



U.S. Voter Turnout in Global Perspective

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Summary of Key Takeaways

- U.S. voter turnout is on the rise but still is not at very high levels relative to many other countries
- When looking at what factors result in increased voter turnout around the world, one sticks out as having clear benefits with minimum downsides: automatic voter registration.
- Another strategy to increase voter turnout overall is to focus on increasing turnout among specific populations within the U.S. where people face economic hardships that reduce the likelihood of going to the polls.
- Countries with mandatory voting tend to have high turnout rates, but this policy may be hard to implement in the U.S., where public opinion on this policy is split.



Introduction

Voter turnout in the U.S. has grown in recent years, but the U.S. is still middle ranking in the world in terms of the percentage of eligible voters who cast their ballot in national elections. In 2020, [62.4%](#) of voting-age Americans turned out to vote,* representing the highest level of election participation in the country in two decades, continuing a wave of increased voter turnout since the 2018 midterms. But the recent election turnout still trails behind that of many other countries, particularly in Latin America, Europe, and Oceania.

Explaining the question of why people do and do not turn out to vote has produced a large body of still-ongoing research. While many of these studies try to explain turnout over time and across geographies within the US, some scholars seek to understand the differences found between different countries in the world specifically.

In a previous analysis, Public Wise looked into [how voting laws shape voting turnout in the United States](#). We found that voter turnout was highest in jurisdictions where voting is made easier. Policies that make voting easier include vote by mail and no excuse absentee voting, easier registration processes such as same day

and automatic voter registration, laws that allow for voting without an ID, and laws that allow voters to cure their mail in ballots when there are discrepancies.

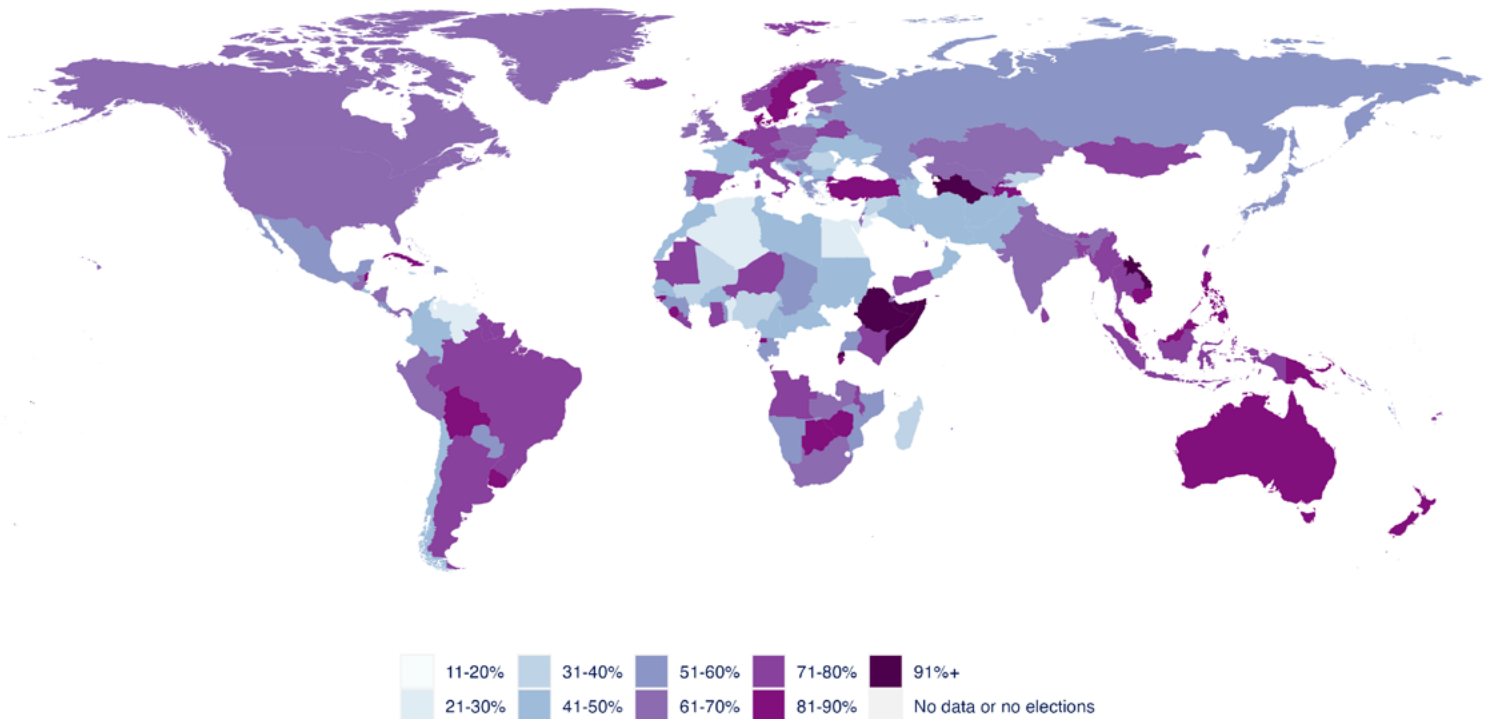
In this report, we explore what researchers have pointed to as the most important factors shaping voter turnout rates globally, and what we in the U.S. can learn from these findings to improve voter turnout in our country.

