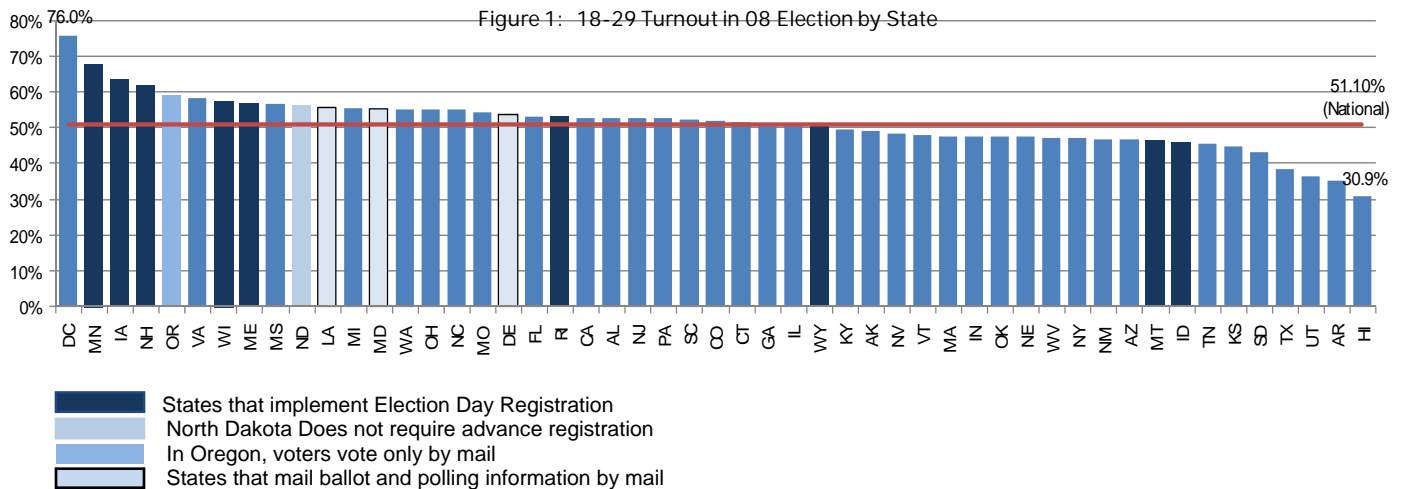


## State Election Law Reform and Youth Voter Turnout

By Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, Amanda Nover, and Emily Hoban Kirby<sup>1</sup>  
July 2009

Voter turnout among young Americans is on the rise. Census data indicate that in the 2008 presidential election, turnout among 18- to 29-year-olds reached 51.1%, which was the third highest turnout rate since voting was extended to those over 18 in 1972, and is 11 percentage points higher than the 1996 low of 39.6%.<sup>2</sup> Proponents of state election law reforms argue that implementing laws to ease the burden of voting has contributed to rising participation among young people, often the most mobile members of society.

### State Youth Voter Turnout At-A-Glance



Source: Census Current Population Survey November Supplement, 2008

Although overall youth voter turnout was 51.1% in 2008, voter turnout ranged widely across states, with a high of 76% in Washington D.C. to a low of 31% in Hawaii<sup>3</sup>. Clearly, voter turnout is a complicated issue that cannot be solely explained by state election laws. However, the chart above provides a quick look at the relationship between election reform and youth turnout. Seven out of the top 10 youth turnout states had some of the more ambitious measures, including Election Day registration, voting by mail (Oregon), or not requiring registration to vote (North Dakota).

