www.nonprofitvote.org

AMERICA Goes to the Polls

A Report on Voter Turnout in the 2006 Election

Prepared by the
Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Executive Summary 2

Methodology and Sources 4

Report

US Voter Turnout in 2006 5

Growth in Voter Turnout in the States: 2002 – 2006 7

Electoral Competition and Turnout 2006 9

Election Day Registration and Turnout 2006 10

Youth Vote 2006 11

Latino Vote 2006 12

Voter Participation Gaps 13
By Education, Age, Ethnicity and Income

Conclusion

Factors Impacting Voter Turnout 15

Ideas for Improvements and Reform 21

Resources 31

America Goes to the Polls

A Report on Voter Turnout in the 2006 Election

prepared by

George Pillsbury, Program Director

Julian Johannesen, Research Associate

Jeff Arp, Senior Policy Associate

Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network

A non-partisan program of the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits, St. Paul, Minnesota

Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network

www.nonprofitvote.org

This report was produced with support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Open Society Institute, The George Gund Foundation, The John Merck Fund, Funding Exchange, Tides Foundation, The Solidago Foundation, Angelina Fund, Angelica Foundation, and individual donors.

Introduction

A growing body of recent research has shown that there are compelling benefits to high voter participation for individuals and for their communities.[1] Individuals who vote are more likely to engage in their community in other positive ways, from volunteering, to communicating with their elected officials, or even entering public service themselves. Communities that vote receive increased attention from and better access to their elected officials, leading to more effective representation.

To learn how we can encourage greater voter participation and civic engagement, we first need to understand current trends in voter participation and the factors contributing to them. Fortunately thanks to the U.S. Election Project and others we not only have good participation data for all the states, but we also have a better understanding of how to address factors underlying voter participation.

This report looks at official election results from across the country to answer some basic questions about voter turnout in the 2006 elections, questions like: Which states had the highest turnout? Which states had the greatest growth or decline in turnout compared to the last midterm election? What is the impact on voter participation of increased political competition or Election Day registration? The report also charts long-standing participation gaps documented over the recent decades by the U.S. Census.

Finally, the report turns to a discussion of voter turnout factors. What are the factors that contribute most to increased voter turnout? What more can be done to further increase voter turnout? The report considers several possible answers to those questions, including improved election practices and opportunities for civil society to play a greater non-partisan role in encouraging voting.

[1] Sources for voting as a civic act with citizenship benefits include:

- *Who Votes, Who Doesn't, and Why: Regular Voters, Intermittent Voters, and Those Who Don't*, The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, October 2006
- *The Political and Civic Engagement of Young Adults in America*, Lake Snell Perry & Associates, The Tarrance Group survey for Democracy and Citizenship, CIRCLE and the Council for Excellence in Government, 2002
- *The Economics of Voting: What Do You Mean, My Vote Doesn't Count?,* National Council on Economic Education, *www.econedlink.org,* October 2004
- *Voting Counts as a Healthy Habit*, Jennifer Warner, *WebMD.com*, 2004
- *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics,* Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1995

America Goes to the Polls

Executive Summary: *Key Findings and Conclusions*

America Goes to the Polls takes a comprehensive look at voter turnout in the 2006 elections and trends from previous midterm elections. Its main findings are:

❶ Voter Turnout in Midterm Elections Remains Low

Despite increased media attention to the contest for control of Congress, overall voter participation in the 2006 midterm elections remained at the same low level it has for more than 30 years. Large gaps between who votes and who doesn't continue to challenge our democracy.

❷ More Competition and Fewer Barriers to Voting Mean Higher Turnout

States with the most competitive statewide races and fewest barriers to voting were leaders in voter turnout and turnout growth.

❸ Increased Voter Participation and Citizenship Require Election Reform

Voter participation in the U.S. midterm elections could be increased from the current average of around 40% of eligible voters to considerably higher levels more closely approaching those in presidential election years by implementing three key reforms:

- *The adoption of election changes that facilitate greater electoral competition and voter choice*
- *Implementation of national standards on major elections practices such as registration and poll procedures to ensure the best opportunity for everyone to vote*
- *Greater and more nonpartisan voter mobilization and education from America's expansive civic sector – nonprofit agencies, schools, local government and more*

Voter Turnout Findings

☑ **Midterm Turnout Unchanged:** The large majority of eligible Americans – almost six of ten – did not vote or, because of an election administration problem were unable to vote in the 2006 midterm elections. While certain states and voter groups did register gains, the overall turnout picture follows a 30 year trend of low voter participation in midterm elections.

☑ **Large Participation Gaps Likely to Persist:** The report notes large 20-30 point voter participation gaps by age, education, ethnicity and income tracked by the U.S. Census. These gaps impact who is represented in government, the reach of democracy and other kinds of citizen engagement.

☑ **Ohio, Michigan and Rhode Island Top in Turnout Increases:** Ohio, Michigan and Rhode Island recorded the largest increases in voter turnout compared to the past 2002 midterms. These three states also had their highest turnout in a midterm in at least three decades. Each state featured highly competitive races for U.S. Senate, Governor and/or House races.

- ☑ **Minnesota Remains Turnout Leader:** Minnesota – a state known for inclusive voting procedures and high levels of political competition and civic engagement – was again number one in its turnout of eligible voters, the same as the previous two midterms.

- ☑ **Political Competition Boosts Participation:** As is generally the case, the 25 states with a competitive statewide contest for Governor or U.S. Senate had higher percentage of voters participating than the other states.

- ☑ **Election Day Registration States Lead Others:** The largest measurable difference in turnout is in states that have Election Day Registration and allow voters to address a registration issue or register on Election Day. These states had turnout 13 points ahead of the other states, a turnout advantage consistent since this practice was first adopted in the 1970's.

Summary of Findings and Ideas for Reform

In its conclusion, the report discusses the largest issues affecting voter turnout. These include political competition and choice; election practices; demographics (age, education and income); family and community traditions; and voter mobilization and education. Changes that address these issues are most likely to boost voting. The report identifies states and jurisdictions where improved election practices are already successfully in place.

- ☑ **Competition and Choice:** Reforms that increase political competition and voter choice are the most likely to boost voter participation. Primary examples of changes highlighted in this report include:

  - Replacing simple plurality voting with the majoritarian voting method known as ranked choice or Instant Runoff Voting
  - Implementing effective public campaign financing along with lower media costs for qualified candidates and parties
  - Adopting non-partisan redistricting

- ☑ **National Standards for Election Administration:** Large and measurable increases in voter participation would result from adoption of best practices on major election issues including:

  - Adopting Election Day Registration (and automatic voter registration at age 18)
  - Re-enfranchising ex-offenders upon release from prison
  - Providing accessible early voting options[2]
  - Improving poll practices, including improved poll worker training, increasing the number of poll workers and machines in each precinct, counting all provisional ballots cast in the correct jurisdiction, etc
  - Implementing voter-verified paper audit trails (VVPAT) and other improved national standards for voting equipment and balloting

- ☑ **Broader, Non-partisan Approaches to Voter Mobilization:** Engaging the nation's diverse and independent electorate of more than 200 million voters will take new voter mobilization and education approaches that are non-partisan and citizen and civic centered.

[2] The popular reform vote-by-mail has less of an impact increasing turnout in national elections. It can raise participation in lower turnout elections such as local ballot issues. Mail-in voting has issues worth debate such as its propensity to widen participation gaps.

Methodology and Sources

Voter Turnout

Voter turnout numbers come from the U.S. Election Project directed by Dr. Michael McDonald at George Mason University. The Election Project has compiled data on eligible voters and voter turnout dating back to 1980. To arrive at the number of citizen eligible voters 18 years or older for each state, the Election Project uses information from the U.S. Census and other government sources such as citizenship and felony data to establish the approximate number of eligible voters in each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

The Election Project gets its voter turnout data from that reported by State Election offices. Turnout is reported two ways – *Highest Office Turnout*, the total votes counted for the highest office such as Governor or U.S. Senate and, where available, *Total Turnout*, the total number of voters who cast a ballot that was counted on or before Election Day (including those provisional votes validated post-election). This difference between *Total Turnout* and *Highest Office Turnout* is called the "residual vote". It is mainly "undervotes" by voters who choose not to vote in the highest office race or because of voter or equipment error. It also includes some "overvotes" where a voter mistakenly marks more than one choice in the highest office election and the ballot is "spoiled" for that race. For midterm elections, total turnout averages about two percent higher than the highest office turnout.

In this report we use total turnout. Most states report this number. For those that do not, we calculate their total turnout based on their highest office turnout increased by the average residual vote factor for that election determined from the states that report both their highest office total and total turnout. For 2006, the residual vote factor in states averaged 2.3%. In 2002 it averaged 2.5%[3].

Voter Turnout by Groups

We report turnout information for demographic groups from survey research such as that of the U.S. Census' Current Population Survey (CPS). Other surveys cited are ones done or reported by CIRCLE for data on young voters, Pew Hispanic Research Center and William C. Velásquez Institute for Latino voters, and *CNN's America Votes 2006*. A major source of this information is the National Election Pool's national exit poll conducted in 2006 by Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International for *CNN*, *Associated Press, ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, The New York Times* and others.)

Electoral Competition

One section highlights how election competition increased turnout in 2006. "Competitive" statewide elections for Governor or U.S. Senate were those judged to be either merely leaning one way or tossup races in the non-partisan *Cook Political Report*. In a future, we hope to also examine competition generated by ballot measures and competition of close U.S. House races.

Find links and more resources under "Resources" on page 30.

[3] *Residual Vote refers to ballots cast without a vote for one or more offices on the ballot (undervotes) plus ballots cast with more than one candidate marked for a particular office (overvotes).*

