

The Takeaway

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Voter Turnout in Texas: Can It Be Higher?

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In the 2016 presidential election, Texas' voter turnout placed near the bottom of all the states, ranking 47th. In Texas' recent 2018 mid-term election, which featured a closely contested US Senate race and concurrent gubernatorial election, not even half of eligible voters (46.3%) participated.¹

Low voter turnout is not a recent phenomenon in Texas. Texas has consistently lagged the national average in presidential elections for voter turnout among the voting eligible population (VEP). In fact, since 2000, the gap between Texas' turnout and the national average consecutively widened in all but one election cycle.² Texans may be open to changes to address low turnout. According to a 2019 poll by the Texas Lyceum on Texans' attitudes toward democracy, a majority (61%) agreed that "significant changes" are needed to make our electoral system work for current times.³



THE TEXAS LYCEUM

WHAT'S THE TAKEAWAY?

Texas' voter turnout is among the lowest in the nation.

Low turnout can lead to policies favoring the interests of demographic groups whose members are more likely to vote.

There are deterrents to registering and voting that the state can address.

Policies such as same-day registration, automatic voter registration, mail-in early voting, and Election Day voting centers could help.

DOES VOTER TURNOUT MATTER?

Voter turnout is often considered the currency of democracy, a way for citizen’s preferences to be expressed. Nonvoters run the risk that their voices go unheard. This matters because demographic disparities exist between voters and nonvoters. For instance, in 2016, only 48% of Texans age 18-24 were registered to vote compared to 78% age 65 and older. For education attainment, only 32% of Texans without a high school diploma voted in the 2016 election compared to 74% of those with a bachelor’s degree.⁴ The consequences of such disparities can prove significant. Research on income differences in the electorate shows that higher turnout among the wealthy leads to the formation of policies favoring their interests at the expense of lower income citizens’ interests.^{5,6}

WHAT DOES TEXAS’ VOTER TURNOUT LOOK LIKE?

The voting eligible population (VEP) is a measure that factors out ineligible voters such as non-US citizens and individuals institutionalized based on state laws regarding felony sentencing and restorative voting rights. Texas’ VEP controls for the 13.3% non-citizen population and the approximately 480,000 ineligible felon population.⁷

In the 2016 presidential election, Texans cast nearly 8.97 million votes for the highest office. This represents just over half (51.4%) of VEP. The Figure 1 breakdown reveals two drop-off points among the voting eligible:

- 1) There are approximately 2.3 million eligible citizens who never registered to vote.
- 2) Approximately 6.1 million registered voters simply did not turn out.

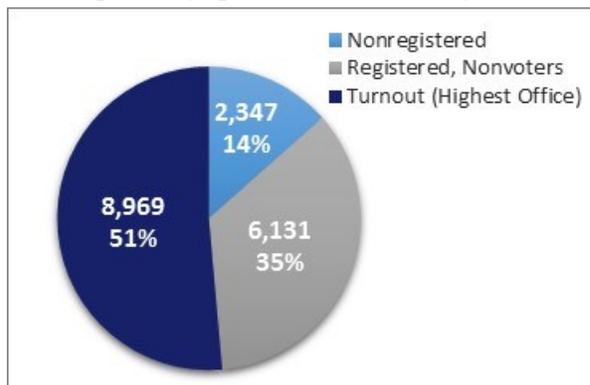
This report addresses ways to boost voter participation in both population sets.

WHY DON’T TEXANS VOTE?

Generally, scholars agree strict voter registration laws can deter turnout.⁸ Registration is the gateway to becoming a mobilized voter on Election Day. Texas cuts off voter registration 30 days before an election, which is the maximum number that any state stops registering voters.⁹ Figure 2 shows that 16 states had Election Day (same day) registration laws in place by 2016, and all of them (except for Hawaii) have higher voter turnout than Texas and most surpass the national average for turnout. In fact, voter turnout among the VEP averages 64% in the states with same day registration compared to Texas’ 51.4%.

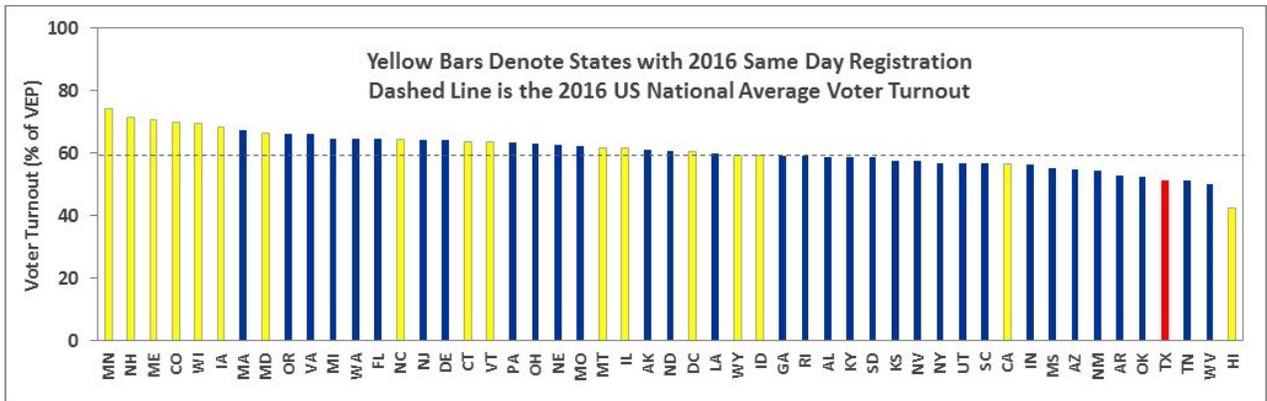
Reasons for nonvoting vary. A post-2016 presidential election survey reported that almost a third of registered, nonvoting Texans said disinterest in campaign issues or candidates was the main reason they did not vote.¹⁰ The state may not be able to do much about that, but other reasons cited are potentially addressable by the state. For example, 20% of registered nonvoters said that they were too

Figure 1: 2016 General Election Texas Voter Participation (reported in thousands)



Source: Texas Secretary of State and US Elections Project

Figure 2: 2016 General Election Voter Turnout by State



Source: United States Elections Project and National Conference of State Legislatures

busy with work or school. Other reasons for nonparticipation included inconvenient polling place hours (4%), out of town (4%), illness or disability (9%), and transportation problems (3%). Texas can act to remedy some of these hurdles to participation.

