

Minnesota Nice: The impacts of voter reform in the United States Midwest

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Abstract

Using dichotomous variables representing state voter reforms, the authors conclude that these variables do impact voter turnout in consistency with the existing scholarly literature. We analyze aggregate data on the status of Election Day Registration, polling place voting, absentee voting with and without excuse, early voting, ability of felons and ex-felons to vote, and the status of election day as a holiday in all fifty states. The results suggest that Election Day Registration and Election day as a holiday have a positive effect on voter turnout, whereas early voting and polling place voting have a negative impact on turnout. The authors use these conclusions to explain the differences in voter turnout in the Midwestern states between election years 2016 through 2020.

Keywords

voter turnout, voter reform, voter identification, voter restriction, election day registration

In the 2016 and 2020 General Presidential Elections, Minnesota had the highest voter turnout of any state in the United States. However, many indicators of high voter turnout, such as high education level, high income, and median age to name a few are not outstanding in Minnesota. Furthermore, other states in the Midwest are similar to Minnesota

demographics-wise, yet have much lower voter turnout. We hypothesize that the presence of voter reforms can explain the differences in voter turnout in the Midwest.

Literature Review

Political scientists study the effects of demographics, ad campaigns, canvassing, restrictive voter laws, and voter reforms on voter turnout. But voter turnout in the United States can be explained by many variables. Scholars tend to agree that voter turnout is influenced by age, marital status, race, education level, income, and region in the United States, amongst other variables (Brians, Leonard, and Grofman 2001; Fitzgerald 2005; Hershey 2009; Burden, Canon, Mayer 2013). High incarceration rates in the United States also impact voter turnout, especially among the black male population. Manza and Uggen (2004) estimate that 4.7 million people were prevented from voting in 2000 due to incarceration.

The effects of voting laws on voter turnout are not agreed upon by researchers. While most researchers do agree that restrictive voter laws are harmful, not all agree that voter reform is an effective tool to increase voter turnout (Hanmer and Traugott 2004; Fitzgerald 2005; Burden, Canon, Mayer 2013). Some researchers' findings agree that voter reform does in fact increase voter turnout (Highton and Wolfinger 1998; Canon, Mayer, and Moynihan 2013; Juelich and Coll 2020.) Since many voter reform initiatives are modern, few studies have attempted to measure the impacts of these reforms. Furthermore, the recent resurgence of restrictive voter laws in the 21st century has left much to be studied by researchers. We conclude that there is a lack of conformity in the literature on the impacts of restrictive voter laws and voter reforms on voter turnout and that there is a gap in the literature in terms of newly instated voter laws and reforms.

Implications of Restrictive Voter Laws

In the past twenty years, voter restriction laws have doubled in the United States (Vickner and Hamner 2017). Voter ID laws require that someone have a valid identification card in order to vote; some states have even attempted to require birth certificates (Hershey 2009). Few studies measure the impacts of voter ID laws in the United States and their results are split. Some researchers find that voter ID laws are not connected to any increase or decrease in voter turnout (Alvarez, Michael, Bailey, and Katz 2008). Yet, other scholars observe that voter ID laws could decrease voter turnout by 3-4%, specifically in already disadvantaged populations (Vercellotti and Anderson 2006). Researchers do agree that restrictive voter laws impact those of lower socioeconomic class more than those of middle or high socioeconomic classes (Brians, Leonard, Grofman 2005). Some scholars find that voter ID laws decrease voter turnout, but that easier access to vote does not encourage those of lower socioeconomic status to vote in higher numbers (Highton and Wolfinger 1998). Barreto, Nuño, Sanchez (2007) find that Latino, Asian, Black, and immigrant populations are statistically less likely to have 5 out of 6 forms of ID than white and native-born populations. Juelich and Coll (2020) observe that restrictive electoral environments impact youth turnout by 16% compared with older voters. Furthermore, researchers find that voters with ID are more likely to vote Republican (Barreto, Nuño, Sanchez 2007; Vickner and Hamner 2017). Vickner and Hamner (2017) observe that the prevalence of these new voter ID laws can be explained by partisan control- when the party in a state switches to Republican, new voter ID laws are likely to be introduced. Vickner and Hamner (2017) explain that the Republican Party benefits from less advantaged people not voting, while the Democratic Party benefits from more new voters. Proponents of voter ID laws cite increased election security, whereas opponents claim it further suppresses the vote of disadvantaged populations (Vickner

and Hamner 2017). However, one form of voter ID law, motor-voter programs, are shown to be helpful to voter turnout. Motor-voter programs have a 4% effect on voter turnout compared to states without a program (Knack 1995).