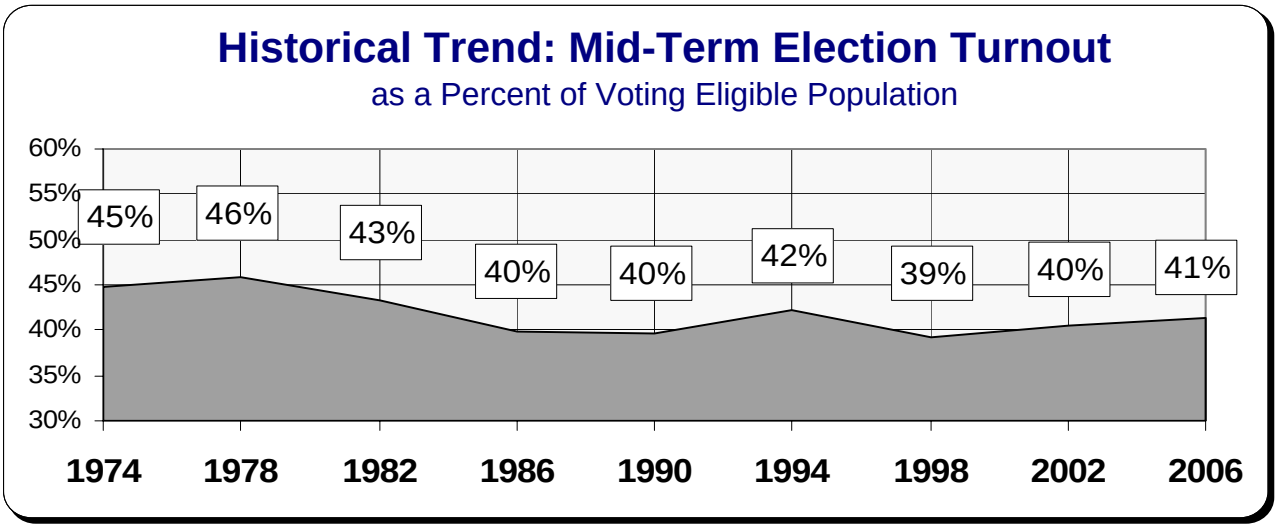
US Turnout in 2006

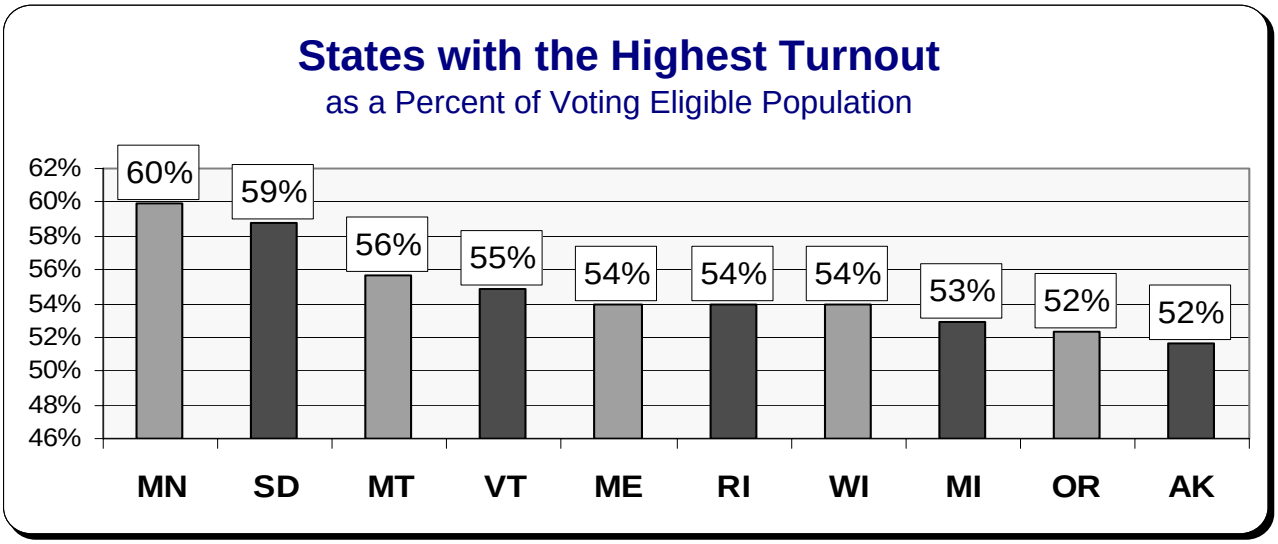
Historical Trends and State Rankings

41.4% of eligible voters turned out to vote in 2006. Voter turnout was again close to the median of the last thirty years.[4]

⇨ Minnesota remained the turnout leader. Montana rose from 10th place in 2002 to 3rd place in 2006, due to the introduction of Election Day Registration and a competitive U.S. Senate race.

⇨ Ohio and Michigan made the biggest leap in rankings.[5] Florida and Louisiana dropped the most. Louisiana had no statewide races and faced the challenge of rebuilding voter rolls post-Katrina.





[4] *The sources for the historical trend chart are the U.S. Election Project for years 1982-2006 and the U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey for years 1974 and 1978. CPS numbers are based on a post-election survey*

[5] *This does not count Virginia which did not have a comparable election in 2002. More on page six.*

2006 Turnout Rankings

State	2006 Turnout[1]	2006 Turnout Rank	2002 Turnout Rank
Minnesota	60%	1	1
South Dakota	59%	2	2
Montana	56%	3	9
Vermont	55%	4	10
Maine	54%	5	4
Rhode Island	54%	6	18
Wisconsin	54%	7	16
Michigan	53%	8	21
Oregon	52%	9	5
Alaska	52%	10	3
Missouri	50%	11	14
Wyoming	50%	12	6
Colorado	49%	13	15
Massachusetts	49%	14	8
Ohio	49%	15	33
Maryland	49%	16	13
Iowa	49%	17	12
Connecticut	48%	18	20
Nebraska	48%	19	30
Washington	46%	20	24
Virginia	45%	21	48
Pennsylvania	45%	22	36
Idaho	44%	23	19
North Dakota	44%	24	7
Kansas	43%	25	22

State	2006 Turnout	2006 Turnout Rank	2002 Turnout Rank
Tennessee	42%	26	32
New Hampshire	42%	27	11
Delaware	42%	28	28
New Jersey	42%	29	37
New Mexico	42%	30	35
California	42%	31	41
Kentucky	41%	32	38
Illinois	41%	33	25
Florida	40%	34	17
Arizona	40%	35	44
Hawaii	39%	36	23
Alabama	38%	37	26
Indiana	38%	38	46
Arkansas	38%	39	29
Nevada	37%	40	43
New York	37%	41	42
Oklahoma	36%	42	27
South Carolina	36%	43	39
Georgia	35%	44	45
Utah	35%	45	40
West Virginia	33%	46	49
North Carolina	33%	47	31
District of Columbia	32%	48	50
Texas	31%	49	47
Mississippi	30%	50	51
Louisiana	28%	51	34

Notes on the Table

1. Turnout is the percent of the Voting Eligible Population who cast a ballot that was counted on or before Election Day (including those provisional votes validated post-election). For states not reporting total turnout, total turnout is based on turnout for the highest office race on the ballot.

Growth in Voter Turnout in the States: 2002 – 2006

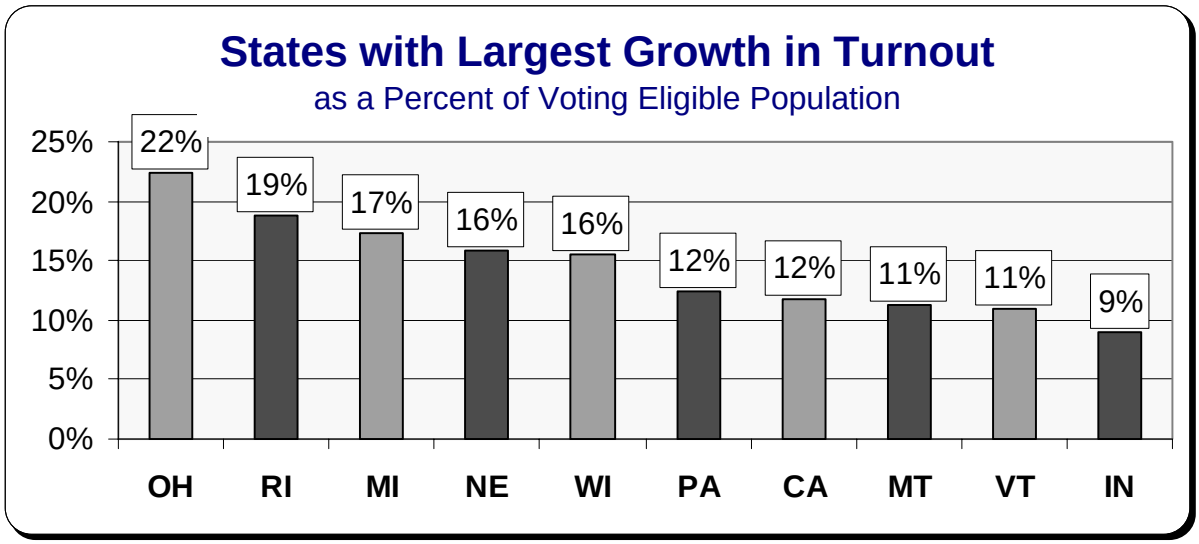
Voter turnout patterns showed large variations from state to state due to levels of political competition and other turnout factors. 12 states achieved their highest voter turnout since the U.S. Election Project began tracking state turnout in 1980. Seven recorded their lowest turnout for this period.

⇨ Ohio, Rhode Island and Michigan were the leaders in their state's percent gain in voters over the 2002 midterm, not including Virginia which had no comparable election in 2002.[6]

⇨ Wisconsin had competitive statewide races and a major party contests in 7 of its 8 House seats. Nebraska had major party competition in all 3 of its House seats compared to only one in 2002.

⇨ Voter turnout went up in 23 states and the District of Columbia, went down in 20 states and stayed the same in two (taking into account change in their pool of eligible voters between 2002 and 2006).

⇨ Key turnout factors include level of competition, partisan and non-partisan voter mobilization, state election laws and others – all discussed in greater depth in the report's final section.



Turnout Records in 2006

Best and Worst of the Last 30 Years

States Setting a 30 Year Record for <u>Highest Turnout</u>

Colorado, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia, Wisconsin

States Setting a 30 Year Record for <u>Lowest Turnout</u>

Alabama, Arkansas, Hawaii, Idaho, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Utah

[6] *Turnout growth is the percent increase or decrease in total turnout of eligible voters compared to the last similar election in 2002 – adjusted for the change in the number of eligible voters in the states from 2002 to 2006.*

Growth in Voter Turnout in the States: 2002 – 2006

State	% Growth in Turnout Over 2002[1]	Competitive State Races[2]
Virginia[3]	40%	✓
Ohio	22%	✓
Rhode Island	19%	✓
Michigan	17%	✓
Nebraska	16%	
Wisconsin	16%	✓
Pennsylvania	12%	✓
California	12%	✓
Montana	11%	✓
Vermont	11%	
Indiana	9%	
New Jersey	8%	✓
Kentucky	8%	
Missouri	8%	✓
Connecticut	6%	
Washington	6%	
West Virginia	6%	
Arizona	6%	✓
Colorado	6%	
Maryland	5%	✓
Tennessee	4%	✓
New Mexico	4%	
Maine	3%	✓
District of Columbia	2%	
Oregon	0%	✓

State	% Growth in Turnout Over 2002[1]	Competitive State Races[2]
Iowa	0%	✓
Massachusetts	-1%	✓
Delaware	-1%	
New York	-1%	
Wyoming	-2%	✓
Nevada	-2%	✓
Idaho	-3%	✓
Kansas	-4%	
Georgia	-4%	✓
South Dakota	-4%	
Illinois	-4%	✓
Alaska	-6%	
South Carolina	-6%	
Mississippi	-7%	
Minnesota	-9%	✓
Texas	-9%	
Utah	-10%	
Arkansas	-10%	✓
North Dakota	-11%	
Alabama	-11%	
Hawaii	-11%	
Florida	-13%	✓
New Hampshire	-14%	
Oklahoma	-15%	
North Carolina	-21%	
Louisiana	-30%	

Notes on the Table

1. Turnout growth is the percent increase or decrease in total turnout of eligible voters compared to the last similar election in 2002 – adjusted for the change in the number of eligible voters in the states from 2002 to 2006.

2. Competitive states are those with a U.S. Senate or Governor's race rated as a competitive contest as of November 6th by the non-partisan Cook Political Report.

3. Virginia is excluded from the chart on the previous page because its 2002 election was not comparable. Virginia holds its state elections in odd years and its 2002 U.S. Senate race had the incumbent U.S. Senator with only token minor party opposition. As noted, Louisiana is last due to post-Katrina population loss and also because it, like four other states, holds state elections in odd years.

