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Policy Brief

State Election Laws: How They Impact Voting Rates of Different Racial, Age, and Income Groups

This memo discusses election laws in place during the 2020 elections and how they vary state-to-state. Then, the memo discusses demographic disparities seen in voting rates, and how ease of voting impacts all voters and different racial, age, and income groups. The analysis concludes that changing voting laws to improve ease of voting will increase voting rates, with disproportionate improvements for Hispanic individuals, young adults, and low-income individuals. Lastly, it recommends six specific changes to make it easier to vote.

Background

Recently, election laws have been one of the most hotly debated issues. While the voter integrity versus voter suppression debate is not new, it has become a particularly high priority for members of Congress and state legislators in recent election cycles. Former President Donald Trump and some elected Republicans claim that our elections are harmed by varying amounts of fraudulent voting (Timm 2020). Trump, in particular, often directs this blame towards undocumented immigrants and vote-by-mail (Philip 2019). Most non-partisan institutions argue that voter fraud occurs in isolated instances and at insignificant levels (Cassidy 2021).

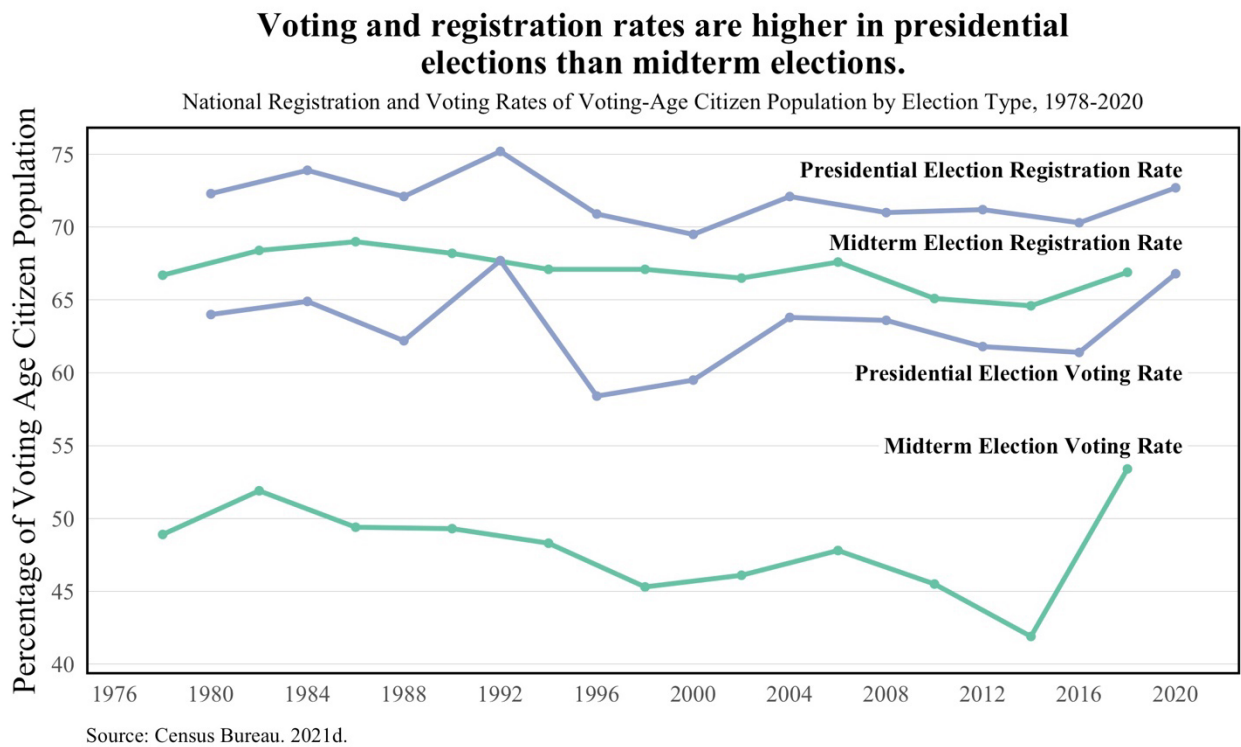
Importantly, apart from minimal federal standards, most aspects of elections vary substantially and are determined at the state and local levels (Shanton 2019). Many states are moving in opposing directions on voting restrictions (Brennan Center for Justice 2021). For example, Virginia and Michigan have recently made it much easier to vote (Schraufnagel, Pomante II, and Li 2020), while Florida, Georgia, Arkansas, and others have made it harder to vote (Rakich and Mejia 2021). Notably, responding to the pandemic, many states modified their vote by mail laws (Weiser, Sweren-Becker, and Erney 2020).

For context, national voting and registration rates for the last forty years are displayed in Figure 1. To be uniform throughout this brief, voting rate refers to the number of people who voted divided by the number of age-eligible citizens. The largest takeaways from the data are

that participation surges in presidential election years (blue lines) and slumps in midterm election years (green lines).

