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Election Laws and Voter Turnout in the United States

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Abstract

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Over the last decade, electoral reform has become a topic of intense controversy in the United States. While Republicans highlight the need for strict voting laws to prevent voter fraud and maintain election integrity, Democrats argue that these laws create barriers to voting and decrease voter turnout. How have U.S. voting laws evolved over the last decade? How do these changes affect voter turnout? Which voting laws have the greatest impact on voter turnout? Researchers Larocca and Klemanski (2011) provide answers to some of these questions through an empirical analysis on the effects of state-level election laws and reforms on voter turnout in the 2000, 2004, and 2008 presidential elections. Using a cost-benefit model, the authors find evidence to support their hypothesis: reducing both the number of trips and the number of tasks required to vote has the most positive impact on voter turnout. Building on this I hypothesize that states with more restrictive voter laws will have a lower voter turnout than states with less restrictive voter laws. I also hypothesize that voter registration deadlines will have the greatest impact on voter turnout. Compiling state-level data on early in-person voting, absentee voting, voter identification requirements, and voter registration deadlines from 2012, 2016, and 2020, I use linear regression to analyze the effects of the average restrictiveness of voting laws on voter turnout. The results of this model reveal that voting law restrictiveness has a highly suggestive effect on voter turnout. As the average restrictiveness of voting laws increased, voter turnout decreased anywhere from 4.7 to 8.0 percent. In addition, voter registration deadlines had a significant impact on voter turnout in all three election years. These results provide compelling implications for future policy proposals regarding election laws. They also pose interesting questions for future research relating to who is most affected by these voting laws.

Introduction

One of the fundamental pillars of democracy is free and fair elections. Adam Przeworksi's *Why Bother with Elections?* argues that the playing field of democracy is never absolutely level, and elections are inherently imperfect. In particular, he demonstrates how elections are skewed towards incumbents and those with money. For example, "control over legislation grants incumbents an opportunity to adopt legal instruments in their favor" (p.51). In office, parties can use resources at their disposal to manipulate election rules and legally discriminate against voters. These laws are often accompanied by a rhetoric of promoting democracy through election integrity. While these laws may appear neutral at face value, they are not equal in their effects. For example, "voter identification cards in the United States are portrayed as a measure to avoid fraud even if they are intended to make voting more difficult for poor people" (p.56). Moreover, given the goals of candidates and political parties to win elections, "it is unreasonable to expect that competing parties might abstain from doing whatever they can to enhance their electoral advantage" (p.73). Przeworski's analysis of elections poses many interesting questions relating to recent U.S. electoral reform and the overall state of democracy. How have U.S. voting laws evolved over the last decade? How do these changes affect voter turnout? Which groups are most affected? In short, assessing the quality of democracy requires understanding by what means and mechanisms it is systematically skewed.

This paper takes up that question by using empirical research methods to analyze electoral reform and assess its impact on political participation. Explaining the relationship between state-level election reform and voter turnout requires an understanding of how voters decide whether to vote or not. The rational choice theory of political participation and the cost-benefit model of voter turnout considers voters as rational decision-makers who weigh

the costs and benefits of voting when choosing to vote. Larocca and Klemanski (2011) refine the cost-benefit model by categorizing the costs into two dimensions: (1) the number of physical trips needed to vote and (2) the number of discrete tasks necessary to vote. This model suggests that when states increase the restrictiveness of their voting laws, they are also increasing the costs of voting. As voting costs increase, individuals are less likely to vote. Therefore, I hypothesize that states with more restrictive voting laws will have a lower voter turnout than states with less restrictive voting laws.

Understanding the current state of electoral politics and how states propose and adopt voting laws requires some knowledge of the history of U.S. voting policies. In 1965, Congress passed the most significant piece of voter access legislation at that time with the Voting Rights Act of 1965. This law was designed to protect minority rights and prohibit racial discrimination in voting. The law ensured that state and local governments do not pass laws or policies that deny American citizens the right to vote on the basis of race. As mandated by Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act, states and jurisdictions with histories of systemic racial discrimination in their voting laws were required to receive federal government approval before making changes to their election rules. For the next nearly half a century, amendments and extensions would be added to increase voting rights and expand voter access to millions of Americans. However, on June 25, 2013, the Supreme Court changed the landscape for electoral politics and state voting laws. In the court case of *Shelby County v Holder,* the Supreme Court ruled that Sections 4 and 5 of the Voting Rights Act are unconstitutional. In a 5-4 decision, the Court argued that the constraints of these sections on the states and jurisdictions in question are outdated and do not reflect the changes made in the last 50 years to narrow the voting turnout gap[1]. As state voting laws were already somewhat mixed in their level of restrictiveness versus

openness, this decision gave many states the green light to adopt restrictive laws.