Based on this research, we identify two key policies that are grounded in evidence and feasible in the United States: 1) automatic voter registration (and variations thereof, such as automatic re-registration when moving), and 2) targeted voter turnout programs for those facing economic hardship. On the other hand, compulsory voting, which is associated with high voter turnout and is common in other democracies around the world, would be nearly impossible to implement in the U.S.

But before we get to factors that affect turnout and how the U.S. compares to other nations, let's talk basics ...

When Compared Globally, US Voter Turnout is Middling

Voting Age Population Turnout in Most Recent Election



Graph by Public Wise Org, Data from the International Institute for Democracy & Electoral Assistance

* Estimates for voting age population turnout come from the [Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance](#).

How is Voter Turnout Measured?

Measuring voter turnout is challenging, in part because there is no universal definition. At its most simplistic, voter turnout is a fraction: the number of people who cast votes, divided by the relevant population. While the number of votes cast is straightforward, defining the relevant population is not. For example, a portion of the population is too young to vote, so they should be excluded from the total count of the relevant population.

One option for determining the total relevant population is using the “voting-age population” – the total population which is above the minimum voting age in a country. This is frequently used by researchers, political organizations, and the media because it is an easy statistic to obtain. It is beneficial for the comparison and study of multiple countries and regions where it might be difficult to get statistics for other definitions of the relevant population. But using the voting-age population may underestimate voter turnout if it encompasses people who are not eligible to vote for reasons other than age. For example, some places ([like many states in the United States](#)) do not allow incarcerated people or people ever convicted of felonies to vote.

The relevant population could be defined alternatively as the “voting-eligible population.” The voting-eligible population only includes those that have the right to vote. Thus turnout would be calculated by dividing those who voted by those eligible to vote.

Lastly, some studies use the number of people registered to vote. In many countries, where voter registration is automatic or obligatory, this should be identical to the voting-eligible population. But in other countries, where people must “opt-in” to register, the number of registered voters might be much lower than the total number of people who are legally able to vote.

For example, if we look at 2020 Presidential election turnout numbers in the U.S. using the registered population, we would determine that turnout was [94.1%](#). But if we use the voting-age population instead (which includes people who are not registered), turnout was a much less impressive 62.4%.

It is hard to say which definition is best. It depends in part on what question we want to answer.

For example, if we start from the premise that we want to maximize the participation of people in one of the most important practices of democracy, then we might want to account for the systemic exclusion of some people from that practice.

For example, if we wanted to account for the exclusion of incarcerated people, we might want to use the voting-age population, rather than the voting-eligible population, to compare turnout rates between countries.

But, if we are interested in how a particular factor, like a voter turnout mobilization campaign, affects people's motivation to cast their ballots, we would want to use the voting-eligible population because the voting-age population would include a number of individuals who are legally unable to vote, regardless of how motivated they are by any campaign.