Additionally, year after year, voting rates are significantly lower than registration rates. In other words, many individuals registered to vote simply do not. Over the last four decades, the difference between voting and registration ranges from a low of about 6% in 2020 to about 23% in 2014. It is important to note that our voting rates trail that of our peer developed, democratic countries; one analysis found that the United States ranked 30th out of 35 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (Desilver 2020).

Figure 1



How do state election laws vary?

I created a simplified Ease of Voting (EOV) statistic to quickly communicate how easy or difficult it is to vote in each state and DC. In short, I took six areas in which states vary and assigned numbers based on each state’s laws. I then summed those numbers to arrive at the EOVS statistic. The six areas and the number of different options within them are as follows: voter identification requirements (4 options), voter registration requirements and timeline (4 options), if felons are allowed to vote (6 options), if and how early and absentee voting operates (5

options), if states have online registration (2 options), and how long polls are open (continuous number between 0 and 2)).

For example, Oregon received a 14.40 because it does not require identification to vote (3), has automatic voter registration (3), does not allow felons in prison to vote but felons on parole and probation can vote (2.4), has all mail voting (4), does not have online registration (0), and its polls are open for 15 hours on election day (2).

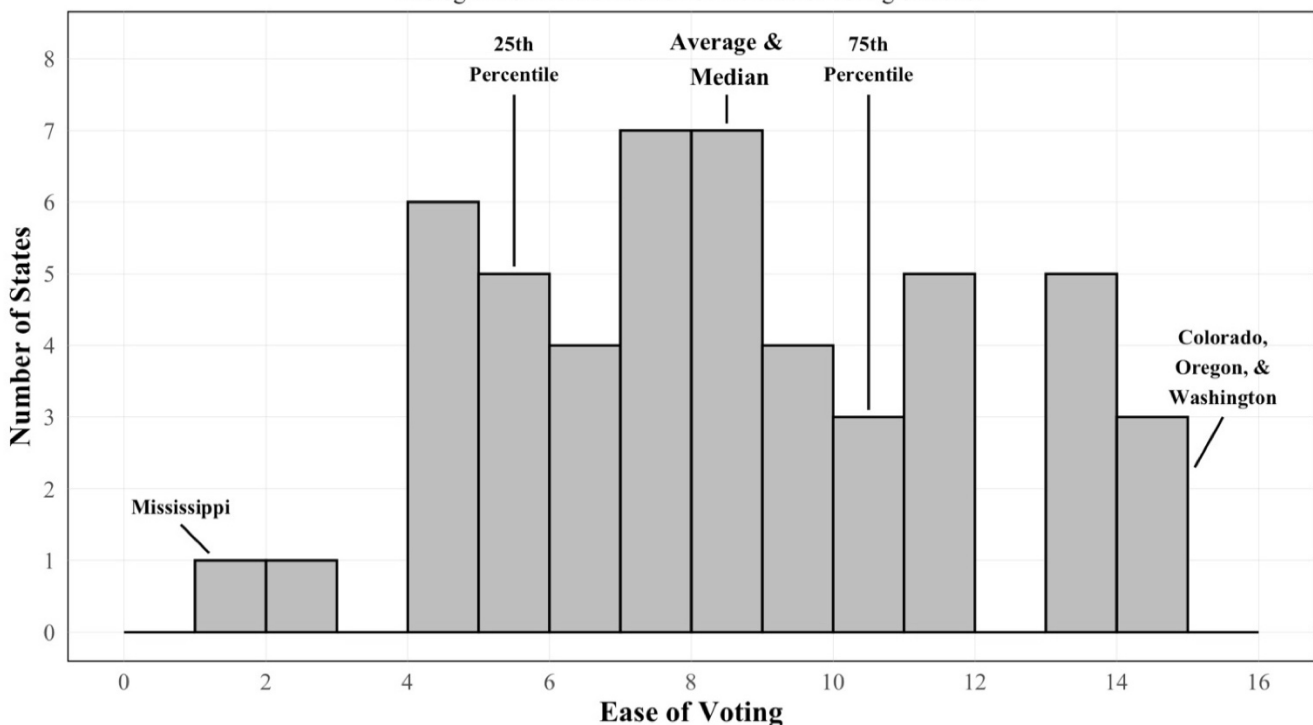
The exact figures, full methodology, and sources for the EOVS calculation are in Appendices A and B. The theoretical range of the EOVS statistic is zero to 16, with higher numbers corresponding to higher ease of voting. Due to data availability and time constraints, there are other important ways states vary (e.g., average distance to polls and if elections are holidays) that were not included, but, as demonstrated, the EOVS statistic is quite comprehensive.

The distribution of how the 50 states and the District of Columbia scored are in Figure 2. The main takeaway from the graphic is that there is considerable variation in how easy it is to vote state to state. It is easiest to vote in Colorado, Oregon, and Washington and hardest to vote in Mississippi. Another takeaway is that there is a large group of 22 states in the middle of the road with scores between six and ten.

Figure 2

Ease of voting varies dramatically state to state.