Literature Review

Understanding the relationship between election laws and voter turnout requires reading relevant literature relating to the questions posed earlier in this paper: how do voting laws affect voter turnout? Does restrictiveness influence turnout? Who is most affected by barriers to voting? Which voting laws have the greatest impact on voter turnout? Considering the research designs of other authors will help determine how to test multiple hypotheses and gather the necessary data for this study.

In recent years, voter identification laws have become a topic of intense partisan conflict. Data from the last two decades show subtle variation in the relationship between voter ID requirements and voter turnout (Highton, 2017). Comparing competing theoretical arguments, research design methods, and empirical results of four studies analyzing the effects of voter identification laws, Highton summarizes that no study reported an overall turnout effect greater than four percentage points. However, Highton notes that a complicating factor to these studies is that the strict photo ID requirement - which has the most substantial effects on voter turnout but has only been in place in a small number of states and for a relatively small number of elections - does not yet show the true effects of strict voter ID laws on voter turnout. While the strict photo ID requirement is considered a fairly recent legislative phenomenon, its adoption has and is expected to continue to increase in many Republican states.

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[1]The states covered by Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act include Alabama, Alaska, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Virginia. In addition, jurisdictions in Arizona, Hawaii, Idaho, and North Carolina were covered.

To understand what variables influence states to propose election reform, Biggers and Hanmer (2017) attempt to provide theoretical insight on how changes in political power influence the adoption of identification laws. Using event history analysis from 1972 to 2013, the authors find that the propensity to adopt restrictive voter identification laws is greatest when control of the governor's office and legislature *switches* to Republicans. The authors also find that the greater diversity in a state's racial and ethnic composition, the more likely Republicans are to enact restrictive voter identification laws once in office. The results from Biggers and Hanmer stress the importance of partisan conflict and a switch in party control in determining a state's likelihood to adopt stricter voting laws. However, these factors are not the only determinants of proposal and passage of stricter voting legislation.

Bentele and O'Brien (2013) also consider the dramatic increase in the proposal and adoption of restrictive voting laws from 2006-2011. Examining conditions that may shape electoral reform policy, the authors find evidence supporting their hypothesis that "targeted demobilization" of minority voters and African Americans is a main factor influencing the passage and proposal of restrictive voter legislation in Republican states. Using voter turnout data, the authors find that "both larger proportions of African American residents and higher levels of minority turnout in the previous presidential election are significantly associated with more proposed legislation" in Republican-dominated states (p.1096). The only other factor associated with an increase in restrictive legislation proposals is in states with larger increases in class-biased turnout (higher turnout among lower-income voters relative to wealthy voters). States with a higher percentage of African Americans in their racial composition as well as a greater preference and strength of an unencumbered Republican majority in the state legislature were more likely to see passage of restrictive legislation in 2011.

Similarly, Hajnal et al (2017) explore the effects of voter identification laws on voter turnout of racial and ethnic minorities. The article examines which party ID/ideological base is most affected by voter ID laws. By analyzing data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Studies (CCES) on individual voter turnout from 2006 to 2014 and strictness of voter identification laws in place in each state from the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), the authors find that strict voter ID laws alter voter turnout in favor of whites and those on the political right. The authors conclude that these laws diminish minority participation and increase the voter turnout differential between whites and nonwhites, leaving minority voters with unequal representation.

Foley et. al (2021) consider the differential experiences of voting barriers and voting policies in midterm elections. The authors analyze who benefits the most from policies designed to mitigate voting barriers. Using pre and post 2018 midterm election panel surveys in Wisconsin, the authors find that Black voters estimate greater commute times in getting to the polls (9 minutes versus 6.5 minutes for non-Black voters) and Hispanic voters report longer wait times once they are there (11 minutes versus 5 minutes for non-Hispanic voters).

