

The Opinion Pages

Increasing Voter Turnout for 2018 and Beyond

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At the moment, given the rocky start experienced by President Trump, 2018 seems like a promising year for Democrats. Still, to win in the next congressional elections, Democrats will need to increase turnout. Last year, city dwellers, young people, Latinos and Asians all supported Hillary Clinton overwhelmingly. But those groups voted underwhelmingly.

This was not an aberration, and it reflects a situation not easy to change. America's voter turnout is far below that of most democracies. Worse, it's uneven: Older, wealthier and more educated people turn out in large numbers. Last year, for example, 70 percent of those over 70 years old voted. By contrast, only 43 percent of those under 25 did.

Even in presidential elections, when turnout is highest, the electorate does not reflect America. In primaries and local elections, turnout can dip into single digits. This has proved catastrophic for both major parties in our political system, often favoring extreme candidates and ensuring that most incumbents have no real contest.

Raising turnout presents two distinct challenges: How does our campaign win the next election? And how does our political system raise voter turnout for the long term?

The first challenge is easier. One way for campaigns to get their voters to the polls is to recruit a good candidate who can inspire voters and run a competitive race.

Then there's painstaking fieldwork. All campaigns do it, but Donald P. Green, a professor at Columbia, said that many do it wrong. With Alan S. Gerber, Green wrote "Get Out the Vote," which collected evidence from randomized controlled trials about what gets candidates' supporters to the polls. "There's a strong consensus that one of the few things that actually does increase turnout is contact, preferably in person," said Green. "Shoe leather really works." Especially when it's a neighbor doing the door knocking.

Voter anger is another turnout boost; hence the dominance of negative ads (which, of course, increase polarization and dysfunction).

Among Democrats this year, serious people are already signing up to run in 2018, even against incumbents formerly considered safe. That's partly because President Trump's initiatives have been resisted with an extraordinary wave of post-November activism — which can also supply door knockers. And voter anger? More like voter apoplexy.

But there's no guarantee that the enthusiasm will last — or that any increase in turnout will, in the long term. Barack Obama's first election, in 2008, was a high turnout year. Just six years later, in 2014, turnout was the lowest it had been since 1942, when a lot of American voters were occupied defending democracy in other ways. Even in 2018, pro-turnout factors will be undercut by numerous structural barriers — long-term obstacles intended to preserve the dominance of rich, white, older people by suppressing the votes of poorer, younger minorities.

Nevertheless, in the last few years, many states and cities have begun institutional reforms that make voting easier.

Denver is a leader. Coloradans have long been among the nation's most enthusiastic voters, and last November, Denver set a personal best: 72 percent of those registered voted — much more than in most major cities. (The percentage was 67 in 2008, and 63 in 2012.)

“For us, this is a customer service issue,” said Amber McReynolds, Denver's director of elections. “Whatever we can do to better serve our voters, we're going to do.”

Denver mailed a ballot to every registered voter. Voters could fill it out at home and then mail it in or bring it to a drop box. Mailed ballots could be tracked with bar codes.

8 Voting at home was popular: 92 percent of voters chose to do it at home. A place could do so anywhere in the city — near home or near work.

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There were other modernizations: People could register and vote on the same day. Those who moved had their voter registration changed automatically when they updated their driver's license.

McReynolds has hosted between 300 and 400 election officials from elsewhere who are interested in Denver's changes, she said. Many were from California; this week, Orange County's board of supervisors is **deciding** on Denver-style reforms.

We hear a lot about voter suppression. It is true that in many states and cities, Republican officials make it harder to vote, placing obstacles aimed especially at minorities. This has rightly drawn attention and condemnation — and some reversals in court.

But the counter-trend is growing. The Illinois legislature, for example, just adopted automatic registration, by unanimous votes in both houses. If the governor signs it, then citizens who have

contact with state agencies, including the motor vehicles department, will be automatically registered unless they decline.

Oregon was the first state to institute automatic registration, but now there are eight, as well as Washington, D.C. They include red states: Alaska, Georgia and West Virginia. Momentum is growing; so far this year, 32 states have introduced proposals to institute or expand it.