Histogram of the distribution of the ease of voting statistic.



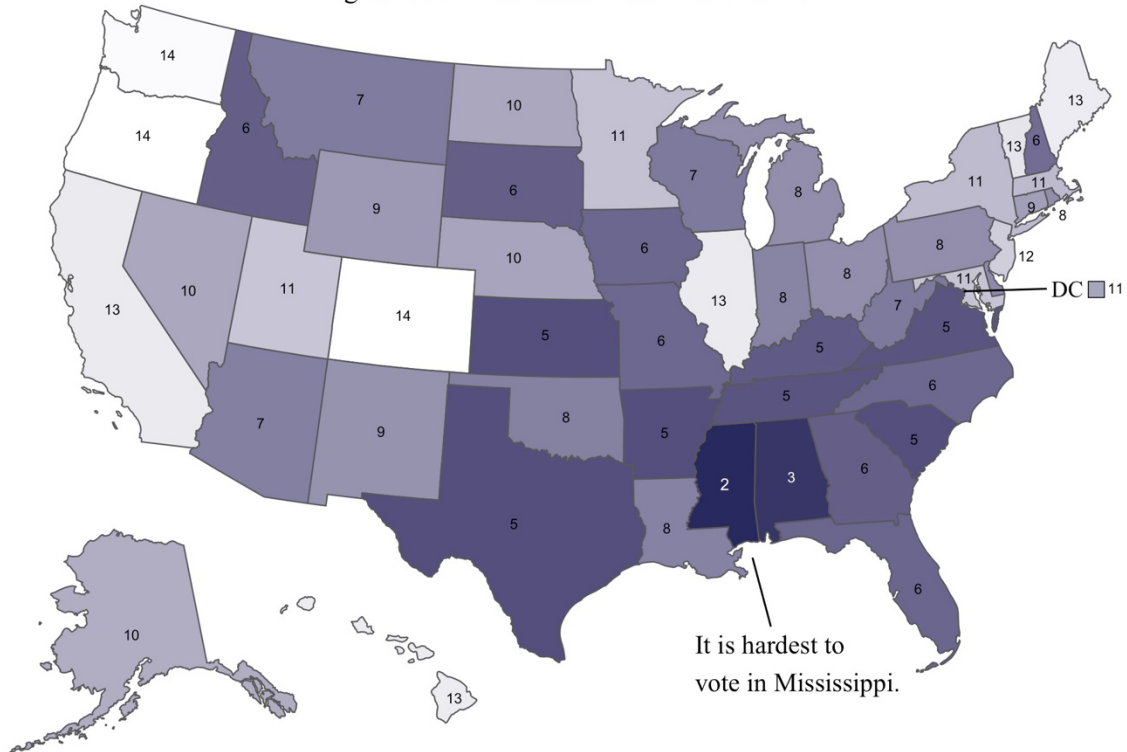
Theoretical range: 0 to 16. Actual range: 1.93 to 14.4. Average = 8.6.
See appendix for exact numbers, methodology, and sources for how the ease of voting statistic was calculated.

Figure 3 shows the EOV statistic in map form. The South is by far the hardest region to vote in. For the most part, it is harder to vote in Republican-led states (for partisanship of states, see Rakich 2021). Typically, it is easier to vote in Democratic-led states and the West and Northeast regions. This follows news reporting from the last few years (Levinson-King 2020).

Figure 3

It is hardest to vote in Republican states, particularly the South.

Lighter color mean state is easier to vote in.



Ease of voting statistic rounded to whole numbers here for simplicity.

How does ease of voting impact voting rates?