Many scholars also consider early voting laws as another voting method influencing voter turnout. While many states offer early in-person voting (EIP), the degree of early voting access can vary by the overall total EIP hours, evening hours, Saturday hours, Sunday hours, and the number of early voting sites available. In Neeley and Richardson's (2001) study on the effects of early voting on voter turnout, they ask the questions "who is early voting?" and "does early voting increase turnout?" The authors find that there tends to be few differences between the demographics of early voters and regular voters; and the "age, race, and income variables suggest that early voting has not had a strong mobilization effect on the disadvantaged groups

for which the law was intended" (p.387). In a bivariate analysis, the strongest effects of early

voting appear to work in the contrary direction: the wealthiest respondents use early voting at a

significantly higher level than lower-class voters.

Additionally, two separate articles analyze the effects of early voting laws in particular

states: North Carolina and Ohio. Using publicly available individual-level voting records from

the North Carolina State Board of elections, Walker et al. (2019) study the effects of early voting

changes on county-level voter turnout in the 2016 general election compared to the 2012

election. While early voting policies varied by county, the authors find little evidence and no

systematic patterns to support a direction or statistically significant effect of early voting

changes on voter turnout. In a different article studying the effects of early voting on voter

turnout from 2008 to 2012, authors used voter registration data in Ohio to compare voter turnout

amongst individuals who live in the same 2x2 mile square block but in different counties

(Kaplan et al., 2020). Between 2008 and 2012, after a 2010 homogenization law, only 2 counties

increased the number of days of early voting whereas 20 counties decreased early voting. The

authors find per additional day of early voting, voter turnout increased 0.22 percentage points

with greater positive impacts on women, Democrats, independents, and those of child-bearing

and working age but do not find statistically significant results for increased evening hours or

Sunday voting availability.

Larocca and Klemanski (2011) provide an empirical analysis on the effects of state-level

election laws and reforms on voter turnout in the 2000, 2004, and 2008 presidential elections.

Indicating the years that states adopted each of the reforms, the authors define and analyze the

restrictiveness of six different methods of voting: universal mail voting, permanent no-excuse

absentee voting, nonpermanent no-excuse absentee voting, early in-person voting, Election Day

registration, and voter identification requirements. The authors use the aforementioned cost-benefit model of voter turnout to hypothesize that voting methods that require the least number of trips and tasks to vote will contribute to a higher voter turnout. Using data from Current Population Surveys (CPS) to determine voter turnout by state, the authors find evidence to support their hypothesis. Permanent and nonpermanent no-excuse absentee voting and Election Day registration were all found to increase the probability of turnout. Early in-person voting had a negative impact on voter turnout, which is expected as this voting method does not reduce the costs of voting, according to their model. While universal mail-in voting did not yield statistically significant results, this could be due to low sample size (only Washington State had universal mail-in voting in the 2008 election).

The analysis from these articles converges around three important trends:

(1) Republican states are more likely to adopt stricter voter laws and electoral reforms are stricter in Republican states

(2) There are multiple factors influencing Republican states to propose and adopt restrictive voter legislation, including switch of party control and diversity in state characteristics

(3) Different voter regulation strategies have different effects on voter turnout

Building on these trends, it is important to note the significance of *Shelby County v Holder* in allowing states and jurisdictions with histories of systemic racial discrimination in their voting laws to change election rules without review and preclearance from the federal government. In recent years, Republican states, including those not previously affected by Sections 4 and 5 of the Voting Rights Act, have shifted to more restrictive voting laws. My analysis will provide insight on the effects of state voting laws on voter turnout in the 2012, 2016, and 2020

presidential elections.

State Election Reforms: Defining its Component Parts

As indicated by the literature review, researchers across studies define election reforms differently. Using four types of election reforms - early in-person voting, absentee voting, voter identification requirements, and voter registration deadlines - this study will look at the restrictiveness of voting laws in each of the fifty states. It is important to begin by defining and operationalizing these voting methods synonymous to the data and goals of the study. Restrictiveness will be measured on an index of 0-1, with 0 being the least restrictive and 1 being the most. Based on a state's election procedures for each voting method, the state will be scaled as a 0 or 1.0 (and in some cases a 0.5).

Early In-Person Voting (EIP)

Early voting allows registered voters to cast ballots on specified days and at selected voting sites prior to Election Day. The rules on early voting such as the number of days, hours, etc. vary from state to state, and some states even choose not to offer early in-person voting. As previously mentioned, there are mixed results regarding the effectiveness of EIP voting on voter turnout. Restrictiveness is quantified by the number of days a state allocates for residents to cast an early in-person ballot. If a state does not offer early in-person voting, they are given a 1; a state with 0-15 days of early voting is a 0.5; and a state with more than 15 days of early voting is a 0.