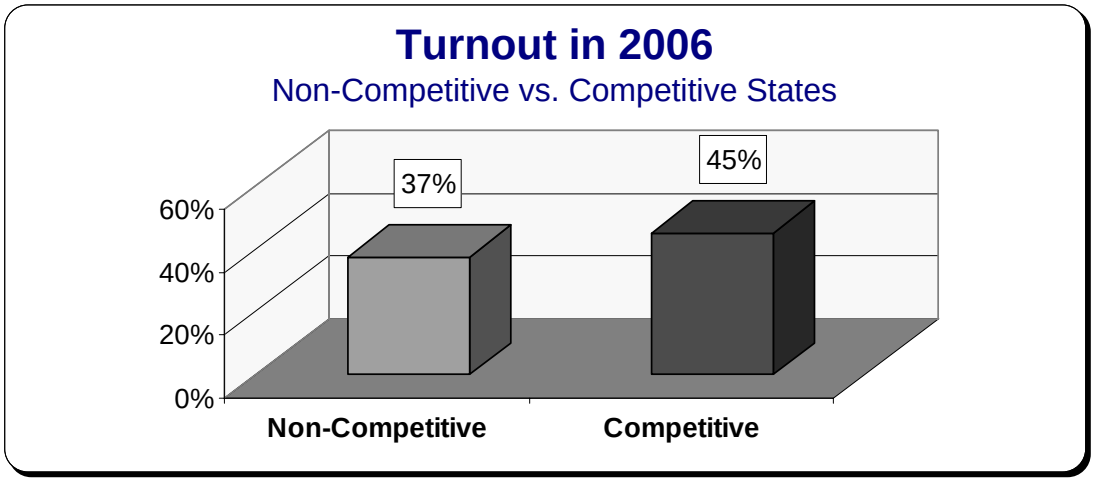
Electoral Competition and Turnout

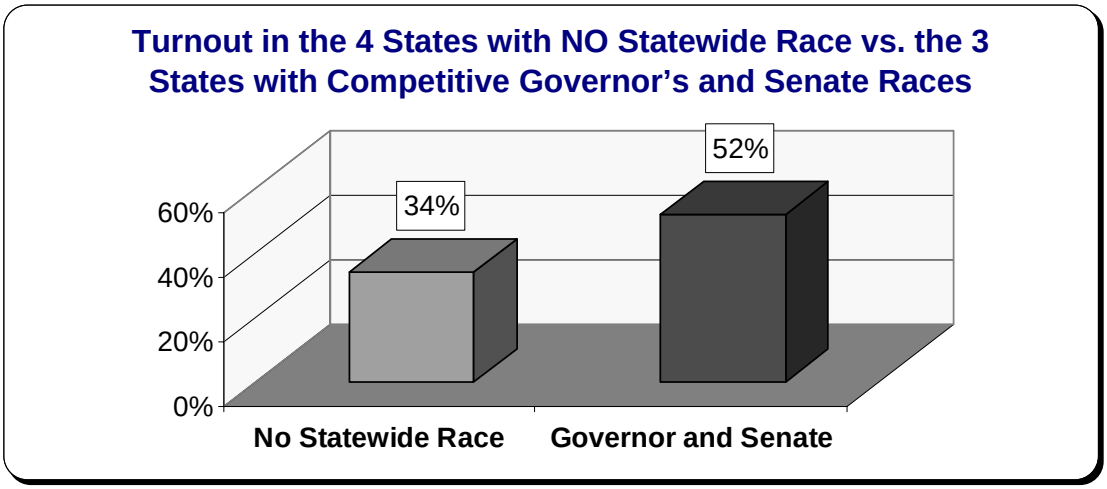
Again in 2006 the level of electoral competition was a strong factor in voter turnout. States with a closely contested statewide race for U.S. Senate or Governor had turnout averaging seven points higher than states without a competitive statewide election.[7]

⇨ States with a competitive Governor's or Senate race showed higher turnout than states without a competitive statewide race. The turnout difference was greater when comparing states with both a competitive Governor and Senate race (MD, MI, RI) vs. states with no contest for either office.

⇨ 75% of House races had little or no competition. Where there were close races, turnout was, in many cases, higher even than top-of-the-ticket statewide contests.

⇨ Ballot measures on controversial issues may or may not have affected turnout in states like South Dakota which had high turnout despite uncompetitive candidate races. It did have measures addressing abortion and gay marriage, though turnout is historically higher in this state.





[7] *Competitive races are those in states with a U.S. Senate or Governor race rated as a competitive contest as of November 6th by the non-partisan Cook Political Report.*

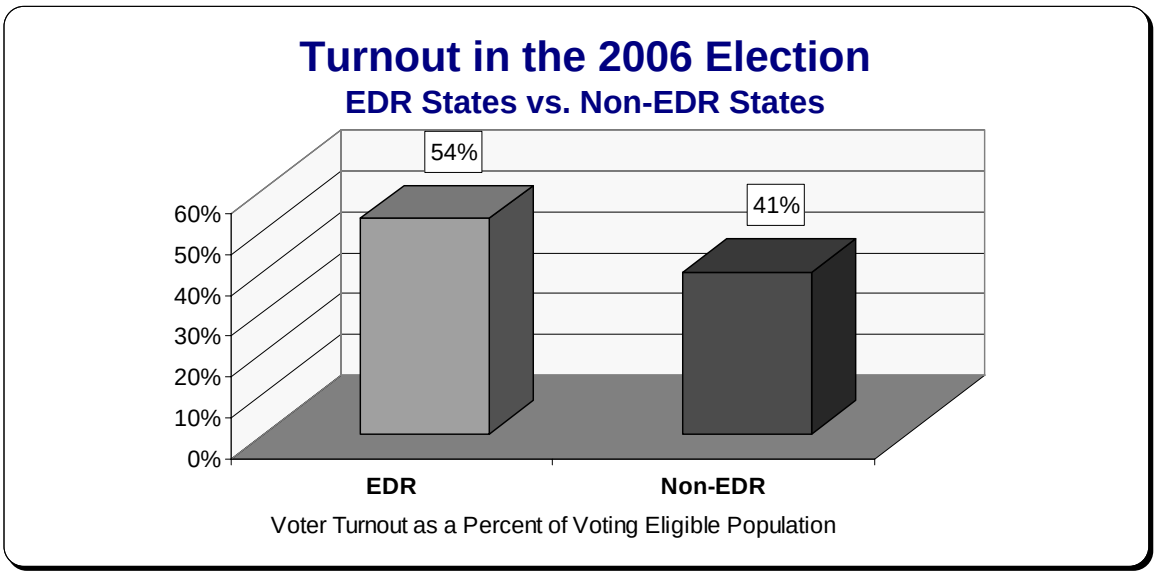
Election Day Registration and Turnout 2006

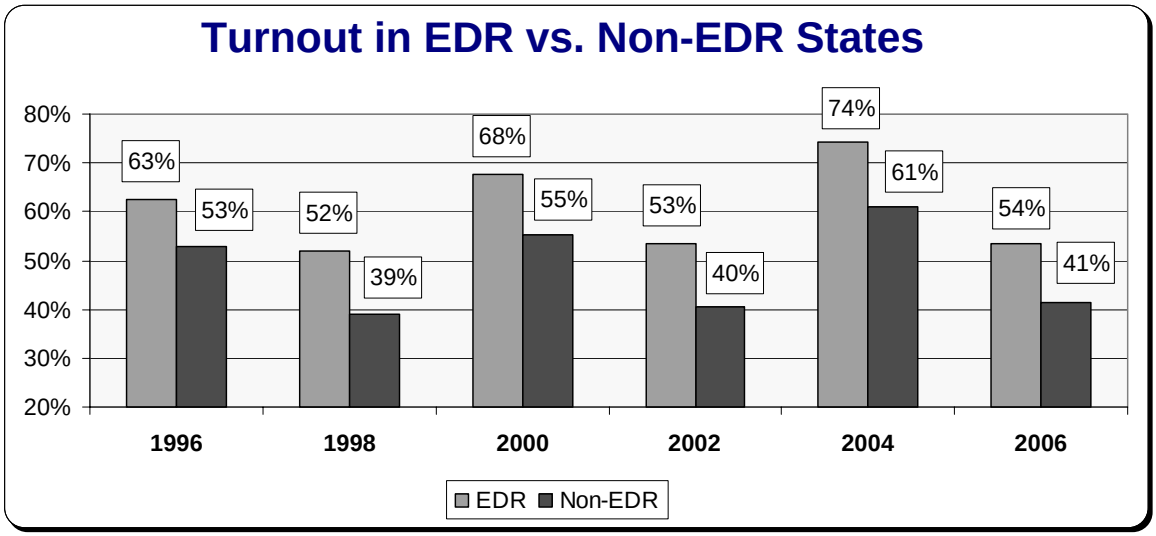
States with Election Day Registration – allowing voters to address registration problems or register on Election Day – averaged 13 points higher in turnout of voting eligible citizens in 2006. This is similar to the turnout advantage of EDR states since EDR was first adopted in the 1970's.

⇨ States that have Election Day Registration have had consistently higher voter participation rates, even adjusting for all other turnout factors.

⇨ Maine, Minnesota and Wisconsin started Election Day Registration in the 1970's. New Hampshire, Wyoming and Idaho followed suit in the 1990's. North Dakota does not have voter registration.

⇨ Montana is the latest state to successfully implement EDR, using it in 2006 for the first time. Turnout rose sharply over its last two midterms.





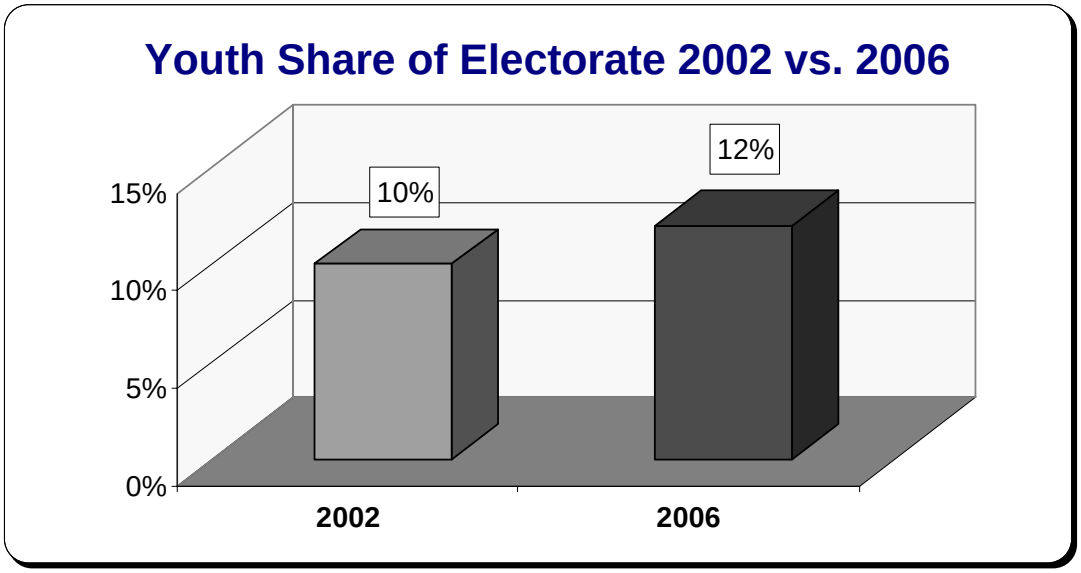
Youth Vote 2006

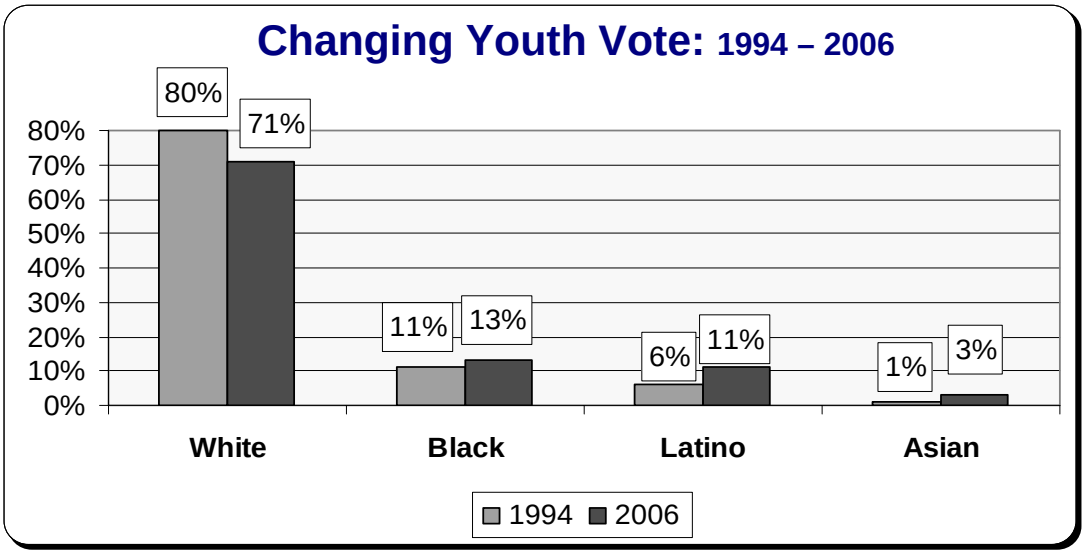
Young voters improved their turnout for the second national election in a row. Nevertheless, a 30 point gap remains between young and older voters. Young voters are steadily becoming more ethnically diverse.

