

Rock the Registration: Same Day Registration Increases Turnout of Young Voters

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Studies find that same day registration (SDR) laws increase turnout, but less is known about which kinds of voters are most affected. Young people are disproportionately burdened by traditional registration laws because they frequently change addresses and infrequently interact with government agencies providing registration services. SDR laws, which lower the cost of registration, should increase turnout most among young people. Laws that lower the cost of voting but not the cost of registration should be less effective at increasing youth turnout. Difference-in-differences estimates suggest that SDR disproportionately increases turnout among individuals aged 18–24 (an effect between 3.1 and 7.3 percentage points). The effect of SDR on young voters is especially pronounced in presidential elections. By contrast, the effects of early voting and other reforms are smaller and do not consistently vary by age. The results suggest that expanded SDR may produce a younger electorate.

It was easier to get my medical-marijuana card—not a right, or even federally legal—than it was to register to vote.
—Jocelyn, 27, Massachusetts (*New York Magazine* 2012)

Less than half of eligible Americans under the age of 30 voted in the 2016 presidential election (File 2017), and only 36% voted in the 2018 midterms—far short of senior citizens' turnout (Misra 2019). Activists and scholars alike express concern about low voter turnout among young Americans (e.g., Bogard, Sheinheit, and Clarke 2008; Cohen 2010; McLeod 2000). Moreover, a large body of research suggests that older individuals exert greater influence over American politics than younger people (e.g., Anzia 2018; Campbell 2002; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Low participation rates may bear partial blame, leading policy makers to be less responsive to young people.

Can election reform improve turnout among young people? Prior studies have thoroughly investigated the effect of specific voting reforms, such as vote by mail (Berinsky, Burns, and Traugott 2001; Karp and Banducci 2000; Kousser and Mullin 2007; Southwell 2004, 2009; Southwell and Burchett 2000), absentee voting (Karp and Banducci 2001; Patterson and Caldeira 1985), early voting (Gronke, Galanes-Rosenbaum, and Miller 2007; Richardson and Neeley 1996; Stein and García-

Monet 1997), and “motor voter” laws (Franklin and Grier 1997; Knack 1995, 1999; Martinez and Hill 1999; Wolfinger and Hoffman 2001). Other research has investigated differences in voter participation across age groups (e.g., Bhatti, Hansen, and Wass 2012; Wattenberg 2015). However, there has been less focus on how voting reforms may affect age groups differently.

We argue that same day registration (SDR) laws are especially likely to improve voter turnout among young people. SDR laws lower the cost of the major barrier to young potential voters: the registration process. Young people's life circumstances make traditional registration uniquely costly. They are more likely to change residential addresses. They less frequently use government offices that provide registration materials. They have not yet developed habits of voting (Gerber, Green, and Shachar 2003) and may not know where or how to register. SDR laws should make voting less costly for these young voters by combining registering and voting into a single act (Wolfinger, Highton, and Mullin 2005).

By contrast, we expect that early voting (EV) and other laws less focused on registration are unlikely to increase turnout

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Replication files are available in the *JOP* Dataverse (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jop>). The empirical analysis has been successfully replicated by the *JOP* replication analyst. An online appendix with supplementary material is available at <https://doi.org/10.1086/714776>.

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rates for young people. Under EV laws, registered individuals can cast a ballot in advance of Election Day (Burden et al. 2014). Laws such as EV and no-fault absentee voting make voting easier for those already registered, but they do not reduce the cost of registration itself. Because registering is especially costly for young people, we hypothesize that these postregistration laws will be less effective than SDR in increasing turnout among young people.

For this new research question, we improve upon the estimation strategies of prior studies of election reform in two ways. First, we use data with greater temporal coverage of voter turnout and state election laws. Second, we apply recent advances in difference-in-differences techniques to estimate the relationship between election laws and turnout.

The results consistently show a substantial positive effect of SDR on young people's turnout. Difference-in-difference results show an increase of between 3.1 and 7.3 percentage points in 18–24-year-olds' likelihood of voting, a greater increase than for older voters. Consistent with greater use of SDR among young voters, we find that young people are disproportionately likely to report registering at their polling place in SDR states. We also find that SDR is especially effective at increasing young people's turnout in presidential election years, while the effect of SDR on older voters is greater in non-presidential election years.

Further analysis suggests that SDR may have electoral and policy consequences. We predict that the US electorate under expanded SDR would have significantly greater concentrations of voters under 35 and a relatively smaller proportion of older voters—which, due to partisan differences across age groups, has the potential to change outcomes in close elections. We also show that policy attitudes across many issue areas vary significantly by age. Given the potential policy consequences of these differences in opinion, as well as the importance of equal participation in democratic equality (Dahl 2006; Griffin and Newman 2005; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012), the implications of our findings are potentially profound.

Youth have often been at the vanguard of democratic and social movements (e.g., Noguera, Ginwright, and Cammarota 2006; Youniss et al. 2002). Yet with few exceptions (e.g., Holbein and Hillygus 2016), political science has had little to say about how laws may affect young people's participation. This article suggests that reducing barriers in the registration process may be especially effective at increasing the turnout of young people. Further research should investigate how other registration and voting reforms, such as newly implemented automatic voter registration laws and vote by mail, may affect young people differently from older people—and how such reforms may foster greater democratic inclusion (Wolbrecht and Hero 2005).

STATE SDR LAWS

SDR allows individuals to register and cast their vote on the same day. Since its implementation in Maine in 1973, SDR has been adopted by 20 additional states, plus the District of Columbia. In nearly all of these states, voters can register and vote on Election Day; the one exception is North Carolina, which only allows individuals to register and vote on the same day in the lead-up to an election (NCSL 2019a; see table A9 for further details; tables A1–A16 are available online). Descriptively, SDR states tend to have higher turnout than non-SDR states. In the 2012 presidential election, for instance, average turnout was more than 10 percentage points higher in states that allow SDR.

