



Do Election Reforms Promote Equal Participation?

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In recent decades, many U.S. states have adopted reforms intended to make it easier for citizens to vote. “Motor-voter” laws, for example, encourage people to register to vote when they renew their drivers permits. Early voting reforms allow people to vote over a period of weeks or days, not just on Election Day. And Election Day registration creates a one-stop process, allowing citizens to register and vote at the same time and place. Proponents of all these changes often say they have two goals in mind. They aim to boost voter turnout. And they want to make elections more equal. As things now are, wealthier Americans are much more likely to vote than citizens with lower incomes.

*Do recent changes in voter registration and voting practices actually make voting more equal in the United States? To answer this question, my colleague Melanie Springer and I looked at patterns of voting before and after each change in state rules about registration and voting. We used statistical techniques to control for many factors that might have influenced who votes, but we also honed in on inequalities between the rich and poor. To measure that inequality, we used data gathered by the U.S. Census Bureau in the November following each presidential or midterm election since 1978 to develop an indicator of *income vote bias*. This indicator tells how much more likely the rich are to vote than people with lower incomes. On average, wealthier Americans are 65 percent more likely to vote than those with low incomes. However, the extent of this income skew has varied across the fifty states and over the course of the sixteen national elections held between 1978 and 2008. Would we find sharp changes in one direction or another following important election-law reforms?*

Some Reforms Promote Equality; Others Do Not

Different reforms have contrasting effects on inequality, we discovered. We identify three approaches states have taken in recent election-law changes – and show how each affects the balance of voter turnout between the rich and poor.

- **Registration reform** focuses on making voter registration easier. Since the 1960s, 48 states have adopted some form of mail-in registration that allows would-be registrants to send in a postcard rather than making a trip to the registrar’s office or arranging for a notary and witnesses to an application. Motor-voter programs were also adopted by a few states before the 1993 National Voter Registration Act required all nonexempt states to implement motor-voter programs. Because registration reforms make it easier for individuals to become eligible voters, they should especially encourage those who were previously underrepresented in the electorate. And that is what our research found for Motor-voter laws, which led to a decrease in income vote bias in states where there had previously been big gaps in registration between the rich and poor.

- **Eliminating the registration barrier** decreases the importance of registration as a gateway to voting. This approach effectively eliminates the two-stage process that requires people first to figure out how to register and then weeks later to go to the polls to deliver their ballots. In 1951, the state of North Dakota completely eliminated registration. No other state has gone that far, but eleven states plus the District of Columbia have adopted Election Day registration programs, which allow potential voters to register when they show up at the polls on Election Day. Everything is compressed into one concise step. Not surprisingly, we find that income bias in voting is reduced following the enactment of this reform – and the equalizing impact is most pronounced in states where the registration rolls were previously especially highly skewed by income.
- **Convenience voting** measures are the third type of reform, in which voting procedures are altered to make casting the ballot easier for citizens who are already registered to vote. One example is “no-excuse” absentee voting, which half the states now offer. Registered voters can request an absentee ballot without any explanation of why they cannot appear on Election Day. Another convenience reform involves opening polling places for days or weeks prior to Election Day, to allow people to cast ballots in person at various times. This approach has recently become popular. No states had adopted early voting in 1978, while 31 states offered this convenience by the time of the 2008 election. Nevertheless, our research documents that convenience reforms mostly help citizens who are already registered to vote. Because low-income citizens are less likely to be registered, they do not benefit very much. We found an increase in the income vote bias after states adopted convenience reforms.

In fact, we saw this dynamic at play during the 2008 presidential election. Among the ten states that experienced the greatest income bias in voting, eight had adopted early voting reforms, and seven had particularly large gaps in registration between the rich and poor. These states made it easier for registered citizens to vote, but the people registered tended to be richer.

Lessons for Reformers

Our findings offer both warnings and opportunities to anyone hoping to make U.S. elections more equal. On the cautionary side, today's most popular electoral reforms focus on making voting very convenient. But doing only this can increase the gap in participation between rich and poor – especially in states where voter registration is very unequal and nothing is done to make registration easier for everyone.

Yet our findings also show that Election Day registration can greatly reduce inequalities in voter participation. Replacing two separate steps with one trip to the voting place makes a real difference for low-income citizens. Election Day registration is the reform that has demonstrated the greatest potential to make American electoral democracy more equal – and simplifying registration is an especially important step to take in conjunction with making voting itself more convenient. To date, only a few states have adopted Election Day registration. This reform beckons as an untapped tool for Americans who want full and equal voter participation.

Read more in Elizabeth Rigby and Melanie J. Springer, “Does Electoral Reform Increase (or Decrease) Political Equality?” *Political Research Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (2011): 420-434.