Republicans approve of automatic registration because researchers believe it is truly nonpartisan. It's so new that we have only one test case: Oregon this year. The state saw higher turnout among people who were young, poorer and less urban. While young people and poor minorities tend to skew Democratic, rural people and poor whites tend to vote Republican.

It's also the right thing to do. "Not everybody's trying to suppress votes," said Wendy Weiser, director of the democracy program at the Brennan Center for Justice. "Some people want the system to work better."

Automatic registration does make the system work better. It saves money, cleans up voter rolls and reduces the chance of error and fraud — without increasing the risk of hacking.

These are all important. But can it raise turnout? By itself, probably not. In concert with other reforms, maybe.

One reason turnout is dismal is that the United States is one of very few democracies that places the burden of registration on the voter. Does it seem normal to have to register to vote? It isn't. In nearly every other advanced democracy, citizens are automatically registered.

And nearly every other democracy holds elections on weekends, or makes Election Day a holiday. (In some countries, people dress up to go vote!) Voting on a workday isn't usually a burden for old people, or people powerful enough to set their own hours. For wage workers, however, it's daunting.

"It is very hard to get voters' attention," said Elaine Kamarck, the director of the Center for Effective Public Management at the Brookings Institution. "We squeeze our Election Day into the middle of everything else Americans are doing. We never say, 'Stop, think about your country and vote.'"

Then there is the decentralization of American elections. "We have elections every single week," said Seth Flaxman, who runs the nonprofit organization Democracy Works and TurboVote, an app that texts or emails people voting reminders, instructions and forms. "We've given out information for over 2,000 races so far this year. Each of them has vote-by-mail deadlines, absentee ballot deadlines and the appropriate forms that people need."

Some people think the barriers to increased turnout are insurmountable. "One of the prime articles of faith is that if we made voting easier, they would vote," said David Becker, who directs the Center for Election Innovation and Research. "Well, voting is easier in the U.S. for almost every voter

than at any time in American history. Despite that, turnout in every kind of election except presidential elections is declining. And in presidential elections, turnout is stagnating. Youth voter turnout is at an all-time low.

“Changing election administration, reforms around convenience voting — the literature is pretty conclusive that none of these have any significant long-term effect.”

Not everyone agrees. Some researchers point to election-day registration, for example, as something that works. Fifteen states let voters register when they vote. It makes sense that election-day registration could increase turnout. In some states, registration closes a month or more before Election Day. Are you finally ready to pay attention to the election? Too late!

In their 2013 book “Who Votes Now?” Jan E. Leighley and Jonathan Nagler found that in such states, election-day registration would raise turnout by 6.6 percentage points. (Becker, however, thinks the evidence linking election-day registration to better turnout is weak.)

As for automatic voter registration, pioneering Oregon had the largest increase in turnout of any state between 2012 and 2016. According to a new analysis by the Center for American Progress, about 116,000 people registered who would have been unlikely to do so on their own, and 35 percent of them voted. That’s a pretty low rate. But it’s still 40,000 new voters.

Other strategies could focus on helping young people identify as prospective voters and make voting a habit once they’re eligible. Eric Marshall, director of the liberal Funders’ Committee for Civic Participation, argues for expanding registration drives in high schools, to register high schoolers before they reach their 18th birthdays, and before they scatter.

Election officials could try to help people feel more competent at understanding the issues and candidates. People don’t enjoy doing things they’re bad at. Becker suggests changing the typical small-type voters’ handout about the candidates, written in government-ese, and experimenting with more appealing messages.

Flaxman’s goal is to bring voting information and inspiration into the channels people already use. His organization supplied the data to Google and Facebook to answer “where do I vote?” — a question people asked 123 million times last year. Colleges offer the TurboVote app alongside class registration. And Starbucks featured TurboVote on the side of millions of coffee cups.

“Each thing by itself has only a marginal impact,” Flaxman said. “But all those different 2 to 3 percent increases — we’re hoping it adds up to 20 percent.”

Correction: June 14, 2017

An earlier version of this article misstated the number of cups on which Starbucks featured TurboVote. The number is millions, not 35 million, a number that cannot be verified.

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