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Technology *For the People*: Increasing American Voter Access Through Pro-Voter Policies and Blockchain Technology

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Executive Summary

A successful democracy requires the full participation of its citizens, and eligible voters in the U.S. should be provided ample opportunity to exercise their civic duty and have their voices heard. In 2018, more than half of U.S. eligible voters cast a ballot, the highest turnout rate for a midterm election in recent history. The increased turnout was particularly pronounced among Hispanics and Asians, making the 2018 midterm voters the most racially and ethnically diverse ever. With enthusiasm at a record high,[1] more than 122 million people voted in the 2018 elections, the highest in a midterm election year since 1978.[2]

Affirmative voting policies— including in-person early voting, no-excuse absentee voting, vote-by-mail, and potentially blockchain-enabled voting—aim to make the voting process more convenient for voters, particularly for those with scheduling and transportation challenges. Some convenience-based voting policies, like vote-by-mail, have shown to be more effective in

driving participation than others and prevail as accessible and safe especially when considering circumstances like the COVID-19 pandemic.[3] And while the effects of early voting and no-excuse absentee voting on participation are less clear, these policies have an important role to play in improving future voting experiences by helping to ensure that voters who want to participate in elections have the opportunities to do so.

Policy Problem

Despite legal and policy advancements that have extended the right to vote, millions of eligible Americans today are either choosing not to vote or face personal obstacles in the electoral process. America's representative government continues to face challenges of low voter participation and participant demographics that are not representative of the broader population of eligible American citizens. Amid these challenges, U.S. elections are further complicated as states are tasked with undertaking steps to ensure that voting is accessible, safe, and secure during COVID-19.
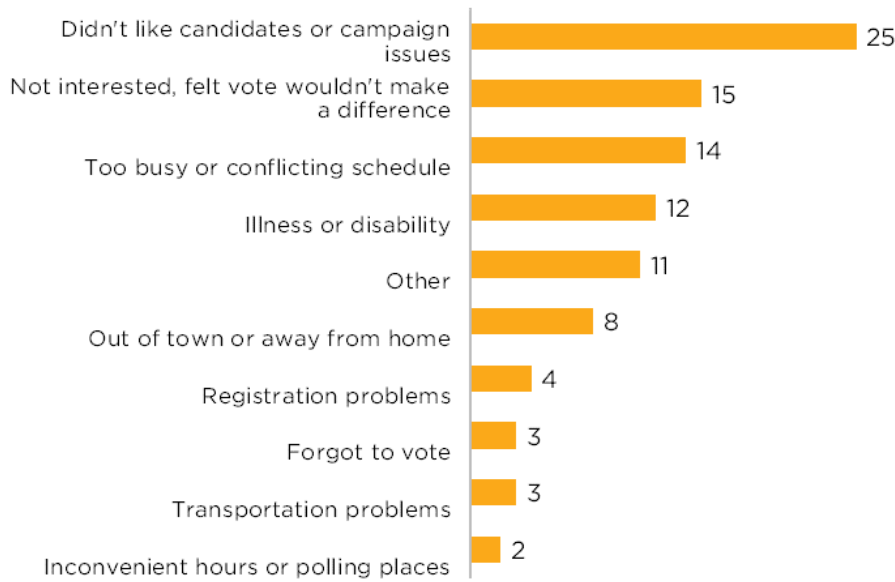
Background

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, voter participation was 53 percent in 2018.[4] Research shows that communities of color, young people, and low-income Americans are disproportionately burdened by registration barriers, inflexible voting hours, and polling place closures, making it more difficult for these groups to vote.[5] Participation gaps persist along racial, educational, and income-level differences.[6]

Figure 1 on page two reveals fourteen percent of registered voters cited being "Too busy or conflicting schedule" as their reason for not voting in the 2016 elections, while two percent cited "Inconvenient hours or polling place."[7] Although most states have rules in place that allow employees to take time away from work in order to vote on Election Day, many eligible voters still are unable to do so. The same is true for Americans with family obligations. Eligible voters with young children may have to find reliable and affordable child care before going to the polls. The challenges existed prior to the

Figure 1. Why registered voters say they did not vote in 2016

Among registered voters who did not vote, & who said main reason was...

