

# Barriers to voting matter, but Americans overlook their impact, study finds

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A new study of eligible voters in the 2020 election highlights how many Americans overlook the influence of external factors like child care constraints and transportation difficulties on voter turnout.

These factors, known as "[friction](#)," include issues like conflicting work schedules, being far away from a polling place, and limited poll opening hours—anything that makes it easier or harder to vote.

"Those may seem like minor barriers, but they do affect whether someone turns out to vote," said the study's lead author, Asaf Mazar, a USC researcher who recently joined the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania.

The study was published Monday in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. Mazar led this paper along with INSEAD's Geoff Tomaino (co-lead author) and Ziv Carmon and USC's Wendy Wood.

In this study of the 2020 presidential [election](#), the researchers conducted pre- and post-election surveys with a representative group of 1,280 voters across 10 states. Research participants estimated the extent to which their own and others' turnout is shaped by friction, as well as beliefs.

In one striking illustration, when asked to list important drivers of turnout, only 12% of study participants mentioned external factors. In contrast, a full 91% of participants cited beliefs such as political ideology and seeing voting as one's civic duty.

## **Consequences of overlooking barriers to voting**

Most importantly, overlooking friction had consequences. Voters who underestimated friction's influence on voting were more likely to support policies that could suppress [voter turnout](#).

These findings carry special importance for future U.S. elections such as the upcoming 2022 midterms. Since the tumultuous 2020 election, various states have passed or considered legislation that can restrict voter

access. Some have further limited the period when voters can register and when they can submit mail-in ballots. Others require exact signature matching for voter registration. Such voting restrictions are especially harmful since they disproportionately affect historically underserved communities including neighborhoods with [people of color](#).

"The findings have clear implications for policy support," said Wood, the study's principal investigator and psychology professor emerita of the USC Marshall School of Business and the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences.

"People who overlooked friction thought that if you are committed to vote, then you'll go ahead and do so. That belief seemed to reduce sensitivity to the challenges of voting. If you overlook friction, you don't see much need to make voting highly accessible."

**More information:** Asaf Mazar et al, Americans discount the effect of friction on voter turnout, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2022). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2206072119](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2206072119)

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