All voters

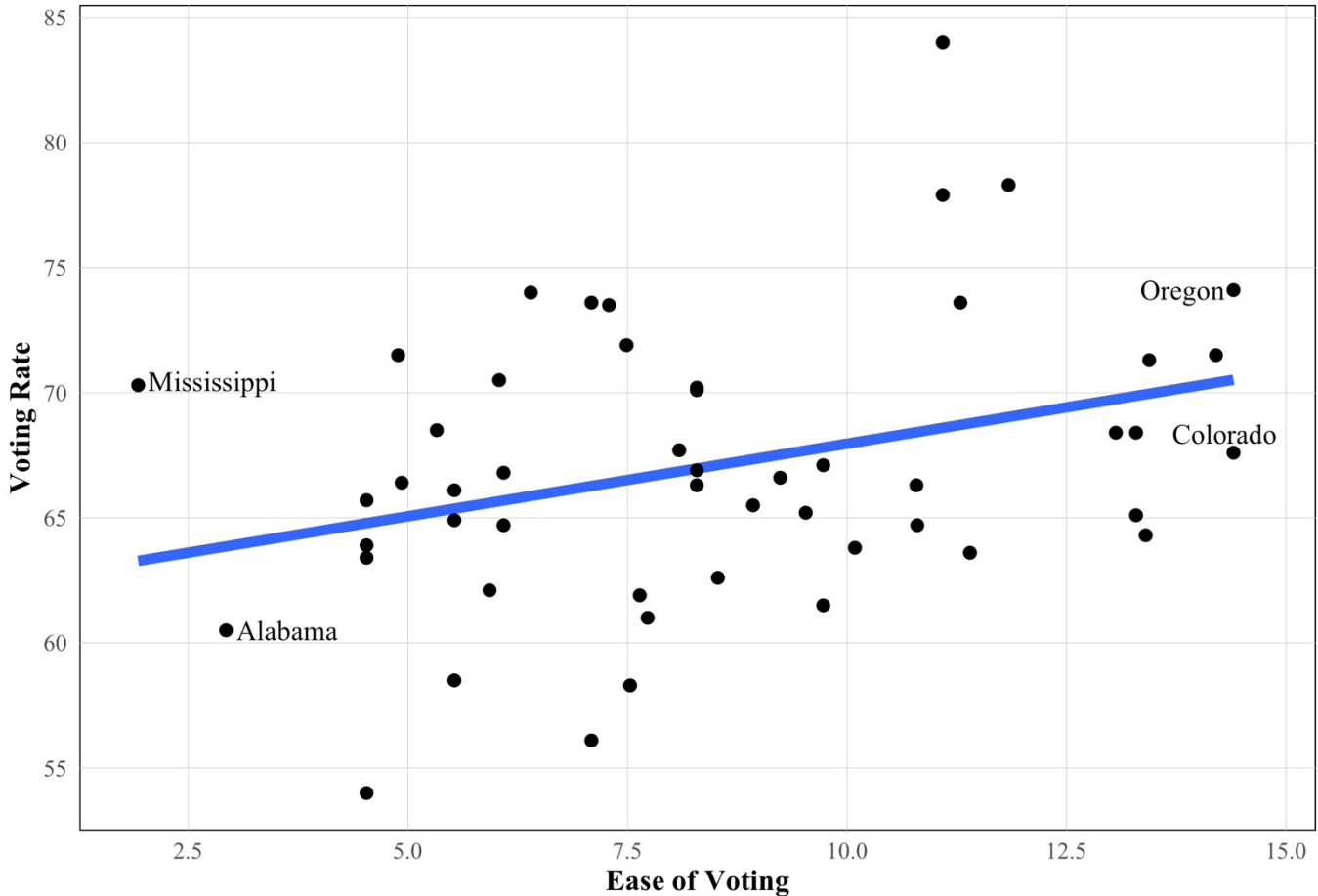
Figure 4 shows each state and DC’s EOV plotted against its voting rate. As indicated by the best fit line (blue line), there is a positive relationship between a state’s EOV and its voting rate. In other words, the higher a state’s EOV is, the higher its voting rate is. EOV may not directly cause this trend, but there is substantial correlation. This suggests that election laws that make it easier to vote (for example, longer poll hours, same-day registration, and not disenfranchising felons) are correlated with higher voting rates. Relatedly, it is well researched

that electoral competitiveness (for example, if an incumbent is running for reelection unopposed), election type, and a state’s demographics impact its voting rate substantially as well.

Figure 4

Ease of voting in a state positively impacts its voting rate.

Author-made ease of voting statistic against 2020 presidential election voting rates.
Each dot is one state or DC.



Source: Census Bureau. 2021a.

The brief now moves to discussing voting rates across different racial, age, and income groups.

Racial Groups

As shown in Figure 5, there are very large disparities between racial groups in voting. In 2020, non-Hispanic white Americans voted roughly 10 percentage points more than Black and Asian Americans and almost 20 percentage points more than Hispanic Americans. As shown in Figure 6, the trend lines suggest that voting rates among Hispanic Americans in 2020 were particularly related to a state’s ease of voting. Notably, the data in Figure 6 has many missing