A substantial body of research has estimated the effect of SDR on overall turnout; for instance, Burden et al. (2014, 26) find that SDR “marginally increas[es] turnout if the window for registration is sufficiently long.” Much of this research has focused on EDR states—that is, the subset of states that only allow same-day registration on Election Day itself. These studies generally indicate that EDR laws have a positive effect on turnout. In 1978, Rosenstone and Wolfinger predicted that eliminating registration “closing dates,” after which prospective voters could not register for an upcoming election, would boost turnout by 6.1%. Highton and Wolfinger (1998) later found that EDR laws in fact boosted turnout by a full 8.7%; other scholars have identified a turnout-boosting effect ranging from 3% to 9% (Fenster 1994; Knack 2001). The current consensus is that EDR laws boost registration by “about five percentage points” (Highton 2004, 509; see discussion in Burden et al. [2014, 4]). However, this research has not been updated to reflect the increasing number of states with SDR laws. Eleven of the 21 states with SDR (plus Washington, DC) enacted their laws in 2012 or later (NCSL 2019a), and, to the best of our knowledge, no published study includes data covering this time period.

Other research has addressed how variation in election law and administrative behavior may have heterogeneous effects on individuals of different demographic and identity groups (e.g., Wolfinger et al. 2005). Some studies investigate the effect of election law and administration with respect to race and ethnicity (Bowler, Donovan, and Brockington 2003; Elul, Freeder, and Grumbach 2017; White, Nathan, and Faller 2015). Others look at the relationship between election law and the class distribution of the electorate (Avery and Peffley 2005; Kropf 2012; Rigby and Springer 2011).

Yet variation in the effect of SDR across demographic groups is less understood. To the extent that existing research has explored the heterogeneous effects of SDR laws, it has largely focused on party turnout. Some studies find that SDR laws primarily increase turnout among Democratic voters

(Berinsky 2005; Franklin and Grier 1997; Hanmer 2009; Hansford and Gomez 2010; Knack and White 1998).¹

While little election law research has focused on young voters, a small number of existing studies suggest that removing registration barriers boosts youth turnout. One study found that youth turnout in EDR states is 14 percentage points higher than in non-EDR states in presidential elections and 4 percentage points higher in midterm congressional elections (Fitzgerald 2003).² Similar effects have been seen with other voting reforms that lower barriers to registration; preregistering 16- and 17-year-olds to vote, for instance, increases the probability that youth will vote by between 2 and 8 percentage points (Holbein and Hillygus 2016, 2017). Most importantly for our study, Leighley and Nagler (2014, chap. 4) compare the aggregate turnout of age groups before and after the implementation of EDR, finding that turnout of young voters increases significantly more than that of older voters.

In addition to covering a longer and more recent time period than earlier studies, we make a number of additional contributions to provide a comprehensive analysis of SDR and age. First, we theorize mechanisms behind an age-conditional effect of SDR. Second, we offer an array of statistical models, using a variety of both individual-level and aggregate data. Third, we investigate additional heterogeneity in the age-conditional effect by election type. Finally, we investigate the potential downstream effects of SDR on election and policy outcomes.

THEORY OF REGISTRATION COSTS, VOTING COSTS, AND TURNOUT AMONG YOUNG VOTERS

Young voters and registration barriers

To understand why young voters may disproportionately benefit from SDR, we consider the potential outcomes of four types of individuals (following concepts from experimental and instrumental variable designs): never-voters, defiers, compliers, and always-voters. In a given election, never-voters do not wish to vote, and they will not vote even if SDR is present. Similarly, always-voters will definitely vote in the election, regardless of whether an SDR law is in place. Defiers will vote only when

SDR laws are not present; theory presumes that this type of voter is either rare or nonexistent. Compliers, on the other hand, are potential voters: eligible voters who wish to vote but only will do so in the presence of SDR. Even if they are inclined to vote in the election, compliers need the help of SDR to lower the cost of registration sufficiently to make voting worth their while. By lowering the cost of registration, SDR makes it possible for these potential voters to become actual voters.

One possibility for why SDR may disproportionately increase youth turnout is that there is a greater proportion of compliers among young voters than among older voters. That is, because they face especially high registration costs (discussed below), young voters disproportionately rely on SDR. Conversely, because their costs of registration are lower, older voters are more likely to be always-voters (or never-voters) who will definitely vote (or not vote) in a given election, regardless of the presence of SDR.

There are reasons to believe that voter registration is a larger obstacle to turnout among young people than among other age groups. Young people cite lack of registration as the number one issue preventing them from voting (Rogowski and Cohen 2015, 38), and they express greater interest in registering to vote than other age groups (Pew Charitable Trusts 2017). Registration may be especially problematic for young people due to their particular stage of life: in comparison to older adults, who are typically settled in one place and job and may no longer be caring for children, “young adults are struggling to succeed in their professional lives, are occupied with starting a family and securing their family’s income” (Goerres 2007).

Young people are also far more likely to move than their older counterparts, a life-cycle effect with clear ramifications for their voting behavior (Ansolabehere, Hersh, and Shepsle 2012). Previous research finds that requiring people to reregister after moving “constitutes the key stumbling block in the trip to the polls,” reducing voter registration rates (Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass 1987, 45). People between the ages of 18 and 29 change addresses more than twice as frequently as those over the age of 30 (US Census Bureau 2016). Many relocate for college just as they become eligible to vote; in one study, more than half of people between the ages of 18 and 21 who reported having moved in the previous year cited education or schooling as a major reason for relocating (Taylor et al. 2008). Unless they are moving within a state with automatic voter registration, these young people must reregister to vote every time they move. We show in figure A6 (figs. A1–A10 are available online) that young people move residences more frequently and that recently moving is negatively associated with voting.