⇨ The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE) estimates turnout of young voters ages 18-29 rose by some two million compared to 2002. Youth share of the electorate went from 10% in 2002 to 12% – likely the largest gain of any age group.

⇨ CIRCLE notes the youth vote has grown steadily more diverse (and is more diverse than the general voting population) with the percentages of Latino, Black and Asian-American voters all increasing.

⇨ There remains a large 30 point gap between younger voters and voters 30 and over, just starting to close in the last two federal elections *(Chart on page 11)*.

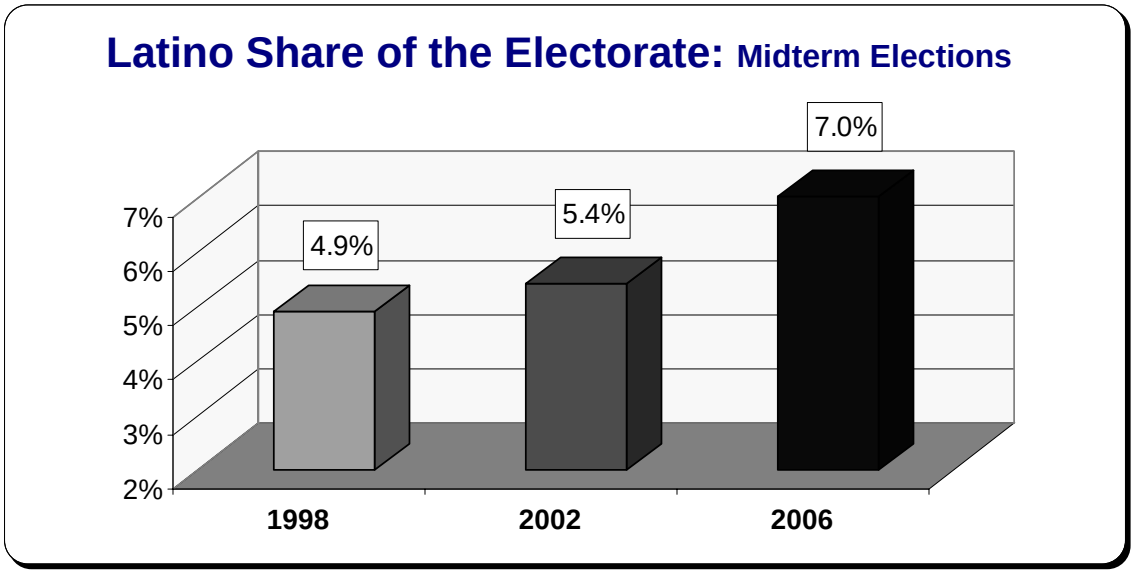


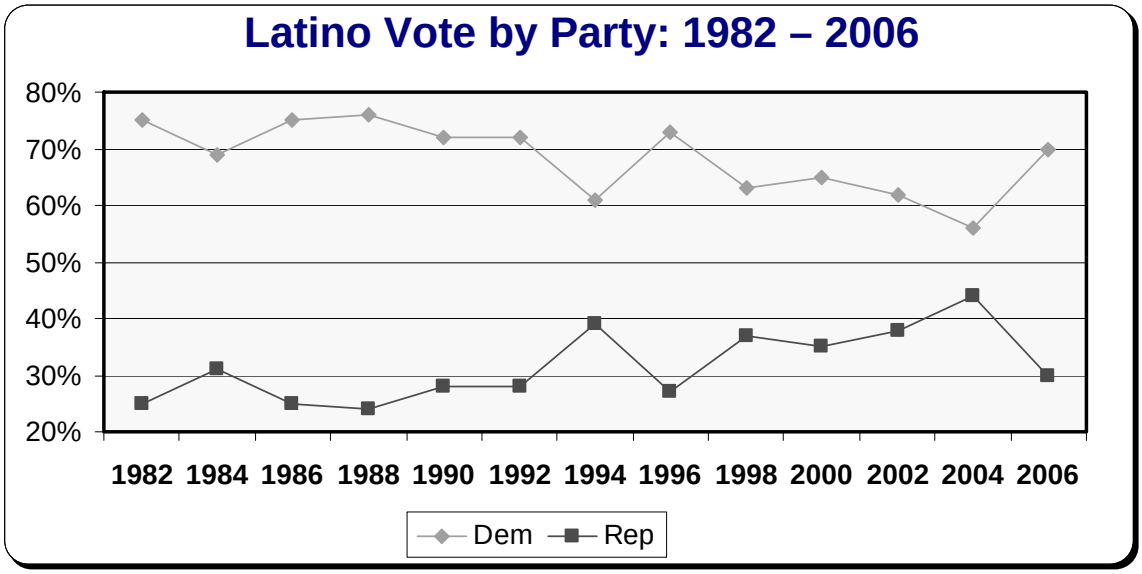


Latino Vote 2006

The Latino vote rose sharply compared to the last two midterm elections due to both population growth and higher voter participation. Compared to other voting groups, immigration policy was an important issue for Latino voters.[8]

- ⇨ Latino voters were an estimated 6-8% of the electorate in 2006 vs. 5.4% in 2002 and 4.9% in 1998.
- ⇨ Surveys indicated Latino voters supported candidates with more moderate views on immigration policies. *(CNN* exit polls, *Pew Research Center)*
- ⇨ The Latino vote was again strongly Democratic after lower than usual Democratic support in 2004.





[8] *The source of share of the electorate is from the U.S. Census-Current Population Survey for 1998 and 2002 and estimates reported by the Pew Hispanic Center and Willie C. Velasquez Institute for 2006. Partisan trends analyzed by The New York Times.*

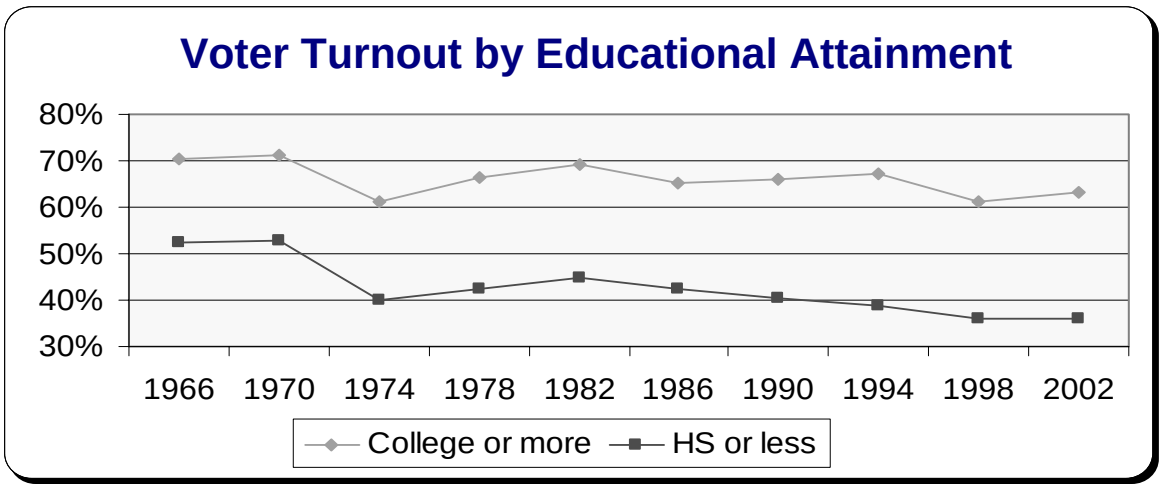
Voter Participation Gaps in Midterm Elections

There are large voter participation differences by educational attainment, age and income. There are also differences in voting by ethnicity but much more variable – the largest among newer Latino and Asian-American populations.

Voter Participation Gap by Educational Attainment

⇨ In the last midterm surveyed by the Census, 52% of eligible voters with a college degree voted vs. only 27% of eligible voters without a college degree – a turnout gap of 25 points.

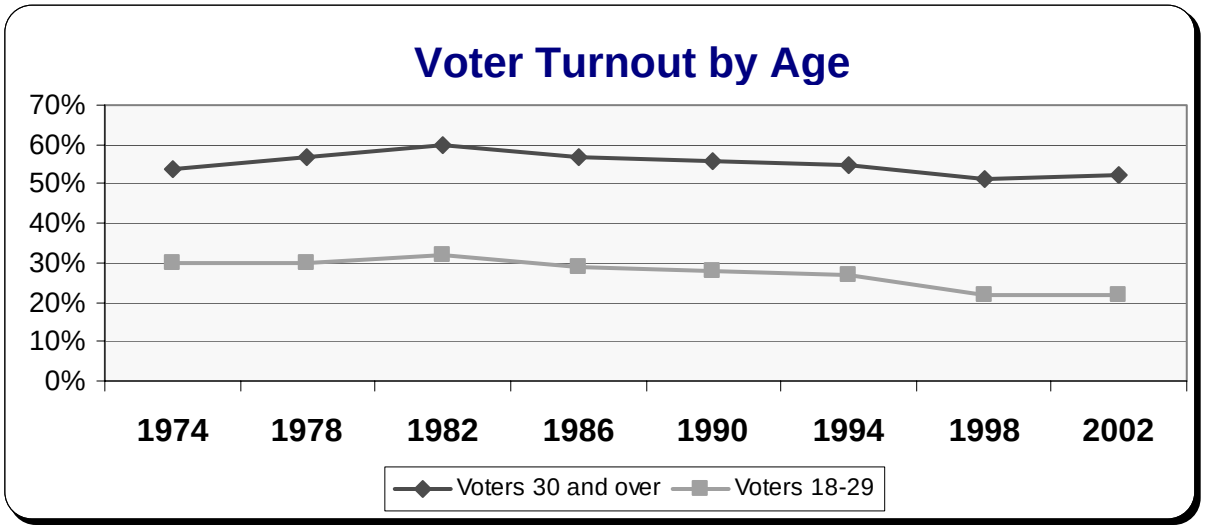
⇨ This turnout gap affects a large number of voters. The 2000 Census reported that only 24% of adults 25 and over had a college degree.