The choice between using all eligible voters and only registered voters introduces a similar puzzle. Places with voluntary registration might make turnout appear higher compared to places where registration is automatic, as all registered voters may be excluding much of the population who opted not to register.*

In short, there is not one clear right choice and scholars use a range of definitions across studies which may somewhat affect results. In this post, we focus on the factors which are most relevant to turnout among eligible voters, though we plan to address global differences in eligibility in a future post.

* See [Stockemer 2017](#) for a more detailed academic discussion of these differences.

Factors Affecting Turnout

Rules around Voting and Registration

Major factors accounting for differences in turnout rates worldwide are ease and obligation around voting and registration, which vary considerably from country to country. In most of the world, voting is considered to be a right, but in some countries, it is an obligation.

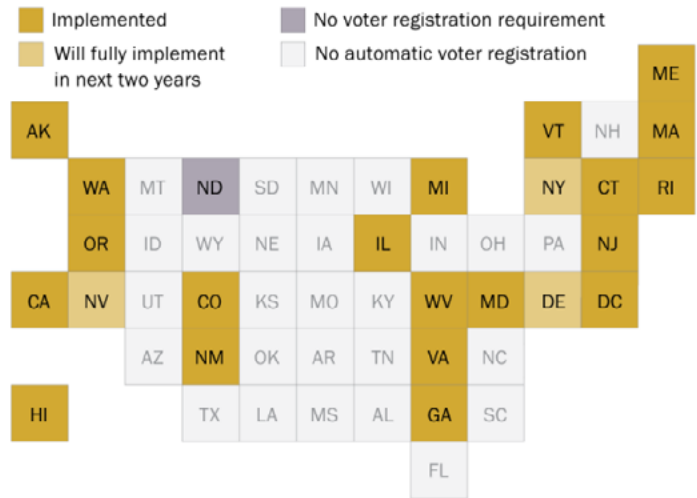
Out of 203 countries, 27 practice compulsory voting. Unsurprisingly, academic researchers have found that compulsory voting is a powerful driver of voter turnout. A meta-analysis of decades of scholarly studies on voter turnout around the world demonstrated that out of 130 studies which investigated compulsory voting, just 4 did not find compulsory voting to be significantly associated with greater turnout rates ([Stockemer 2017](#)).

However, the definition of compulsory can hide a lot of variation. Depending on the country, sanctions for not voting range from requiring an explanation, monetary fines, disenfranchisement, or non-formalized sanctions like difficulty getting a public sector job. Compulsory voting has a much stronger effect on voter turnout when the consequences for not voting are heavier (such as receiving a fine) and well-enforced (such as [Stockemer 2017](#)). For example, in a cross-country study where they distinguish between the effects of strictly and weakly enforced compulsory voting, Quintelier et al. ([2011](#)) find that weakly enforced compulsory voting policies were only half as effective on turnout as strictly enforced voting policies.*

The difficulty of voter registration also varies by country.** Some countries require people to opt in to registration, like in most of the U.S. (for a more detailed discussion of variation in voter registration and voting laws within the U.S., see [Kalbfeld 2021](#)).

