



Data-driven diagnoses of critical civic issues organized around strategic targets

ISSUE | CIVIC PARTICIPATION

OVERVIEW

Voter turnout, a key indicator of civic participation remains low. For 2012, North Carolina's voter turnout rate was 65%, 11th best in the US and 2nd best in the Southeast. However, for the 2010 non-presidential election, North Carolina's voter turnout rate was 43%, 27th in the US and lower than 39 other developed nations. North Carolina's voter registration rate, after peaking in 2000 at 88%, outpaced the US average from 2004 to 2010. Recent legislative initiatives in North Carolina could reverse these favorable trends.

CIVIC IMPACT

Low voter turnout (and civic participation) has many ills. It makes politicians and their operatives more cynical and unaccountable, freeing them to make elections less competitive and take other measures to protect incumbents. In turn, this fosters voter alienation and weakens our democracy.

CAUSAL FACTORS

Several factors contribute to low voter registration and turnout, e.g.:

- US society is mobile (45% move every 5 years and 15% every year)
- Work schedules can conflict with traditional election days and hours
- Inconsistent special and primary election dates confuse many voters
- General elections are often uncompetitive, giving challengers little chance to unseat incumbents

Political campaigns are becoming less competitive due to many factors, e.g.:

- Gerrymandered and geographically contorted legislative districts
- Primary elections that allow the most partisan ideologues to select party nominees
- Campaign finance laws that allow wealthy, powerful individuals to buy elections

Voting laws and standards are fragmented and inefficient, e.g.:

- Lax state laws allow counties to use inconsistent voting systems and procedures
- Many jurisdictions lack sufficient capacity for acquiring, maintaining and monitoring voting machines
- States and counties lack cost-effective anti-fraud controls (e.g., for absentee ballots)
- Counties use multiple voting systems, including equipment hacking-vulnerable machines

RECENT EVENTS

In 2013, the governor signed NC General Assembly's HB-589 which:

- Eliminated public financing for Council of State (COS) and judicial elections
- Eliminated same-day registration and teenage pre-registration programs
- Reduced early voting period from 17 to 10 days and required uniform hours for each county
- Instituted photo ID requirement for in-person voters (not for absentee voters)

In 2011, North Carolina allowed a local public financing program to expire despite several municipal requests.

The 2011 redistricting plan split neighborhoods to protect incumbents.

While some states use non-partisan redistricting commissions, North Carolina's legislators control the process, often gerrymandering districts to protect their seats.

OTHER DATA

- **Voter participation (turnout) tends to be higher among certain groups**, including senior citizens & affluent citizens
- **Turnout rates are often lower for other groups**, especially young, minority and low-income voters
- **The Federal government is less committed to protecting voter rights** (e.g., 2013 US Supreme Court ruling undercutting the 1965 Voting Rights Act and failure to fully implement the 2002 Help America Vote Act)