Increasing Voter Turnout
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The state of Utah has historically been a state where voter turnout has been relatively high, compared to the national average. However, over the last two decades, turnout in Utah in federal elections has declined relative to national turnout. Earlier this year, I did a presentation with Quin Monson, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Brigham Young University, to the Governor’s Commission on Strengthening Utah’s Democracy. One of the key issues we discussed in our presentation was why Utah has had relatively low turnout and what might be done to address the problem. As we discussed with the commission members, there are two issues associated with voter turnout in Utah, individual factors related to Utah’s population and structural factors associated with how we run elections in the state.

The first set of factors that affect turnout are individual factors. The attributes of the residents of a state that can affect the level of turnout in the state and one of the key factors that affects turnout is age. Older people vote at much higher rates than do younger people and Utah has the youngest population in the country. The high percentage of young people means that, demographically, Utah would be expected to have a lower rate of voter turnout than a state with an older population. In addition, turnout is affected by a person’s life situation—marriage, divorce, births, deaths in the family—and Utah also has all of these things in relatively high numbers as well. These life changes often lead to people not making time to vote because they have to deal with other issues. These younger people are also generally more mobile, which also lowers their likelihood to vote. These life factors are not things that policy makers can easily change but are important for understanding the environment in which individuals make decisions about voting.

Voter Registration
However, there are structural factors that policy makers can address that could improve turnout. The first of these are the state’s voter registration laws. One of the most studied issues in political science is voter registration. It is generally known that states with more stringent voter registration laws have, on average, lower voter turnout than do states that have more generous voter registration laws. In recent years, many states have adopted election day voter registration laws that allow voters who are not registered to vote to register on election day and then cast a ballot. These ballots are held separate from the other ballots on election night and are counted only after the voter’s registration is validated and it is determined that the voter was not registered somewhere else in the state. Election day registrants register in the exact same way as do regular voters, they just are doing so on the day of the election, not prior to the election. This reform has been shown to boost turnout in states that have adopted it and the administrative issues associated with its adoption are relatively minor.

There have also been numerous initiatives in the last several years to promote online voter registration. Arizona and California, for example, both have adopted online voter registration. This system is helpful because it allows a voter to register easily and it allows the voter to enter the registration data directly, which lowers the likelihood of errors such as not being able to read handwriting, missing required information, and data transcription errors. Also, online registration would link well with the work that the state has already done to create a highly effective online presence in the state election office.

Increasing Competition and Interest in Elections
The second critical factor that increases turnout is having competitive elections. Now there is little that the state can do to make any given election competitive. One reform that would likely heighten interest in elections would be to have competitive primary elections. Currently, Utah uses a hybrid system of party caucuses and primaries. However, primary elections are only held if a candidate in the party caucus does not win a sufficient number of votes in the caucus. If parties had primary elections for all partisan offices—which could be closed to only registered members of each party—then candidates would be forced to reach out more to party members in the primary election process as well as in the general election. This primary election activity would create pressures within the party to mobilize primary election voters, who would then be more informed and energized for the general election. Given that much of the state is dominated by one party or the other, primary elections are often the critical election and having these elections competitive
could play an important role in mobilizing voters for general elections as well.

**Conclusions**

Voting is an important way for individuals to be a part of the political process and making registration easier is perhaps the single best way of increasing turnout. There are reforms that can be easily implemented—such as election day voter registration and online voter registration—that would likely boost turnout in the state. Utah is lucky in that there are clear models for these reforms that can be adopted from other states. In the short term, registration reform is the easiest way to improve Utah’s democracy.

Making elections in the state more competitive—most easily through primary election reform—is likely to be more politically difficult but could also be an important reform. Primary elections allow parties to mobilize their memberships more broadly than does a caucus and promotes intra-party competition before the two parties face off in the general election. Such a reform could serve to make both parties in Utah stronger and more competitive in the future.