Voter Participation Gap by Age

⇨ In the 2002 midterm election survey, conducted by the US Census, 52% of eligible voters 30 years and older voted vs. only 22% of eligible voters 18-29 years of age – a turnout gap of 30 points.

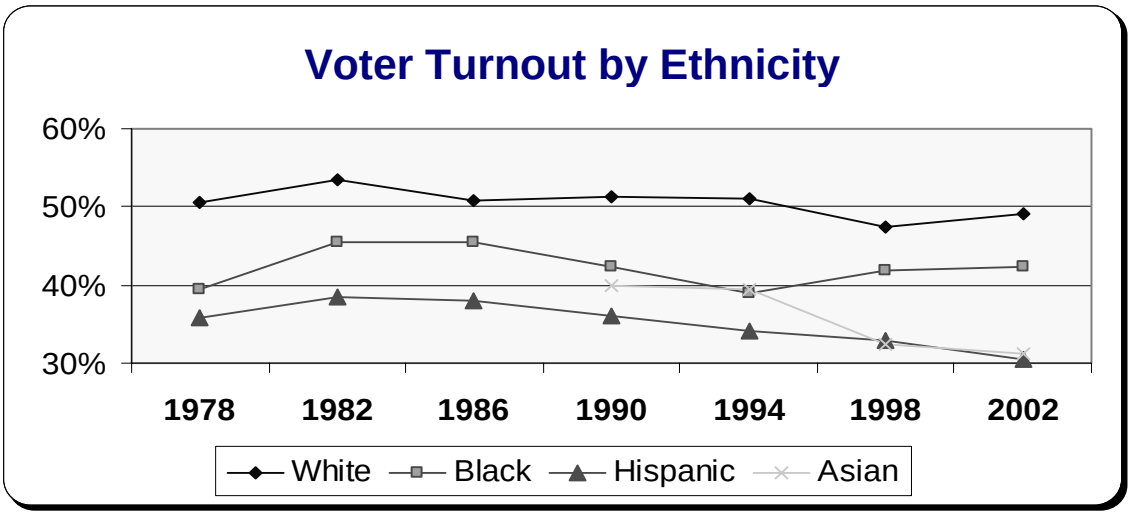
⇨ This chart from US Census surveys records the age gap starting in 1974, the first midterm election after the voting age was lowered to 18.



Voter Participation Gap by Ethnicity

⇨ The makeup of the Latino and Asian voting populations has changed over recent decades with more recent immigrants from more countries. The influx of diverse new immigrants is a factor contributing to turnout declines in the 1980's and 1990's, both groups trailing non-hispanic whites by 20 points. Preliminary data suggests an increase in voter participation among Asian-Americans and Latinos in the 2006 midterm. *(More will be known when the Census releases its report on the 2006 elections in Spring 2008.)*

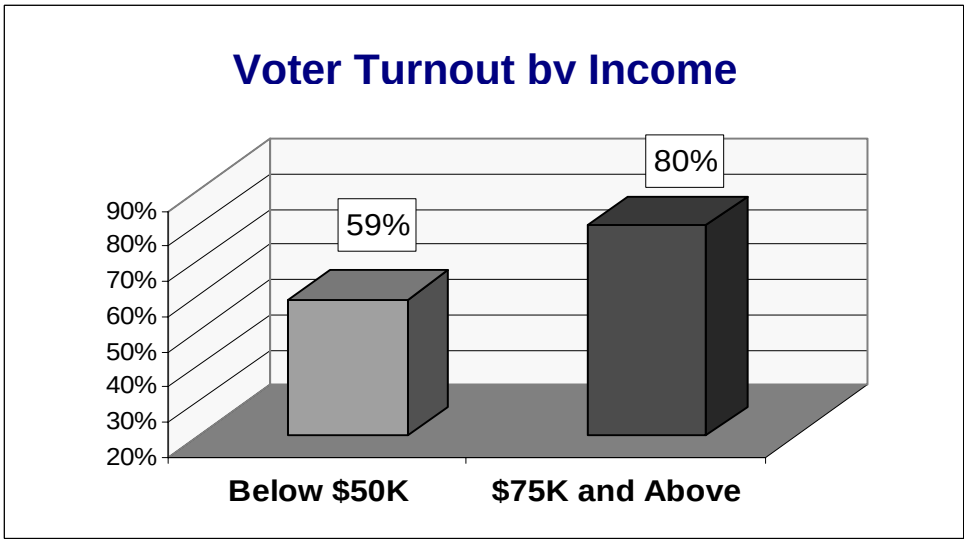
⇨ Black and white voter participation has more closely followed overall trends, with the Census reporting a much smaller voter participation gap between these groups.



Voter Participation Gap by Income

⇨ Because of numerical change in income, one can only reliably make comparisons within an election, rather than between different years. Here we look at the most recent election where Census data is available. The voter participation gap based on income closely tracks the gap by educational attainment.

⇨ In the 2004 election, lower income voters with household incomes of less than $50,000 per year turned out at a rate 21 points below higher income voters.



Conclusion: Factors Impacting Voter Turnout

Of all things affecting voter turnout, a competitive race and a compelling reason to vote looms the largest. Voter turnout is highest when there is something at stake – a high profile, competitive contest, a salient issue on which leading candidates differ, a controversial ballot measure, or the perceived overall importance of the election.

However, competitive races and hot issues are not the only factors affecting voter turnout in America. The issues of who makes it to the polls and whose votes are counted are impacted by institutional barriers to voting such as restrictive voter registration practices, level of familiarity with democracy (often an obstacle for new Americans), accessible voter education information, and access to the polls. As this report demonstrates, demographic factors also play a significant role as do family and community voting traditions, voter education and the type and level of citizen mobilization around elections.

1. A Reason to Vote: Competition and Choice

Observers of voter turnout agree that competition, as much as any other factor, impacts turnout. A competitive race energizes voters[9]. It motivates both partisan and nonpartisan voter mobilization efforts, expands media coverage, and triggers an investment in voter registration, voter education, and getting out the vote. It's simple: when there is a reason to vote, voters respond.

This report demonstrates that in 2006 states with high profile U.S. Senate races or close contests for Governor had higher turnout than states without a competitive statewide contest. An additional factor, raising the bar of competition in 2006 was the partisan battle for control of Congress. This appeared to impact turnout in key Senate contests in Virginia, Rhode Island and Ohio, which recorded their highest voter turnouts for a midterm election in several decades.

Conversely, the lack of political competition in most U.S. elections dampens overall turnout. In 2006, even with more Congressional seats seemingly up for grabs, three-fourths of the 435 House seats were not considered competitive.[10] Likewise more than half of Senate seats and Governorships were noncompetitive.

2. Voting Barriers

Several million American citizens who wish to vote either cannot vote or have problems when they attempt to vote in national elections.[11] This is mainly a result of questionable and often

[9] *Rocking the House: Competition and Turnout in the 2006 Midterm Election*, Michael P. McDonald, The Forum: Vol. 4 : Iss. 3, Article 4, 2006

[10] *From the Cook Political Report - www.cookpolitical.com.*

[11] *Missing Votes in the 2004 Election,* George Pillsbury (Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network), NVEN Library, *www.nonprofitvote.org,* January 2006

outmoded election practices. Problems of this sort are exacerbated by the fact that election practices vary markedly among America's 50 states and over 3,000 counties.

A number of states have addressed or started to address barriers like the ones discussed here with measurable outcomes. In other places, some are working to erect new obstacles, often created to serve partisan objectives and aimed to disproportionately affect the already underrepresented populations. The barriers discussed here are a shorter list of the most common and addressable ones.

Cutting Off Voter Registration in Advance of Election Day

The majority of states cut off voter registration in the weeks before an election, just as many voters are becoming interested in the upcoming contest. Election Day Registration (EDR) allows eligible voters to register on Election Day. Seven states allow EDR. These seven states consistently show voter turnout 10% to 13% above that of non-EDR states (see page 11). If non-EDR states adopted EDR, an additional two to three million citizens who are now turned away at the polls due to registration issues would be able to vote.[12]

Felony Disenfranchisement Laws

According to the Sentencing Project, a national leader in removing barriers to voting for ex-offenders, an estimated 5.3 million American citizens[13] were ineligible to vote in 2006 due to a prior felony conviction. Felony disenfranchisement laws take away the right to vote for people in prison, on parole and, in several states, for the rest of their lives. Individuals affected by these laws are disproportionately low-income and minority. These laws were first enacted to curtail the voting rights of newly freed blacks in the South after the Civil War and vary greatly from state to state. Felon disenfranchisement laws allow states to define who has the right to vote and who does not (even in federal elections). Fifteen states allow citizens to vote immediately upon release from prison (though even in these states many are misinformed about their rights). , Millions of American citizens would regain their right to vote if the other 35 states conformed.

Time and Accessibility

When surveyed by the U.S. Census, eligible voters cite time constraints as the number one reason for not voting. Even if this is overstated, time and accessibility to the polls are critical factors affecting turnout. This is especially true in local elections where the profile of the races tends to be lower, voter education tools are generally less available, and media attention is lower. Particularly in these contests, the perceived time it takes to vote and accessibility of the polls can become deciding factors in whether an individual will vote or not.

There are several remedies that can make voting less time-consuming and more accessible. Early voting offers convenient locations for people to vote in the weeks leading up to Election

[12] *California Votes, The Promise of Election Day Registration,* R. Michael Alvarez (CalTech), Stephen Ansolabehere (MIT), January 2002

[13] *Felony Disenfranchisement Laws in the United States,* The Sentencing Project, www.sentencingproject.org, November 2006

Day. Ensuring adequate poll worker training and an adequate number of poll workers, as well as an adequate number of functional voting machines will help to reduce long lines and wait times, making voting more practical for workers taking time off to vote, parents caring for children, or elderly voters who cannot wait in line. Through rides to the polls programs and education about how and where to vote, both political parties and nonpartisan nonprofits can play a critical role in helping voters get the polls on Election Day.

Poll Procedures and Voting Equipment

In 2006 the residual vote rate (the percentage of ballots cast without a vote for highest office) was about 2.2%, a slight improvement over 2002. Nevertheless, that 2.2% represents more than one million voters. Some of those voters chose not to vote for their state's Governor or Senator. However, a larger proportion voted, but their vote was not counted due to poor poll procedures or voting equipment errors. The most notorious example of this problem in 2006 was in Sarasota County in Florida's 13th CD. Sarasota recorded a residual vote rate of 13%, much higher than other counties in the same congressional district. That 13% amounted to more than 18,000 lost votes in a race where the margin of victory was only a few hundred votes.

3. Education

Education is a powerful determinant in voting. Voting is skewed by educational attainment in all democracies though probably to a greater degree in the United States. Census data back to 1966 demonstrate that those with a high school diploma or less, consistently vote at a rate 20 or more points below college graduates – a gap which has continued to widen in the last 30 years (see page 14). The educational attainment gap correlates with other identified demographic gaps in voter turnout. The strongest correlation is between educational attainment and income. Additionally, less educated citizens report more difficulty navigating the voting process. When surveyed, some may say they don't vote due to an issue of the time required to vote, when, in fact, research reveals they are reluctant to vote because they believe that they don't sufficiently understand how to vote or aren't adequately educated about their choices on the ballot.[14] Families and friends can help potential voters with these issues as can civic institutions and government. Studies indicate that people with lower levels of education would be more likely to vote, if their states issued nonpartisan sample ballots and voter guides. American elementary and high schools, in particular, could have a dramatic impact on building a more civically-educated society through partnership with nonpartisan programs like Kids Voting, if allowed or encouraged to do so by state education requirements.[15]

4. Families and Friends: A Cultural Tradition of Voting

Another factor in voter turnout is whether voting is an integral part of one's family or community tradition. Studies like the "Young Citizen Survey" done by the Center on Democracy and

[14] *A Community Based Approach to Increasing Voter Turnout,* Easy Voter, www.easyvoter.org, 2000

[15] Kids Voting USA, *www.kidsvotingusa.org*

Citizenship[16] show parents and families play a major role in voting behavior. The likelihood that a person will vote is much higher if their parents are active voters and if politics is discussed at home.

