Improving Voter Turnout  
By Katy Owens Hubler

After a big election, candidates and the public look for two things: Who won and the voter turnout. Good democracy depends on voter turnout. It is no surprise, then, that legislators would like to see greater civic engagement and higher participation in voting. Turnout is complicated, however. It can be difficult to measure and even more difficult to improve.

**Measuring Turnout.** Methods to measure turnout take the number of ballots cast against one of three denominators, each of which may give a different number for voter turnout. One denominator is the voting-age population (the number of people in the United States who are age 18 and older). Although this approach is used by the U.S. Census, critics argue it is imprecise because it includes ineligible voters (such as felons and noncitizens) and excludes those living overseas. Another denominator is the voting-eligible population (excluding those who are not eligible to vote, such as felons and noncitizens). A third is registered voter data provided by states, which quickly becomes outdated due to ever-changing voter registration lists.

According to Michael McDonald, a University of Florida professor who manages the United States Elections Project, presidential elections typically draw between 55 percent and 65 percent of eligible voters, while midterm elections see turnout in the low 40 percent range. At 76.1 percent, Minnesota had the highest turnout during the 2012 presidential election. McDonald uses the voting-eligible population for his turnout analysis.

**Increasing Turnout.** Turnout is affected by many variables, most of which are not the result of election administration policy decisions. These include a state's civic culture, demographics, the competitiveness of the races and ballot measures, get-out-the-vote efforts and even Election Day weather.

**State Action**

It often is difficult to pinpoint policies that may increase voter turnout, but legislators and others are interested in any measures that might make a noticeable change. Details follow about four common options—pre-Election Day voting, same-day registration, vote centers and election consolidation. Although it is uncertain if these measures can significantly affect turnout, it is clear that all provide more convenience for voters.

**Pre-Election Day Voting.** The 2008 report, *Convenience Voting*, found that providing pre-Election Day voting options has a small (2 percent to 4 percent) but statistically significant effect on turnout.

- Thirty-six states permit voters to cast ballots before Election Day, through early in-person voting, no-excuse absentee voting and vote-by-mail elections.
• Some contend that pre-Election Day voting only provides more convenient options for voters who would have voted anyway.
• According to McDonald, vote-by-mail elections often increase turnout during local and smaller elections, but not during larger elections.
• Voters often prefer the civic experience of voting at a traditional polling place. Ensuring the security of alternate voting methods can be a problem, and cost also may be an issue.

**Same-Day Registration.** Of the various elections administration policies, researchers contend same-day registration has the most effect on increasing voter turnout.
• Ten states and the District of Columbia allow a person to register at the polling place or elections office and vote on the same day.
• Four of the top five states for voter turnout in the 2012 presidential election offered this option, although this data does not prove that same-day registration causes higher turnout.
• Same-day registration could be an administrative burden on election officials. A voter’s eligibility must be determined on the spot, and a letter confirming the voter’s information generally is sent after the fact. Proof of residency and some form of identification are required in all of the states that allow same-day registration.

**Vote Centers.** Another form of convenience voting, vote centers take the place of traditional neighborhood precincts by allowing voters from any part of a jurisdiction to cast a ballot in any location.
• The report “Engaging the Unengaged Voter: Vote Centers and Voter Turnout” shows that vote centers increase turnout, particularly among infrequent voters.
• Jurisdictions that use vote centers typically provide fewer, but larger, voting sites.
• Eleven states now either permit jurisdictions to replace precinct polling places with vote centers or have authorized pilot projects in select jurisdictions.
• Anecdotal evidence from states that use vote centers suggests that they offer a way to ensure that voters who plan to vote in the election have more opportunity to do so.
• New technology and equipment may be needed for vote centers, including Internet connections that may be unavailable in more rural areas. Rural voters also may need to travel even farther to reach the nearest voting site.

**Election Consolidation.** Some states have considered moving smaller elections to share the ballot with larger state and federal elections, where turnout is higher.
• One reason U.S. voter turnout often lags behind voter participation in other countries is the busy elections calendar in many states.
• Although consolidating elections may increase overall turnout and save costs, voters may not necessarily vote on local or school board elections placed further down on the ballot.

Voter turnout is based on a variety of factors, only some of which are within policymakers’ control. In addition, while high levels of participation are valued; election integrity is of equal value. Thus, when considering election administration policy decisions, it is important that these benefits be balanced.

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NCSL’s Vote-by-Mail Web page  
NCSL’s Early and Absentee Voting Web page  
NCSL’s Same-Day Registration Web page  
NCSL’s Vote Center Web Page