

The Impact of Voting Laws on Youth Turnout and Registration

March 17, 2022

Research suggests that policies like online, automatic, and pre-registration can increase youth voter participation, especially where there is effective and equitable implementation.

Our research over the past two decades has shown that youth voter participation is a matter of access, opportunities, and infrastructure conducive to voter registration and electoral engagement. Voting laws and policies are a critical part of that infrastructure: restrictive policies can hinder broader and more equitable participation

<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-february-2022>

, while more facilitative laws and policies can broaden the electorate, close inequities between various groups, and expand access to the ballot.

While these laws and policies affect the entire electorate, they are especially critical for young people, many of whom are newly eligible to vote, have to register for the first time, and may be unfamiliar with the processes. Youth also have higher rates of mobility, meaning they need to update their registration each time they move; in fact, young people are more likely to cite missing the registration deadline or not having information about when or where to register as reasons for not doing so. Youth are also less likely to have a car, and many cite lack of transportation to the polling place

<https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/why-youth-dont-vote-differences-race-and-education>

as a logistical barrier to voting.

In recent years, as our work—and that of other scholars—has tracked youth registration and voting over multiple cycles, the evidence for the effect of various policies on youth voting has grown. Here's what we know, and what it means for how to support broad and equitable youth voter participation in 2022 and beyond:

Online Voter Registration

Forty states and Washington, D.C., currently allow online voter registration (OVR), and research suggests that it increases turnout, especially among younger voters

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/ssqu.12598>

. In 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of many popular in-person locations for voter registration, like college campuses and community events, online voter registration was seen as the natural solution to engage a young and digitally savvy electorate. It certainly played a critical role in that cycle; despite the pandemic, youth voter registration exceeded 2016 levels in most states

<https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/youth-voter-registration-exceeds-2016-levels-most-states>

. A recent CIRCLE analysis showed that in 2020, when controlling for other factors like education and income, youth voter registration was 10 points higher in places with OVR.

At the same time, our 2020 pre-election poll found that 34% of young people (ages 18-29) said they did not know if their state offered online voter registration, which suggests there is still massive untapped potential to broaden its use. OVR is also implemented differently in different states: some require in-state IDs (which some youth may not have), and some states require an online form to be printed and mailed (which youth may be less likely to do).

Standardizing the implementation of OVR to make it as easy and accessible as possible to a wide range of youth, as well as state and national voter education campaigns about its availability, could further increase the policy's impact on youth voter turnout.

Same-Day (or Election-Day) Registration

Same-day registration policies allow eligible voters to register to vote and cast a ballot at the same time—whether on Election Day or during early voting. Currently, 20 states and D.C. allow same-day registration, though the specifics vary by state. As of October 1 of this year, in time for the midterms, Virginia will become the 21st state to allow same-day registration.

Since young people move often and registering to vote requires an updated address, same-day registration may be one of the most promising electoral reforms for increasing youth electoral participation. Indeed, recent research has found that [same-day registration disproportionately increases the turnout of young people](https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/714776) (ages 18-24), especially during presidential elections.