Another potential reason for SDR’s disproportionate impact on youth voters is that political campaigns and organizations may prioritize mobilizing young people (as opposed to other

1. However, Neiheisel and Burden (2012) find that EDR laws in particular “actually decreased the Democratic share of the two-party vote for president,” because the voters who take advantage of EDR “tend to have higher levels of education and income, factors that also make them likely to vote Republican.” Yet increasingly, education and income do not predict support for Republican candidates (Pew Research Center 2016, 2018). Moreover, recent research by Burden et al. (2017) finds that EDR now benefits Democrats, while EV helps Republicans.

2. Our study differs from Fitzgerald’s. We increase the sample size (from $n = 1,718$ to $n = 1.6$ million individual observations) and use estimation strategies beyond cross-sectional regression.

age groups) in states with SDR laws. Under traditional registration laws, campaigns, interest groups, and activists have little incentive to contact unregistered people after the registration deadline has passed. Under SDR, however, they have an opportunity to mobilize unregistered people during the lead-up to Election Day and even on Election Day itself. Young people make for especially attractive mobilization targets under SDR: not only are they disproportionately unregistered, thus composing a large pool of potential voters, but their voting behavior is less crystallized than that of older Americans, creating an outside opportunity for parties and interest groups to influence their turnout decisions.³ It may be especially valuable for parties and political organizations to engage with young people before their identities and attitudes are crystallized for the long term (Beck and Jennings 1991; Plutzer 2002).

Mobilization efforts may be particularly effective at boosting turnout among young people, as compared with other age groups (Bennion 2005). As one study put it, “when ‘get out the vote’ efforts are directed at young, first-time voters (e.g. college students), the payoffs are considerable” (Iyengar and Jackman 2003, 3). Moreover, once young people are registered, they are highly likely to vote. In the 2008 presidential election, for instance, 84% of registered voters between the ages of 18 and 29 cast a ballot (CIRCLE 2018), very close to the 88% of registered seniors over 65 who turned out to vote (File and Crissey 2012).

Even if young people are not directly mobilized by political groups, however, they may still be motivated to vote after contact with other actors, such as the media and their peers (e.g., Bhatti and Hansen 2012; Gerber, Karlan, and Bergan 2009). Media coverage, as well as peer contact in person and on social media, ramps up as Election Day approaches. In states with registration deadlines in place, however, much of this mobilizing stimulus may come too late; in the 2008 election, for instance, when unregistered young people were asked why they had not signed up to vote, a full one in five reported that they had missed the registration deadline (Godsay 2010). By making it legal for young people to register up until Election Day itself, then, SDR ensures that young people inspired to vote by late-stage media coverage or social pressure can still cast a ballot.

Both of our arguments, about the greater proportion of potential voters among young people and about mobilization, suggest that SDR may have a larger effect in presidential elec-

tions than midterm elections. Young voters are disproportionately activated by high-salience election environments (Jackson 2000). In highly salient presidential elections, many young people are likely to move from never-voters to compliers, hoping to vote but only when the costs of registration are sufficiently low. Older individuals, by contrast, are less affected by election salience and more likely to have established habits and identities around voting. Accordingly, they are more likely to already be always-voters who benefit little from SDR laws in presidential years. (Descriptively, turnout among voters ages 18–29 in presidential elections is already often double that of midterm elections, a much greater difference than for older voters.)

In addition, the importance of campaign, media, and social mobilization for young people also leads us to expect a greater SDR effect in presidential elections. Political campaigns invest more in voter mobilization in presidential election years (Bergan et al. 2005; Jackson 1996), and several recent presidential campaigns have been especially effective at connecting with and turning out young voters (Pomante 2017). Similarly, news media cover presidential campaigns more than their congressional counterparts (Flanigan and Zingale 2006), and social pressure is also presumably greater. By incentivizing groups to mobilize an even broader range of young people, and by providing an opportunity for these youth to vote up until Election Day itself, SDR should amplify this turnout increase even further. Mobilization is unlikely to be as important for older voters, who are much more likely to already be registered and have calcified habits.

Young voters and other electoral reforms

In contrast to SDR, we expect policies focused on lowering the cost of voting—but not registration—to be less effective at increasing youth turnout. Early voting (EV) laws, which allow registered voters to vote ahead of Election Day, are a prominent example of such a policy. While EV laws make voting more convenient for those already prepared to cast a ballot, such as older voters with a long history of civic engagement, they do nothing to alleviate the voter registration burdens facing younger voters. Because EV laws fail to address registration barriers while making it easier for seasoned voters to participate in elections, we hypothesize that EV will not have a greater effect on turnout of younger individuals than older individuals.

No-fault (unrestricted) absentee voting laws similarly reduce the cost of voting by providing an alternative to in-person voting. Absentee voting allows voters to avoid potentially long lines at polling places and may be especially beneficial for individuals who work or are otherwise busy during daytime voting hours, as well as rural voters (e.g., Oliver 1996). But like EV, no-fault absentee voting does not

3. Campaigns and organizations attempt to mobilize young people during election years (e.g., Miller, Reynolds, and Singer 2017; Nickerson, Friedrichs, and King 2006), and parties and grassroots organizations alike actively try to “rock the vote” for young individuals who are newly eligible to cast a ballot (Burgess et al. 2000; Green and Gerber 2001; Rogowski and Cohen 2015, 39).