5. A Stake in the Outcome and Political Dialogue

We've noted that competition and saliency of issues matter when it comes to voter turnout in any given election. But even with a competitive race and salient issues, potential voters may still lack a sense of their stake in the outcome of an election. People need to know *how* and *if* the outcome of an election will affect their daily lives and the lives of their families and community. Voters need a concrete understanding of how elected officials and public policy decisions at the local, state and federal level affect their lives. While, partisan organizations often play a positive role in targeting voters and educating them about their stake in an election's outcome, they may fail to motivate broader participation precisely because of their narrow target audience and partisan message. Partisan efforts can introduce a level of negativity that decreases voter trust in government and elections. Increasingly, media outlets contribute to the negative polarization of candidates and parties by focusing on confrontation instead of how policy positions affect people's lives. Nonpartisan organizations with deep community ties play a critical role in giving all voters of all income and education levels a greater understanding of the connections between voting and government's impact on their lives. Nonpartisan civic and voter engagement initiatives can reintroduce real political dialogue and articulate the overall community benefit of high voter turnout in building an authentic democracy. Finally, nonpartisan organizations can help communities increase their voter turnout and then hold their elected officials accountable to the issues that matter to them.

6. Negative Politics and Trust in Elections

Negative politics and lack of faith in the electoral process play a significant role in Americans' professed lack of confidence in elections and government. The negativity and partisanship of politics in general discourages potential voters from taking the time to register, educate themselves about candidates and issues and vote. There are a variety of ways in which to address these issues. Public financing of elections and ranked choice voting are two key factors that receive little media attention but could have an enormous impact on the tone of public debate, the perceived fairness of elections, and overall confidence in government.

The flood of interest group dollars is one of the strongest factors undermining public confidence in elections and government. Limiting or disclosing the money has proven of little help. Only when combined with public funding of elections and lower media costs – the standard in all other democracies – can a democracy reduce the flow of special interest money to candidates and elected officials, allow more ordinary citizens to enter politics and free candidates to spend more time to on issues and all of their voters.

---

[16] *The Political and Civic Engagement of Young Adults in America*, Lake Snell Perry & Associates, The Tarrance Group survey for Democracy and Citizenship, CIRCLE and the Council for Excellence in Government, 2002

Our current plurality voting method creates strong incentives for zero-sum negative contests that undermine voter confidence. Candidates win by reducing voter support for their opponent by going negative. Ranked choice voting – used in several U.S. jurisdictions and other countries like ourselves – changes the incentives as it allows voters get to rank their choices in order of preference. Candidates are inherently far more careful about going negative on opponents when they want to be the second choice of their supporters. Further, it ensures the winner of an election is the choice of the majority and not just the simple plurality winner of a split ballot. All of these features increase voter confidence, increase participation, and lead to a more civil society.

7. Mobilization

Voter mobilization always plays a major role in elections. At one time, this involved a relatively small electorate both in size and who was allowed to vote. Today, mobilizing the electorate means reaching over two hundred million eligible voters of diverse economic, cultural, and social backgrounds.

Mobilization is most intense when there are competitive contests and compelling issues. 2006 was no different. Mobilization in competitive Congressional and state races boosted this year's midterm turnout in 12 states to their highest levels in the last 30 years. Mobilization efforts are also more effective when coupled with election reform efforts aimed at decreasing barriers to voting such as Election Day Registration or felon re-enfranchisement.

Partisan mobilization around specific elections encourages voter participation. However, these efforts are in fact more aimed at influencing outcomes. Increased voter participation is a frequent ancillary benefit of these efforts, but it is not their goal. Partisan efforts, honed by modern targeting techniques, are designed to mobilize only likely supporters. In some case, partisan mobilization can actually turn off many voters. This is particularly true when candidates or parties "go negative." While effective for those they manage to reach, partisan mobilization methods miss a large part of a more mobile, less-accessible, electorate. Recent surveys have shown that even in areas with high mobilization, partisan canvassers only manage to reach three in ten voters and these voters are disproportionately higher income, older and pre-disposed to vote anyway.[17]

More likely to forge sustainable voter participation growth in today's electorate is a broader non-partisan approach from America's expansive civic sector. One reason is sector's scale and reach into traditionally lower voting populations. The size of the nonprofit community alone has more than doubled just in the last 20 years. There are more than a million 501c3 nonprofits nationwide employing more than 11 million people, engaging millions and board members and volunteers and serving millions more[18]. At the heart are neighborhood groups, health centers,

[17] *Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior,* American National Election Studies, *www.electionstudies.org* tracks voter contact by political parties by demographics; *Campaign for America's Future and Democracy Corps survey,* November 2006, by Greenburg, Quinlan, Rosner.

[18] Independent Sector; National Center for Charitable Statistics

human service and social welfare agencies, youth alliances, and educational institutions. If tapped, nonprofits have an inherent ability to increase voter and civic participation given their constituencies, missions, standing in their communities, and strong interest in public policy and the role of government. They have the built-in ability to involve voters without inventing new programs, but by integrating voter and civic engagement into what they already do.

In addition, local and state government – often in tandem with the nonprofit sector – can play a much larger role through its schools and colleges, social agencies and election departments in educating today's electorate about the learning how to vote and engage in other civic ways.

The bottom line is that to achieve lasting increases in participation, voter mobilization must include more education-driven mobilization that is more expansive but less expensive, more connected to the daily lives of voters and less limited to traditional campaign tactics It will be more connected to people in a variety of settings: where they gather to work or learn, where they participate in community and faith activities, and where they go to volunteer, connect to government or get services.

Ideas for Improvements and Reform

There are exciting and promising ways to both increase and improve the quality of participation in elections and civic affairs. We have many more models today at the local and state level of positive ways to address the underlying turnout factors discussed above.

Here we present an abbreviated list of election improvements that both address the major turnout factors described in the previous section and have a track record of success in states and local jurisdictions and in democracies similar to ours.

I. Eliminating Voting Barriers

ELECTION DAY REGISTRATION

◈ *Description:* Election Day registration allows voters to address registration issues or make a new registration on Election Day either at the polls or at a local election office.

◈ *Where in place:* Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, Wyoming.

◈ *Turnout Impact:* Voter turnout increases an estimated 3-6% when a state adopts same day voter registration. Adopted as a national standard, Election Day registration would likely add two to three million new voters in a presidential election year.[19]

VOTING RIGHTS FOR EX-OFFENDERS

◈ *Description:* People serving time in prison have their right to vote restored upon leaving prison as part of re-entry into society.

◈ *Where in place:* 15 states and the District of Columbia. Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Utah, Vermont and now Rhode Island who changed their law by voter initiative in 2006.

◈ *Turnout Impact*: If the national standard was the same as the 15 states listed above, it would enfranchise about three million voters[20], not to mention the societal benefits to encouraging ex-offenders to engage as citizens and participate in the political process.

FULL PROVISIONAL VOTING

◈ *Description*: Full provisional voting counts the votes cast by registered voters who cast their ballot in the correct jurisdiction, even if they accidentally cast their ballot in the wrong precinct within that jurisdiction.[21]

---

[19] *California Votes, The Promise of Election Day Registration,* Alvarez, Ansolabehere, *op. cit.*

[20] *US Election Project*, McDonald, Ibid.

[21] *Balancing Access and Integrity: The Report of The Century Foundation Working Group on State Implementation of Election Reform*, The Century Foundation, July 2005; *Solution or Problem? Provisional Ballots in 2004*, Electionline.org, March 2005

◈ *Where in place:* According to *Electionline.org*, 15 states in 2006 allowed voters to cast a provisional ballot so long as it was cast at a voting location in the correct jurisdiction, i.e. municipality, county, state. The 15 states are: Arkansas, California, Colorado, Georgia, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington. Thirty states discard provisional votes – even for a statewide office like governor – if not cast in the precinct where the voter is listed as registered. The seven states with Election Day Registration and North Dakota, which doesn't have voter registration, have few provisional voting issues since voters can fix a registration problem on Election Day.

◈ *Turnout impact:* In 2004, *Electionline.org* reported that of states with data available, states allowing votes to count as long as cast in the correct jurisdiction validated 70% of provisional ballots; the 26 states who disqualified votes cast outside the exact precinct validated only 62%, with 11 of those states counting less than 50% of their provisional ballots. If the national standard was the cast-in-correct-jurisdiction rule, at least 40,000 more votes in 2004 would have counted.

BETTER VOTING EQUIPMENT, BALLOT DESIGN AND STANDARDS

◈ *Description:* Driven by national standards, states would replace old voting equipment with newer equipment like optical scan machines or mixed DRE/optical scan systems with a lower error rate. States would ensure that ballot design is understandable to all voters, require that all voting equipment have a voter-verifiable paper audit trail (VVPAT) and mandate hand counts of a portion of all ballots cast.

◈ *Where in place:* As mandated by the 2002 Help American Vote Act, most U.S. jurisdictions have replaced their older machines and the error rate has started to decline.[22] Twenty two states have a mandate for VVPATs (an additional five require paper ballots) but many do not. Congress still has not adopted a federal VVPAT requirement.

◈ *Turnout impact:* Nearly two million voters in 2006 cast a ballot but did not have a vote counted for the highest office on the ballot.[23] Some voters choose not to vote for Senator or Governor, but in the majority of cases these residual votes (under and over votes for a particular office) are a sign of machine error, voter error, problematic ballot design, or other potentially avoidable problems. In a study by Charles Stewart for the CalTech, MIT Voting Technology Project, an estimated one million "new" votes in 2004 over 2000 were likely due to or facilitated by reforms in voting machines and administrative procedures.

BETTER PROCEDURES AT THE POLLS, POLL WORKER RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

◈ *Description:* There are many areas of potential improvement in election administration, such as better training and hiring of poll workers, allowing split shifts to reduce poll worker fatigue in higher turnout elections, more convenient poll locations, better signage and eliminating long lines.

---

[22] Residual Vote in the 2004 Election, CalTech/MIT Voting Technology Project, Charles Stewart III, February 2005

[23] Based on average residual vote rate of 2.2% computed from 30 states (plus District of Columbia) who reported total turnout on website of *U.S. Election Project*, McDonald

◈ *Where in place:* Many jurisdictions have good election administration while others – generally in urban settings – are known to consistently have long lines and misinformed poll workers and rate poorly.

◈ *Turnout impact:* Whether due to work or family pressures, age, physical health, or other reasons, many voters are unable to vote if the line and wait are too long. The Census estimated that a half million registered voters did not vote in 2004 due to long lines[24], while the Harvard Vanishing Voter post-election survey had a higher estimate of one million[25]. Long lines with waits of two to five hours or more prevented thousands of voters from casting their ballot in, for example, Columbus, Ohio in 2004[26] and in Colorado in 2006[27]. The mistakes of poll workers in opening polls on time, understanding how to use the equipment or giving the right assistance to voters also results in many unnecessarily lost votes.