Absentee Voting

Absentee voting allows residents to vote by mail. An advantage to absentee voting is that it does not require the voter to be available on a particular day or at a particular time. As with early voting, states differ in their rules regarding absentee voting. There are two main

types of absentee voting: no-excuse and excuse-required. No-excuse voting means that voters can apply for an absentee ballot without providing a reason whereas excuse-required means that voters must request and be approved to vote by absentee ballot based on a list of acceptable excuses. In this study, if a state requires an excuse, they are given a 1, and states that do not require an excuse are given a 0. In 2020, the index changes slightly to include states who automatically sent registered voters ballots or absentee voter applications as a 0, states who allowed COVID-19 fears to be listed as an excuse for all voters as a 0.5, and states who did not extend absentee accommodations to all voters as 1.

Voter Identification Requirements

In recent years, voter identification requirements have become a topic of intense controversy. As the table below indicates, the number of states with no ID requirement has decreased over the last two decades as more states have implemented election reforms with stricter identification requirements (*NCSL*). Today, a majority of states have laws requesting or requiring voters to show some form of identification at the polls. If voters do not have the necessary identification, states can provide voters with alternatives. These alternatives fit into two categories: strict and non-strict. In strict states, voters without proper identification can cast a provisional ballot but must take additional steps after Election Day for their vote to be counted, such as returning to their election office within a few days to show identification. Non-strict states allow the voter to cast a ballot without further action from the voter. For example, voters may cast a provisional ballot and sign an affidavit of identity. After Election Day, election officials use signature checks or other methods of identification to determine whether the voter was eligible and registered. Using this, states with strict identification requirements were counted as a 1 and states with non-strict ID requirements were a 0.

Voter ID Chronology
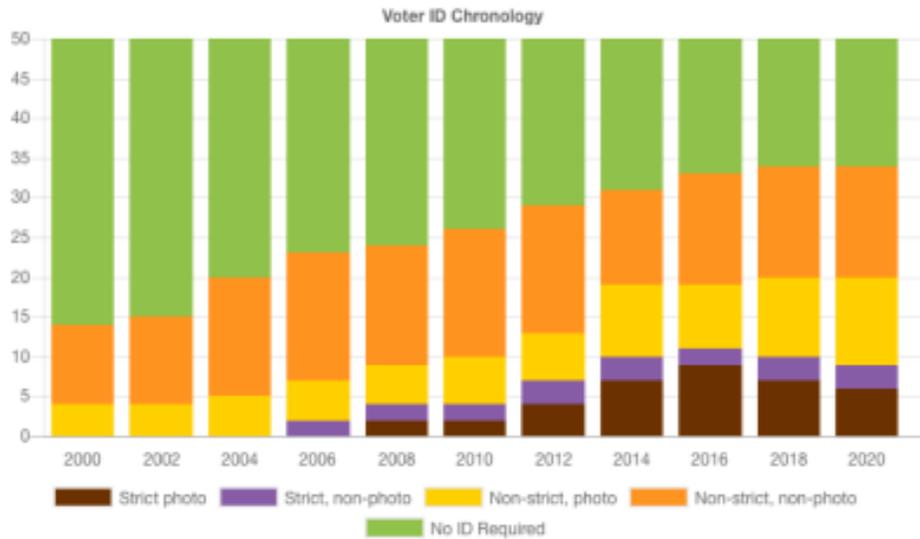
Voter Registration Deadlines

Every state except North Dakota requires its citizens to register in order to vote. Voting

registration deadlines vary drastically by state, with some states closing their registration periods

30 days or more before an election and others offering Election-Day voter registration.

Therefore, states with Election-Day registration are given a 0; states whose registration

deadlines are 1-15 days prior to Election Day are a 0.5; and states whose registration deadlines

are more than 15 days from the election are a 1.

Research Design

The first step in analyzing the effects of election reform on voter turnout is classifying

and categorizing states according to their laws. Using the four aforementioned voting

methods, this research codes each state based on the restrictiveness of their individual election

laws. Additionally, these values are averaged to give each state an overall restrictiveness

score. Researching the election laws in each state and reporting its values is based on data

from the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), the Brennan Center for Justice,

NPR, and Ballotpedia. In addition to a state's restrictiveness, this study also controls for other

independent variables which have been shown to have an effect on voter turnout. These variables include median age by state and percent population of the state with an undergraduate degree. The model originally included median household income by state and percent population of the state that is Black or African American as two other independent variables to factor into the analysis; however, these variables were removed from the model as they lacked statistical significance and experienced collinearity in a bivariate analysis. Information on these variables was retrieved from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the United States Census Bureau. Finally, based on turnout data from the Election Project, the dependent variable is the voting-eligible population turnout rate by state in three presidential election years - 2012, 2016, and 2020.

