

Voter Preregistration

What is Preregistration and Where Has It Been Implemented?

Preregistration allows Americans who are not old enough to vote to complete a registration form and be automatically added to the voter rolls when they reach voting age. Most states allow residents to register before they turn 18 if their 18th birthday is on or before the next election, but preregistration allows young people to complete a registration form even if they will not be old enough to vote in the next election. Nine states plus the District of Columbia have implemented this reform: Colorado, D.C., Delaware, Florida, Hawaii, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Oregon, and Rhode Island.¹ Currently, preregistration is allowed starting at 16 years old in Colorado, D.C., Delaware, Florida, Hawaii, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Utah, and at 17 in Maine, and Oregon. California has enacted preregistration for 17-year-olds, but it will not take effect until California has a statewide voter registration database compliant with the Help America Vote Act of 2002.² In 2013, North Carolina repealed its preregistration law as part of the voter suppression package that contained its strict photo ID requirement for voting and the elimination of same day registration.³ Its elimination is being litigated in federal court.

Barriers to Youth Voting

In 2012, Americans under 30 years old voted at a rate approximately 8% lower than the voting rate for all Americans.⁴ That gap is even wider during non-presidential elections.⁵ Americans' interest in elections increases as Election Day approaches, which creates a problem disproportionately affecting younger Americans.⁶ Unlike many older voters who registered in a previous election and do not have to reregister, young people are often first-time voters. Newly eligible voters often do not think or know about the need to register until just before Election Day, which in many cases is after registration deadlines have already passed.

Preregistration Helps Young People Participate in Democracy

Preregistration creates many more contact points at which government agencies, teachers, or third-party voter registration organizations can offer young people registration opportunities. It allows 16- and 17-year-olds to preregister when they obtain a driver's license. Additionally, 21 states and the District of Columbia require students to attend school until they are 18 years old while another 11 require attendance until 17 years old.⁷ High school represents one of the last opportunities to reach so many potential voters concentrated in one place before they reach voting age.

Bringing young people into the voting system even before they reach voting age has important benefits. Federal law protects voters who have moved within the same electoral jurisdiction, which is usually the county. As a result, individuals who register and then move somewhere within the same jurisdiction can update their address and vote on Election Day. In states without Election Day registration, preregistration provides a democratic lifeline. It protects voters even if they did not update their information before the deadline or might not have otherwise registered on time.

Preregistration Helps Young People Participate in Democracy (continued)

Preregistration also allows election officials to provide young people with important voting information well in advance of Election Day. This could include communications about polling place locations, voter ID requirements, and early voting options.

Preregistration increases democratic participation. In Florida, voters who preregistered were 4.7% more likely to vote than those who registered after they turned 18.⁸ When young people are empowered with the information they need to register, they show up. In addition, a young person's willingness to vote in a given election is one of the best predictors of whether they will vote in the following election. Helping young Americans register to vote increases the odds that they will make a lifelong habit of electoral participation.

Sources and Additional Reading

¹ COLO. REV. STAT. § 1-2-101; D.C. CODE § 1-1001.07(a-2); 15 DEL. CODE § 1701(b); FLA. STAT. § 97.041(1)(b); HAW. REV. STAT. § 11-12; LA. REV. STAT. §§ 18:101(A)(2)&(3), 18:114; ME. REV. STAT. tit. 21-A, § 155; MD. CODE ANN., ELEC. LAW § 3-102(a); OR. REV. STAT. § 247.016; R.I. GEN. LAWS § 17-9.1-33(b); <http://le.utah.gov/~2015/bills/static/HB0340.html>.

² Cal. Elec. Code § 2102(d).

³ N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-82.1 repealed by S.L. 2013-381, § 12, eff. Sept. 1, 2013.

⁴ The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, *Updated Estimate: Youth Turnout was 50% in 2012; Youth Turnout in Battleground States 58%*, Nov. 9, 2012, <http://www.civicyouth.org/updated-estimate-50-of-youth-turnout-in-2012-youth-turnout-in-battleground-states-58/>.

United States Elections Project, *2012 General Election Turnout Rates*, http://elections.gmu.edu/Turnout_2012G.html (last visited May 2, 2013).

⁵ Michael P. McDonald, *Voter Turnout in the 2010 Midterm Election*, in THE FORUM: Vol. 8: Iss. 4, Article 8, page 6 (2010).

⁶ Election 2010 Gallup Poll at 1, available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/142907/Election-2010.aspx>.

⁷ Tamar Lewin, *Obama Wades Into Issue of Raising Dropout Age*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 25, 2012.

⁸ MICHAEL P. McDONALD, VOTER PREREGISTRATION PROGRAMS 24 (2009).

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