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Voter Turnout in the United States

This report discusses current and potential electoral system reforms to increase voter turnout in the United States. To understand voting behavior, Political Scientists have taken two main approaches. One approach is to focus on the costs and benefits of voting. The costs of voting include time commitments and the effort required to vote. The benefits of voting include the opportunity to influence the political process and the satisfaction of civic duty. Political scientists have found that citizens are more likely to vote when the benefits of voting are perceived to outweigh the costs. This approach has led to the development of various reforms, such as early voting and mail-in ballots, which aim to reduce the costs of voting and increase the benefits.

Another approach is to focus on the public attitudes that are related to participation, such as partisanship, engagement in politics, and cynicism. Based on these two approaches, scholars have identified a number of causes of low voter turnout and system reforms to address those causes.¹ As will quickly become apparent, the politically under-informed populace.

elections occur in the middle of a presidential term, and state level elections occur annually.⁴ S

first-time voters who registered by mail.¹⁷ In addition to these reforms, Vermont's electoral turnout is

political reforms fail to engage and increase turnout among nonvoters.²⁷ There are other reforms that have been shown to marginally increase voter turnout, but the efficacy of those reforms depend on the local context.²⁸

Ballot Reform

In addition to the costs associated with a greater number of elections, ballots in the United States are frequently quite complicated, a further disincentive to voting. Research emphasizes the impact of ballot readability,

Despite the concerns of U.S. officials, global interest in online voting has not diminished. In 2016, Canada began researching online voting.³⁸ In Canadian municipalities, internet voting increased voter turnout by 3 percent, an impact similar to other types of convenience.³⁹

Voter Identification Laws

Research on voter identification laws and their effect on voter turnout varies greatly. Some studies conclude that voter ID laws have no effect on turnout;⁴⁰ others see a substantial increase in the gap between white and nonwhite turnout in states with strict voter identification laws.⁴¹ The varying results occur for a few reasons: First, older studies focus on the effect of ID laws from the early 2000s. Most of these early laws did not require voters to present photo identification and are mild in comparison to laws that have recently been introduced. Because strict voter ID laws are relatively new, little data on their impact currently exists, making it challenging to assess their influence on voter turnout. In

The high frequency of elections and the number of ballot questions presented to voters are burdens compounded by the overwhelming amount of options within each question. Additionally, the complexity of voting in the U.S. makes it difficult for voters to see the impact of their vote, obscuring the link between their many voting decisions and government action.

The current mass media environment in the U.S. puts a premium on presenting spectacle rather than informing the public. Placing requirements on broadcasting organizations to fulfill a public service mandate through dedicated coverage of local elections and free television time for state and local candidates could initiate a reversal of the trend.

In addition to these issues, scholars have identified a number of other legal and structural characteristics of U.S. elections that work to reduce turnout, including the subversion of the "one person, one vote" principle through:

