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The Center for Information & Research
on Civic Learning & Engagement

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Contacts: Kevin Bonderud
Michael Fleischer
202-667-0901

Key State Election Laws Can Boost Youth Voter Turnout *Reforms Can Help Reduce Decline in Voting*

The voter turnout rate among young Americans has dropped by a third in the three decades since 18-year-olds were first eligible to vote. But a new analysis released today shows that some key state election-law reforms can raise youth voter turnout rates by up to 14 percentage points.

Many states have recently enacted a variety of reforms to make it easier for citizens to register to vote and subsequently cast a vote. These range from allowing election-day registration to mailing sample ballots and information on the location of polling places.

Using two studies it commissioned, the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE) examined the impact certain laws have on turnout among young voters, between the ages of 18-24. Youth turnout was higher on average by:

- 14 percentage points in presidential years in states with Election-Day registration.
- 4 percentage points in mid-term election years in states with unrestricted absentee voting.
- 7 percentage points in 2000 in states that mailed sample ballots.
- 3 percentage points in 2000 in states that mailed polling place information (among registered voters without a high school diploma).
- 10 percentage points in 2000 in states that mailed both sample ballots and polling place location information and offered extended voting hours.

“The decline in youth voter turnout is real and alarming,” said William A. Galston, Director of CIRCLE, “and we should all look for ways to reverse this trend. For the first time, we have good research on the impact specific reforms have on younger voters. While many factors influence voter turnout, making it easier to register and vote clearly makes a big difference.”

Election-day registration also increases the likelihood that young voters will be contacted by a political party in presidential elections by 11 percentage points, which research has shown improves voter turnout.

Other positive practices, such as requiring employers to provide time off to vote do not appear to have a significant impact on youth turnout. Extending voting hours does not seem to have an impact on youth voting, but it does have a positive impact when combined with laws requiring election information to be mailed to voters.

“The 2000 presidential election focused attention on the patchwork system of voting in the US and problems some voters have casting a ballot,” said Galston. “As this year’s campaigns heat up, we all need to explore ways to increase the nation’s low voter turnout rate. And it’s especially important when it comes to younger voters – the future of our democracy.”

“Many states are taking positive steps to make voting easier and provide more information,” said Mark Hugo Lopez, CIRCLE’s Research Director. “We are not saying that any given state will increase its youth voter turnout by these percentages if it enacts certain new laws. There are numerous factors that influence how many young people will vote in any given election. The research cited by CIRCLE uses statistical models to estimate the effects of voting laws if all other factors are held constant. These models cannot predict actual turnout levels in a given state, but they do suggest that specific reforms can have a significant impact on turnout.”

CIRCLE also provided a state-by-state list of laws.

- 6 states allow Election-Day registration.
- 24 states allow unrestricted absentee voting.
- 7 states mail a sample ballot to all registered voters.
- 15 states mail information about polling place locations.
- 27 states have extended polling hours.
- 25 states require employers to provide time off for workers to vote.
- 30 states give state workers time off.
- 19 states allow in-person early voting.

The CIRCLE analysis was based in part on “Easier Voting Methods Boost Youth Turnout,” published last year by James Madison University Professor Mary Fitzgerald, and “How Postregistration Laws Affect the Turnout of Registrants,” a new study by Raymond E. Wolfinger, Benjamin Highton, and Megan Mullin of the University of California Berkeley.

The two papers are available on CIRCLE’s web site (www.civicyouth.org). On the site, CIRCLE also has a US map that provides state-by-state information on youth voter turnout statistics for the last three elections and summaries of state election and registration laws.

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Funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and Carnegie Corporation of New York, and housed at the University of Maryland’s School of Public Policy, **CIRCLE** (www.civicyouth.org) is a premier source of impartial, nonpartisan, and comprehensive data, research, and analysis on the civic engagement of young people.

Summary of Key State Election Laws

| <i>State</i> | <i>Election Day Registration</i> | <i>Mails Sample Ballots</i> | <i>Unrestricted Absentee Voting</i> | <i>Mails Information on Poll Location</i> | <i>Extended Voting Hours***</i> | <i>Time Off to Vote ****</i> | <i>In-Person Early Voting</i> |
|----------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Alabama | | | | | | | |
| Alaska | | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Arizona | | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | | Yes |
| Arkansas | | | Yes | | | Yes | Yes |
| California | | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | |
| Colorado | | | Yes | Yes | | Yes | Yes |
| Connecticut | | | | | Yes | | |
| Delaware | | | | Yes | | Yes | |
| Florida | | Yes | Yes | Yes | | Yes | Yes |
| Georgia | | | | | | | Yes |
| Hawaii | | | Yes | Yes | | Yes | Yes |
| Idaho | Yes | | Yes | | | | Yes |
| Illinois | | | | | Yes | Yes | |
| Indiana | | | | | | | |
| Iowa | | | Yes | | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Kansas | | | Yes | | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Kentucky | | | | Yes | | Yes | |
| Louisiana | | | | | Yes | Yes | |
| Maine | Yes | | Yes | | Yes | | Yes |
| Maryland | | Yes | | Yes | Yes | Yes | |
| Massachusetts | | | | | Yes | | |
| Michigan | | | | Yes | Yes | | |
| Minnesota | Yes | | | | Yes | Yes | |
| Mississippi | | | | | | | |
| Missouri | | | | Yes | Yes | Yes | |
| Montana | | | Yes | | Yes | Yes | |
| Nebraska | | | Yes | | | Yes | Yes |
| Nevada | | Yes | Yes | Yes | | Yes | Yes |
| New Hampshire | Yes | | | | | | |
| New Jersey | | Yes | | Yes | Yes | Yes | |
| New Mexico | | | Yes | | | Yes | Yes |
| New York | | | | Yes | Yes | Yes | |
| North Carolina | | | Yes | Yes | Yes | | Yes |
| North Dakota* | | | Yes | | | | |
| Ohio | | | | | Yes | Yes | |
| Oklahoma | | | Yes | | | Yes | Yes |
| Oregon** | | | Yes | | | | |
| Pennsylvania | | | | | Yes | | |
| Rhode Island | | | | | Yes | | |
| South Carolina | | | | | | | |
| South Dakota | | | | | | Yes | |
| Tennessee | | | | | | Yes | Yes |
| Texas | | | | | | Yes | Yes |
| Utah | | | Yes | | Yes | Yes | |
| Vermont | | | Yes | | Yes | | Yes |
| Virginia | | | | | Yes | | |
| Washington | | | Yes | | Yes | Yes | |
| West Virginia | | | | | Yes | Yes | |
| Wisconsin | Yes | | Yes | | | Yes | |
| Wyoming | Yes | | Yes | | | Yes | |

* North Dakota does not require voter registration.

** Oregon is a "vote by mail" state.

*** Extended voting hours were shown to have an effect on turnout when offered in combination with mailing sample ballots and mailing information on poll location.

****Except where noted, requires time off for state government and private sector employees. Delaware, Florida, Indiana, Louisiana, Montana, and New Jersey require time off for only state government employees. Georgia only requires private employees.