



Beyond the Ballot: Identifying Barriers to Voter Registration and Improving First-time Voting Rates

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Abstract: Youth voter registration remains much lower, limiting political representation for younger generations. This study examines common barriers that prevent eligible young Americans from registering to vote and asks how voter registration systems can better support first-time voters. I argue that inconsistent registration processes and limited civic education discourage youth participation. I reviewed existing research and personally evaluated the voter registration processes of seven states from the perspective of a first-time voter, documenting differences in accessibility, identification requirements, deadlines, and website design. The analysis shows that states with simpler registration systems create a more accessible experience for young voters. I propose a three-part plan consisting of mandatory voter education, statewide registration competitions with mock elections, and a standardized national voting website to strengthen lifelong civic engagement and democratic participation.

Introduction

Youth voter registration refers to the process through which eligible young people enroll to vote and gain access to participate in elections. In the United States, voter registration is



generally a separate requirement from voting itself, meaning individuals must take an additional step before they are legally able to cast a ballot. Because registration rules, deadlines, and procedures vary by state, the process can be confusing and inconsistent for first-time voters.

Youth voter registration is important because early political participation can shape long-term civic engagement. Research and voting behavior patterns suggest that individuals who register and vote in their first eligible elections are more likely to continue voting later in life. In this way, increasing youth registration strengthens democratic participation by ensuring that younger generations—who are affected by major policy decisions involving education, the economy, climate, and social rights—are represented in the political process.

Despite its importance, youth voter registration remains uneven and is influenced by multiple factors. Structural barriers such as strict deadlines, limited access to registration opportunities, and a lack of clear information can prevent young voters from registering. In addition, motivational factors, including political interest, trust in government, and the belief that voting makes a difference, can also shape whether young people choose to register. At the same time, modern strategies such as online registration systems, school-based voter registration drives, and digital outreach have created new opportunities to expand youth participation. Complicated registration rules, limited access to civic education, and low levels of political motivation can prevent many young people from registering to vote. However, expanding school-based voter registration efforts, strengthening civic education, and using digital outreach strategies can increase youth participation in the democratic process. This paper will examine the key challenges affecting youth voter registration, including structural barriers, civic education gaps, and motivational factors, and it will also explore how digital mobilization and outreach can help with youth participation.

I examine these challenges first by reviewing the existing literature about youth voter registration, voting, and political participation. Then, I simulate registering to vote in several states, including New York, Oregon, California, and Florida. Using my unique perspective as someone in the same age range as young voter registrants, I synthesize these two sources of information to present a plan to increase youth voter registration and participation. This is important because increasing youth participation is not simply about improving voter turnout statistics, but about strengthening democratic legitimacy, encouraging lifelong civic engagement, and ensuring that the principle of "one person, one vote" applies equally to every generation. A democracy is strongest when all voices are heard, and removing barriers to youth participation helps make that ideal a reality.

Literature Review

Youth voter participation has long been of interest to both social scientists and the mass media. There are several findings, regarding youth participation, that have been robust across several studies. Pero and Nelson (n.d.) summarize some of this work, as relevant to this project: (1) that political engagement and knowledge are uneven across young people; (2) that people with more education are more likely to vote; (3) and that election laws can both help or hinder youth voter participation. They come to these conclusions by analyzing data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Assessment, which shows that civic knowledge is low among Americans aged 18 to 29. And, moreover, this knowledge is uneven across different classes and racial groups. Zhu (2021) extends Pero and Nelson's finding that

there are disparities between young Americans of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Specifically, Zhu finds that there are differences in voting rates among young individuals from these different demographic groups.

While there are likely many reasons for these disparities, one well-studied reason is that education helps students learn the types of skills needed to participate in politics (Verba et al., 1995). For the purposes of voter registration, these findings imply that those with higher education are more able to navigate the voter registration process; they may find it easier to locate and fill out registration forms, for instance. Similarly, researchers have found that African Americans tend to experience more barriers to political participation, due to systemic inequalities like fewer community resources, lower socioeconomic status, and, on average, less education (Leighley and Vedlitz, 1999). It's valuable to note, though, that Leighley and Vedlitz (1999) only studied African American political participation in Texas, as such—while it's reasonable to assume that similar patterns exist in other states due to widespread inequalities in American society—I do want to interpret their results with caution. That said, evidence also exists suggesting that young people who experience racism or oppression can develop skills that make them even more effective in political participation (Wegemer et al., 2025). This discrepancy highlights the complexities involved in trying to improve voter participation among young people.

