

Late Registrants More Likely to Vote, Finds Study of Voter Participation

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"Later is better" when it comes to voter registration in national elections, according a new study of voter participation in the 2000 presidential election.

People who register to vote closer to registration deadlines are much more likely to vote on Election Day than are people who register earlier in an election year, according to the study conducted by political scientists from the University at Buffalo, University of Maryland and University of Texas.

"It's a very interesting pattern," says UB researcher Joshua J. Dyck, Ph.D., assistant professor of political science. "For political campaigns focused on get-out-the-vote efforts, the takeaway message is this: you'll get more bang for your buck if you focus on the narrow window close to the registration deadline.

"That's where we see a huge surge in voter registration and those people are much more likely to turn out to vote."

Dyck's co-researchers were James G. Gimpel, Ph.D., professor of government at University of Maryland, and Daron R. Shaw, Ph.D., associate professor of government at University of Texas.

The researchers focused on voter registration and voter turnout in large counties in six states during the 2000 presidential campaign. These included battleground states Florida, Iowa and New Mexico, as well as

Kentucky, Nevada and North Carolina. The sample included more than 400,000 registered voters. The deadline for voter registration is about 30 days before an election in most states.

To be published in a forthcoming issue of *Party Politics*, the study is one of the first to assess to the effect of timing and campaign activity on voter registration, explains Dyck, an expert on political participation. Campaigns historically have focused on turning out registered voters, but with the closeness of recent national elections the major parties are focusing more on voter registration, he notes.

"Political parties are much more effective at turning out people who they know are going to be reliable supporters than they are at generating new voters," Dyck explains. "These results show that they should consider adding late-registration drives to their outreach, and that timing is important."

The study found that people who registered to vote the week of the registration deadline were 16 percent more likely to vote than those who registered one year from the deadline. Of the late registrants, young adults were 15 percent less likely to vote than older adults, and women were more likely than men to turn out. Across all counties studied, an average of 125 percent more registrants signed up in the three weeks prior to the deadline than in all previous weeks.

Also, Republican late registrants were much more likely to vote than late-registering Democrats. The study showed that in most places where Democrats "won" the election in 2000, they had to register many more people than the Republicans because the GOP's new registrants appeared to vote at almost twice the rate as new Democratic registrants. Late registrants from both parties were more likely to vote than independents.

As a group, late registrants were generally young adults between the ages of 18-49; the majority were under 40. Most late registrants were independents, particularly among younger adults.

The study also found that spikes in voter registration coincided with the occurrence of conventions, primaries and other major political events during an election year. "This would appear to be good news for campaign organizers, but it is unclear if the spike in registrations after major political events is result of extensive party outreach that accompany these events or a spontaneous reaction," Dyck says.

Another spike in registration occurred after Independence Day, when campaigns targeted communities that grant citizenship to immigrants on that date, the study shows.

On the flipside, the study also suggests much more muted electoral effects from motor voter laws. While people are registering with greater frequency when they make their regular trip to the DMV, the electoral gains realized from this registration increase is nowhere near to what you get over the course of a campaign.

"Reforms, such as motor voter laws, aimed solely at increasing registration rates, will not necessarily lead to higher voter turnout," Dyck says.

Source: University at Buffalo

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