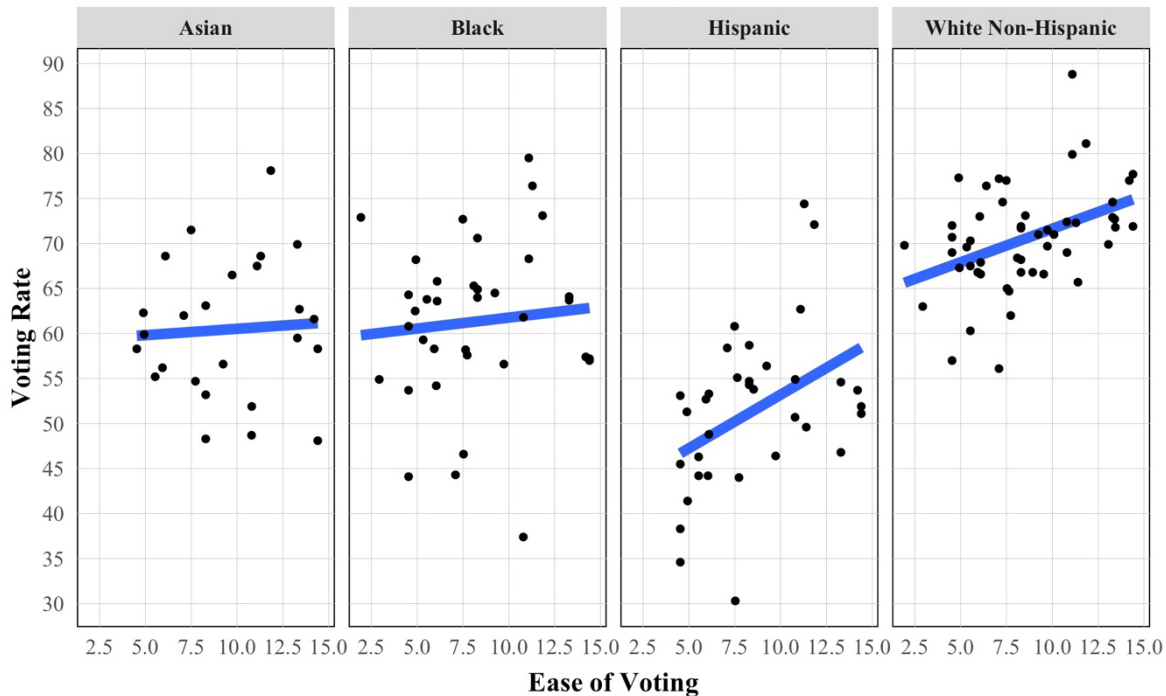
values since the Census does not supply an estimate when a particular demographic group in a state has a population of less than 75,000.

The trend line of Black Americans is surprising. Given our nation’s fraught history of voter suppression, perhaps, Black communities are more resilient to restrictive election laws than speculated. For example, recently, Black communities in Georgia fought back against a restriction to limit Sunday voting, which would have hurt a mobilizing tradition known as “Souls to Polls” (Doubek and Inskeep 2021). Also, there is research suggesting that enactment or even proposal of restrictive election laws may instead mobilize minority communities in some instances (Valentino and Neuner 2017, Biggers and Smith 2020).

Figure 6

Hispanic voters disproportionately impacted by restrictive election laws.

Author-made ease of voting statistic against 2020 presidential election voting rate.
Each dot is a racial group in one state.

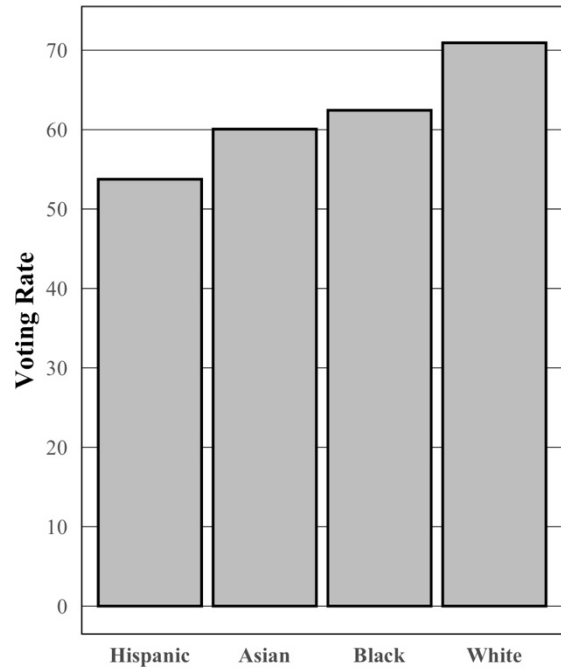


Note: The Census Bureau does not provide data when a racial group's population is below 75,000. Best fit lines of Asian, Black and Hispanic voters are likely flatter than they would be without missing data. Number of missing values: Asian (26), Black (15), & Hispanic (17). Source: Census Bureau. 2021a.

Figure 5

There are very large racial disparities in voting.

Aggregated national voting rates by race, 2020.

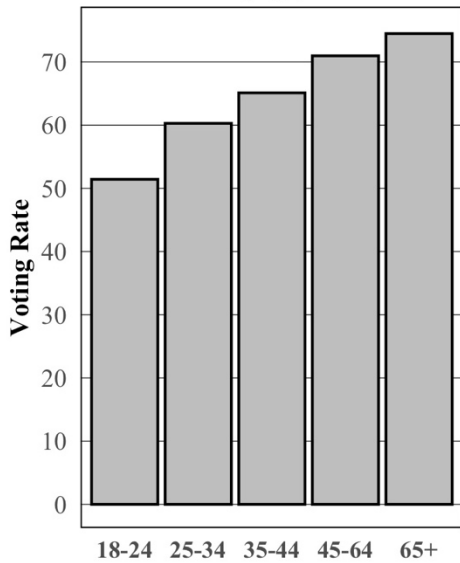


Note: White here refers to Non-Hispanic white people. Source: Census Bureau. 2021a.

Figure 7

There are massive age disparities in voting.

Aggregated national voting rates by age, 2020.



Source: Census Bureau, 2021b.

