

'No Child Left Behind' leaves some voters behind

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When public schools receive failing grades, turnout increases in local school board elections, according to research from Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy. However, turnout increases unequally, with very different results among the rich and the poor.

Affluent, white citizens who were already more likely to vote do so in significantly greater numbers after their local schools are labeled "failing." Voters who were previously unlikely to vote are only slightly more likely to go to the polls after school grades are issued.

The study, "Left Behind? Citizen Responsiveness to Government Performance Information," by John Holbein, a doctoral candidate in [public policy](#), is forthcoming in the *American Political Science Review*. Holbein's study is the first to link large-scale school administrative records and individual voting behavior.

"In the United States, voter turnout is low and unequal," Holbein said. "There is plenty of research showing that more advantaged people are more active voters. There's also clear evidence that lack of information is a barrier to civic engagement. I wanted to find out if providing citizens with information about school performance helps address or exacerbates imbalances in turnout."

Holbein looked at local [school board](#) races from 2004-2012 in North Carolina communities where schools failed to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) as defined by the 2001 federal No Child Left Behind

legislation. Generally speaking, AYP is determined by student performance on standardized tests.

"I found school failure signals increase [voter turnout](#) in school board elections by 5 to 8 percent, on average," Holbein said.

Compared to typical get-out-the-vote activities, having a failing school in the neighborhood had a smaller effect on turnout than face-to-face contact, but a noticeably larger effect than campaign phone calls and mailers.

However, the increase came primarily from those who were already engaged. The mobilizing effect was more than five times larger for individuals who had previously voted than those who had not.

No Child Left Behind was championed as a way for parents to hold schools accountable for the quality of education they deliver. It sought to make it easier for parents to choose schools using not only performance data, but also vouchers and charter schools.

Holbein thus also examined whether a failing school report card led to [school](#) exit, or families "voting with their feet." He found that affluent students are much more likely than poor students to exit failing schools.

"While reforms like No Child Left Behind empower local communities with valuable information, this information is not enough to mobilize poor families, thus leaving behind the group that No Child Left Behind explicitly sought to help," Holbein said.

More information: "Left Behind? Citizen Responsiveness to Government Performance Information," John Holbein. *American Political Science Review* (forthcoming). The paper is available online at the *Social Science Research* Network: [papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cf ...](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cf...)

[?abstract_id=2455512](#)

Provided by Duke University

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