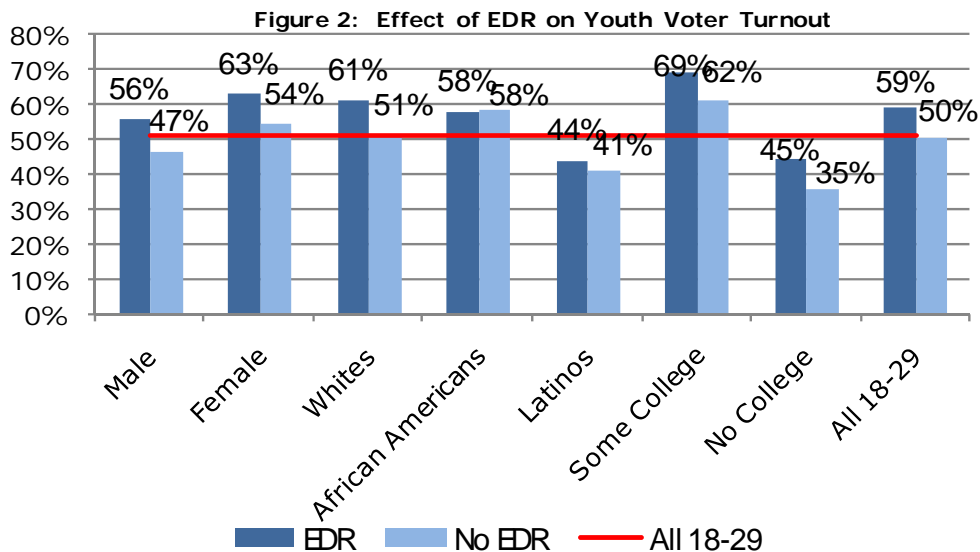
This fact sheet describes the relationship between various options for state election law reform and youth voter turnout. Our analysis focuses on the 2008 presidential election. Similar studies on previous presidential elections are available as working papers funded by CIRCLE.<sup>4</sup> The term “youth” in this fact sheet refers to American citizens whose age is between 18 and 29, unless otherwise noted.

### **Election Day Registration**

One of the biggest barriers to youth voting is the registration process. Registration often involves more time and information than voting itself, and in many states, registration is closed weeks before the Election Day. In fact, in the 2008 presidential election, 21% of 18- to 29-year-olds who did *not* register to vote stated that they did not meet the registration deadlines in their states. An additional six percent stated that they did not know where or how to register and four percent said that they did not meet the residency requirement for registration.

Election Day registration laws (EDR) allow voters to avoid the inconvenience and pressure of registration deadlines. As of 2008, nine states (Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Wisconsin, and Wyoming) allow voters to register at the polls on Election Day.<sup>5</sup> In a 2003 study about the 2000 Presidential Election, it was found that turnout was, on average, 14 percentage points higher among 18- to 24-year-old youth in states that had EDR.<sup>6</sup> EDR may also decrease the disparity between younger and older voters. Before implementing EDR, Idaho, New Hampshire, and Wyoming were among the worst states in terms of turnout inequality between younger and older Americans. After EDR laws took effect, all three states decreased this gap dramatically. Wyoming, for example, moved from 39<sup>th</sup> place to the 7<sup>th</sup> smallest turnout gap.<sup>7</sup>

In 2008, on average, 59% of young Americans whose home state offered EDR voted; nine percentage points higher than those who did not live in EDR states. This was true for virtually all demographics of young Americans, with the exception of African American youth, who maintained a high turnout rate regardless of EDR. EDR had a relatively strong effect on voting for youth without college experience and for White Non-Hispanic youth (a 10 percentage point increase) whereas it had a relatively weak, though noticeable effect on Latinos (3 percentage point increase). After controlling for effects of educational attainment, gender, marital status, age, race, and ethnicity, young people whose home state implemented EDR were 41% more likely to vote in the November 2008 election than those who did not have residence in the EDR states.<sup>8</sup> As seen in Figure 1, five out of the top 10 youth turnout states offered EDR.



## ***Alternative Voting Methods***

Another strategy to ease voter burden and thus encourage turnout is to allow voters to vote at their convenience. No-Excuse Absentee Voting and Early In-Person Voting are intended to assist voters who are otherwise unavailable in their precincts due to work and school conflict and minimize Election Day voter disenfranchisement because voters do not have to stand in a long line. These strategies are also intended to reduce the burden on precincts on Election Day. Administrative advantages include more accurate vote counts and decreased costs.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Absentee Voting***

Absentee voting is meant to help people vote even if they are not available to vote in their own precinct, whether it is due to work conflict or students moving away from their home districts for school. As of 2008, 32 states allowed absentee voting without an excuse. Twenty-eight of these states allowed absentee voting without excuse by mail. On average the youth turnout rate was slightly higher when young people had the option to vote via absentee ballot. The average youth turnout rate was 52% in the states that allowed No-Excuse Absentee voting and 50% in the states that required an excuse to vote absentee. However, many young people did take advantage of this option in 2008. Fourteen percent of young Americans who voted did so by mail. In the states where No-Excuse Absentee Voting was an option, 23% of young people who voted did so via absentee ballot. We are not able to estimate how the use of this strategy impacts state-by-state turnout since many young people, such as college students, live outside of their home state. However, it is likely that allowing absentee voting is an important strategy to encourage all young Americans to vote, regardless of where they may be on Election Day.