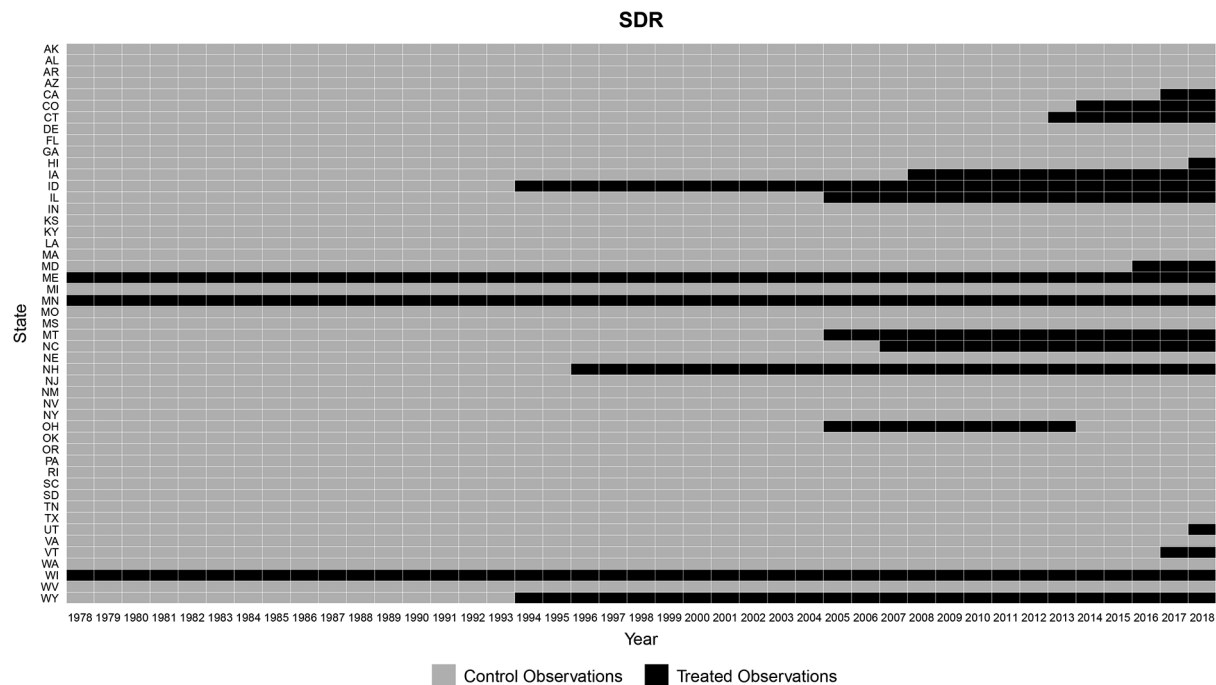


Figure 1. Implementation of SDR in the US states

affect young people's disproportionately costly registration and also does not interact with (and may even diminish) the role of organized mobilization efforts, media coverage, and social pressure. Like for EV, we hypothesize that no-fault absentee will not increase turnout as effectively as SDR among young voters.⁴

METHODS

Some studies define SDR relatively narrowly, conceptualizing it separately from Election Day registration (EDR). In their view, SDR encompasses laws permitting people to register and vote up to, but not including, Election Day. By contrast, we view SDR as an umbrella concept that captures any law allowing people to register and vote on the same day. Since EDR allows same-day registration and voting, albeit only on Election Day, EDR falls under the broader SDR umbrella. Our definition follows the US Election Assistance Commission's approach of definitionally grouping together laws that permit "registering to vote on the same day in which a vote may be cast" (Election Assistance Commission 2008, 8).

4. We similarly do not expect voter ID laws to disproportionately affect turnout among young people. Although the effects of voter ID laws remain somewhat unclear (Fraga and Miller 2018; Grimmer et al. 2018; Hajnal, Lajevardi, and Nielson 2017), both young and elderly individuals are less likely to possess identification than middle-aged people. We estimate the effect of voter ID and additional election laws on turnout by age in fig. A7.

Data on SDR state laws come primarily from the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL 2019a, 2019b); however, because NCSL lists the year of SDR enactment, rather than implementation, we update these data using information from state government reports and news coverage identifying the first election in which a given SDR law was used. Data on state early voting laws (fig. A4) and no-fault absentee voting laws are from Boehmke and Skinner (2012), Biggers and Hammer (2015), Grumbach (2018), and the US Election Assistance Commission (2015); voter ID data come from Biggers and Hammer (2017) and Jordan and Grossmann (2020). Our data cover the years 1978 through 2018 (see fig. 1).⁵

We collect data for the dependent variable, voter turnout, from the Census Current Population Survey (CPS) Voter Supplement. The CPS Voter Supplement is a biennial survey of approximately 60,000 households,⁶ which affords us a large sample for quite precise estimates. Our individual-level models use over 1.6 million observations. Like all prominent self-reported measures of voter turnout, the CPS turnout question is known to suffer from overreporting. However, studies suggest that this overreporting is unlikely to introduce bias to estimates

5. We exclude North Dakota, which does not require any form of voter registration, from our analysis.

6. The CPS is administered every month in order to track unemployment and other labor market dynamics. Biennially, the CPS produces the Voter Supplement in November with survey questions related to voting.

of the relationship between election laws and turnout (e.g., Burden et al. 2014, 101; Highton 2005).⁷

The CPS data also contain the age variables necessary to estimate the effect of election laws on the turnout of different age groups. The CPS measures specific yearly age. In our main analyses, we group individuals into conventional age categories: 18–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, 55–64, and 65 and above.⁸ The groups are of roughly comparable population size, except for the 18–24 category, which is a smaller group in the population (9.5% of the US population in the 2010 census, compared to 13.5% on average for the other groups).⁹

While the CPS is the canonical data set for studies of election law and turnout (Alvarez, Bailey, and Katz 2011; Nagler 1991), as a robustness check, we replicate our analyses with data from Fowler (2017) in figure A3. Despite these data being limited to 2010–16, the results are consistent (though somewhat imprecise).

