

Study finds that state-mandated civics test policy does not improve youth voter turnout

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The United States has the largest age gap in voter turnout among advanced democracies. Youth voter turnout remained low, at 48%, in 2020. Scholars, educators, and policymakers often recommend civic

education as a solution to low youth voter turnout.

However, new [research](#) finds that a commonly used state-mandated civics test policy—the Civics Education Initiative (CEI)—does not improve youth [voter turnout](#), at least in the short term.

The study, by Jilli Jung and Maithreyi Gopalan, both at Pennsylvania State University, was published in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*.

As of 2022, 18 states have implemented a version of CEI, which requires [high school students](#) to take or pass a standardized civics test as a condition for graduation. The study used data on self-reported voting behaviors of 18-to-22-year-old U.S. citizens from the nationally representative 1996–2020 Current Population Survey, which includes approximately 36,000 young citizens nationwide.

This is the first study to examine the causal effect of state-level civics test policies on voter turnout.

"Our findings show that when it comes to improving voting among youth, mandating civics tests that focus on assessing political knowledge might be a wasted effort," said co-author Jilli Jung, a graduate student in education policy studies at Pennsylvania State University. "Luckily, we found that this policy did not harm high school graduation rates—a possible unintended consequence that we were concerned about."

The authors found a marginal negative effect on Black youth [voter](#) turnout, but they interpret this result with caution, given the low sample size.

The authors emphasized that instead of CEI, which focuses on rote memorization and testing of [political knowledge](#), schools and [school](#)

[leaders](#) might find it more useful to thoroughly integrate other forms of content within the social studies curriculum.

"We would encourage students and parents to ask schools to provide more practical civics learning activities, such as visiting legislators, participating in a 'Get Out the Vote' campaign, or learning how to register," said co-author Maithreyi Gopalan, assistant professor of education and [public policy](#) at Pennsylvania State University.

"Holistic education initiatives that improve students' non-cognitive self-motivational skills more broadly, which encourage students to overcome the burdens of getting to the polls, might be more useful as well."

"We now know a lot more about what doesn't work when it comes to traditional civic education in the U.S.," said Gopalan. "However, given the persistent low [youth](#) turnout in the U.S., we continue to push researchers, [education](#) leaders, and policymakers to rigorously examine what works, for whom, and in what contexts so we can strengthen a core pillar of a thriving American democracy."

The authors note that future research should continue to examine the effect of CEI on civic knowledge and other forms of civic engagement, as well as the effects of CEI on voting in the long term.

More information: Jill Jung et al, The Stubborn Unresponsiveness of Youth Voter Turnout to Civic Education: Quasi-Experimental Evidence From State-Mandated Civics Tests, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* (2023). [DOI: 10.3102/01623737231195887](https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737231195887)

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