### ***Early In-Person Voting***

As of 2008, 32 states permitted no-excuse pre-Election Day in-person voting. We did not find that individuals who lived in states that allowed early in-person voting were more likely to vote than others, but we did find that 24% of 18- to 29-year-old voters from the states that allowed in-person early voting voted early and in person. This finding suggests that early in-person voting is a convenient option for young people to vote, though it does not seem to mobilize young voters who would not have otherwise voted.

### ***More Time to Vote***

#### ***Longer Polling Hours***

Another strategy to increase youth voter turnout is to keep the polls open longer so that people who work or have conflicts earlier in the day can still vote. Twenty-eight states provide extended polling hours (i.e., polls are open for more than 12 hours). Keeping polls open longer is associated with higher voter turnout for young Americans who are not in school. Among 18- to 29-year-old citizens who are in the labor force, implementation of longer polling hours was associated with a seven percentage point increase in the voting rate for full-time (35 or more hours per week) workers and a five percentage point increase for part-time workers. It appears that longer polling hours is providing young working Americans an opportunity to vote.

The census also asks 18- to 24-year-olds about school enrollment. Thus, our findings related to school enrollment pertain only to this group. Longer polling hours were not associated with higher turnout for full time students (turnout was 51% for all full time students, regardless of the polling-hours law<sup>10</sup>). However, longer polling hours did help part-time students

who are likely to be juggling school and work at the same time. Among all part-time students (college, professional and vocational school students), turnout was boosted by five percentage points in states that offer longer polling hours. Among part-time college students, turnout was boosted by six percentage points.

Figure 3: Effect of Polling Hours on Working Youth

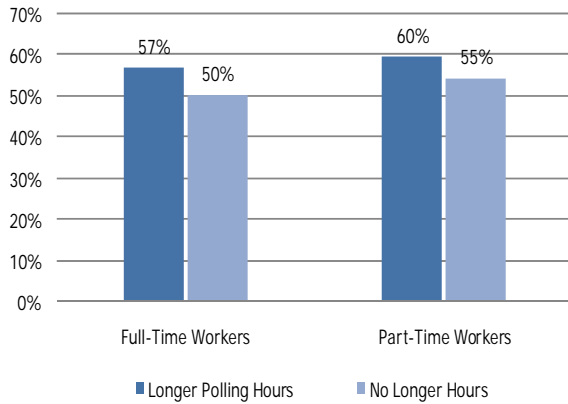
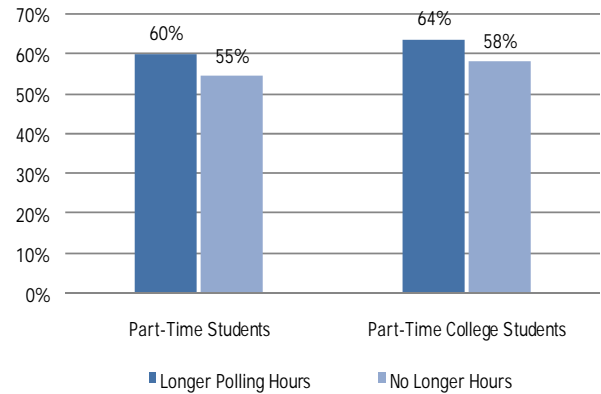


Figure 4: Effect of Polling Hours on Part-Time Students (18-24)



### *Time Off to Vote*

Twenty-nine states currently require private firms to provide time off for employees to vote and 30 states give state employees time off on Election Day. Research has not found a significant link between time off to vote and youth turnout.<sup>11</sup> Our analysis of the 2008 data confirmed this.

### **Informing the Voters**

Three states (Arizona, Louisiana, and Maryland) mail all registered voters a sample ballot before Election Day. It has been found that in states that mailed sample ballots before the 2000 election, turnout among 18- to 24-year-olds was seven percentage points higher.<sup>12</sup> In states that require that all registered citizens be mailed information about their polling location, youth turnout was slightly higher in the 2000 election.<sup>13</sup> In our study, we did not specifically examine the impact of mailing sample ballots because only three states employed this strategy. However, the three states that did mail ballot information to its constituents ranked high in youth turnout rankings (see Figure 1).