These complexities are further exacerbated by differences in laws and barriers to voter participation, and registration, across states. Beadle, Guzman, and Medina (2022) study this issue directly, finding that different voter registration policies affect who registers and who actually votes, especially regarding young people. These authors study four common policies meant to make voting easier: (1) Automatic Voter Registration (AVR), where individuals are automatically registered when using certain state services, like motor vehicle services;¹ (2) Online Voter Registration (OVR), where individuals can directly register online without having to go to any particular location or interact with any specific people; (3) Same-Day Registration (SDR), where individuals can register and vote on the same day; and (4) Pre-registration policies, which allow teens (16–17) to register before turning becoming of voting age. They find that, for the general population, these policies do not have a huge overall effect once other factors (like income or education) are controlled for. However, they also find that these policies do matter for young people. OVR does increase registration, but variation in the policy across states and lack of publicization has contributed to low awareness of the program among young people. Additionally, they found that SDR policies also increase youth voting rates. Despite the benefits of these policies, Beadle, Guzman, and Medina argue that making registration easier doesn't always lead to increased youth voter turnout. They argue that this occurs for several reasons. First, despite these policies leading to easier registration, voting still has barriers like ID requirements, needing transportation to the polls, and the time spent researching candidates and casting votes. Additionally, some new registrants may be “low-propensity voters” who are less likely to actually vote, despite registering. Finally, some communities may have less trust in government systems. So, while existing policies meant to ease youth voter registration can help, they certainly have been unable to solve the problems that youths face in registering and casting their ballots.

¹ Per the author's experience, AVR programs depend on the personnel working within state programs. For instance, it is possible to not be offered automatic enrollment while receiving other services at the DMV.



Contribution

Overall, these articles show that youth voter participation is shaped by unequal access to knowledge, differences in education, and structural barriers embedded in laws. These factors act in different ways, producing disparities among groups and making it more difficult for people of a young age to register and vote for others. While much of this existing research is valuable, one common limitation is that none of these researchers are youth-aged. They bring prior experiences that limit their ability to understand how youths experience the voter registration process. I, thus, add to this literature by sharing the experience of myself, a young registrant, navigating the voter registration process. I focus on voter registration as a key point to political participation. Then, I further apply my insights to real-world efforts designed to increase registration among high school students.

Analysis

Methodology

To examine the barriers young voters faced, I tried to register myself and selected several states with different voter registration systems, including Florida, Texas, New York, California, Wyoming, North Dakota, and Oregon. These states were chosen because they represent a variety of approaches to voter registration, including same-day registration, online systems, paper systems, automatic registration, and some strict identification requirements. Some states, such as California and Oregon, are known for more modern and flexible systems, including same-day registration and automatic voter registration, while others, such as Texas and Florida, require additional steps that may make registration more difficult for first-time voters. Wyoming and North Dakota were also included because they use less common systems that may create confusion for young voters unfamiliar with election procedures.

To make this as realistic as possible, I approached each state's voter registration process as a first-time young voter attempting to register. This effort was inspired by the "Administrative Burdens" approach associated with Pamela Herd and Donald Moynihan (2018). Because I am also a first-time prospective voter, I was able to evaluate the systems from the perspective of someone with limited experience navigating government websites and election procedures. I was able to locate each state's official voter registration website, reviewed the requirements, and attempted to fill out the forms without submitting them. During this process, I documented how easy the websites were to navigate, whether registration could truly be completed online, identification requirements, registration deadlines, and any confusing or time-consuming steps. I paid particular attention to barriers that may disproportionately affect high school students and first-time voters, including a lack of access to driver's licenses or state IDs, printing and mailing requirements, and unclear instructions. Although the applications were not submitted, and thus I cannot gauge any barriers that may arise after form submission, my approach still provides valuable insight into how registration systems themselves can either encourage or discourage youth participation in elections.