ENSURE DISABILITY AND LANGUAGE ACCESS

◈ *Description:* The Help America Vote Act (HAVA) mandates that every polling place provide a handicapped-accessible voting machine so that disabled voters can vote privately and independently. The language provisions of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) require language assistance based on a coverage formula. Electronic voting machines (if properly implemented with paper trails, etc.) are seen as one effective way to provide accessibility to both the disabled and language minorities.

◈ *Where in Place:* HAVA rules on disability and language access are federal law that applies to all fifty states and the District of Columbia. Implementation of HAVA is ongoing with some states achieving much greater compliance than others.[28] The Census Bureau provides a list of jurisdictions that are required to provide language assistance.

◈ *Turnout Impact:* The American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) vote project reports estimates from the U.S. Census that there are 45.5 million voting age Americans with disabilities, of which 18.6 million voted in the 2000 election, more than 10 points below the nation's average. The AAPD Disability Vote Project says many more would vote if they had better access to the polls and accessible voting equipment – including and beyond HAVA-mandated improvements.[29] In terms of language access, according to *Electionline.org*, the language assistance provisions of the VRA, enacted in 1982, have opened the voting process to half a million new citizens per year.[30] Compliance in areas covered by the VRA has been mixed. Jurisdictions with high numbers of new citizens would enfranchise new voters by providing language assistance even if not technically covered under section 203 of the VRA.

---

[24] *Voting and Registration in the Election of 2004*, U.S. Census, Current Population Survey, Release date May 25, 2005

[25] *Vanishing Voter Post-Election Survey,* Thomas Patterson, Harvard University, November 2004

[26] *Long Lines, Voting Machine Availability and Turnout: The Case of Franklin County, Ohio in the 2004 Presidential Election*, Benjamin Highton, UC Davis, January 2006

[27] *Long Lines, Glitches Frustrate Voters,* DenverChannel.com and Associated Press, www.thedenverchannel.com/politics/10258481/detail

[28] U.S. Department of Justice, Voting Rights Division, www.usdoj.gov/crt/voting/sec_203/203_brochure.htm.

[29] Census estimates provided by the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) Disability Vote Project, *www.aapd-dc.org/dvpmain/dvpindex*

[30] *Translating the Vote: The Impact of the Language Minority Provision of the Voting Rights Act*, Electionline.org, *www.electionline.org*, October 2006

II. Better Opportunities to Vote

EARLY VOTING

◈ Description: Early voting allows voters to vote at consolidated voting centers during an early voting period prior to Election Day.

◈ *Where in Place:* 15 states have early voting programs. Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, West Virginia. For up-to-date listings go to *Electionline.org* – (www.electionline.org) or the National Association of Secretaries of States (www.nass.org).

◈ *Turnout Impact:* Census surveys have consistently found that difficulty getting to the polls on Election Day is a leading reason registered voters don't vote. Early voting helps. But the magnitude of help is often hard to measure and probably not as great as other changes[31]. Most studies say it helps most in lower turnout elections and depends on levels of political competition and voter mobilization to take advantage of the extended voting period.[32] For more information, visit Paul Gronke's early voting website at www.earlyvoting.net.

"NO EXCUSE" MAIL-IN OR ABSENTEE VOTING

◈ *Description:* No-excuse mail-in voting or absentee voting allows any voter to vote by mail before Election Day without providing a reason. One advantage of mail-in voting is that it is much less costly than traditional in-person elections. However, since mail-in voting takes place outside of the polling place or other official location the chances for outside influence are greater than in other forms of voting. Also, some studies have noted that mail-in voting is used more by higher income populations and slightly exacerbates participation gaps.

◈ *Where in Place:* Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Maryland, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, Washington, Wisconsin, Wyoming.

◈ *Turnout Impact:* The most common example of mail-in voting in the U.S. is Oregon, which switched to all mail in voting over a decade ago. The complexity of Oregon's ballot, often posing 50 or more ballot questions, does make Oregon unusual. Turnout in Oregon has traditionally been high and since the switch to all mail-in voting it has remained so, helping infrequent voters remain in the voting electorate. Voter turnout trends in other states that have recently loosened absentee voting rules show limited increases in some, but not all, cases.[33] Convenience is helpful to voters as it is in any business or government activity. Mail-in ballots are necessary for some. But because it is more difficult to authenticate a mail-in ballot, early voting where a voter casts their ballot at an official voting location may be more preferred option[34].

---

[31] *Early Voting and American Elections*, Paul Gronke, Reed College, www.earlyvoting.net, August 2004

[32] *Early Voting and Political Mobilization*, *and Voter Turnout,* Robert Stein, Rice University, Chris Owens, Texas A&M University, Jan Leighley, Texas A&M University, 2005

[33] *Who Votes by Mail: A Dynamic Model of the Individual Consequences of Vote-by-Mail Systems*, Adam J. Berinsky, Nancy Burns, Michael W. Traugott, Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol.65:178-197, 2001

[34] *Absentee and Early Voting: Trends, Promises and Perils,* John Fortier, American Enterprise Institute, AEI Press, 2006

III. Education

MORE VOTER EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

◈ *Description*: Opportunities for students to learn about the voting process.

◈ *Where in place:* State mandates for civic education vary widely and civic education has been squeezed out of many curricula all together. Several nonprofits have attempted to reintroduce civic education into the school setting. Kids Voting USA, which operates in 26 states and the District of Columbia, is one such organization. For more information on Kids Voting USA, visit www.kidsvotingusa.org.

◈ *Turnout Impact:* Increasing voting among young people has a high payoff in creating lifelong voters. Voting or non-voting habits are formed early and can last a lifetime and influence the voting habits of the next generation. Teaching high school students the mechanics of voting boosts participation[35]. Participation can also go up among parents when school children are involved at school in voter education.[36]

MORE VOTER EDUCATION BY GOVERNMENT

◈ *Description:* Government plays a vital role in helping voters understand the voting process. Important activities include TV, radio and newspaper advertising and mailings explaining when, where and how to vote, and describing state and local ballot measures and offices on the ballot. One of the most important ways in which state and local governments can assist voters is by mailing sample ballots well in advance of Election Day.

◈ *Where in place:* All jurisdictions conduct some form of voter education. However many fall well short of acceptable levels of voter education. For example, in 2004 only 7 states required the distribution of sample ballots for statewide and federal elections.[37]

◈ *Turnout Impact:* When an election is well-advertised, information on how to vote is readily accessible and citizens understand their options, participation increases. On the other hand, when governments do little to educate the public or even worse, discourage voters by adopting draconian language about, for example, the criminal penalties for making a simple mistake on a registration form, participation decreases.

IV. Increasing Competition and Choice

DIRECT ELECTION OF THE PRESIDENT (VS. ELECTORAL COLLEGE)

◈ *Description:* Voters elect the president directly. The candidate with the majority (or in some countries plurality) of votes wins. Under our current system the popular vote in each state determines how that state's Electors will vote in the Electoral College. Each state has a number of Electors equal to its number of US Representatives and Senators. The candidate who receives the most Electoral votes in the Electoral College wins. Unfortunately, this results in system in which the national popular vote does not necessarily determine who will be president.

---

[35] CIRCLE, *www.civicyouth.org*

[36] *Experiments in Political Socialization: Kids Voting USA as a Model for Civic Education Reform*, Michael McDevitt, University of Colorado, www.civicyouth.org, August 2006

[37] *Key State Election Laws Can Boost Youth Voter Turnout,* CIRCLE, www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/release_State_Laws.pdf , June 2004

◈ *Where in place:* Every advanced democracy except the U.S. that elects a national president uses direct elections. Most have a majority vote requirement. Some allow a candidate to win the presidency with only a plurality of votes.

◈ *Turnout Impact:* Certain "battleground states" where campaigns compete for voters have much higher turnout than non-swing states in presidential elections. For example, in the 2004 election, turnout of eligible voters in 16 commonly considered swing states was 66.3% compared to 58.6% in non-swing states.[38] If every citizen's vote in all 50 states was sought after by candidates, more eligible voters by a large factor – in the millions – would participate in presidential years. The turnout impact of candidates spending most of their time and money in 16 or fewer battlegrounds states also has a decided bias by voter ethnicity because Asian-American, Latino and Black voters live disproportionately in non-swing states.[39]

RANKED CHOICE VOTING

Most U.S. elections are "plurality" winner elections in which the candidate with the most votes wins, regardless of how small his "winning" percentage. For example, if three candidates run in a race, the winner can win with as little as 34% of the vote. In other words, a candidate can be elected even if a large majority of voters did not vote for him. Third party candidates become potential "spoilers" who may deny the candidate preferred by the most voters the plurality to win. Plurality winner elections create a two-person, two-party, zero-sum dynamic which inherently advantages negative campaigning.

◈ *Description:* Instant runoff voting (IRV) or ranked choice voting lets the voter rank the candidates. Instead of being limited to only putting a mark by one name in the field of candidates, the voter ranks as many choices as desired in order of preference, 1, 2, 3 … If the voter's first choice is last after the first round of vote counting, that vote will go to the second choice – all to ensure the candidate with the broadest, majoritarian support wins. Voters readily adapt to and like ranked voting as seen in several U.S. cities now using IRV.

◈ *Where in place:* Partial List: Cities: San Francisco, Minneapolis, Burlington, VT; States: Louisiana, South Carolina and Arkansas use IRV for overseas voters and military voters; Countries: Australia (House of Representatives), Ireland (President), England (Mayor of London); Other: American Political Science Association, Heisman Trophy, etc.

◈ *Turnout Impact:* IRV or ranked choice voting has many benefits: giving voters a wider range of choices, encouraging more robust debate, eliminating the spoiler factor of "third-party" candidates, saving tax dollars spent on election runoffs and decreasing negative campaigning, to name just a few. Because it leads to greater competition and choice, it is likely to increase voter participation.[40]

---

[38] Based on swing states followed by Zogby International and others, and voter turnout for highest office from U.S. Election Project.

[39] *Time for a National Election*, George Pillsbury, www.nonprofitvote.org/library, 2004

[40] For more information in Instant Runoff Voting (IRV) visit the websites of *www.fairvote.org/irv, www.instantrunoff.com, www.betterballotcampaign.org* and others.

ALTERNATIVES TO WINNER-TAKE-ALL VOTING

◈ *Description:* Other countries and many U.S. jurisdictions use a variety of proportional or semi-proportional voting methods for at-large or legislative elections. Single winner elections like mayor, governor or president are by definition conducted on a winner-take-all basis where the candidate with the majority or plurality of votes, wins. However, in elections for at-large seats or for legislative bodies, many countries choose to use proportional or semi-proportional methods as opposed to electing all their legislative seats in single member, apportioned districts or winner-take-all at-large voting.

- In a fully proportional system, parties are awarded legislative seats based on their percentage share of the vote.
- In a "mixed member" system, half the legislative seats are elected in single member districts and the other half allocated as above on a percentage basis to parties in a compensatory or non-compensatory manner.
- Semi-proportional methods such as preference voting, cumulative voting or limited voting are also used for at-large or local elections that are more candidate-centered rather than party-centered like U.S. elections or countries who inherit their voting methods from England.

◈ *Where in place:* Almost all democracies, including the US, use these methods in some or all elections. They are most common in the U.S. in at-large elections for school committees, county boards or city councils in local jurisdictions in Texas, Massachusetts, North Carolina, South Dakota, Minnesota, Alabama, and others.