Age Groups

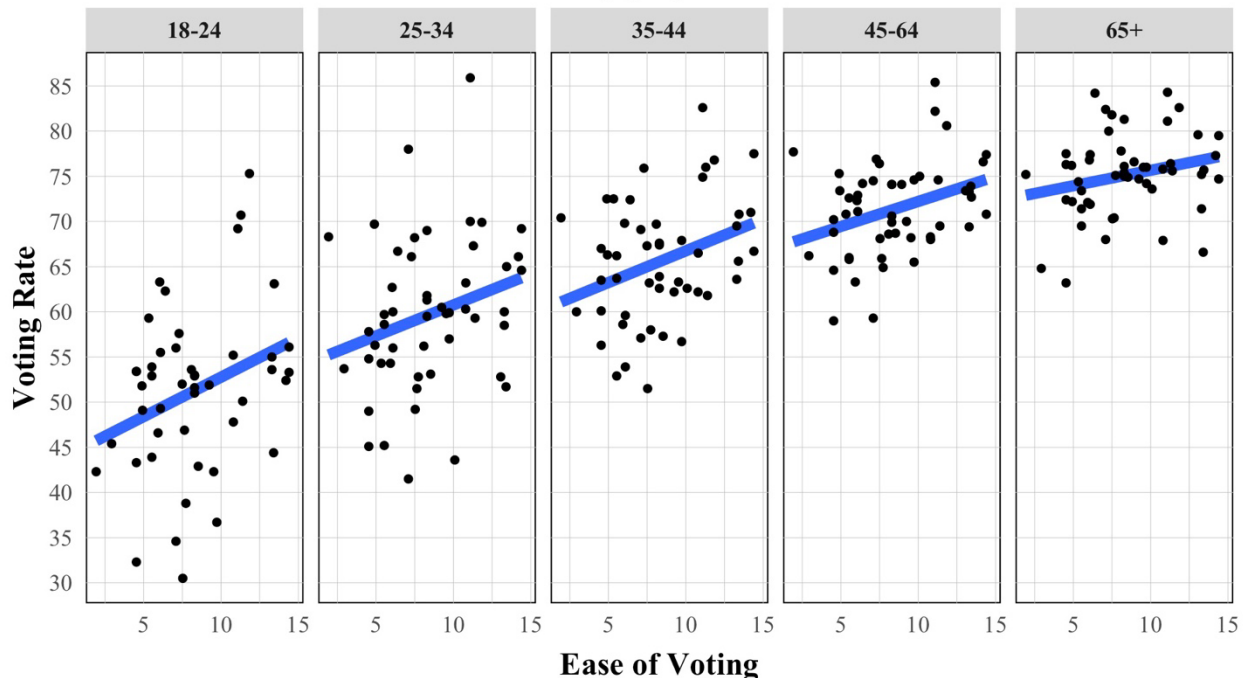
As shown in Figure 7, there is an almost 25 percentage point difference between the voting rates of young adults (18-24) and seniors (65+). As shown in the trend lines of Figure 8, younger adults appear to be the most impacted by restrictive election laws. With each jump in age, there appears to be more resilience to restrictive election laws.

There are likely many explanations for these trends. One researcher found that consistently voting boils down to forming a habit, which takes time (Plutzer 2002). Using survey data, research suggests younger voters are more likely to not vote due missing registration deadlines, not getting work off to vote, not receiving absentee ballots on time, or not having proper identification (Thomson-DeVeaux 2020, Hill 2020). Relatedly, research shows that same-day and online registration particularly benefits young voters (Grumbach and Hill 2022, Yu 2019).

Figure 8

Younger adults most impacted by restrictive election laws.

Author-made ease of voting statistic against 2020 presidential election voting rates. Each dot is an age group in one state or DC.



Note: The Census Bureau does not provide data when a age group's population is below 75,000. Some states not shown. Missing values: 18-24 (AK, DC, ND, VT, WY), 25-34 (WY), 35-44 (VT, WY). Source: Census Bureau, 2021b.

Income Groups

As shown in Figure 9, there were immense income disparities in voting in 2020. The highest earners in this Census data outvoted the lowest earners by almost 40 percentage points, with the former voting at roughly 85% and the latter at 47%.

Except for one income bracket, there was a sharp increase in voting with each jump in income bracket.

Unfortunately, the Census Bureau does not provide state-level data breaking voting rates down by income group. Thus, I cannot complete the same level of analysis as I did for the last three sections.

Returning to the disparities seen in Figure 9, there are many explanations. Lower total poll hours and less access to early and absentee voting are thought to particularly impact lower earners because their jobs may be less flexible than higher earners and their shifts may be longer (Adam Smith and Pattabhiraman 2020).

