

Early voting option can decrease turnout, research shows

November 17 2009, by Stacy Forster

(PhysOrg.com) -- Although states are moving quickly to put in place election procedures that allow for early voting, allowing people to cast ballots ahead of Election Day often results in lower turnout, according to research from a team of University of Wisconsin-Madison political scientists.

However, in states such as Wisconsin, which also allow voters to register at the polls, the effect on turnout is more muted, the research showed.

Although about 30 percent of voters nationally cast ballots before election day in 2008, the buzz that builds around Election Day — the key to bringing less-dedicated voters to the polls — isn't as strong when voting activity is spread out over the last weeks of the campaign, the report from the UW-Madison shows.

"Early and absentee voting siphons activity away from Election Day itself that would have stimulated turnout," says a report from UW-Madison political science professors Barry Burden, Kenneth Mayer and David Canon, as well as public affairs professor Donald Moynihan from the La Follette School of Public Affairs.

One in five Wisconsin voters cast absentee ballots in 2008, prompting the Government Accountability Board to study whether early voting should be offered here. Wisconsin voters may vote by absentee ballot without giving a reason, but the practice isn't considered early voting because ballots aren't placed or cast in a voting machine.

Kevin Kennedy, director of the state Government Accountability Board, says early voting wouldn't be offered to simply increase turnout, but to make voting more convenient and easy.

"People use this so that they don't have to stand in line on Election Day; they could plan the time they were going to stand in line," Kennedy says. "I don't think we would tout this as anything that's guaranteed to increase turnout."

The early voting research was conducted through a collaboration between the UW-Madison Department of Political Science and the state of Wisconsin's Government Accountability Board, which works with municipal officials to administer state elections.

One recent UW-Madison research project involved a survey of Wisconsin's 1,850 local election officials, who would have to put in place any changes to the system, to gauge their response to potential reforms.

"That's going to be critical for our planning and public policy making to use that data and be sensitive" to clerk's attitudes, says Nathaniel Robinson, administrator of the Government Accountability Board's Elections Division.

The board is likely to consider recommending changes to state law making it easier for people to vote absentee while also making it easier for election clerks to process those ballots.

Election administrators and members of the public who have weighed in on the proposals have been less enthusiastic about setting up municipal or regional early voting sites or allowing municipalities to opt in to an early voting system.

The Government Accountability Board will receive a report on recommendations for early voting in Wisconsin, including results from the UW-Madison [political science](#) team, at its Dec. 17 meeting in the Capitol. The board is expected to advance the plans to the state Legislature, which could vote to change state law in its spring session.

Election Day registration, which is popular among Wisconsin's [election](#) clerks, consistently increases turnout, the UW-Madison research shows, and states where it's allowed typically have the nation's highest voting rates. In Wisconsin, 11.4 percent of voters registered at the polls in 2008, and turnout was second highest in the nation, behind Minnesota.

View the [Government Accountability Board report on early voting](#).

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison ([news](#) : [web](#))

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