Electoral reform does not happen in a vacuum; confounding variables may lead states to both implement SDR and have higher voter turnout. In this section, we describe our multifaceted strategy to avoid such confounders. Most studies of the effect of SDR on turnout have used traditional ordinary least squares (OLS) and maximum likelihood estimation with controls for demographic characteristics that might affect turnout (e.g., Brians and Grofman 2001; Highton 1997; Knack and White 2000). Burden et al. (2014) augment their regression analysis with matching and difference-in-differences analysis to mitigate the threat of confounders (see Hanmer [2009] for discussion of threats to causal identification in studies of turnout).

Our main estimates come from a difference-in-differences design, which exploits variation within states across time, protecting against time-invariant characteristics of states that may affect both SDR and turnout.¹⁰ We fit difference-in-differences models on both individual-level and aggregate state-level data, using state and year fixed effects. With the individual-level data, we are able to include individual-level covariates for census-categorized race (white, black, Native American, Asian, Pacific

Islander/Native Hawaiian, multiracial, and other race), gender, family income, and education (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). With the state-level data, we are able to include covariates for the percentage of the state that is white, the percentage that is Asian, and the percentage that is black; the percentage of the state living under the federal poverty line; and the percentage that is a college graduate or above. Additional information on covariate measurement can be found in the appendix, available online (“Covariate Measurement”).

The aggregate state-level data allow us to supplement our two-way fixed effects model with a weighted fixed effects (WFE) estimator (Kim and Imai 2017).¹¹ Because the weighting procedures of WFE reduce statistical precision considerably and our effective sample size is small, we primarily use it as a substantive robustness check.

All of our difference-in-differences specifications assume parallel trends across SDR and non-SDR states. Although this assumption cannot be directly tested, we support it with an event study design in the appendix (“Event Study Analysis”) that sheds light on pretrends and long-run treatment effects. The event study is based on a model with state and year fixed effects that interacts treatment assignment with an indicator of the years until (or after) SDR treatment. The results, shown in figures A1 and A2, corroborate our main findings about the SDR effect for young people (in absolute terms and relative to older age groups).

We also supplement our difference-in-differences analysis with a matching design (table A6), comparing differences in turnout between demographically similar individuals in SDR and non-SDR states in the same election, and with a placebo analysis that tests for postmatching differences in turnout between states that will later adopt SDR and those states that never adopt SDR (table A7).¹² Through these multiple design strategies (including nonparametric tests), we improve on previous estimation strategies.

RESULTS

We first present descriptive averages of turnout by age and SDR laws in figure 2. The probability of voting for 18–24-year-olds increases by 6.9 (raw) percentage points under SDR, but only 2.5 percentage points for 55–64-year-olds and 4.9 percentage points for people 65 and over. These correlations are

7. Following convention (e.g., Burden et al. 2014, 101), we code individuals who respond with “Refused,” “Don’t know,” or “No Response” as nonvoters. As a robustness check, we replicate the main analysis excluding these individuals in fig. A9. The results are consistent.

8. We use age categories because the conditional effect of election laws may not vary linearly by age. An alternative strategy is to use a continuous age variable with quadratic and/or cubic terms. The results are substantively consistent. We opt for the age categories for purposes of substantive clarity.

9. We provide statistics on the age composition of the US population in table A12.

10. Specifically, within-state changes in turnout in SDR vs. non-SDR years are compared to within-state changes in states that do not implement SDR.

11. Goodman-Bacon (2018) shows that under varying treatment timing across units, unbiased two-way fixed effects requires the assumption of a time-invariant within-unit treatment effect. WFE relaxes this assumption but at the cost of precision.

12. Although the placebo test is successful for young voters, these matching estimates rely on the selection on observables assumption and thus should be interpreted as more descriptive than causal.

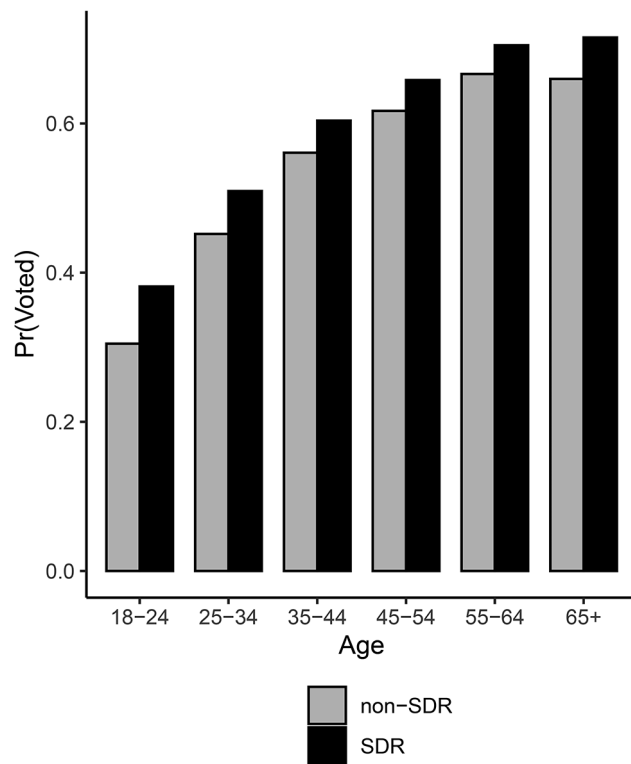


Figure 2. Average turnout by SDR and age

consistent with our theory of heterogeneous effects by age. The next section turns to our difference-in-differences design.

Difference-in-differences results

Figure 3 plots the effect of SDR from separate difference-in-differences model specifications along with 95% confidence intervals. For 18–24-year-olds, the individual level models show a 3.23 and 5.41 percentage point increase in turnout for the bivariate and covariate-adjusted specifications, respectively. When including state-decade fixed effects or state-specific linear time trends, the marginal effects range from 4.84 to 7.27. The aggregate state-level models show effects of 3.10 (bivariate) and 3.51 percentage points (controls). By contrast, SDR effects for individuals aged 25 and over, and especially for those 35 and over, are smaller within specifications. Estimates for groups 35 and over range from -0.99 to 4.49. With the exception of the WFE specification, the 18–24 coefficient is significantly greater than each of the coefficients for groups 35 and over ($p < .05$).