Didn't like candidates or campaign issues	25
Not interested, felt vote wouldn't make a difference	15
Too busy or conflicting schedule	14
Illness or disability	12
Other	11
Out of town or away from home	8
Registration problems	4
Forgot to vote	3
Transportation problems	3
Inconvenient hours or polling places	2

Note: "Don't know," "Refused," "Bad weather conditions" and "No response" not shown.
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of the 2016 Current Population Survey, November Supplement

current public health crisis too. As states hasten to make adjustments in time for the November 2020 Presidential Election, access to voting remains difficult for communities of color because they are most at risk for contracting COVID-19.[8] Voting also remains especially difficult if designated polling places are located far away or lines are long, requiring additional time away from work or home—time that many Americans cannot afford.[9]

During the recent June 2020 primary elections in Georgia, reports revealed that voters waited in line for four to six hours.[10] In 2012, voting lines cost Americans an estimated $544 million in lost productivity and wages.[11] These costs often fall disproportionately on communities of color and low-income Americans. African American voters are, on average, forced to wait in line for nearly twice as long as white voters.[12] Moreover, long wait times can play a role in dissuading would-be voters from participating in future elections.[13]

Potential Solutions: Making Voting More Convenient

States can implement the following pro-voter policies in order to expand voting opportunities for eligible Americans and increase participation: (1) In-person early voting, (2) No-excuse absentee voting, (3) Vote-by-mail, and (4) Blockchain electronic-enabled voting.

In-Person Early Voting

Early voting aims to make voting more convenient for eligible voters by providing them with greater flexibility and opportunities to cast ballots. If implemented correctly and with sufficient resources, early voting has the potential to facilitate shorter lines on Election Day and improve the American voter experience. In at least 39 states and the District of Columbia, any qualified voter may cast a ballot in person during a designated period prior to Election Day, with no excuse or justification required (two additional states will provide this option in the coming years).[14] Data

indicate at least 42 million people chose to vote early in the 2016 elections.[15] Early voting that takes place on Sundays and "Souls to the Polls" events are particularly popular among the African American and Hispanic voting populations.[16]

In implementing this policy, states should ensure that there is an adequate number of early voting locations conveniently located near public transportation. Early voting options that allow voters to cast their ballots on Saturdays and Sundays would accommodate non-traditional work schedules. Additionally, as research suggests that early voting is most commonly utilized by infrequent voters and nearer to an election, early voting that begins at least 14 days prior to Election Day could also help increase voter turnout.[17]

While early voting seeks to provide voter convenience and satisfaction with participation, the main disadvantage discussed for this policy option is its split with the civic tradition of voting on Election Day. A 2013 study suggested that early voting decreases voter turnout.[18] However, the early voter turnout of the 2018 midterm election increased and in some states surpassed historical turnout for non-presidential elections.[19] Reductions of early voting options have shown a decrease in participation for communities of color.[20] As states approach the November 2020 Presidential Election during the COVID-19 pandemic, early voting provides an option that would allow voters to cast their ballot in person ahead of time, but some may view the health risks involved with voters going to a public place, with the frequent movement of people, as a deterrent.

Pro-voter policies have the potential to increase voter turnout and wake historically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, like Hispanic voters. About 500,000 U.S.-born citizens of Hispanic origin will turn 18 every year for the next 20 years, roughly 10 million Hispanic voters who will enter the electorate.

No-Excuse Absentee Voting

"No-excuse absentee" voting is the process whereby eligible voters are permitted to return, by mail or in person, voted paper ballots prior to an election. Currently two-thirds of the states, including the District of Columbia, allow any qualified voter to vote absentee without offering an excuse, and in one-third of the states, an excuse is required. Some states offer a permanent absentee ballot list, which means, once a voter asks to be added to the list, the voter will automatically receive an absentee ballot for all future elections.[21]

Voters are typically required to fill out an application online or by mail in order to receive an absentee paper ballot from designated election authorities. No-excuse absentee voting is particularly useful for students, those with conflicting work schedules, and those who travel frequently and are otherwise unable to vote in person on Election Day. While costs associated with producing paper ballots are a disadvantage, another drawback to absentee voting is the burden falls on the voter to pay attention to deadlines and submit a vote on time—a responsibility aligned with one's civic duty to vote. No-excuse absentee voting also serves as an option that enables voters to cast their ballots safely, avoiding traditionally crowded polling places, during the COVID-19 pandemic where social distancing is strongly encouraged.