In many states, registering to vote is automatic

States that have implemented, or plan to implement, automatic voter registration

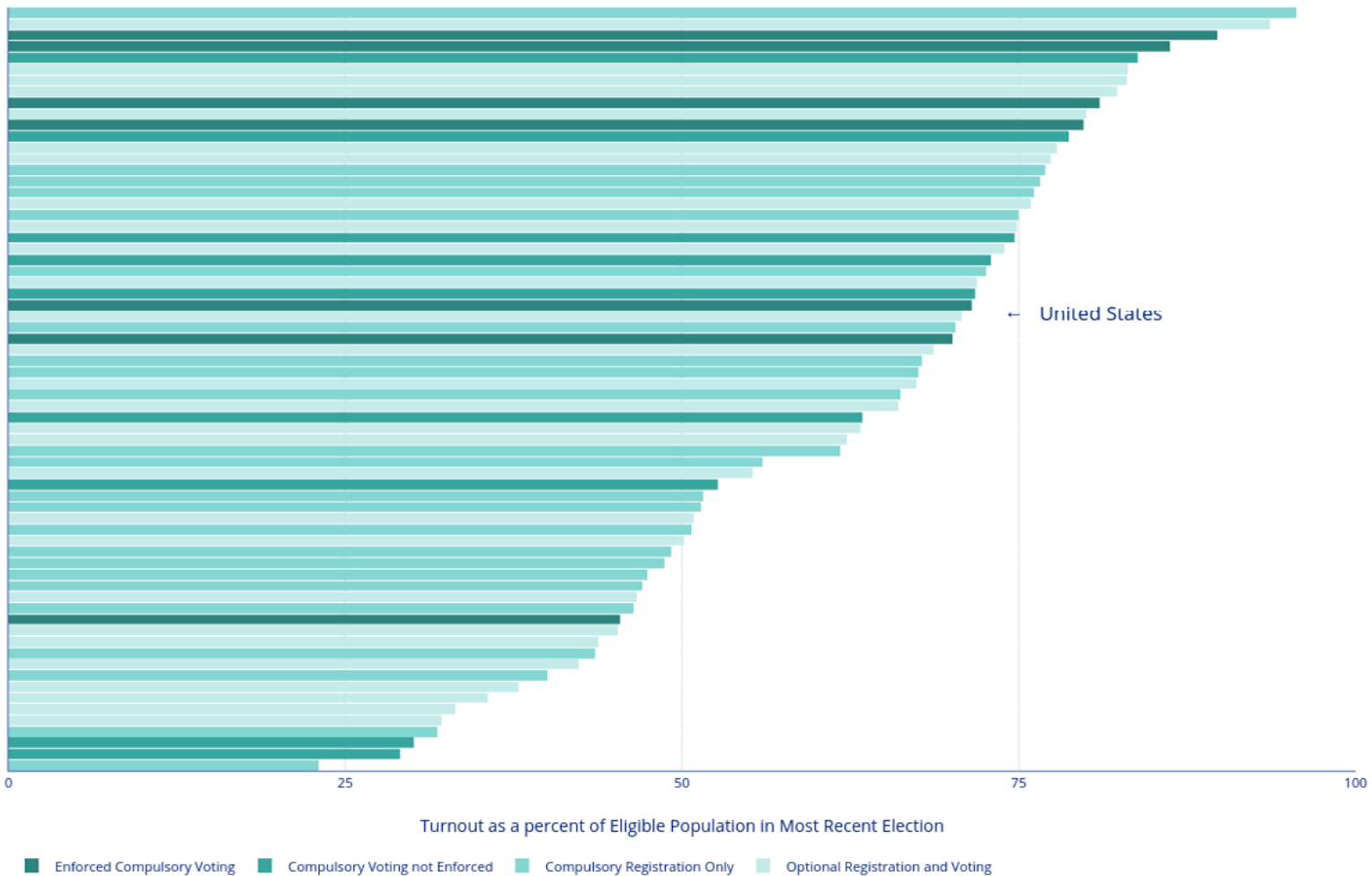


Note: Data as of January 2022.
Source: National Conference of State Legislatures.
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* Places considered to have "strictly enforced" at the time of their study include Australia, Belgium, Cyprus, Uruguay, the provinces of Vorarlberg and Tyrol in Austria, and the canton of Schaffhausen in Switzerland

** See Rosenberg and Chen ([2009](#)) for a comparative overview of voter registration rules around the world.

Turnout Rates and Registration and Voting Rules



But in many other countries, all eligible voters are automatically registered, as is the case in Germany, South Korea, and Indonesia. Other countries (Canada, for example) allow people to register on election day, as [21 U.S. states and Washington D.C.](#) have implemented. Studies looking at registration practices consistently find that more restrictive practices, like requiring registration well in advance of the election or re-registering for every election, negatively impact turnout ([Geys 2006](#)).

Simple policies such as making re-registration automatic can have big payoffs: For example, Kim (2022) finds that automatic re-registration following a residential move in Orange County, California increased turnout by 5.8 percentage points. It is also worth noting that the effect of registration policy changes on voter turnout may not be immediate: In a study on voting rights and turnout in the U.S. authored by Public Wise’s research director in 2021, the effect of registration reform grew stronger a few years after its implementation ([Kalbfeld 2021](#)).