◈ *Turnout Impact:* Jurisdictions using proportional voting methods tend to have higher turnout, adjusting for all other factors for two main reasons – there is more competition and it allows more voters to cast ballots for a winner and have real representation.[41]

NON-PARTISAN REDISTRICTING

◈ *Description*: Instead of elected officials drawing their own district lines and choosing their voters, a state establishes a non-partisan commission to redraw political boundaries for the redistricting which follows the census every ten years.

◈ *Where in Place:* Fully nonpartisan, authoritative commissions – Arizona, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, New Jersey and Washington; less than fully partisan or full authoritative commissions – Connecticut, Indiana, Iowa and Maine.

◈ *Turnout Impact:* Increasingly sophisticated computer-driven and partisan redistricting has been a factor in the rapid reduction of political competition in U.S. Congressional races in the last 25 years.[42] Nonpartisan redistricting could reverse this trend, increasing the number of competitive districts.[43] Increased competition leads to increased turnout. From the viewpoint of voters, more than turnout and competition, the most compelling reason for adopting nonpartisan commissions is that the idea of legislators drawing their own lines – choosing their own voters – is counter to what the fundamentals of voting and democracy is about.

---

[41] *What Affects Voter Turnout?*, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), *www.idea.int,* Proportional Representation library at Mt. Holyoke College, *www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/polit/damy/prlib.htm;* Lijphart, Arend. 1997. *"Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma."* American Political Science Review 91: 1-14.

[42] *Redistricting Reform*, Thomas Mann, Senior Fellow, The Brookings Institution, The National Voter, June 2005

[43] *Enhancing Competitiveness in Redistricting*, Michael McDonald, U.S. Election Project, www.elections.gmu.edu

PUBLIC FUNDING OF CAMPAIGNS

◈ *Description:* Public funding of campaigns provides grants or matching funds to qualified candidates who agree to spending and contribution limits. When public funding is in place, more average citizens can seek public office. Candidates do not have to rely on special interests and big donors. Freed from the money chase, candidates can spend more campaign time talking to voters instead of making calls and attending events aimed at large donors.

◈ *Where in Place:* Partial List: Statewide and Legislative races – Arizona, Connecticut, Maine and, partially, Minnesota; Judicial races – North Carolina; Governor and Lt. Governor races – New Jersey, Kentucky, Florida, Vermont; Municipalities – New York City, Albuquerque, NM and Portland, OR.[44]

◈ *Turnout Impact:* Campaign finance laws that provide public funding to candidates increase competition. Public campaign funding that is tied to strict spending limits levels the playing field for candidates who may otherwise choose not to run when faced with large financial disparities between candidates. With both more candidates and more diverse candidates[45] comes increased competition and potential increases in voter turnout both in local jurisdictions and statewide.[46] An added benefit of public financing is that the shift of focus towards voters may reduce cynicism and apathy, resulting in increased voter participation.

V. Other

NON-PARTISAN ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

◈ *Description:* Elections are run on a non-partisan basis by professional election administrators rather than by officers serving on a board on the basis of party affiliation, a partisan election or a partisan appointment. Methods vary on how to choose top election officers or election boards.

◈ *Where in place:* Most if not all other democracies outside the U.S. No new democracy would consider having elections run by a partisan official, nor does the U.S. recommend this method to any new democracy. Almost every state in the U.S. has a partisan Secretary of State (though the level of partisanship in election administration varies widely depending on the individual).

◈ *Turnout Impact:* Nonpartisan election administration along with more transparent and accountable decision-making decreases the likelihood of a partisan official engaging in tactics to suppress or discourage the participation of voters from the opposing party and increases the likelihood that the election administrator is acting in the best interests of all voters. This and other non-partisan reforms help boost voter confidence in fairness of elections and government.

---

[44] *State Public Campaign Financing Laws and Public Financing Laws in Local Jurisdictions -- Summary Charts* (2005), CGS [insert full name of organization] *www.cgs.org/projects/politicalreform* or Public Campaign at *www.publicampaign.org*

[45] *The Impact of Public Election Funding on Women Candidates: Comparative Evidence from State Elections,* Timothy Werner, Kenneth R. Mayer, University of Wisconsin, The Wisconsin Campaign Finance Project, 2005

[46] *Do Public Funding Programs Enhance Electoral Competition?*, Kenneth R. Mayer, Timothy Werner, Amanda Williams, University of Wisconsin, The Wisconsin Campaign Finance Project, Updated March 2005

RIGHT TO FULL REPRESENTATION FOR RESIDENTS OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

◈ *Description:* Legislation pending in Congress would give the non-voting representative now elected by D.C. residents full voting rights in Congress. The legislation, agreed on by advocates of the District of Columbia and leaders in both parties in the House and Senate, would create two new seats – one for D.C. and another temporarily in Utah subject to re-location depending on reapportionment in 2011. More than a half million people living in the capitol city – whose population is majority African-American – are now the only Americans in the United States who fulfill all the responsibilities of citizenship but are denied equal rights to representation in Congress[47].

◈ *Where in Place:* All other Americans in the continental United States, Hawaii and Alaska have the citizenship right to vote for a full representative in Congress.

◈ *Turnout Impact:* Voter turnout in the District of Columbia averages about 7-8 percentage points below the U.S. average. If D.C. residents gained actual representation in Congress, even without a truly competitive general election contest, turnout could match the U.S. average and 30,000 more eligible voters would vote - not a large number nationally, but important for many other reasons for the people who make the nation's capitol their home.

A Final Note:

There are other election reforms not listed here that could have a salutary effect on voter participation. Some deserve more study, such as automatic voter registration, better and universal standards for voter identification or an amendment to the Constitutional guarantee of a right to vote. Conversely election changes aimed at or with the consequence of suppressing the participation such as overly burdensome ID laws or new and intimidating registration procedures should be opposed. There are some potential reforms we are uncertain of both for practical reasons and doubts about their participation benefits, such as making every Election Day a holiday or changing the voting day to a weekend. In all cases, the there are considerable benefits to citizenship and democracy beyond issues of voter turnout highlighted in this report.

---

[47] For more information, visit DC Vote at *www.dcvote.org*

Other Sources

Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945, Mark N. Franklin, European University Institute, Florence, Cambridge University Press, 2004

Democracy at Risk: How Political Choices Undermine Citizen Participation and What We Can Do About It, co-authored with American Political Science Association Committee on Civic Education and Engagement and The Brookings Institution, Brookings Institution Press, 2005

Fulfilling America's Promise: Ideas to Expand Opportunity and Revitalize Our Democracy, Demos, September 2006

Improving Voter Participation, Tova Andrea Wang, The Century Foundation, 2006

Balancing Access and Integrity: The Report of The Century Foundation Working Group on State Implementation of Election Reform, The Century Foundation, July 2005

Resources

United States Election Project – *www.elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout*
The U.S. Election Project, directed by Dr. Michael P. McDonald, has as its mission to provide timely and accurate election statistics, electoral laws, research reports and other useful information regarding the United States electoral system.

US Census Current Population Survey (CPS) – *www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/voting*
Information on reported voting and registration delineated by various demographic and socioeconomic characteristics is collected for the nation every November of congressional and presidential election years and is available in the Current Population Survey (CPS).

CNN America Votes 2006 – *www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2006*
CNN's America Votes 2006 profiles results and exit polls on races for Governor, U.S. House, U.S. Senate, Ballot Measures and Key Issues in the 2006 election. CNN used the National Election Pool's National Exit Poll for the major media consortium including ABC, CBS, NBC, Associated Press, FOX and *The New York Times* conducted by Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International. It was based on questionnaires of 13,251 voters at 249 polling locations around the nation and in telephone interviews with absentee and early voters.

For information about specific voting constituencies

The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) – *www.civicyouth.org*
CIRCLE promotes research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25. It is also a clearinghouse for relevant information and scholarship.

Pew Hispanic Research – *www.pewhispanic.org*
The Pew Hispanic Center is a nonpartisan research organization supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts. Its mission is to improve understanding of the U.S. Hispanic population and to chronicle Latinos' growing impact on the entire nation.

Young Voter Strategies – *www.youngvoterstrategies.org*
Young Voter Strategies is a nonpartisan project of The Graduate School of Political Management at The George Washington University.

APIA VOTE – *www.apiavote.org*
The Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote (APIAVote) is a national nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that encourages and promotes civic participation of Asian Pacific Islander Americans in the electoral and public policy processes at the national, state and local levels.

Asian-American Legal Defense and Education Fund – *www.aaldef.org*
The Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) is a national organization that protects and promotes the civil rights of Asian Americans.

League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) – *www.lulac.org*
LULAC advances the economic condition, educational attainment, political influence, health and civil rights of Hispanic Americans through community-based programs nationwide.

William C. Velásquez Institute (WCVI) – *www.wcvi.org*
WCVI is a non-partisan public policy analysis organization whose purpose is to conduct research aimed at improving the level of political and economic participation in Latino and other underrepresented communities; provide information to Latino leaders relevant to the needs of their constituents; inform the Latino leadership and public about the impact of public policies on Latinos and the political opinions and behavior of Latinos.

The National Council of La Raza (NCLR) – *www.nclr.org*
NCLR, a national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States, works to improve opportunities for Hispanic Americans. Through its network of nearly 300 affiliated community-based organizations, NCLR reaches Hispanics each year in 41 states, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia.

Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies – *www.jointcenter.org*
The Center informs illuminates the nation's major public policy debates through research, analysis, and information dissemination in order to: improve the socioeconomic status of black Americans and other minorities. It has a new paper on *Blacks and the 2006 Midterm Elections* by David A. Bositis, Senior Research Associate

The National Coalition on Black Civic Participation – *www.ncbcp.org*
The NCBCP serves as a facilitator and convener at the local, state and national levels.

NAACP – Civic Engagement Program – *www.naacp.org/advocacy/civic/goals*
The Civil Engagement Program's goal is to increase African American participation in the democratic process by removing roadblocks and disincentives to participation.

Native VOTE – *www.nativevote.org*
The Native VOTE Campaign is a national non-partisan effort to mobilize the American Indian and Alaska Native vote in collaboration with regional organizations, local tribal governments, centers serving the Indian populations of urban centers and non-governmental organizations whose focus is on democracy initiatives.

For information on non-partisan sources of candidate competition

The Cook Political Report – *www.cookpolitical.com*
The Cook Political Report is an independent, non-partisan newsletter that analyzes elections and campaigns for the U.S. House of Representatives, U.S. Senate, Governors and President as well as American political trends.

The Rothenberg Political Report – *rothenbergpoliticalreport.blogspot.com*
The Rothenberg Political Report, published bi-weekly, includes House and Senate election ratings as well as gubernatorial ratings. The Report also contains in-depth analysis of the most competitive races in the country and each issue.

Fair Vote – *www.fairvote.org*
Fair Vote's Voting and Democracy Research Center helps Americans understand their elections, by presenting objective research on the results and consequences of U.S. elections. It features FairVote's analysis of elections, in particular its Monopoly Politics report and its data collections on plurality elections in the United States, redistricting in all 50 states and state election results.

National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS) – *www.nass.org*
The stated purposes of NASS is to disseminate and exchange information among its members their duties, responsibilities, methods of operation, suggestions and proposals for improvement in their respective offices thought mutually beneficial to themselves, their states, and the nation

***Electionline.org* –** *www.electionline.org*
Electionline.org is a forum for learning about, discussing and analyzing election reform issues related to the Help America Vote Act of 2002. Serving policymakers, officials, journalists, scholars and concerned citizens, *Electionline.org* provides a centralized source of data and information in the face of decentralized reform efforts for everyone with an interest in the issue.