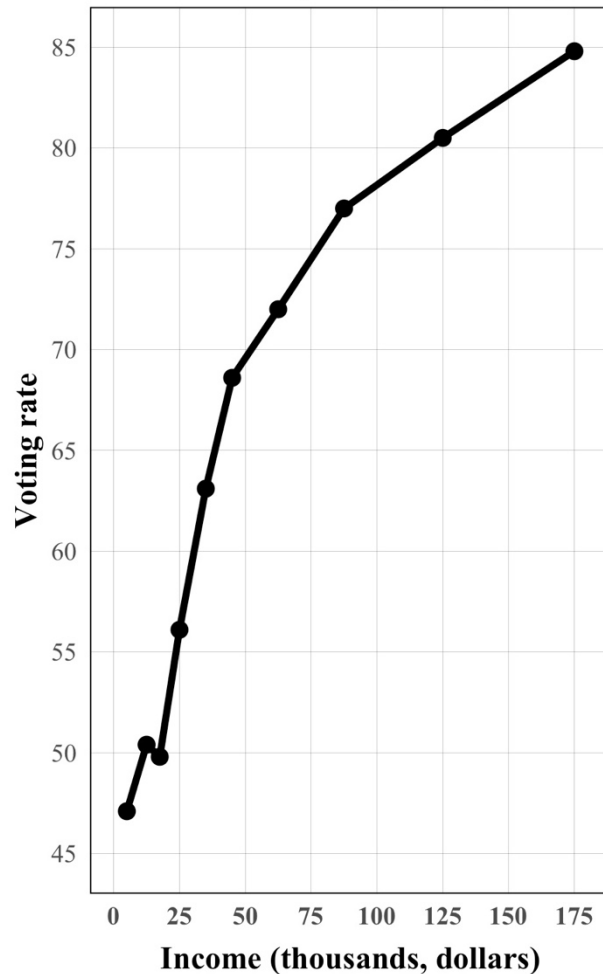
Research suggests better access to vote by mail, specifically automatically mailing ballots or applications to voters,

disproportionately benefits low-income individuals (Clemens, Lake, and Mitchell 2021). Felon disenfranchisement likely disproportionately impacts lower income voters because felony charges skew towards individuals with lower incomes (Hayes and Barnhorst 2020). Additionally, stricter voter identification requirements are thought to harm lower income voters as government-issued identification cards can be expensive (Hoffman 2021).

Figure 9

The highest income earners vote at almost twice the rate as the lowest earners.

National voting rates by income, 2020.



Note: The census provides income data in brackets. The x-values above are the mid-points of the provided income brackets. For example, earners between 30K and 40K vote at a rate of 63.1%; the dot plotted is at 35K and 63.1. Under 10K and over 150K were assumed to have mid-points of 5K and 175K, respectively. Source: Census Bureau. 2021c.

Further Study

This memo did not analyze all possible reforms which should be the subject of further study. Some academic literature is listed here. Research suggests decreasing distances to polls; specifically, the researcher's analysis suggests that decreasing average poll distance by a quarter mile would increase voting by 2% to 5% (Cantoni 2020). Other research suggests that non-trivial cash incentives increase voting rates (Panagopoulos 2012). The paper's findings suggest that \$50 incentives would increase voting by 7.5 percentage points. A newspaper's comparative analysis suggests that making election days holidays would improve voting rates (Kim 2020). The author notes that 29 out of 36 OECD countries have elections on weekends or holidays.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

My analysis concludes that changing voting laws to improve ease of voting will increase voting rates, with disproportionate improvements for Hispanic individuals, young adults, and low-income individuals. This memo analyzed and recommends the following six changes:

1. Reducing identification requirements at polls,
2. Reducing and streamlining registration requirements (including allowing same-day, automatic, and/or online registration),
3. Enfranchising felons (or never disenfranchising them in the first place),
4. Increasing access to early and absentee voting, and
5. Increasing election day poll hours.

Appendix A

The EOV statistic was found by taking the sum of the following six variables. Almost all data is from late 2020.

- VoterID
 - Rao, Salam, and Adolphe 2020.
 - 0 strict photo ID required, 1 not strict photo ID required, 2 no photo ID required, 3 no ID required
- VoterReg
 - Rao, Salam, and Adolphe 2020.
 - 0 proof of citizenship/exact match needed, 1 register before elections, 2 same-day registration, 3 automatic voter registration
- FelonEnfranchisement
 - American Civil Liberties Union n.d.; Rao, Salam, and Adolphe 2020 for DC.
 - 0 All felons permanently cannot vote (red); 0.6 some felons permanently cannot vote (orange stripes), 1.2 felons can vote upon completion of sentence (orange), 1.8 people in prison or on parole cannot vote (blue/green), 2.4 people in prison cannot vote (blue), and 3 everyone can vote (green).
- EarlyandAbsenteeVoting
 - Zoch 2021; Vote.org n.d.; Rao, Salam, and Adolphe 2020 for DC.
 - 0 no early voting, 1 early voting with approval, 2 early voting less than 3 weeks with no restrictions, 3 early voting more than 3 weeks, 4 all-mail voting.
 - Massachusetts has early voting with no restrictions that varies by county in terms of length. I assigned it the half-way point of early voting, a 2.5.
- OnlineReg
 - Zoch 2021; Rao, Salam, and Adolphe 2020 for DC.
 - 0 No, 1 Yes.
- PollHoursRatio
 - Ballotpedia 2020; David Scanlan NH Department of State 2022.
 - I found the total hours polls were open on election day. The lowest was 11.4 hours and highest was 15 hours. I gave the all-mail voting states the maximum, 15.
 - I want to represent the range in the reported value, so I subtracted 11.4 (the minimum; after this step they range from 0 to 3.6), then divided by 1.8 (after this they range from 0 to 2). I round to two digits for simplicity.
 - Polls range in TN by county so I had to speculate and said 12. TN polls must close at 7pm, so it is not an outlandish to estimate that the average one opens around 7am. Polls range in NH. I calculated average myself based on county level clerk data.

