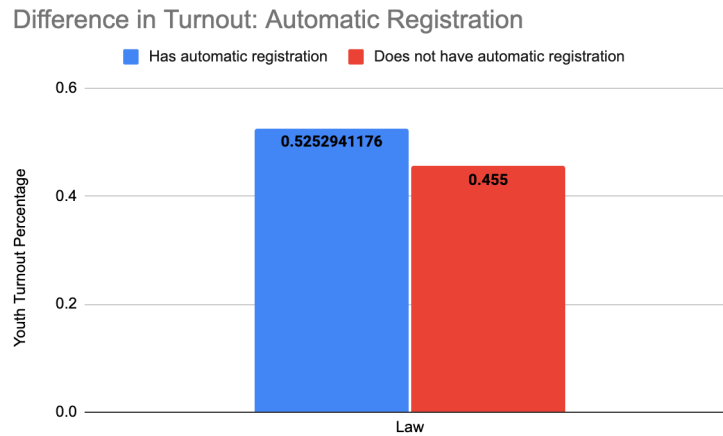


Polling place registration also boasts a large turnout difference, at 7.82 percent.

Difference in Turnout: Polling Place Registration



Some other notable differences are automatic registration at 7 percent and “excuse required” for absentee voting at just less than 7 percent.



For some laws, differences in turnout did not exist at all, such as early voting or pre-registration. It is important to recognize both laws with significant impacts as well as those with lacking impacts, so that policy makers and scholars can understand what works and what does not. All of the laws in the registration category, except polling place registration, showed nearly no difference in turnout between states with and without them (same day registration, online registration, and pre-registration).

Discussion

Scholars agree that *combinations* of laws can have immense effects, compared to specific laws. In order to get a broader understanding of this, the mean turnout of states with 9 or less turnout depressing laws was compared to that of states with greater than 9, and a difference of greater than 7% was calculated. This finding goes hand in hand with the idea that combinations of laws have greater effects than just specific laws.

Although the effects of law combinations are immensely important, it is also useful to understand the possible effects of specific laws as well. All mail voting, when all registered voters are automatically sent a ballot, was found to have the strongest relationship with turnout. When voters are automatically sent a ballot, the only true barrier they may have to face is registering; therefore, it is unsurprising that the effects of all mail voting appear to be high.

Polling place registration and same day registration had moderate relationships with turnout, which could suggest that when registration is made available on election day young people are more likely to vote. Election enthusiasm is the greatest on election day, and many people are likely to be mobilized right around this time also. With

same day and polling place registration, people who forgot or did not think they wanted to vote during the registration period are still able to register and cast a vote on election day. Adding on to these findings, on average turnout was over 7% greater in states that offered polling place registration and/or same day registration. Also, when looking into the relationship between all registration legislation and youth turnout there was a moderate relationship, indicating that as states make registration easier, youth turnout tends to increase. Reducing the barriers of registration in one of these aforementioned ways could be an effective way to increase the turnout of 18–29-year-olds.

Both strict and flexible voter ID requirements, as well as excuse required for absentee ballots had notable relationships with turnout, most likely due to the fact that they raise the cost of voting. Absentee voting can provide convenience to many people, and individuals may be less likely to go through the process of obtaining an absentee ballot when there are obstacles in the way. Similarly, if voters think they are going to need an ID in order to vote and they don't have one, it is probable that they are simply just less likely to show up. In states where an excuse is required to obtain an absentee ballot, turnout is nearly 7% lower than in states where excuses are not required. Strict voter ID requirements appear to have the greatest impact on turnout: states with strict ID requirements have nearly 10% lower youth turnout. According to the *National Conference of State Legislatures*, in some states these laws are deemed necessary to safeguard elections from fraud (2023). On the other hand, some view them as a purposeful rise in the cost of voting that disproportionately affects certain groups, in the context of this study, youth in particular.

Early voting laws are another important set of legislation, and their effectiveness has been up for debate in the scholarly community. Ashok et al found that early voting laws have nearly no effect on turnout, which goes hand in hand with the results of this study. The findings of this research conclude that there exists nearly no statistically significant relationship between youth turnout and early voting, and there is also no difference in turnout between states who do and do not offer early voting. This study also did not find a strong relationship between pre-registration and turnout, and the difference in mean turnout between states with and without pre-registration was only around 3 percent. These results differed from Holbein and Hillygus who found that turnout was boosted by pre-registration, however their study was done over multiple election cycles which could have caused the difference (2016).

Limitations

There are a few limitations within this study that must be taken into consideration. First, there were 8 states that were unable to be included in the results due to a lack of data within the *Catalist LLC* voter file used by *CIRCLE*. Because of this, the results may be slightly skewed, however this skewing is not biased towards an increase or decrease in turnout. Additionally, the results in regards to registration drives were excluded because New Jersey is the only state (of the 41 analyzed) that is not allowed to host registration drives.

Although minorities were not able to be studied within the parameters of this study, minorities remain an underrepresented population in the electoral process. Race is not taken into account on voter registration, therefore only estimations are able to be created. Understanding which laws have the greatest impact on minorities is extremely important; if race were taken into account on voter registration forms, policy makers and scholars would be better informed about how to increase minority turnout.

Implications

Certain election laws have greater impacts than others on young voters. If the goal of American policy makers is to boost turnout (in favor of democracy) this research has great potential at informing future policy implementations. Reducing the barriers in the way of voting is the first step towards increasing voter turnout. For example, making registration easier lowers the cost of voting immensely. There is also a large contrast in turnout when strict voter ID laws are in place versus when they are not, suggesting that strict ID laws are negatively impacting turnout. Policy makers should advocate for laws that reduce the cost of voting and oppose laws that deter voters. Many policy makers

have focused heavily on pushing convenience voting laws; however, the results of this study combined with other scholarly work regarding this topic make it clear that their impacts are lacking. The overall theme of the results of this study, along with others in the field, suggests that, even though certain laws may help to boost turnout, legislation should not be the first resort. Instead, stakeholders must shift the focus of reform from legislation towards education. Increasing civic education, in schools and at home, must be a priority when addressing the lack of turnout for young people. Studies regarding the effect of increased civic education's effect on voting are few and far between, but the results of this study suggest that it should become a high priority. Finally, it is important to remember that no matter how easy or difficult the act of voting is made to be through legislation, the effect of mobilization remains extremely important and impactful, despite this study not addressing it specifically.

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