

What Affects Voter Turnout Rates?

Turnout varies greatly by state. In the 2012 Presidential Election, 76% of eligible Minnesotans cast ballots, whereas only 45% of eligible Hawaiians did. Many different factors influence voter turnout levels.

- **Electoral Competitiveness:** One of the most important factors is the competitiveness of the presidential election in each state. Overall, 66% of eligible voters turned out to the polls in the nation's 12 most competitive states in 2012, but only 57% did in the nation's 39 other states (including the District of Columbia).
- **Election Type:** Low turnout is most pronounced in primary elections, off-year elections for state legislators, and local elections. For example, a 2013 study of 340 mayoral elections in 144 U.S. cities from 1996-2012 found that voter turnout in those cities averaged at 25.8%. In many cities, mayors have been elected with single-digit turnout. For example, turnout in Dallas' 1999 mayoral election was a mere 5%.

Run-off elections for all offices also tend to have lower turnout than first round elections, especially if the first round election takes place on the same day as several other elections. For example, of 171 regularly scheduled primary runoffs for U.S. House and U.S. Senate from 1994 to 2012, all but six of them resulted in a turnout decrease between the initial primary and the runoff, meaning that 96.5% of federal runoff elections had fewer people voting in the second round than in the first. The average reduction in turnout was 35.3%. Additionally, the longer the wait between the initial primary and the runoff, the higher the decrease in voter turnout between elections. Primary elections with a gap of more than thirty days had a median decline in voter participation of 48.1%, while those with a gap of twenty days or less had a median decline of 15.4%.

- **Voting Laws:** Voter registration laws, voter identification laws, early voting, and polling place accessibility can also affect voter turnout, though not always in the ways that we might expect. For example, the introduction of early voting, which was intended to make voting easier and increase turnout, appears to have actually decreased turnout.
- **Demographics:** In the aggregate, voters tend to be older, wealthier, more educated and whiter than non-voters.
 - **Age:** Young people are much less likely to vote than older ones. From 1972 to 2012, citizens 18-29 years old turned out at a rate 15 to 20 points lower than citizens 30 year and older.
 - **Race/ethnicity:** Voter turnout also varies by race and ethnicity. In 2012, turnout rates among eligible white and black voters was 64.1% and 66.2%, respectively, while it was only 48.0% and 47.3% among Latino and Asian American voters respectively. The 2012 election was the first presidential election since Reconstruction ended in which black turnout exceeded white turnout.
 - **Gender:** Women's voter turnout has surpassed men's in every presidential election since 1980. In the 2012 election, 7.8 more women than men voted. Interestingly though, older women are actually less likely to vote than older men. In 2008, 72.2% of men 75 years and older voted, compared to only 64.9% of women that age.
 - **Socio-economic status:** Wealthy Americans vote at much higher rates than those of lower socio-economic status. During the 2008 presidential election, only 41% of eligible voters making less than \$15,000 a year voted, compared to 78% of those making \$150,000 a year or more. Studies have shown that this difference in turnout affects public policy: politicians are more likely to respond to the desires of their wealthy constituents than of their poorer constituents, in part because more of their wealthy constituents vote.

Once you have read the "What Affects Voter Turnout Rates?" handout, discuss the following questions and record your answers. Be prepared to share your answers with the class.

1. What surprised you most about this article?
2. Are you familiar with the terms "blue states," "red states," and "swing states?" How might these terms relate to voter turnout?
3. How do the different types of elections affect voter turnout?
4. Why do you think laws designed to increase turnout (early voting, etc.) appear to have depressed turnout?
5. Why do you think voters tend to be wealthier, older, and white?
6. Why is it important to vote?
7. Do you think this article listed all the reasons for low voter turnout? What other ones can you hear of?
8. What do you think are effective strategies for increasing voter turnout?