

Same Day Voter Registration and Increasing Voter Turnout

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Abstract:

Among major democracies, the United States has one of the lowest voter turnouts. Presidential elections in the United States see a turnout of only about 60% and turnout for midterm elections is even lower. These percentages are made worse when one considers that the population that does vote isn't representative of the demographics of the nation as a whole. One of the reasons that voter turnout is so low is because many states require potential voters to register months before election day. A remedy to this problem that has been utilized by other nations and some states within the U.S. is same day voter registration. This policy allows people to register to vote on election day rather than having to register prior to the day of the election. If the federal government were to implement this policy nationwide, the voter turnout would increase and the population that voted would be more representative of the nation as a whole.

The Turnout Problem:

For decades America has had low voter turnout in elections. In 1988, turnout for the presidential election was slightly above 50% of the eligible voting population (Teixeira, 29). Since then participation has increased slightly but not nearly enough. Modern participation has increased but for presidential elections, voter turnout is only at about 60% (Fowler, 205). This is only for presidential elections however, with midterm and off-year elections having substantially lower turnout. Only about 40% of voters participate in midterm elections (Khalid, Gonyea, and Fadel). Compared to other nations in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the U.S. placed 26th out of 32 nations for turnout, with other nations having a participation rate above 80% (Desilver). These low rates of participation harm our democratic system because it means that a large portion of our population does not have a voice in how the nation is governed.

Restrictions on Voting:

While there is no doubt apathy plays a role in why some eligible voters do not participate in voting, there are some ways that voting laws discourage voting. About 14 states passed laws that restricted voting in 2016 (Regan). These laws can range from requiring a photo ID to vote to mandating that voters must register weeks or even months before an election in order for their vote to count. Another reason that people may be unable to vote is that some states purge voting records and the number of people purged from voting rolls has increased in the past decade (Khalid, Gonyea, and Fadel). Of course legal barriers are not the only cause of low turnout, people in non-competitive districts or states are less likely to vote. However legal restrictions play a role in keeping voter turnout down and laws that make it easier to vote would therefore increase participation in voting.

Same Day Registration:

One law that has been passed in multiple states to increase voter turnout is same day voter registration. This law allows voters to register on the day of the election rather than having to register weeks or months in advance. To register, a voter must provide proof of residency and an ID that may or may not have to be a photo ID depending on the state ("Same Day Voter Registration"). This makes it easier for non-registered people to vote as they don't have to do so before hand. Over 20 states have implemented this policy and there is a clear increase in voter turnout over states that have not adopted the law. States with same day voter registration had 7% higher turnout than states that had not adopted the policy in the 2018 midterm election (Miller and Rapoport). In the 2008 election, more than 1 million people registered and voted on election day (Sekou, 206). While same day voter registration is only one policy that can be adopted, it will substantially increase voter participation in elections if adopted in all 50 states.

Why Voter Turnout Matters:

Same day voter registration will increase voter turnout, but why does this matter for our democracy. More people voting means the democracy will be more representative of what people want. So would more turnout have an effect on policy? Some studies have concluded that non-voters are more likely to support wealth redistribution policy (Khalid, Gonyea, and Fadel). Low turnout also effects specific demographics rather than the population as a whole. People who don't vote are more likely to be Hispanic-American, Asian-American, young, or poor while wealthy people are likely to vote (Khalid, Gonyea, and Fadel). By increasing voter turnout, these demographics are more likely to be better represented in government. While same day voter registration is not a cure-all for low voter turnout, it is a step in the right direction for ensuring that more eligible voters participate in our democracy.

Conclusion:

Low voter turnout continues to be a problem in the United States. Laws across all 50 states can be obstacles to voting and may drive the participation rate in elections down. One step that states can take to increase voter turnout is to allow voters to register on election day. This drives up participation and makes our government more representative as the populace.

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