Implications of Voter Reforms

Brians, Leonard, and Grofman (2001) observe that Election Day Registration (EDR) produces a 4 percentage turnout increase in the average state. Highton and Wolfinger (1998) estimate EDR can increase voter turnout by up to 8.7% compared with a 30 day closing date. Scholars seem to generally agree that EDR increases voter turnout (3-9%) because it decreases the cost of voting by eliminating one trip to the polls to register. Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) observe that participation in elections is most concentrated among individuals with high socioeconomic status. Yet Brians, Leonard, and Grofman (2005) found that EDR impacted the turnout of middle income high school graduates the most. The cost of voting tends to deter disadvantaged populations the most, however, EDR may not help the turnout of these groups (Hershey 2009). This is the point that some scholars make about reforms- that they may retain existing voters instead of mobilizing a significant number of new voters to go to the polls (Fitzgerald 2005; Burden, Canon, Mayer 2013). However, Juelich and Coll (2020) find that younger and less educated populations are more likely to vote in states with Election Day Registration, which may mean that EDR mobilizes new voters. Furthermore, researchers disagree on the effectiveness of early voting on voter turnout. Burden, Canon, Mayer, and Moynihan (2013) observe that election day registration itself has a positive effect on voter turnout yet early voting, when implemented without EDR, is typically observed to lower voter turnout. Some scholars believe that this phenomenon occurs because early voting reduces the cultural significance of election day (Fortier 2006; Burden, Canon, Mayer, and Moynihan 2013).

Another form of voter reform is vote by mail. Hanmer and Traugott (2004) found that vote by mail did not change previous voting patterns in Oregon. In line with other scholars, Hanmer and Traugott (2004) conclude that vote by mail serves to retain voters instead of mobilizing new ones. Fitzgerald (2005) states that voter reform offers greater convenience to current voters, but does not equate to greater turnout. Yet, some scholars argue that mail ballot elections increase election integrity and create easy access to voting, which increases voter turnout (Hamilton 1988). Hamilton (1988) observes during two simultaneous elections occurring 16 miles apart, that the in-person election turnout was 39%, whereas the vote by mail election was 70%. More research is left to be done on vote by mail and mail-in elections, but Hamilton's findings do point to some interesting connections between mail-in elections and voter turnout.

We conclude that scholars tend to be inconsistent in their findings on the effects of restrictive voter laws and voter reform. There is a lack of research on the impacts of voter ID laws because of their recent resurgence in partisan politics. More remains to be explored on the topic, however, scholars tend to agree that restrictive voter laws impact the vote of those whose vote has been historically suppressed. There is an abundance of literature on Election Day Registration that tends to be agreed upon by researchers. Other voter reforms tend to fall into a gap in the literature, where more research is needed, and where conclusions amongst scholars are split. After assessing the literature on voter ID laws, we find that states that require an ID to vote tend to have lower voter turnout rates, especially amongst already disadvantaged people. We believe further research is needed on the topic, specifically in the midwest region, which has historically high voter turnout in some states and very low voter turnout in others. Thus, this leads us to conclude that the presence of voter ID laws may be one explanation of voter turnout rates in Minnesota and the states surrounding it. We find that many variables can influence voter

turnout rates, especially in terms of both voter reforms and restrictive voter laws. In an attempt to explain why Minnesota has a consistently high turnout rate compared to other Midwest states, we will examine the impacts of voter reforms and laws in the Midwest region. We hypothesize that Minnesota has a consistently high turnout rate because it was the first state to adopt Election Day Registration in 1973 (Brians, Leonard, and Grofman 2001), has no voter restriction laws, and has a moderate early voting period that contributes to a strong sense of civic responsibility and easy access to voting amongst its citizens. Furthermore, we hypothesize that Election Day Registration, implemented without early voting, will have a greater effect on voter turnout than Election Day Registration or early voting alone.