Using multiple regression analysis, the paper tests two main hypotheses. The first is that states with more restrictive voter laws will have a lower voter turnout than states with less restrictive voting laws. This is because states that are considered more restrictive often have measures in place that increase the burden of voting for individuals, yet they do not increase the burden for all voters equally. Studies have found that voting restrictions have the most negative effects on minority groups and poor people. Overall, these restrictions disenfranchise certain groups of voters, making it harder for individuals to vote and decreasing voter turnout. The second hypothesis is that voter registration deadlines will have the greatest impact on voter turnout. Using the cost-benefit model of voter turnout, an individual's decision to vote is affected by (1) the number of physical trips needed to vote and (2) the number of discrete tasks necessary to vote (Larocca and Klemanski, 2011). States that offer Election Day registration allow voters to register and vote all in one trip. In many states, the only documents needed to register are proof of residency and voter identification. States with Election Day registration

provide a greater advantage to voters than states where voter registration closes more than 15 days prior to the election. Comparing other voting methods, the difference between most strict (1) and least strict (0) is not as significant. For example, while voter identification may differ from state to state, many U.S. voters possess photo identification and therefore, are not affected by the cost-benefit model. Additionally, early in-person voting still requires the same number of physical trips and discrete tasks in order to vote regardless of the number of days a state allows voters to cast a ballot. Because of this, voter registration deadlines will affect voter turnout more than other election laws.

While not a specific component of the hypothesis, it will also be compelling to look at trend lines across presidential election years, especially as major events have shaped the political landscape. For example, the 2013 Supreme Court decision of *Shelby County v Holder* struck down on Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act, effectively ending the preclearance requirement of certain states and jurisdictions. Since then, the Brennan Center for Justice has consistently found many of these previously covered states engaging in significant efforts to disenfranchise voters. The research in this paper tests the validity of this data in the four voting law categories and its significance on voter turnout. In contrast, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the 2020 election as many states made changes to their election laws which made it easier for individuals to vote. For example, many states requiring excuses for absentee ballots allowed voters to select "physical illness/disability" or "COVID-19" when requesting an absentee ballot. Other states automatically mailed absentee ballots to all their registered voters. As many states became less restrictive in their election laws, one would expect the average restrictiveness of a state to decrease and voter turnout to increase.

Results

Using SPSS software and linear regression models, the results of the study are presented below. Figure 1 reports the effects of states' average election law restrictiveness in the 2012 presidential election on state-level voter turnout. When considering the restrictive index for 2012, the results are significant at the 0.05 level. The data shows that for every 1 unit increase in restrictiveness, voter turnout decreases by a little over eight percent. Median age is significant at the 0.1 level and education at the 0.01 level and both show a positive correlation between the variable and voter turnout. The beta weights indicate that education is the most important determinant of voter turnout in this model. For 2016 (Figure 2), the average restrictiveness is highly suggestive, as the coefficient is significant at the 90% confidence level. In this case, for one unit increase in restrictiveness, voter turnout decreases by almost 5 percent. In this model, median age is more significant than in 2012 ($p<0.05$). In 2016, education is still the most significant predictor of voter turnout (beta weight 0.451). For every one percentage point increase in the population of the state with an undergraduate degree, voter turnout increases by 0.522 percent. In 2020, the average restrictiveness index is significant at the 95 percent confidence level. The B coefficient reveals that for every 1 unit increase in restrictiveness, the voter turnout rate decreases by almost seven percent. Median age is significant at the 0.1 level and education at the 0.01 level. Combining average restrictiveness, age, and education, these variables explain almost 50 percent of the variance in voter turnout in the 2020 presidential election.

Figure 1.