### **Conclusion**

Our findings suggest that these strategies do indeed encourage young Americans to vote, which is crucial in upholding the ideal of American democracy and nurturing civically engaged citizens. Various state voting law reforms were related to higher youth turnout rate. Of all the strategies, Election Day Registration seems to have the strongest and most widespread impact on youth turnout, affecting almost all demographic groups. However, strategies that may not have an impact on the overall state youth turnout may help various groups of young voters who have specific needs, such as part-time students and working youth. Therefore, it is important that state lawmakers understand the needs and characteristics of their constituents to determine which voting law reform, if any, would be most beneficial for a particular state.

## Appendix A– Early Voting and Voter Registration Laws by State, 2008

<i>State</i>	<i>Unrestricted Absentee Voting</i>	<i>In-Person Early Voting</i>	<i>Election Day Registration</i>	<i>Allows 17 Year Olds to Vote in Primaries</i>
Alabama	No	No	No	No
Alaska	Yes	Yes	No	No
Arizona	Yes	Yes	No	No
Arkansas	No	Yes	No	No
California	Yes	Yes	No	No
Colorado	Yes	Yes	No	No
Connecticut	No	No	No	No
Delaware	No	No	No	Yes
Florida	Yes	Yes	No	No
Georgia	Yes	Yes	No	No
Hawaii	Yes	Yes	No	No
Idaho	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Illinois	No	Yes	No	No
Indiana	No	Yes	No	Yes
Iowa	No	Yes	Yes	No
Kansas	Yes	Yes	No	No
Kentucky	No	No	No	Yes
Louisiana	No	Yes	No	No
Maine	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Maryland	No	No	No	Yes
Massachusetts	No	No	No	No
Michigan	No	No	No	No
Minnesota	No	No	Yes	No
Mississippi	No	No	No	Yes
Missouri	No	No	No	No
Montana	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Nebraska	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Nevada	Yes	Yes	No	No
New Hampshire	No	No	Yes	No
New Jersey	Yes	No	No	No
New Mexico	Yes	Yes	No	No
New York	No	No	No	No
North Carolina	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
North Dakota	Yes	Yes	No Registration	No
Ohio	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Oklahoma	Yes	Yes	No	No
Oregon	Yes	No	No	No
Pennsylvania	No	No	No	No
Rhode Island	No	No	Yes	No
South Carolina	No	No	No	No
South Dakota	Yes	Yes	No	No
Tennessee	No	Yes	No	No
Texas	No	Yes	No	No
Utah	Yes	Yes	No	No
Vermont	Yes	Yes	No	No
Virginia	No	No	No	Yes
Washington	Yes	No	No	No
West Virginia	No	Yes	No	Yes
Wisconsin	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Wyoming	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Table adapted from: "State Voter Registration and Election Day Laws." CIRCLE Fact Sheet, which can be accessed at: [http://civicyouth.org/PopUps/FS\\_08\\_State\\_Laws.pdf](http://civicyouth.org/PopUps/FS_08_State_Laws.pdf)

## Appendix B – Postregistration Election Day Laws by State, 2008

<i>State</i>	<i>Extended Voting Hours</i>	<i>Time Off to Vote (Private Sector)</i>	<i>Time Off to Vote (State Government)</i>	<i>Mail Information On Poll Location</i>	<i>Mail Sample Ballots</i>
<b>Alabama</b>	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Alaska</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Arizona</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Arkansas</b>	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>California</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Colorado</b>	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Connecticut</b>	Yes	No	No	No	No
<b>Delaware</b>	Yes	No	No	No	No
<b>Florida</b>	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Georgia</b>	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Hawaii</b>	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Idaho</b>	No	No	No	No	No
<b>Illinois</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Indiana</b>	No	No	No	No	No
<b>Iowa</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Kansas</b>	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Kentucky</b>	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Louisiana</b>	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
<b>Maine</b>	Differs by polling place	No	No	No	No
<b>Maryland</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Massachusetts</b>	Yes	*	*	No	No
<b>Michigan</b>	Yes	No	No	No	No
<b>Minnesota</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Mississippi</b>	No	No	No	No	No
<b>Missouri</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Montana</b>	Yes	No	No	No	No
<b>Nebraska</b>	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Nevada</b>	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>New Hampshire</b>	Differs by polling place	No	No	No	No
<b>New Jersey</b>	Yes	No	No	No	No
<b>New Mexico</b>	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>New York</b>	Differs by polling place	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>North Carolina</b>	Yes	No	No	No	No
<b>North Dakota</b>	Differs by polling place	No	No	No	No
<b>Ohio</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Oklahoma</b>	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Pennsylvania</b>	Yes	No	No	No	No
<b>Rhode Island</b>	Differs by polling place	No	No	No	No
<b>South Carolina</b>	No	No	No	No	No
<b>South Dakota</b>	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Tennessee</b>	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Texas</b>	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Utah</b>	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Vermont</b>	Differs by polling place	No	No	No	No
<b>Virginia</b>	Yes	No	No	No	No
<b>Washington**</b>	Differs by polling place	No	Yes	No	No
<b>West Virginia</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Wisconsin</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Wyoming</b>	No	Yes	Yes	No	No