Data and Methods

We primarily use data from the 2016 United States Election Project, the 2018 United States Election Project, the 2020 United States Election Project, the U.S. Vote Foundation, the National Conference of State Legislatures, and NonprofitVOTE to assess the relationship between voter reforms and voter turnout. Our analysis relies on states that have one or more of the following voter reforms: absentee voting with excuse, absentee voting without excuse, early voting, allow incarcerated people to vote, allow incarcerated people to vote after release, election day as a recognized holiday, election day registration, and polling place voting. Our analysis was done with data from all fifty states as it would produce more reliable results that we could use to explain the variances in voter turnout in the Midwest.

We created dichotomous variables by assigning the number 0 to a state that does not have the voter reform and by assigning the number 1 to a state that does. We coded each state for each voter reform included in this study. Quantifying voter reforms in this way allows us to find

predictive correlations of voter reforms on voter turnout. Furthermore, our method of coding provided us advantages by standardizing voter reform across all fifty states. We then use the data on voter turnout from the 2016, 2018, and 2020 United States Election Project to find a relationship between these reforms and voter turnout in each respective election. The dependent variable in our research is the voter turnout rate for each state in the 2016-2020 General Elections. To find this number, we look at the total number of voter eligible citizens, divide the total number of ballots counted, and then multiply that number by 100. To collect our data on voter turnout, we chose VEP by highest office because it was the only data measure available for all fifty states. We utilized statistical linear regression techniques to analyze the impact of voter reforms on voter turnout.

For our analysis of voter reforms in the Midwestern states, we chose to define the Midwest as Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, and Wisconsin because these states are accepted as part of the same region. Other states that could be defined as Midwestern, such as Michigan, could also describe themselves as part of another region. We identified which voter reforms are present in each midwestern state and compared this data to our findings.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1 2020 Voter turnout percent by midwest state and presence of voter reforms

| | Iowa | Minnesota | Nebraska | North Dakota | South Dakota | Wisconsin |
|--------------------------------|--------|-----------|----------|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| Absentee voting with excuse | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Absentee voting without excuse | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Early voting | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Incarceration vote | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| After Incarceration vote | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Election Day as a holiday | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Election Day Registration | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Polling place voting | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 2020 General Election turnout | 73.20% | 80% | 69.90% | 64.50% | 66% | 75.80% |

Source: 2020 National Election Project, the U.S. Vote Foundation, the National Conference of State Legislatures, and NonprofitVOTE.

Note: 0 indicates that the voter reform is absent in the state, 1 indicates the presence of the voter reform.

Our findings suggest the presence and absence of voter reforms impact voter turnout in Midwestern states. Furthermore, the existing literature asserts that we can expect states that have implemented early voting, yet not Election Day Registration to have lower turnout rates. Nebraska, North, Dakota, and South Dakota have implemented early voting, yet not EDR, and have lower turnout rates than the other states. Whereas Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin have implemented election day registration and have the highest voter turnouts in the region.

Table 2 Effects of voter reforms in the 2016 General Election

| Model | | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | t | Sig. |
|-------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|------------|---------------------------|--------|-------|
| | | B | Std. Error | Beta | | |
| 1 | (Constant) | 69.510 | 5.033 | | 13.812 | <.001 |
| | ElectionDayregistration | 3.701 | 1.818 | .284 | 2.035 | .048 |
| | PollingPlaceVoting | -6.651 | 4.697 | -.208 | -1.416 | .164 |
| | Absenteevotewithexcuse | -4.142 | 4.694 | -.303 | -.882 | .383 |
| | Absenteevotewithoutexcuse | -1.166 | 4.694 | -.085 | -.248 | .805 |
| | Earlyvote | -3.718 | 1.669 | -.293 | -2.227 | .031 |
| | Felonyvote | 3.456 | 4.309 | .108 | .802 | .427 |
| | Felonyvote2 | -.209 | 1.772 | -.016 | -.118 | .907 |
| | Electiondayholiday | 3.350 | 1.757 | .257 | 1.907 | .064 |

a. Dependent Variable: Voterturnout2016

Source: 2016 National Election Project, the U.S. Vote Foundation, the National Conference of State Legislatures, and NonprofitVOTE.