Appendix B

State Name	FIPS Number	Rounded Total	Total	Voter ID	Voter Reg	Felon Enfranchisement	Early And Absentee Voting	Online Reg	Poll Hours Ratio	Total Poll Hours
Alabama	1	3	2.93	0	1	0.6	0	1	0.33	12
Alaska	2	10	10.09	2	3	1.2	2	1	0.89	13
Arizona	4	7	7.49	0	2	0.6	3	1	0.89	13
Arkansas	5	5	4.53	0	1	1.2	2	0	0.33	12
California	6	13	13.29	3	3	2.4	3	1	0.89	13
Colorado	8	14	14.40	2	3	2.4	4	1	2	15
Connecticut	9	9	9.24	2	3	1.8	0	1	1.44	14
Delaware	10	8	8.09	2	2	1.2	1	1	0.89	13
DC	11	11	11.09	3	3	1.2	2	1	0.89	13
Florida	12	6	5.93	1	1	0.6	2	1	0.33	12
Georgia	13	6	5.53	0	0	1.2	3	1	0.33	12
Hawaii	15	13	13.40	2	2	2.4	4	1	2	15
Idaho	16	6	5.53	0	1	1.2	2	1	0.33	12
Illinois	17	13	13.29	3	3	2.4	3	1	0.89	13
Indiana	18	8	7.73	0	1	2.4	3	1	0.33	12
Iowa	19	6	6.04	0	1	0.6	2	1	1.44	14
Kansas	20	5	4.53	0	0	1.2	2	1	0.33	12
Kentucky	21	5	5.33	2	1	0	1	1	0.33	12
Louisiana	22	8	7.64	1	1	1.2	2	1	1.44	14
Maine	23	13	13.44	3	3	3	3	0	1.44	14
Maryland	24	11	11.29	3	2	2.4	2	1	0.89	13
Massachusetts	25	11	10.79	3	1	2.4	2.5	1	0.89	13
Michigan	26	8	8.29	1	2	2.4	1	1	0.89	13
Minnesota	27	11	11.09	3	2	1.2	3	1	0.89	13
Mississippi	28	2	1.93	0	1	0.6	0	0	0.33	12
Missouri	29	6	6.09	2	1	1.2	0	1	0.89	13
Montana	30	7	7.29	0	1	2.4	3	0	0.89	13
Nebraska	31	10	9.53	3	1	1.2	3	1	0.33	12
Nevada	32	10	9.73	1	3	2.4	2	1	0.33	12

New Hampshire	33	6	6.40	1	2	2.4	1	0	0	11.4
New Jersey	34	12	11.84	3	1	2.4	3	1	1.44	14
New Mexico	35	9	8.53	2	1	1.2	3	1	0.33	12
New York	36	11	10.80	3	1	1.8	2	1	2	15
North Carolina	37	6	6.09	0	1	1.2	2	1	0.89	13
North Dakota	38	10	9.73	2	3	2.4	2	0	0.33	12
Ohio	39	8	8.29	0	1	2.4	3	1	0.89	13
Oklahoma	40	8	7.53	2	1	1.2	2	1	0.33	12
Oregon	41	14	14.40	3	3	2.4	4	0	2	15
Pennsylvania	42	8	8.29	2	1	2.4	1	1	0.89	13
Rhode Island	44	8	8.29	0	3	2.4	1	1	0.89	13
South Carolina	45	5	4.53	0	1	1.2	1	1	0.33	12
South Dakota	46	6	5.53	0	1	1.2	3	0	0.33	12
Tennessee	47	5	4.93	0	1	0.6	2	1	0.33	12
Texas	48	5	4.53	0	1	1.2	2	0	0.33	12
Utah	49	11	11.40	1	1	2.4	4	1	2	15
Vermont	50	13	13.06	3	3	3	3	1	0.06	11.5
Virginia	51	5	4.89	1	1	0	1	1	0.89	13
Washington	53	14	14.20	3	3	1.2	4	1	2	15
West Virginia	54	7	7.09	2	1	1.2	1	1	0.89	13
Wisconsin	55	7	7.09	0	2	1.2	2	1	0.89	13
Wyoming	56	9	8.93	3	2	0.6	3	0	0.33	12

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