

**Research Brief Peer Review: Factors Affecting Voter Participation in US National
Elections**

Emma Barnhouse

Advanced Academic Programs of Communication, Johns Hopkins University

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Dr. Jenn Bishop

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Factors Affecting Voter Participation in US National Elections

Voter turnout in America is influenced by various factors, prompting researchers to explore strategies for enhancing participation. Voter turnout in the United States, particularly in presidential elections, has been a topic of significant interest and concern in recent years. Since the 2020 presidential election, there has been heightened scrutiny on voter participation rates, with researchers and policymakers seeking to understand and address factors influencing turnout. According to data from the United States Elections Project (2020), the 2020 presidential election saw the highest voter turnout in over a century, with approximately 66.7% of eligible voters casting their ballots. This marked a notable increase compared to the 2016 presidential election, where turnout stood at around 60%.

Voter turnout is a global concern, but much of the prominent research on this topic centers around the United States. Voting is a fundamental aspect of civic engagement that impacts people of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds. Understanding the factors that influence turnout is crucial for both voters and candidates. Increased political participation is essential for driving meaningful change in the democratic process, but there is still significant room for improvement.

This research brief is designed to shed light on the primary factors that impact voter turnout and, consequently, to advocate for structural changes within the democratic framework of the United States. While the focus of the research primarily delves into the intricacies of the American electoral process, it also draws insights from select international studies to underscore the global significance and universality of the issue at hand. Through this comprehensive examination, the aim is to foster a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding voter

participation and to catalyze meaningful reforms that can enhance democratic engagement and representation both domestically and internationally.

Literature Review

There are many factors that impact voter turnout in America and researchers have sought ways to increase the current participation numbers. Three key factors were identified by studying the current literature: voter laws, media's persuasiveness, and socioeconomic bias. Voter laws encompass regulations at both state and national levels, addressing registration limitations, fraud prevention, constitutional rights, and ID requirements. The complexity of these laws, coupled with varying regulations across states, has contributed to decreased voter turnout. Media, including social media, news outlets, and television, serves as a persuasive tool shaping political engagement among different demographics. Furthermore, socioeconomic status, encompassing income, education, and occupation, influences voter behavior, with disparities evident in voting patterns among different socioeconomic groups.

The Effects of Voter Laws on Voter Turnout

Voter laws in the United States cover various aspects like voter registration, fraud prevention, constitutional rights, and ID requirements. While voting isn't mandatory, differing laws among states and stricter ID rules nationwide have led to lower voter turnout. Sofia Papoutsis from Illinois Wesleyan University discovered in 2022 that eligible voters often didn't vote due to intimidating voter laws and registration deadlines. Analyzing data with SPSS software and linear regression models, Papoutsis found that about 12% of registered voters felt too overwhelmed by laws to vote. Additionally, nearly 9% of voters showed up with invalid registrations (Papoutsis, 2022). In 2023, the University of Maryland reported that 36 states

require ID to vote, though 16 states have enacted new ID laws that restrict the current identification since 2020, resulting in nearly 29 million U.S. citizens restricted from voting due to documentation (Maryland Today Staff, 2023). This raises the question: Why is the American registration and voting system so complex and intimidating for those who want to participate?

Additional research corroborates that voter stress stems from the complexity of the process. In a study conducted in 2022 by Kelly Beadle, Peter de Guzman, and Alberto Medina for Tisch College's Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), researchers found that voter registration laws posed significant challenges for individuals of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds. Through surveys, they discovered that nearly 40% of young people were unsure about their state's voter registration requirements, such as same-day registration or online applications, leading to confusion about the registration process, voting timelines, necessary preparations, and utilization of options like mail-in or early voting. The study revealed that only 57% of those registered managed to cast their votes. Those who abstained cited confusion early in the process as the primary reason, expressing uncertainty about how and when to vote beyond election day as further sources of discomfort (Beadle, de Guzman, & Medina, 2022).