We find that Election Day Registration has a statistically significant relationship with voter turnout at the .05 level, which confirms the previous literature on Election Day Registration. For every one unit increase in Election Day Registration status (moving from no to yes) there is a 3.701% increase in voter turnout rate. Furthermore, we observe a positive relationship between the variable Election Day as a holiday and voter turnout that is statistically significant at the .1 level. When a state implements Election Day as a holiday, we expect voter turnout to increase by 3.350%. Moreover, we find the relationship between early voting and

voter turnout to be statistically significant at the .05 level. For every increase in early voting time, we expect to find a 3.718% decrease in voter turnout. We did not observe polling place voting, absentee voting with excuse, absentee voting without excuse, incarceration vote, and after incarceration vote to be statistically significant. The adjusted R-squared for our data in 2016 was .273, which means that 27.3% of the data of the variance in the dependent variable, voter turnout 2016, can be explained by our model and the independent variables we are measuring.

Table 3 Effects of voter reforms in the 2018 General Election

| Model | | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | t | Sig. |
|-------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|------------|---------------------------|--------|-------|
| | | B | Std. Error | Beta | | |
| 1 | (Constant) | 62.387 | 4.556 | | 13.695 | <.001 |
| | ElectionDayregistration | 2.253 | 1.646 | .182 | 1.369 | .178 |
| | PollingPlaceVoting | -8.916 | 4.252 | -.294 | -2.097 | .042 |
| | Absenteevotewithexcuse | -5.297 | 4.249 | -.408 | -1.247 | .220 |
| | Absenteevotewithoutexcuse | -.110 | 4.249 | -.009 | -.026 | .979 |
| | Earlyvote | -3.415 | 1.511 | -.283 | -2.260 | .029 |
| | Felonvote | 2.436 | 3.900 | .080 | .624 | .536 |
| | Felonvote2 | .157 | 1.604 | .013 | .098 | .923 |
| | Electiondayholiday | 1.580 | 1.590 | .127 | .993 | .326 |

a. Dependent Variable: Voterturnout2018

Source: 2018 National Election Project, the U.S. Vote Foundation, the National Conference of State Legislatures, and NonprofitVOTE.

In the 2018 General Election, we find that Election Day Registration positively impacts voter turnout by 2.253%, however, the value is not statistically significant. This does not align with the scholarly literature on the effects of Election Day Registration on voter turnout during presidential elections. More research is needed on the impacts of Election Day Registration on voter turnout in non-presidential years. Furthermore, we find a positive correlation between Election Day as a holiday and voter turnout, yet it is not statistically significant. These values were both statistically significant during the 2016 General Election, so this suggests that voter reforms do not have the same impact on voter turnout in non-presidential years. The correlation

between polling place voting and voter turnout continues to have a negative relationship with voter turnout and is statistically significant at the .05 level. Furthermore, when a state implements stricter polling place voting measures, we expect to find an 8.916% decrease in voter turnout. This relationship is significant at the .05 level. Lastly, we find that for each time a state implements a longer early voting period, we can expect a 3.415% decrease in voter turnout. This relationship is statistically significant at the .05 level. We did not observe absentee voting with excuse, absentee voting without excuse, incarceration vote, or after incarceration vote to be statistically significant, as well. The adjusted R-squared for our data in 2018 was .341, which means that 34.1% of the data of the variance in the dependent variable, voter turnout 2018, is explained by our model and the independent variables.