Interestingly, while facilitating registration is associated with higher voter turnout, the effects of increasing flexibility in the process of voting is not as

straightforward. In their article on election reform effects in the United States, Burden et al. (2014) find that more flexibility around voting, such as implementing early voting, can actually undermine turnout when not coupled with making registration easier.

They attribute this to the “mobilizing effects of Election Day,” noting that having elections on one special, highly visible day contributes to a sense of civic culture around voting that can increase turnout. Public Wise’s 2021 study on U.S. turnout found that facilitating voting had a positive effect but that the effect was larger in midterms than in Presidential elections, suggesting a possible interaction between voting ease and enthusiasm on turnout.

Population Size

Another factor that researchers have consistently linked to voter turnout is the population size of a country. Theoretically, if potential voters decide whether or not to vote partly based on how much of a difference they think their vote will make, countries with larger populations may have lower turnout because each person's vote has a lower chance of changing the election result.

Population size may also play a role in how easy it is for campaigns and the government to mobilize people to vote – a small country can have a more centralized GOTV effort. We can see this pattern in the map of voter turnout above – among the countries with the highest voter turnout in the world, many are somewhat less populated countries, like Guyana, Sierra Leone, Uruguay, and Laos. In 58 academic models which looked at population size, over 75% found that increasing population size of a country was associated with a lower voter turnout ([Stockemer 2017](#)).

This factor is illustrative of the fact that, while some factors have clear policy implications (such as voter registration policies), other factors that affect voter turnout – like population size – are out of our control.

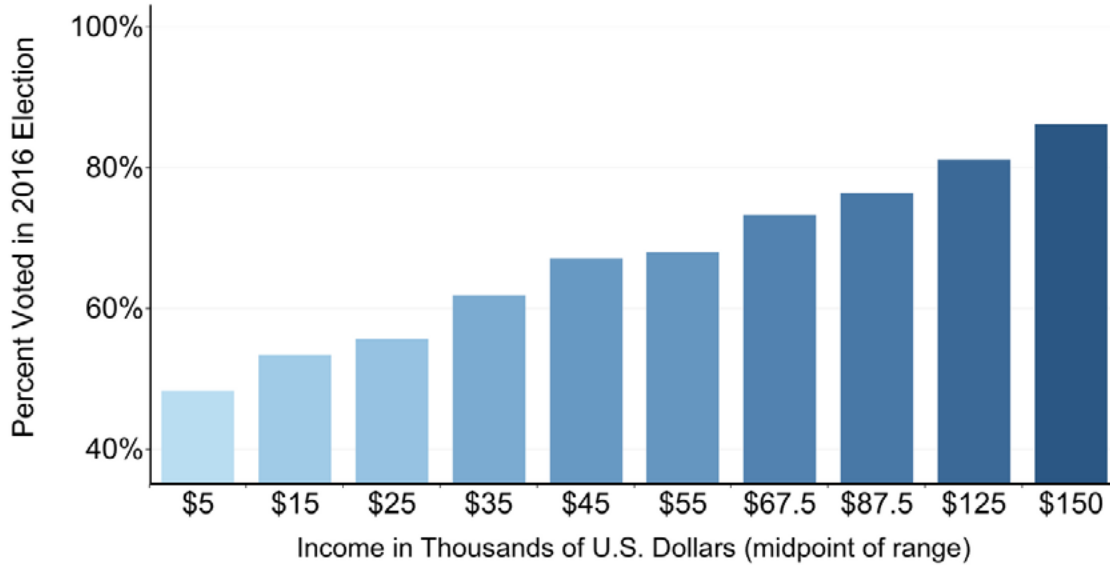
Economic Hardship and Income Inequality

As income inequality rises around the globe, its potential effects on political participation might give cause for concern. As it turns out, the effects of income inequality in a given country depend on other political and economic conditions that exist there.

Studies have consistently demonstrated first of all that lower-income citizens tend to turn out to vote less ([Franko et al. 2016](#), [Matsubayashi and Sakaiya 2021](#)) and that individuals suffering from unemployment or economic distress are primarily preoccupied with their own pressing economic problems and are less concerned with political participation ([Pacheco and Plutzer 2007](#), [Schaub 2021](#), [Wilford 2020](#)). Economic hardship is associated with a range of conditions that lower propensity to vote, such as difficulty in accessing an appropriate [ID](#), [housing instability](#), [lack of access to transportation](#), and [long work hours](#).