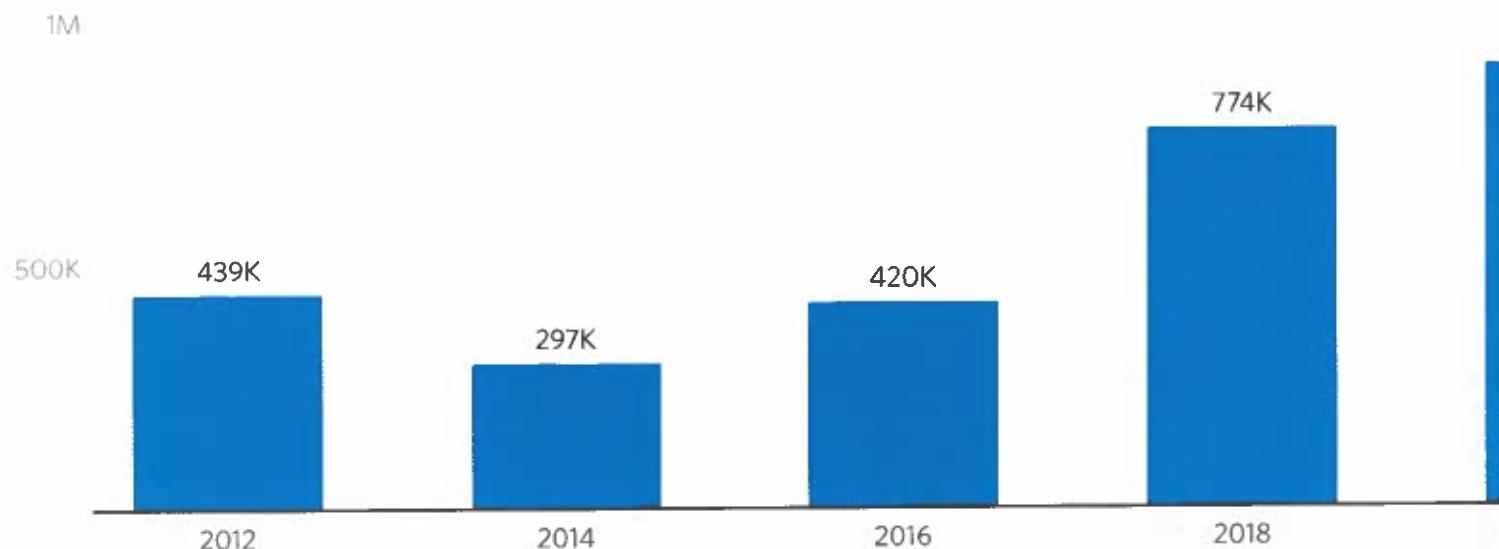
Pre-Registration

Many states allow 17-year-olds to register to vote only if they will turn 18 before the next federal election. Full pre-registration policies go further: 15 states and D.C. allow 16-year-olds to preregister, while [several other states set it at various other points](https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/preregistration-for-young-voters.aspx)

between ages 17 and 18. This has a host of potential benefits: some have long argued that age 18, when many youth are moving for school or a job, is an inopportune time for voter registration. On the other hand, being able to register to vote while still in school promotes opportunities to learn about elections and receive support with the process.

Pre-Registration Is on the Rise, but Still Massive Potential to Engage More Teens

Total pre-registrations of 16- and 17-year-olds



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Source: Election and Voting Survey, Election Assistance Commission, 2012-2020

[Download image](#)

Previous scholarship

(<https://www.libertypub.com/doi/10.1089/eij.2017.0436>)

has found that pre-registration of 16- and 17-year-olds improves voting rates

(<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/ajps.12177>)

. We will soon publish an analysis that found, on average, counties with pre-registration had a 9-point higher youth voter turnout rate (ages 18-29) than those without in 2020.

Automatic Voter Registration

Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) is a newer policy—first implemented in Oregon in 2016 and now enacted in 22 states—that drastically lowers the barrier of entry into the electorate. Eligible voters are automatically registered when they utilize the services of a state agency, most commonly the Department of Motor Vehicles.

Early research from Oregon

(<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/democracy/reports/2017/06/07/433677/votes-automatic-voter-registration/>)

showed that AVR added 272,000 voters to the rolls in Oregon in 2016, 36% of which were first-time registrants, and that the registrants were younger, more likely to be from rural areas, and more ethnically diverse than other registered voters. A more recent study showed

(<http://static1.squarespace.com/static/57b8c7ce15d8b599fb46ab/t/5eb9847fb7a1/13362ced2d99/1589216438166/USC+CCEP+Effects+of+AVR+in+the+U.S.+Final.pdf>)

that, in some states, the voter registration gap between younger (ages 18-24) and older voters decreased in some states, though not in others. Our analysis of 2020 data showed that, when controlling for other factors, youth voter registration was 3.5 points higher in places with AVR.