HOW CAN TEXAS RESPOND MOVING FORWARD?

The first way the state can address low voter turnout is by *getting eligible voters registered*. At one time, Texas was leading the nation with innovative approaches to registration; in 1941, it was the first state to implement a mail-in registration program.¹¹ However, Texas has not kept pace with evolving methods other states are using for voter registration. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, studies show **same-day registration** can lead to, on average, a 5 percent increase in voter turnout.¹²

Another registration policy Texas may consider is **Automatic Voter Registration (AVR)**. Citizens are automatically registered to vote (unless they opt-out) when interacting with state offices, predominantly the Department of Motor Vehicles. This efficiently streamlines

the registration process with existing state-wide digital records. Oregon was the first state to adopt it in 2016, but now 16 states and the District of Columbia have AVR. Early analysis shows that the impact of AVR can be significant. For example, in 2016 Oregon saw monthly voter registration almost quadruple when compared to 2012 voter registration rates.¹³ In Texas, AVR bills were introduced in the 2017 and 2019 legislative sessions, but none made it out of committee.

Additionally, the state can improve participation by *addressing obstacles cited by registered nonvoters*. Texas is already implementing strategies to minimize some of the deterrents to voting such as making voting systems more accessible to those with disabilities.¹⁴

But the state can do more. Demand for alternative voting measures is on the rise. Currently Texas conducts early voting between 4 and 15 days prior to an election.¹⁵ Between the mid-term elections of 2014 to 2018, there was a 24.5 percentage point increase of Texans who used the early voting option.¹⁶ Research shows that expanding early voting through mail-in ballots can increase turnout.¹⁷

Another way to facilitate voting is to increase the number of counties participating in the state's **Countywide Polling Place Program** (CWPP). CWPP removes the necessity for an individual to travel to a particular precinct location to vote, if it is more convenient to do so at a different center. This approach has received positive feedback for increasing convenience from voters across the 56 Texas counties (as of 2018) that have implemented the CWPP program.¹⁸ Recently, in Texas' most populous county (Harris County), 36% of voters reported using a new polling location different than their home precinct during program implementation in the 2019 Harris County Joint Election.¹⁹

CONCLUSION

Texas lags other states in voter turnout. Innovative strategies such as same-day registration and automatic voter registration; continued use of early voting; and wider implementation of countywide polling places could lead to more participation and increase the likelihood that the views of more Texans are represented in the election process.

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Notes:

- ¹ McDonald, Michael P. (2018). *United States Elections Project*. Voter Turnout. Retrieved May, 2019 from <http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/voter-turnout-data>
- ² McDonald, Michael P. (2018). *United States Elections Project*.
- ³ Texas Lyceum Poll, 2019. <https://www.texaslyceum.org/lyceum-poll-3>
- ⁴ Annette Strauss Institute: 2018 Texas Civic Health Index https://moody.utexas.edu/sites/default/files/2018-Texas_Civic_Health_Index.pdf
- ⁵ Hill, K.Q. & Leighley, J.E. (1992, May). The Policy Consequences of Class Bias in State Electorates. *American Journal of Political Science*, 36(2), 351-365.
- ⁶ Hajnal, Z.L. (2010). *America's Uneven Democracy: Race, Turnout, and Representation in City Politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- ⁷ McDonald (2018). 2016 Nov. General Election Turnout Rates.
- ⁸ Hill, D. (2006). *American Voter Turnout: An Institutional Perspective*, p. 33. Westview Press.
- ⁹ National Conference of State Legislatures (2019) <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/same-day-registration.aspx>
- ¹⁰ Annette Strauss Institute: 2018 Texas Civic Health Index
- ¹¹ Hill, D. (2006). *American Voter Turnout*. p. 36.
- ¹² National Conference of State Legislatures (2019).
- ¹³ Brennan Center for Justice: NYU School of Law (2019). <https://www.brennancenter.org/analysis/automatic-voter-registration>
- ¹⁴ Texas Secretary of State (2012). <https://www.votetexas.gov/voters-with-special-needs/index.html>
- ¹⁵ Texas Election Center (2018). <https://www.vote.org/state/texas>
- ¹⁶ United States Census Bureau (2019). Behind the 2018 US Midterm Election Turnout. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2019/04/behind-2018-united-states-midterm-election-turnout.html>
- ¹⁷ Gronke, P., Galanes-Rosenbaum, E, & Miller, P. (2007). Early Voting and Turnout. *Political Science and Politics*, 40(4).
- ¹⁸ Texas Secretary of State (2018). <https://www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/forms/86th-Legislature-related-to-the-Countywide-Polling-Place-Program.pdf>
- ¹⁹ Trautman, D. (2019, May). Election Voting Centers Report. <https://www.harrisvotes.com/Docs/VotingCenters/May%202019%20Election%20Voting%20Centers%20Report.pdf>

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