Vote-by-Mail

Vote-by-mail, which is sometimes called "vote-at-home," is another convenience-based voting policy that improves the voting experience and can increase voter participation. At least 21 states have provisions allowing certain elections to be conducted entirely by mail.[22] Vote-by-mail differs from no-excuse absentee voting in that registered voters need not file a request to receive their ballots. States distribute paper ballots by mail to all registered voters ahead of Election Day.

Through vote-by-mail, voters can take their time examining and researching the candidates and issues, and they can vote in the comfort of their own home before placing their ballot in the mail or dropping it off at a vote center or collection box. Some criticisms of this voting option are its disparate effects on some populations, slow vote counting, and cost. While jurisdictions may save money because they no longer need to staff traditional polling places and equip each polling place with voting machines, all-mail elections greatly increase printing costs for an election. Yet, states like California have managed to shift their voting process for the November 2020 election entirely to vote-by-mail as response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, this policy option is currently the most convenient option to the American voter.

Blockchain-Enabled E-Voting (BEV) System

Lastly, the implementation of a BEV system has the potential to promote more voter participation, especially with the advent of a BEV system that is accessible through smart phone devices. BEV provides a flexible solution that enables convenient, cost-effective voting to facilitate participation and voting from a distance to all voters.[23] BEV also has the potential to ease identity verification in states that require it, which ultimately can help increase access and participation. Approximately 11 percent of U.S. citizens lack government-issued photo identification cards,[24] and a BEV system "would allow voters to personally audit their votes by making sure the ballot they cast matches the one on a printed digital receipt coded with a unique, anonymous voter ID."[25]

However, there are strong election security concerns related to electronic-enabled voting. Experts suggest that electronic voting systems are vulnerable to hacking and manipulation and complicate voter auditing.[26] In the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election and the findings of the Mueller Report, many 2020 Democratic progressive presidential candidates supported the use of paper ballots in future elections.[27] The House of Representatives also supports the use of paper ballots for auditing purposes in its comprehensive election bill, H.R. 1 *For the People*

Act of 2019. Without a paper audit trail, it can be difficult to detect errors or breaches in the voting machine's software or hardware, possibly allowing an incursion into American voting systems to go unnoticed. Even if an error is found, performing an audit of a paperless system can be difficult or impossible given a lack of redundant records to verify vote totals.[28]

Amid election security concerns, different U.S. jurisdictions and states like West Virginia have continued to experiment with block-chain enabled voting in elections.[29] Whether or not the voting system evolves from paper to paperless voting remains to be determined.

Recommendation

Any individual pro-voter policy or combination of policies would provide a convenient method for the eligible American voter to cast her vote. No-excuse absentee voting and vote-by-mail are two affirmative voting policies that can make the process of voting more convenient. No-excuse absentee voting and vote-by-mail policies help eligible voters to cast ballots at their convenience, often in the comfort of their own homes. More importantly, studies have demonstrated that early voting options increase voter turnout among people of color. Similarly, blockchain enabled electronic voting would have the same level of convenience, especially if the technology could allow for voting to take place over one's cellular device.

However, as the United States approaches another presidential election, many states have shifted to absentee ballot and vote-by-mail options in order to administer elections carefully during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the pro-voter policies considered in this brief, vote-by-mail is currently the safest and most accessible because it allows voters to vote from home and avoid traditionally crowded polling places.

Notwithstanding the COVID-19 pandemic, pro-voter policies have the potential to increase voter turnout and wake historically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, like Hispanic voters. For example, about 500,000 U.S.-born citizens of Hispanic origin will turn 18 every year for the next 20 years, roughly 10 million Hispanic voters who will enter the electorate.[30] In conjunction with pro-voter policies in the United States, the Hispanic voting bloc will soon have the numbers to assert itself in elections at the local and national level.

Endnotes

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