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.580[a]	.336	.293	5.53174

a. Predictors: (Constant), Education, Restrict_Index_12, Median_Age

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	712.931	3	237.644	7.766	<.001[b]
	Residual	1407.606	46	30.600		
	Total	2120.537	49			

a. Dependent Variable: Voter_Turnout_12

b. Predictors: (Constant), Education, Restrict_Index_12, Median_Age

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	21.354	13.787		1.549	.128
	Restrict_Index_12	-8.094	3.396	-.288	-2.384	.021
	Median_Age	.608	.347	.213	1.751	.087
	Education	.572	.149	.464	3.837	<.001

a. Dependent Variable: Voter_Turnout_12

Figure 2.

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.629[a]	.396	.356	4.95235

a. Predictors: (Constant), Education, Median_Age, Restrict_Index_16

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	738.321	3	246.107	10.035	<.001[b]
	Residual	1128.184	46	24.526		
	Total	1866.505	49			

a. Dependent Variable: Voter_Turnout_16

b. Predictors: (Constant), Education, Median_Age, Restrict_Index_16

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	19.333	12.431		1.555	.127
	Restrict_Index_16	-4.780	2.509	-.227	-1.905	.063
	Median_Age	.687	.310	.256	2.216	.032
	Education	.522	.139	.451	3.764	<.001

a. Dependent Variable: Voter_Turnout_16

Figure 3.

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.726[a]	.527	.497	4.13807

a. Predictors: (Constant), Education, Median_Age, Restrict_Index_20

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	878.824	3	292.941	17.107	<.001[b]
	Residual	787.688	46	17.124		
	Total	1666.511	49			

a. Dependent Variable: Voter_Turnout_20
b. Predictors: (Constant), Education, Median_Age, Restrict_Index_20

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	34.418	10.818		3.181	.003
	Restrict_Index_20	-6.869	2.742	-.278	-2.505	.016
	Median_Age	.439	.259	.173	1.697	.096
	Education	.571	.121	.522	4.700	<.001

a. Dependent Variable: Voter_Turnout_20

In the next series of results, the four voting laws - early in-person, absentee, voter identification requirements, and registration deadlines - are analyzed independently in a linear regression model. Figure 4 reports that in 2012, early voting, absentee voting, and voter identification requirements did not have a significant effect on voter turnout. However, voter registration deadlines were significant at the 0.01 level - a 99% confidence interval. The B coefficient explains that as voter registration restrictiveness increases by 1 unit, voter turnout decreases by 7.5 percentage points. The data in Figure 5 again support voter registration deadlines as significant ($p<0.05$); for every 1 unit increase in voter registration restrictiveness, voter turnout decreases by a little more than four percent. Finally, Figure 6 indicates that in 2020, voter registration was significant at the 0.05 level. The B coefficient shows that for every one unit increase in voter registration deadlines alone, voter turnout decreases by three percent. As before, the 2020 model explains almost 50 percent of the variance.

Figure 4.

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.678[a]	.459	.384	5.16470

a. Predictors: (Constant), Education, ID_12, Median_Age, Regis_12, Absentee_12, Early_Voting_12

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	973.551	6	162.259	6.083	<.001[b]
	Residual	1146.986	43	26.674		
	Total	2120.537	49			

a. Dependent Variable: Voter_Turnout_12

b. Predictors: (Constant), Education, ID_12, Median_Age, Regis_12, Absentee_12, Early_Voting_12

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	34.404	14.144		2.432	.019
	Early_Voting_12	2.179	2.544	.134	.856	.397
	Absentee_12	-2.006	1.997	-.144	-1.005	.321
	ID_12	1.919	2.656	.102	.723	.474
	Regis_12	-7.687	2.018	-.461	-3.810	<.001
	Median_Age	.338	.345	.118	.981	.332
	Education	.543	.140	.441	3.873	<.001

a. Dependent Variable: Voter_Turnout_12

Figure 5.

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.660[a]	.435	.356	4.95225

a. Predictors: (Constant), Education, Early_Voting_16, Median_Age, ID_16, Regis_16, Absentee_16

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	811.938	6	135.323	5.518	<.001[b]
	Residual	1054.566	43	24.525		
	Total	1866.505	49			

a. Dependent Variable: Voter_Turnout_16

b. Predictors: (Constant), Education, Early_Voting_16, Median_Age, ID_16, Regis_16, Absentee_16

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	24.585	13.269		1.853	.071
	Early_Voting_16	-.715	2.615	-.047	-.273	.786
	Absentee_16	.168	2.242	.013	.075	.941
	ID_16	-.322	1.927	-.021	-.167	.868
	Regis_16	-4.109	1.817	-.292	-2.262	.029
	Median_Age	.603	.328	.225	1.836	.073
	Education	.495	.142	.427	3.479	.001

a. Dependent Variable: Voter_Turnout_16

Figure 6.