The WFE specification shows a 6.14 percentage point effect of SDR on the turnout of 18–24-year-olds, with a very similar estimate for 25–34-year-olds. As expected, the traditional fixed effects specifications produce estimates with considerably smaller variance than WFE.¹³ In turn, although the SDR effect is

13. This is due to the weighting and aggregation procedures of the WFE procedure (Kim and Imai 2017), especially the arbitrary autocorrelation correction used in WFE standard errors.

again greatest for young voters, the estimates are not significantly greater than those of 45–54-year-olds ($p < .05$ level). As an additional robustness check, we provide a lagged dependent variable model in table A13.

Finally, we run additional difference-in-differences analyses interacting other election laws—early voting, no-excuse absentee voting, and voter ID—with age (fig. A7). Unlike SDR, these reforms show similar turnout effects across age groups and smaller turnout increases for young voters relative to SDR.

Effect of SDR is concentrated in presidential elections

We also suspected that the effect of SDR on youth turnout would be concentrated in presidential elections. Figure 4 compares the marginal effect of SDR laws on the probability of voting by age group in presidential and nonpresidential elections.¹⁴ The estimates in black represent presidential elections, and the estimates in gray represent nonpresidential elections. The full models used for these estimates, which we subset to presidential or midterm election years, adjust for individual race, gender, and income and include state and year fixed effects; detailed results are shown in table A11.

The results show that the effect of SDR is conditional not only on age, but on age and the occurrence of a presidential election. For individuals aged 18–24 and 25–34, the effect of SDR is substantially greater in presidential elections than nonpresidential elections. SDR affects individuals aged 35–44 and 45–54 similarly across election types. The effect of SDR is noticeably smaller in presidential election years for individuals over 45, and especially over 55. It may be that, during high-salience (presidential) elections, older Americans register to vote well in advance of registration deadlines, making SDR laws less necessary, whereas in low-salience elections, they learn about the election closer to Election Day, at which point they need SDR to both register and vote.

SDR makes young voters more likely to register at a polling place

Figure 5 shows the effect of SDR on the probability of registering at a polling place. Marginal effects are based on individual-level difference-in-differences models that interact SDR with each age category. SDR increases the likelihood that younger people register at the polling place relative to alternative methods, such as registering at the Department of Motor Vehicles, a public assistance agency, a school, a hospital, a town hall or county/government registration office, or a registration drive, or by internet or mail. The relationship between SDR and the

14. A descriptive plot of turnout by age group in SDR vs. non-SDR states can be found in fig. A5.

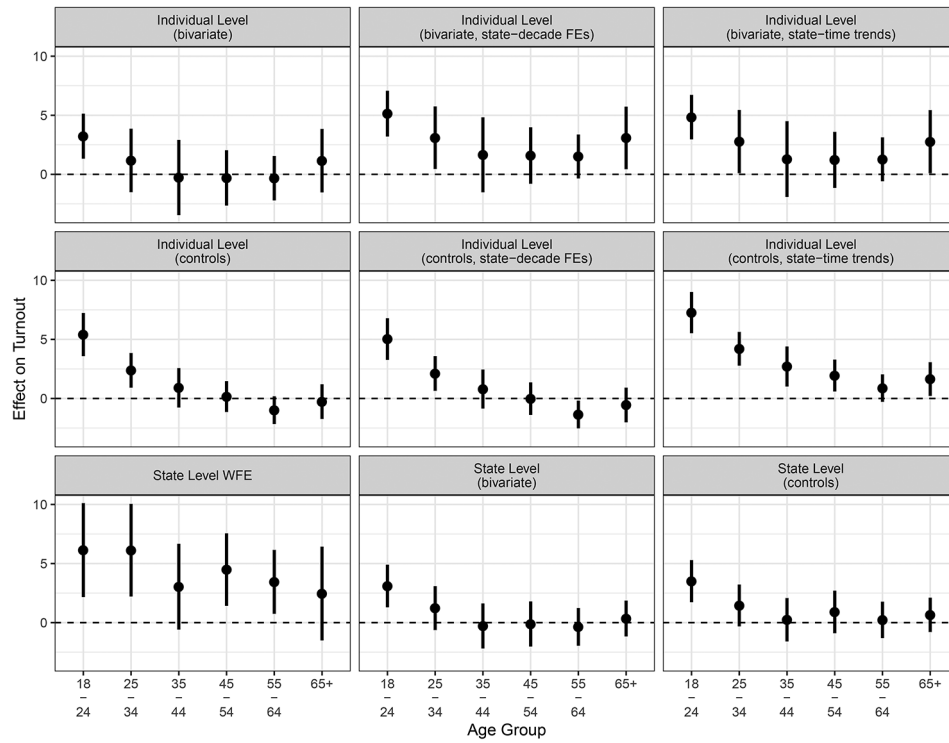


Figure 3. Difference-in-differences effect on turnout by age. All models include state and year fixed effects (FEs). State-decade fixed effects specifications include three fixed effects for each state (1978–90, 1992–2004, and 2006–18). State-time trends specifications also include state fixed effects interacted with a linear time trend. State-level models use aggregated state-level data ($N = 980$ for each age group model). Individual-level covariates include race, gender, income, and education. State-level covariates include percentage white, percentage black, percentage Asian, poverty rate, and percentage college graduates or above. Full regression results are presented in tables A1–A4. Robust standard errors are clustered by state. In addition to heteroskedasticity, WFE standard errors allow for arbitrary autocorrelation.