Another issue arises from how registration laws disproportionately affect individuals based on socioeconomic backgrounds. In a study conducted by Mark Hoekstra and Vijetha Koppa of the National Bureau of Economic Research in 2019, it was revealed that laws mandating proof of identity and registration identification particularly disenfranchised low-income and minority voters. Over 18% of US citizens lack proper photo identification, and voter turnout decreased to 16.2% across election years due to the implementation of laws requiring such documentation (Hoekstra & Koppa, 2019). The study, which examined over 2,000 past

elections in Florida, a state known for its historical lack of identification requirements, observed a trend of laws being enacted to restrict voter eligibility and access. While these laws were intended to combat voter fraud, research indicates that they instead contribute to the breakdown of the election system and discourage voter participation.

Holly Ann Garnett and Peter Miller, supported by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, investigated the impact of legal reforms on voter turnout. They conducted quantitative comparative research analyzing changes in laws over time in relation to voter registration and turnout. Registrations were monitored from 1996 to 2016 to assess the effectiveness of newer registration laws. The findings indicated that allowing election-day registrations at polling places reduced barriers to entry, leading to increased turnout. However, as registration laws became more complex and required additional documentation for verification, voter registration and subsequent turnout declined. Voters often cited the complicated registration process as a reason for abstaining from voting, fearing they would encounter obstacles or be turned away at the polls (Garnett & Miller, 2023). This study underscores the importance of easy registration access but suggests the need for further research to propose practical solutions for the future.

The Effects of Media on Voter Turnout

Media, encompassing social media, television, news outlets, and online platforms, serves as a powerful tool influencing various industries and generations. In a study conducted by Kernell and Lamberson (2023), it was proposed that social media can influence voting behavior, particularly among young people, through a phenomenon termed "voting contagion." Their research revealed that engaging in political discussions and voting online can create momentum,

encouraging young individuals to participate in elections. The study involved a blind test conducted on 61 million Facebook users, who were exposed to political content shared by their connections. Subsequently, a survey was conducted to assess the impact of social media engagement on voter turnout. The findings indicated a 5% increase in voter participation, corroborated by cross-referencing the data with polling place records. However, the researchers acknowledged the challenge of determining whether social media or traditional face-to-face interactions had the greatest influence on the observed outcomes (Kernell & Lamberson, 2023).

In a recent study published in the *American Political Science Review*, John Sides, Lynn Vavreck, and Christopher Warshaw (2021) explored the impact of advertising budgets on voter turnout in the 2020 election. They found that candidates who invested more in online television advertising (commercials) attracted a higher number of voters, and there was a significant correlation between increased voter registration and the total amount spent on political advertising by all candidates. However, the study solely focused on television advertising, and the researchers suggest that examining other online media sources could provide more comprehensive insights. While drawing from two decades of research and analyzing current polling data alongside historical trends, the researchers acknowledge a lack of clear understanding regarding the specific effectiveness of these advertisements. Additionally, the study's findings are limited to general presidential elections and may not be directly applicable to local elections. Another constraint is the study's failure to consider variations in exposure to advertisements among participants (Sides, Vavreck, Warshaw, 2021). Despite these limitations, the research is valuable for its breadth and depth of analysis.

Social media is undeniably valuable for modern-day political candidates, helping them reach broader audiences. In 2020, Fujiwara, Müller, and Schwarz investigated the impact of

social media on elections, with a particular focus on Twitter, the primary platform used by candidates. Contrary to expectations, they discovered that the level of activity on social media didn't notably influence voter turnout for specific candidates. However, they did find that social media was cited as a factor motivating more voters to participate in elections overall (Fujiwara, Müller, & Schwarz, 2020).

Yamiemily Hernandez from Seton Hall University (2019) conducted a study to examine hypotheses regarding youth engagement in politics and voting. The study found that media, including social media, news media, and web advertisements, had a positive impact on engagement. Using an online survey, 147 participants were asked about their political involvement before and after receiving personalized political messages through their preferred media channels. The responses were then analyzed using linear regression models. Those who received media prompts to vote and were presented with issues online that they had previously expressed interest in showed a 9.3% increase in voter turnout on election day compared to those who did not receive such prompts (Hernandez, 2019). Limitations of the study include the exclusive use of online surveys and the snowball sampling method. The researchers aim to address these limitations in future studies using different methodologies.