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.745[a]	.555	.493	4.15092

a. Predictors: (Constant), Education, Early_Voting_20, Median_Age, ID_20, Regis_20, Absentee_20

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	925.614	6	154.269	8.953	<.001[b]
	Residual	740.897	43	17.230		
	Total	1666.511	49			

a. Dependent Variable: Voter_Turnout_20

b. Predictors: (Constant), Education, Early_Voting_20, Median_Age, ID_20, Regis_20, Absentee_20

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	30.967	11.327		2.734	.009
	Early_Voting_20	-2.469	1.668	-.153	-1.480	.146
	Absentee_20	-1.105	2.170	-.064	-.509	.613
	ID_20	.502	1.624	.033	.309	.759
	Regis_20	-3.010	1.442	-.244	-2.087	.043
	Median_Age	.522	.266	.206	1.959	.057
	Education	.588	.126	.538	4.657	<.001

a. Dependent Variable: Voter_Turnout_20

The data in these figures is also broken down and reported in an average restrictiveness table which can be found here.[2] Comparing 2012 to 2016, 12 states became less restrictive and 11 states became more restrictive in their voting laws. Many of the states whose average restrictiveness increased were states previously covered by Sections 4 and 5 of the Voting Rights Act, including Louisiana, Mississippi, Virginia, North Carolina, and Idaho. The remaining states whose voting laws became more restrictive were also all Republican states.[3] In contrast, comparing 2016 to 2020, 21 states had a lower average restrictiveness in the 2020 election than in the 2016 election while 12 states became more restrictive.[4]

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[2] Table 1: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1VImMsP1dyB3I8b7SSpwQrRMAls5MrjKtsxBUhdO7d Q8/edit#gid=1681647270

[3] These Republican states are Arkansas, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Texas, and Wisconsin.

[4] The states that became more restrictive were Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Maine, Minnesota, Montana, New Jersey, North Dakota, South Dakota, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this study provide interesting insight into the debate on electoral reform. As the data shows, voting law restrictiveness has a highly suggestive effect on voter turnout and voter registration deadlines have the greatest impact. As the average restrictiveness of voting laws increased, voter turnout decreased anywhere from 4.7 to 8.0 percent. In addition, voter registration deadlines were significant in all three election years. These results are supported by the cost-benefit model of voter turnout as discussed by Larocca and Klemanski, which argues that voting methods which decrease the number of tasks or the number of trips to vote will make it easier for individuals to cast a ballot and will increase voter turnout. While dated, Fenster's research (1994) on Election Day Registration is still noteworthy. Using a pre-post quasi-experimental design, Fenster estimated that a nationwide law allowing Election Day Registration would increase voter turnout by 5%. This one-step system decreases the cost of voting more than the least restrictive policies of early in-person voting, absentee voting, and voter identification requirements.

The historical events surrounding each election year also shed some light on the categorization of voting laws. For example, the 2013 Supreme Court decision of *Shelby County v Holder* gave states previously covered by Sections 4 and 5 of the Voting Rights Act the freedom to change election laws. It should also be noted that this decision may have incentivized states not covered in this provision of the Voting Rights Act to become more restrictive. By 2016, all 11 states that became more restrictive were Republican, and 5 of those states were previously covered by Section 4. In 2020, many states eased voting restrictions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly all states implemented at least one type of accommodation to ease the burden of voting. For example, many states requiring excuses for absentee ballots allowed voters to

select "COVID-19" when requesting an absentee ballot. Other states automatically mailed absentee ballots or applications to their registered voters. As Table 1 highlights, average restrictiveness in 21 states decreased in the 2020 election. These effects on voter turnout are visible in the data, as the 2020 model with average restrictiveness explains almost 50% of the variance. However, as many of the 2020 election accommodations were temporary and as some states have already proposed and adopted more restrictive laws since the election, it will be important to track how states proceed in coming years and to follow the long-term trends this data produces.

Finally, while not a focus of this study but as the literature review discusses, voting laws and other barriers (informational, motivational, procedural) to voting have unequal effects on voters. Many restrictions have a disproportionately negative impact on low-income voters and voters of color. In future studies, it would be compelling to do more research on *who* is most affected by these specific voting laws and policies.

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