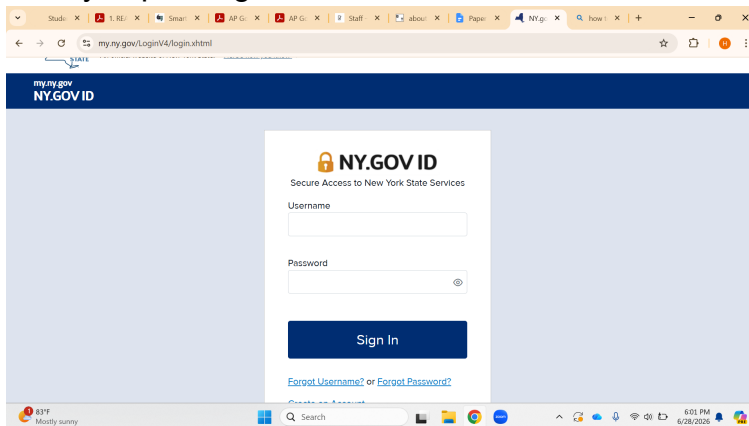


Experience Registering to Vote

The voting registration process varied greatly depending on the state, and these differences revealed how registration systems can either encourage or discourage participation among young voters. Some states offered straightforward and accessible systems, while others required additional steps that made registration more difficult and confusing.

Texas created one of the largest barriers because the state does not provide true online voter registration. Although users can fill out the form online, they must still print, sign, and mail the application for it to count. This process may confuse first-time voters who assume the registration was already submitted electronically. It also creates practical obstacles for students who may not have printers, stamps, or experience mailing official forms. Texas also requires registration thirty days before Election Day, adding additional pressure to complete the process early.

Florida and New York also created challenges through identification requirements. In both states, online voter registration requires a driver's license or state-issued identification card. Students without identification must instead register by mail or in person, making the process less accessible. Florida's long registration deadline and lack of same-day registration also increase the likelihood that students who miss the deadline cannot participate in the election. In New York, the website itself created confusion because it appeared to request login information before clearly explaining how first-time users could create an account.



In contrast, California and Oregon provided much more accessible systems. California clearly included information for 16- and 17-year-olds interested in pre-registering, and the state allows same-day registration, reducing the impact of missed deadlines. Oregon also simplified participation through automatic voter registration and universal vote-by-mail elections. These systems removed many of the barriers present in stricter states and made the registration process feel easier and more welcoming for first-time voters.

Overall, the experiences showed that strict deadlines, identification requirements, paper-based systems, and confusing instructions create significant barriers for young voters. Meanwhile, states with same-day registration, automatic registration, and simpler online systems generally make participation easier and more accessible. These findings suggest that administrative complexity itself can discourage youth civic participation, even when voting rights formally exist.

Discussion

Through my analysis of voter registration systems and barriers to young voters, I identified several challenges that may discourage participation, including a lack of knowledge about the registration process, transportation difficulties, language barriers, inconsistent state requirements, and fear of making mistakes during the registration process. Many students lack knowledge about registration requirements, election procedures, and voting deadlines, making the process confusing for first-time voters. Transportation can also be a challenge, as younger individuals may not have access to a vehicle, experience using public transportation, or enough time to reach polling locations after school. In addition, varying registration rules across states create unnecessary confusion, while language barriers may make election information difficult for some students to understand. Finally, many young voters fear making mistakes on official registration forms, especially when government websites include warnings about penalties for errors, which can make the process seem intimidating. Together, these barriers may reduce participation among eligible young voters and highlight the need for solutions that make civic engagement more accessible and approachable.

Based on these findings, I developed a three-part plan designed to reduce these obstacles and increase youth civic engagement. The plan consists of a mandatory voter education program in high schools, a statewide voter registration challenge combined with mock elections, and the creation of a standardized national voting website. Together, these initiatives aim to make voter registration more accessible, understandable, and less intimidating for first-time voters.