\*Massachusetts- Voters employed in mechanical, manufacturing or mercantile businesses are allowed time off during the first two hours after polls have been opened only if an application for absence has been submitted. *Massachusetts General Law: Ch. 149 Section 178.*

\*\*Washington- Only King and Pierce Counties in Washington State still have polls. Both counties mail pamphlets with voting information.

\*\*\* In many states, each county chooses whether or not to mail sample ballots and information on poll location. Appendix B does not reflect this information.

Table adapted from: "State Voter Registration and Election Day Laws." CIRCLE Fact Sheet.

[http://civicyouth.org/PopUps/FS\\_08\\_State\\_Laws.pdf](http://civicyouth.org/PopUps/FS_08_State_Laws.pdf)

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Lead Researcher, Research Assistant, Senior Associate Researcher at CIRCLE. We would like to thank Peter Levine and Subhi Godsay for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this fact sheet.

<sup>2</sup> See CIRCLE Fact Sheet, *The Youth Vote in 2008*. Available at: [http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS\\_youth\\_Voting\\_2008\\_updated\\_6.22.pdf](http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_youth_Voting_2008_updated_6.22.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Although Current Population Survey by Census Bureau is the best available source of data for estimating youth turnout at the time of press, readers should note that CPS did not report turnout estimates for 18-24 year-olds in turnout in AK, DE, DC, HI, MT, ND, RI, SD, VT, and WY due to small sample size.

<sup>4</sup> Wolfinger, Highton & Mullin (2003). *How Postregistration Laws Affect the Turnout of Registrants*, CIRCLE Working Paper 15. Available at: <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP15Wolfinger.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> North Dakota is the currently the only state that does not require registration at all ("State Voter Registration and Election Day Laws"). North Carolina also allows early voters (up to three days before Election Day) to register at polling stations but does not allow voters to register and vote on Election Day itself. Connecticut also allows unregistered voters to cast a ballot for the presidential election on Election Day, but not for other offices.

<sup>6</sup> Fitzgerald (2003). *Easier Voting Methods Boost Voter Turnout*. CIRCLE Working Paper 1. Available at: <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP01Fitzgerald.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Knack & White (2000). Election-Day Registration and Turnout Inequality. *Political Behavior*, 22, 29-44.

<sup>8</sup> This is based on the odds ratio of 1.41 associated with EDR in logistic regression analysis controlling for demographics. This figure does not suggest that the states that offer EDR would have a 41 percentage point increase. State-level demographic factors such median income and average educational attainment are related to turnout.

<sup>9</sup> Gronke, Galanes-Rosenbaum & Miller, (2007). *Early Voting and Turnout*. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, October 2007. Available at: <http://www.earlyvoting.net/resources/ohio07.pdf>. Also see <http://www.verifiedvotingfoundation.org/downloads/Newvypbcosts.pdf> for sample financial worksheet for paper-ballot cost savings.

<sup>10</sup> Includes students enrolled in college, high school, and all other post-secondary institutions as full-time students.

<sup>11</sup> See CIRCLE Fact Sheet, *State Voter Registration and Election Day Laws*. Available at: [http://civicyouth.org/PopUps/FS\\_08\\_State\\_Laws.pdf](http://civicyouth.org/PopUps/FS_08_State_Laws.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Wolfinger, Highton & Mullin (2003). See note 4.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.