Unan, Foos, John, and Cheng-Matsuno (2024) examined the impact of online promotion on voter turnout in the UK, particularly following the introduction of online voter registration options. They conducted three simultaneous studies to assess the role of online media in influencing voter participation: 1) in local elections, 2) in general elections, and 3) at both aggregate and individual levels. Surprisingly, none of the studies found a significant increase in voter turnout associated with online promotion efforts. These findings challenge current strategies aimed at increasing voter participation and raise questions about their effectiveness

(Unan, Foos, John, & Cheng-Matsuno, 2024). In addition to their findings, this research provides a contrasting perspective compared to other studies included in this summary and highlights the importance of considering regional differences in voter behavior. It emphasizes that findings from one country or region may not necessarily apply universally.

The Effects of Socioeconomic Bias on Voter Turnout

According to the *American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology*, socioeconomic status “encompasses not only income but also educational attainment, occupational prestige, and subjective perceptions of social status and social class. SES reflects quality-of-life attributes and opportunities afforded to people within society and is a consistent predictor of a vast array of psychological outcomes” and, thus, “high” or “low” status individuals are categorized based on ease of access to these resources (*APA Dictionary of Psychology*, n.d.).

In 2023, Kevický and Suchánek aimed to expand on research conducted in the early 1940s by Columbia University researchers who investigated factors influencing voter turnout. Their focus was on determining whether socioeconomic status played a significant role and if the findings were applicable on a regional or international scale. The study revealed that proximity to polling stations significantly affected voter turnout. Additionally, a higher proportion of individuals participated in elections in districts with higher socioeconomic status. Furthermore, the researchers observed disparities in the number of polling locations between lower and higher socioeconomic status groups, providing more voting opportunities for those with higher socioeconomic status. Limitations identified in the study suggest that the OLS model only identified conclusive evidence in some regions and was less effective in others,

meaning some variables had to be excluded and requires further research (Kevický & Suchánek, 2023).

Barber and Holbien's study in 2022 revealed the existence of "turnout deserts" in the United States, strategically maintained to perpetuate political inequality. By examining voter turnout at the precinct level, they found that precincts with fewer polling stations per capita had significantly lower voter turnout compared to the national average. This pioneering research introduced the concept of "deserts" in terms of voter turnout, akin to food deserts or resource deserts. However, further investigation is needed to understand the long-term implications of these findings (Barber & Holbien, 2022).

Furthermore, Baumann, Winburn, Russo, & Islam's research highlighted the impact of distance from polling locations on voter turnout and the significance of geographical proximity to candidates. They discovered that friends and neighbors play a crucial role in encouraging voter participation through activities like providing transportation, engaging in political discussions, and having connections with candidates. Conversely, areas with low socioeconomic status lacked transportation resources, had limited political openness, and fewer connections to candidates, resulting in lower voter turnout. The study's main limitation is its sample size, primarily focusing on Ohio and Georgia, indicating the need for broader research across more states to generalize the findings (Baumann et al., 2020).

Conclusion

In conclusion, voter participation in America is influenced by a combination of legal frameworks, media influence, and demographic factors. Voter laws, with their intricate regulations and varying state-level implementations, pose challenges for eligible voters, particularly those from marginalized communities. Media platforms play a significant role in

shaping political engagement, especially among younger demographics, yet their impact on voter turnout remains multifaceted. Additionally, socioeconomic status emerges as a key determinant of voter behavior, highlighting disparities in electoral participation.

It's crucial to acknowledge the limitations of the research we've discussed. Because voting laws in the United States are constantly evolving and the issue is complex, the literature available is limited. Moreover, findings can become outdated rapidly as laws change, making the data irrelevant. This highlights the need for ongoing research and analysis to keep up with the dynamic nature of voting regulations.

Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive strategies aimed at simplifying voter laws, leveraging media platforms effectively, and mitigating socioeconomic barriers to voting. By understanding and addressing these factors, policymakers and electoral stakeholders can work towards fostering a more inclusive and participatory democratic process.

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