Voter Turnout by Family Income

2016 Election



Source: Current Population Survey

EconoFact econofact.org

But this finding is not exactly the same as saying that inequality suppresses turnout and it's important to distinguish between economic hardship and inequality. A country with deteriorating economic conditions could have hardships be experienced by all, keeping the level of inequality between the richest and poorest constant. On the other hand, a country with a growing economy concentrated in a few sectors could see an explosion of wealth for the richest of the country while the poor see no economic improvements though their living standards remain the same, resulting in widening inequality.

While hardship and poverty seem to reduce the likelihood of turning out to vote at both the individual and the aggregate level, the effect of inequality is less clear. On the one hand, scholars have theorized that growing economic inequality may disempower and thus disenfranchise lower income people more, thus decreasing overall voter turnout ([Solt 2010](#)).

Others have argued that greater income inequality could raise the stakes of elections and their policy outcomes for both the rich and the poor, giving everyone more of an incentive to cast their ballot. Overall, studies seem to find a wide range of outcomes for the relationship between inequality and voter turnout ([Killian et al 2008](#), [Stockemer 2017](#), [Frank and Martínez i Coma 2021](#)). Its effects are not as clear cut as those of hardship on its own.

Concurrent and Decisive Elections

In some countries, multiple types of elections are held at the same time, while in others, each type of office triggers a different election. Since 1845, the U.S. has held the election for President every four years on the first Tuesday after November 1st. When a U.S. voter receives their ballot to vote for the President, their ballot is likely to also include a range of other elections at the federal, state, and municipal level.

Many countries, such as the United Kingdom and Bangladesh, have a parliamentary system in which voters elect their representatives in parliament, who in turn decide on the executive office holder (the Prime Minister). This system also means that any election for parliament is more influential over final policy outcomes, because it fills legislative and executive positions in the government.

Researchers find that elections which incorporate more than one type of office tend to have higher turnout rates, as separating out types of office into different election days diffuses the importance of any given election ([Frank and Martínez i Coma 2021](#)). The much lower turnout in the U.S. for midterm and special elections compared to the Presidential election is illustrative of the important positive effect that both concurrent elections and elections for higher-level offices have on turnout.

The Effect of Proportional Representation is Unclear

Scholars have devoted intense study to the effects of different kinds of electoral systems on voter turnout. The primary focus has been the potential effect of proportional representation versus other kinds of systems. Under proportional representation, seats in parliament are allotted to political parties on the basis of the number of votes polled for them. 85 countries use some form of proportional representation in contrast to countries like the U.S. or India, where voters elect a specific candidate to represent them.

There are a few arguments for why we would expect a proportional representation system to garner higher voter turnout. First, under this system there is a closer match between the number of votes and the number of seats received. Under other types of systems, the more distorted relationship may lead more voters to think their vote is not important, especially for supporters of smaller parties ([Ladner and Milner 1999](#), [Jackman 1987](#)). Another argument is that proportional representation means that there will be fewer districts that are considered to be uncompetitive, giving parties an incentive to campaign in a wider range of places, and therefore, increasing turnout ([Blais and Carty 1990](#)).

Research from the 1980s up through the 2000s found a consistent pattern: countries with proportional representation systems tended to have higher turnout rates ([Geys 2006](#)). But in the last decade or so, newly available data have allowed studies to cover a wider range of countries, including more countries with lower incomes, weak democracies, or other countries that were previously excluded from earlier research.

Researchers also developed more sophisticated statistical modeling techniques. With these updated models and datasets, newer studies have found a weaker relationship between proportional representation and higher voter turnout than previous research ([Stockemer 2017](#), [Frank and Martínez i Coma 2021](#)). With the current state of the literature, it is unclear if proportional representation is as relevant for voter turnout as it was once considered to be.

What Can We Learn From Global Patterns of Voter Turnout?