Table 4 Effects of voter reforms in the 2020 General Election

| Model | | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | t | Sig. |
|-------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|------------|---------------------------|--------|-------|
| | | B | Std. Error | Beta | | |
| 1 | (Constant) | 76.713 | 4.216 | | 18.194 | <.001 |
| | Absenteevotewithexcuse | -4.790 | 3.932 | -.371 | -1.218 | .230 |
| | Absenteevotewithoutexcuse | -.801 | 3.933 | -.062 | -.204 | .840 |
| | Earlyvote | -2.871 | 1.399 | -.240 | -2.053 | .047 |
| | Felonvote | 3.597 | 3.610 | .119 | .996 | .325 |
| | Felonvote2 | .118 | 1.484 | .010 | .080 | .937 |
| | Electiondayholiday | 3.450 | 1.472 | .280 | 2.344 | .024 |
| | ElectionDayregistration | 4.081 | 1.523 | .331 | 2.679 | .011 |
| | PollingPlaceVoting | -8.340 | 3.935 | -.276 | -2.119 | .040 |

a. Dependent Variable: Voterturnout2020

Source: 2020 National Election Project, the U.S. Vote Foundation, the National Conference of State Legislatures, and NonprofitVOTE.

In the 2020 General Election, we observe that implementation of Election Day Registration can be expected to increase voter turnout by 4.081%, which is a stronger positive correlation than the model from 2016. The relationship between Election Day Registration and voter turnout is statistically significant at the .05 level. Furthermore, we observe that states where

Election Day is a holiday have an increased voter turnout of 3.450% than those without. We find this relationship to be statistically significant at the .05 level. Polling place voting also has a statistically significant relationship with voter turnout at the .05 level. This relationship shows that voting by mail mobilizes more voters to vote, which is consistent with the scarce amount of literature available on voting by mail. Lastly, we observe that early voting has a negative relationship with voter turnout, which is significant at the .05 level. We did not observe absentee vote with excuse, absentee vote without excuse, incarceration vote, or after incarceration vote to have a statistically significant relationship with voter turnout. The adjusted R-squared for our data in 2020 was .428, which shows that 42.8% of the data of the variance in the dependent variable, voter turnout 2020, can be explained by our model and the independent variables.

For two of our three elections, we see that there is a positive statistically significant relationship between Election Day Registration status and voter turnout. This demonstrates that our hypothesis is partially correct- states with Election Day Registration have higher voter turnout rates than those without EDR during presidential elections. Our findings suggest that Election Day Registration has an impact on voter turnout in presidential elections, yet not in non-presidential years. The existing literature suggests that EDR does impact voter turnout, and our findings confirm this notion in some regard. Yet, more research needs to be done on the impacts of EDR during non-presidential election years. Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin are our only midwest states that have implemented EDR, which may explain why their voter turnouts are higher than Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

Furthermore, we observe that the relationship between early voting in a state and voter turnout is negative in the 2016, 2018, and 2020 General Elections. In each election we find this relationship to be statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. This finding confirms

existing literature that early voting does not mobilize voters to the polls. We did not expect to find such a large impact on voter turnout from early voting, however, the literature suggests that states that implement early voting without EDR experience lower voter turnout. We believe this phenomenon occurs because early voting helps existing voters vote, but does not mobilize new voters to the polls. Of our Midwestern states, we find that those with early voting have lower voter turnout than states without early voting. Furthermore, the states with early voting have not implemented EDR. This confirms our original hypothesis, so we can reject the null hypothesis.

Conclusion

To conclude, our findings confirm our hypothesis. When a state implements Election Day Registration without early voting there will be a greater effect on voter turnout than Election Day Registration with early voting or early voting alone. We can use this information to explain the differences in voter turnout in the Midwest. In future research, we would rule out other variables when studying the effectiveness of voter reforms, such as median age, income, race, education level, and rural versus urban setting. Furthermore, the relationship between voter restriction laws and voter reforms should be measured in future scholarship. Due to limitations in our study, we were not able to test these measures against our voter reform data. Furthermore, more scholarship is needed on voter reforms during non-presidential elections. We found that the relationship between Election Day Registration and voter turnout in the 2018 General Election was not statistically significant, yet it was significant during both the 2016 and 2020 Presidential General Elections. The implications of these findings suggest that the effectiveness of voter reforms in presidential and non-presidential elections differs and requires further research.

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