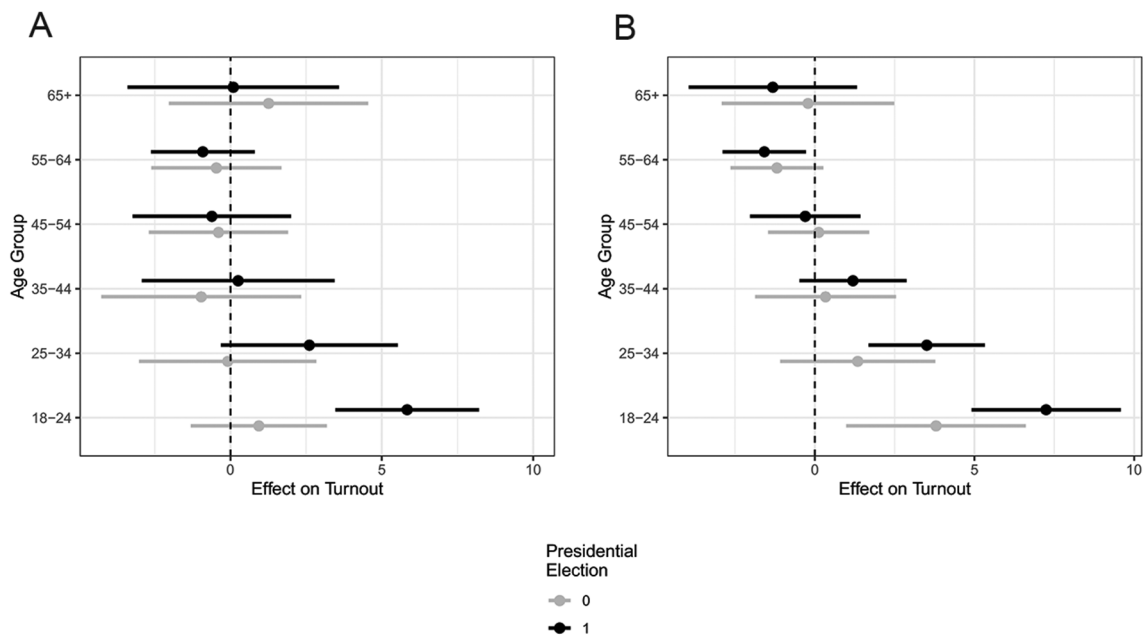


Figure 4. Effect of SDR in presidential and nonpresidential elections. A, Bivariate difference-in-differences. B, Difference-in-differences with controls. Predicted probabilities and 95% confidence intervals are derived from separate models for midterm and presidential elections. Models use individual-level data and include state and year fixed effects. Robust standard errors are clustered by state.

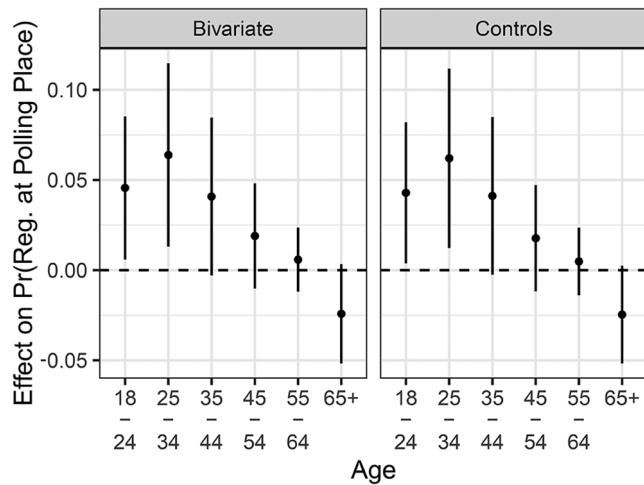


Figure 5. SDR and probability of registering at a polling place. Models include state and year fixed effects. Robust standard errors are clustered by state. CPS data cover years 1996–2018; $N = 527,881$.

likelihood of registering at one’s polling place varies by age. SDR makes people under 45 between 4 and 7 percentage points more likely to register at their polling place, whereas voters over 55 receive no such boost.

SDR makes the electorate younger

As noted earlier, age groups make up different proportions of the US population. We estimate population effects to see how the composition of the electorate would change under expanded SDR. In figure 6, we predict the change in the age composition of the US electorate if all states were to allow for SDR. We first estimate the predicted probability of voting by age group under counterfactual scenarios of all states with SDR and no states with SDR (using the individual-level bivariate and control specifications in fig. 3). For each counterfactual, we then weight these probabilities by the number of individuals of each age group in the population from the 2010 census. We divide this estimate (the number of voters from each age group) by the total number of voters to estimate each group’s percentage of the electorate.

Figure 6 plots the difference in percentage of the electorate from each age group under full SDR and no SDR, along with 95% confidence intervals around the predictions. The shares of 18–24-year-olds and 25–34-year-olds in the electorate increase under SDR. Mechanically, this also means that older voters make up a smaller part of the electorate under SDR. It appears that universal statewide adoption of SDR would make the electorate younger.

A younger electorate could have major consequences for both election results and policy outcomes.¹⁵ Previous research

15. See fig. A10 for an original analysis of policy preferences by age group. We find that policy attitudes vary greatly by age, with young Americans holding more liberal stances on most issues.