Research on this relatively new policy is ongoing; one key unanswered question is whether, because of its reliance on DMVs, automatic voter registration may “miss” young people who are increasingly less likely to have driver’s licenses

(<https://www.statista.com/chart/18682/percentage-of-the-us-population-holding-a-drivers-license-by-age-group/>)

Voting By Mail

Mail-in voting took on new prominence in the past election. While a handful of states had been conducting all-mail elections for many years, in 2020 many more states expanded access to mail-in voting, by, for example, removing requirements for ballots to be notarized or witnessed by other voters. In addition, 34 states allowed voters

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/08/11/us/politics/vote-by-mail-us-states.html>

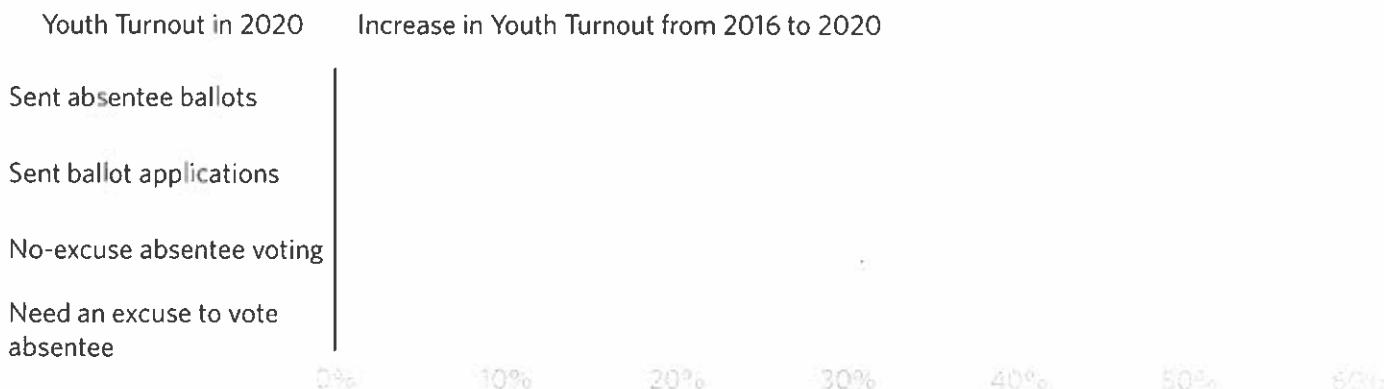
to either cast an absentee ballot without an approved excuse or to cite the COVID-19 pandemic when requesting an absentee ballot. Nine states and Washington D.C. went further: they mailed every registered voter a ballot before Election Day.

These facilitative vote-by-mail policies increased youth electoral participation. Our analysis found that youth voter turnout was highest (57%), and had the largest increases over 2016

<https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/half-youth-voted-2020-11-point-increase-2016>

, in states that automatically mailed ballots to voters. Conversely, states with the most restrictive vote-by-mail policies averaged much lower youth turnout: 42%. (We estimate the overall youth turnout in the U.S. was 50%).

Youth Turnout Was Highest, and Increased Most, In States that Automatically Sent Absentee Ballots to Registered Voters



Note: Increase in youth turnout is expressed in percentage points.

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Source: Voter turnout data from CIRCLE analysis of 2020 Catalist voter files and population estimates from the Census 2019 American Community Survey. Data on vote-by-mail policies from the National Conference of State Legislatures.

[Get the data](#)

As policymakers and advocates adjust to post-2020 election administration practices, they should take note of the positive impact that keeping expanded mail-in options in place may have on youth voting. They should also work to address possible inequities: our post-2020 election survey

<https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/young-people-embraced-voting-mail-improvements-still-needed-engage-all-youth>

found that youth of color and the youngest eligible voters (ages 18-19) were more likely to encounter difficulties with voting by mail.

CIRCLE Growing Voters: Engaging Youth Before They Turn 18

In addition to policies directly related to registration and voting, policymakers and election administrators can invest in other efforts that facilitate electoral engagement for youth before they turn 18. For example, 29 states have codes that say voter registration forms should be accessible or promoted in schools, and in 44 states youth under 18 can serve as poll workers. The latter is particularly promising: in a study of Minneapolis precincts in 2020 and 2021, we found that youth voter turnout (for all ages) was highest in precincts with more student poll workers

<https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/understanding-benefits-young-people-serving-poll-workers>

, and the young people who worked at polling places reported benefitting from the experience.

Removing barriers to electoral participation, and facilitating the registration and voting processes, is critical to forging a more accessible and equitable democracy. Electoral laws and policies are only one piece of the puzzle: robust programming and outreach, improved civic education, and many other institutional and community efforts are also critical. But they're a critical piece that requires attention and action in this and future election cycles.

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