A wide range of factors affect voter turnout, some of which are easier to change than others. Population size isn't exactly a lever that can be pulled to increase turnout, but other factors that are known to affect turnout are within the power of policy makers to control. However, it is important to note that the effects of any given policy on voter turnout will be dependent on the nexus of factors found in the political and cultural context where that policy is implemented.

Based on studies around the world, one factor appears to have clear benefits with minimum downsides: automatic voter registration. Making registration of eligible voters automatic reduces some of the burden on time and resources associated with voting, which enables more voters to cast their ballots. The United States is an unfortunate outlier in terms of this factor: A [2009 study](#) by the Brennan Center of sixteen democratic countries and four Canadian provinces found that just four of these geographic entities placed the onus of registration on the individual, the United States being one of them.

We also need to focus on increasing turnout among specific populations within the U.S. in order to increase turnout overall. Across the world, including in the US, people suffering from economic hardship are less likely to turn out to vote. Thus, we should continue to ensure that outreach and voting support efforts are targeted at lower income communities to reduce economic inequalities in participation in the electoral process.

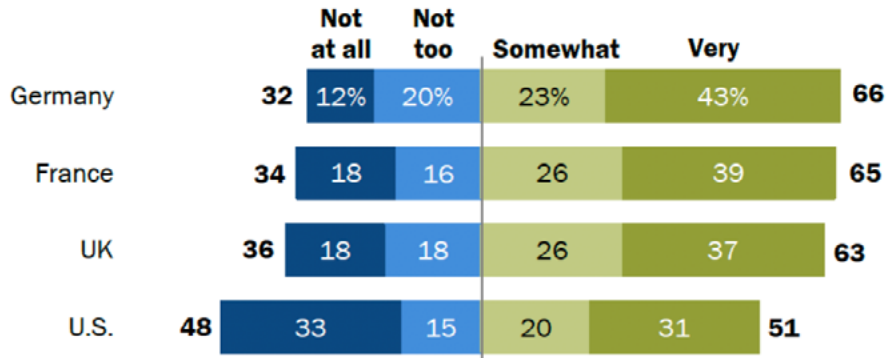
On top of all of this, it is worth thinking of growing voter turnout not only by removing barriers which reduce turnout but by creating positive motivation to turnout through connecting voting to powerful, meaningful reform and change. [Previous research](#) by Public Wise found that among Americans who are eligible to vote a perceived lack of accountability and follow-through from elected officials and not enough transparency around the electoral process discouraged some would-be voters from casting their ballots.

A more dramatic step which would likely have huge returns for turnout is compulsory voting, with some mechanism of enforcement. But such a policy would like be difficult to legislate in the US: A [2020 Pew Research survey](#) found that while mandatory voting was favored by a majority of adults polled in several Western European countries, views among Americans were split.

Majorities favor mandatory voting in Germany, France and the UK, but opinion is split in the U.S.

Majorities favor mandatory voting in Germany, France and the UK, but opinion is split in the U.S.

% who say it is ___ important for the national government to make voting mandatory for all citizens



Note: Those who did not answer are not shown.
Source: Fall 2020 Global Attitudes Survey. Q21a.

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In contrast, while proportional representation may have had a clear positive association with turnout in previous decades of research, more current evidence does not seem strong enough to support the implementation of this sort of electoral system just for the purpose of increasing voter turnout. Read more about proportional representation as a possible solution to gerrymandering in [this piece](#) from our gerrymandering series.

Overall, the experiences of other similar countries shows that there are many low-hanging fruits of reform which would likely expand the size of the American electorate. [Canada](#) and Australia are both countries with federalized systems like the U.S. and share many comparable cultural and political traditions. Both countries modernized their registration systems in the 1990s through the introduction of voter databases that are kept current through data-sharing with other government agencies. By using information from other agencies, including data on address changes, these systems have the capacity to increase the accuracy of their voter rolls at a relatively low cost. Additionally, by eliminating the need for voters to submit paperwork, the risk of errors due to clerical mistakes or mail issues is greatly reduced.

Studying the factors shaping voter turnout around the world allows us to leverage and learn from the mistakes and successes of other countries. We do not need to delay moving forward with policies that can strengthen our democracy by ensuring everyone gets a say.

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