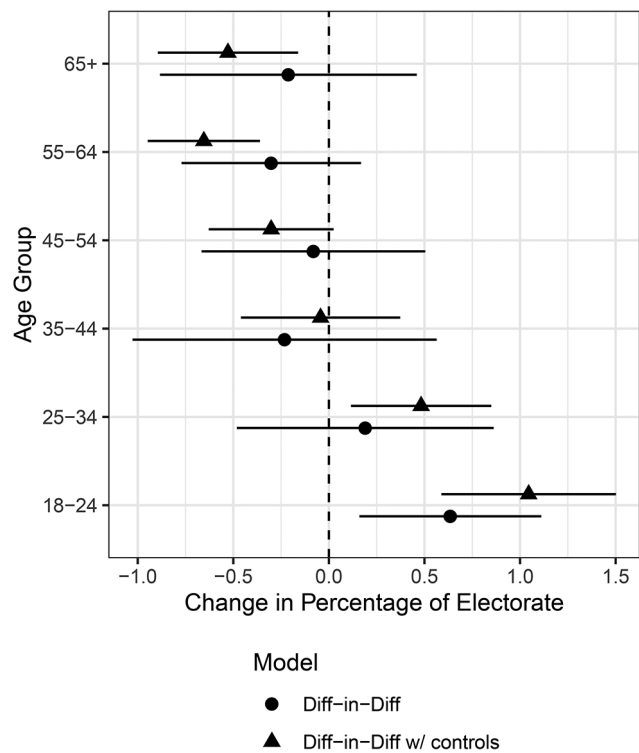


Figure 6. Change in age composition of electorate under SDR

has estimated the impact of universal turnout on election outcomes; since nonvoters lean slightly more Democratic than voters, universal turnout would likely increase Democratic vote shares by 1.5 percentage points in Senate races (Citrin, Schickler, and Sides 2003; Sides, Schickler, and Citrin 2008). However, because young nonvoters are even more likely to lean Democratic, expanded SDR would likely change nearly as many election outcomes as universal turnout—including, quite possibly, the result of the 2016 presidential election. The non-SDR state of Michigan, for example, is home to nearly 1 million 18–24-year-olds. If additional voters from SDR were to have voted in the same patterns as real 2016 Michigan voters of their age groups (and if SDR did not meaningfully change other critical election factors such as the geography of turnout), our difference-in-differences estimate implies a counterfactual vote swing for Hillary Clinton of between 19,000 and 28,000 votes, larger than Donald Trump’s victory margin in Michigan of 10,704 votes.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

Do election reforms affect younger and older individuals differently? Our analysis of over 1.6 million individuals across

16. We take the partisanship of presidential vote by age group from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) data. The substantive point stands when using exit poll estimates instead. Overall, our prediction is relatively conservative given the greater effect of SDR on young people in presidential elections shown earlier.

three decades and 20 elections suggests that they do. In addition to their less-developed voting habits, our theory points to young people's greater propensity to change residences, a barrier to obtaining and maintaining consistent registration. We argue that lowering the costs of voter registration can significantly increase the size of the youth voting population and that doing so may be more effective at increasing the turnout of young people than other election laws. We find that same-day registration laws disproportionately increase turnout among 18–24-year-olds. By contrast, the effect of early voting and absentee laws is smaller for young people and less conditional on age. We conclude from this that electoral reforms can shape the composition of the electorate in important ways; specifically, we predict that universal expansion of SDR would make the overall US electorate slightly younger by increasing the relative proportion of voters 35 and under.

As partisanship varies greatly by age, SDR's effect on the age distribution of the electorate could change electoral outcomes in close races. Selecting new representatives by swinging elections is one way that SDR could improve young people's representation in American politics—but greater turnout could also improve young people's representation if it opens up channels of communication between constituents and politicians (Griffin and Newman 2005, 1207–8), or if reelection-minded politicians self-sanction according to the attitudes of the electorate (Fenno 1978). At present, young adults are dramatically underrepresented in elected office, and public budgets tend to support programs that disproportionately benefit older people.

We also find that SDR has a greater impact on youth turnout in presidential elections. Our theory centers around the potential interaction of mobilization and SDR laws. The 2018 midterm election featured historically high mobilization efforts, especially toward young people. Research should further explore whether SDR's effect on youth turnout varies based on the intensity of organized mobilization efforts, as well as media and social media activity (e.g., Moeller et al. 2013). Researchers should also explore whether and how voter mobilization efforts shift in response to the passage of SDR laws. In theory, SDR should give political groups greater incentive to reach out to young people on Election Day, regardless of whether those young people are currently registered.

Other emerging reforms could also substantially shape the age distribution of the electorate. Further research should pay special attention to automatic voter registration (AVR) laws, in which eligible residents of a state are automatically registered to vote upon interacting with a designated government office or agency, unless they opt out. These laws have diffused across states since 2016. As AVR dramatically reduces the cost of registration, its effect on turnout across age groups will be an important test of our theory. We expect AVR to have

a positive effect on youth turnout. However, states that combine AVR with SDR may increase turnout even more, as SDR further lowers the cost of registration for individuals who do not interact with their state's motor vehicle agency or other AVR administrators.

The implications of our work should be of interest to scholars of both American government and elections, as well as policy makers and elected officials. While SDR laws are currently distributed across Democratic, Republican, and divided-control states (table A10), in this politically polarized era, the two major parties have distinct relationships with democracy and the voting franchise. Although there is evidence that elements of the Democratic Party prefer to keep local elections off-cycle in order to control who votes (Anzia 2014; Hersh 2015), the Republican Party has stronger incentives to oppose reforms that expand the electorate (e.g., Ziblatt 2017), especially reforms that would increase the concentration of voters who lean Democratic, such as young people, people of color, and low-income people.

In those states where SDR laws are passed, other political reforms are likely to follow, as new participants in the political system—young voters in particular—express their policy preferences at the ballot. Past studies find that young people have distinct political attitudes (Cutler and Kaufman 1975; Foner 1974; Neugarten 1974; Rhodebeck 1993), and their electoral participation has been integral to political change over the past century; increasing their participation could significantly influence political outcomes. In political systems that increasingly resemble gerontocracies (Atella and Carbonari 2017; Harper and Hamblin 2014; Pollack 2017), this article points to SDR laws, and lowered registration costs more generally, as mechanisms to bring these changes to fruition.

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