1. Mandatory (not optional) voter knowledge class. The first component of the plan is a mandatory voter knowledge class. This class will start in the freshman year of high school and go to the end of senior year. Students would attend a monthly class integrated into an existing history or civics class. This session would explain the importance of voter registration, the requirements, election terminology, and common challenges young voters encounter. The program would also help students create secure digital voter portfolios where they could organize registration confirmations, election information, and other important documents. To encourage participation, the program could count for a small percentage of a student's history grade. By providing consistent instruction throughout high school, students would gain confidence and knowledge before becoming eligible to vote.
2. The second part of the plan would be a statewide Voter Registration Competition combined with mock elections. Schools would compete to register the highest percentage of eligible students, with incentives such as awards, public recognition, or school-wide prizes. Friendly competition could motivate students to participate while creating a culture of civic engagement. In addition, schools would host mock elections that closely resemble real voting experiences. Students would complete sample registration forms, visit voting booths, and practice casting ballots. These simulations would reduce anxiety, familiarize students with election procedures, and help eliminate fears about making mistakes during the actual voting process.
3. The final component is the creation of a standardized national voting website used by all states. It would be important for this website to be mobile-friendly. As Barati (2023) finds that online social media usage weakly increases offline political participation, it seems reasonable to suggest that an online, mobile-access-optimized voting registration and



information website may help more young people register to vote. While states would maintain authority over elections, the website would provide a consistent structure and user experience nationwide. The homepage would clearly explain its government purpose and include large, easy-to-navigate buttons for registration, registration status verification, voting information, and voter assistance. Users could quickly access information about in-person voting, early voting, mail-in voting, polling locations, deadlines, and ballot tracking. The website would also provide support and accessibility tools for users with different language needs. A standardized platform would reduce confusion created by varying state websites and make election information easier for first-time voters to locate and understand.

Together, these proposals address barriers identified in this paper. Mandatory Voter Knowledge classes would reduce the gaps and uncertainty that discourage many first-time voters, while registration competitions and mock elections would increase familiarity and confidence in the voting process. Additionally, a standardized national voting website simplifies registration, reduces confusion caused by differing state systems, and makes election information more accessible, helping more young Americans participate in democracy.

Conclusion

To ensure the largest impact, I recommend the whole plan be implemented, in one go, through an act of Congress. If it's implemented in parts, politicians may only implement the bits amenable to them, and not the parts they don't like, which would undermine the efficacy of the whole thing. It might not work if not done altogether. While there could be some benefits to implementing it on a state-by-state basis, particularly ease of building support, that pathway would not address the problems of inconsistencies between states. So, while any path to the whole plan being implemented would be good, it would be best to work through Congress. There are no persuasive ethical reasons to oppose this plan --- the vast majority of Americans think voting is a public good (Silver, 2022) . People have become frustrated by not knowing how states count ballots, for instance, or why polls have become more inaccurate. In fact, this is an opportune time for more transparent election rules. Public policy isn't forward-looking enough without youths sharing their views. The American dream/identity is based on one person, one vote, and we aren't living up to that right now when it comes to young voters.

By implementing my proposed plan, in the way I've suggested, we — as a society — can fix the myriad youth voter registration barriers that I identified. I was able to identify these issues by going through several states' registration processes and by leveraging my unique perspective as a soon-to-be young voter. Through my examination of voter registration systems in Texas, Florida, New York, California, Oregon, Wyoming, and North Dakota, I found that young voters often face inconsistent registration requirements, strict deadlines, identification requirements, confusing websites, and limited access to civic education. I intentionally selected these states because they offer a wide variety of voter registration systems. For example, California and Oregon offer more modern approaches through same-day and automatic voter registration, while Texas relies on a paper-based system that requires forms to be printed and mailed. States such as Wyoming and North Dakota were included because they use less common registration procedures that may create additional confusion for first-time voters. To identify these barriers, I navigated each state's voter registration process as if I were a first-time



voter, documenting the challenges and obstacles I encountered. This approach allowed me to evaluate the system from the perspective of the people most affected by it: young Americans preparing to vote for the first time.

Youth participation should matter to those who care deeply about our future because young people are not only first-time voters but are also future workers, community leaders, and policymakers. The decisions made today last longer than a click of a button, but for the future regarding education, the economy, healthcare, technology, and climate change, making it essential that they have a voice in selecting the leaders who make those decisions. Furthermore, voting often begins early in adulthood: those who vote in their first available elections are more likely to remain engaged throughout their lives (Dinas et al., 2023). When barriers discourage young people from participating, democracy loses valuable perspectives and becomes less representative of the population it serves. A healthy democracy depends on broad participation across all generations, and ensuring that young people can easily register and vote strengthens democratic legitimacy, increases civic engagement, and helps create a government that better reflects the interests of all Americans.

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