



The Two Electorates

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Everyone knows that fewer Americans vote in midterms than in presidential elections. What's less recognized is that midterm voters look increasingly distinct from voters as a whole: They're older, whiter, more affluent – and, yes, more Republican. When the votes are cast this November 4th, a very skewed cross-section of America will have the biggest say. That's not just a problem for one party; it's a problem for American democracy.

Consider turnout by age. In the 1994 midterm – famous for delivering Congress to Republicans for the first time in 40 years – the turnout gap between voters aged 18-44 and voters aged 45 or older was 10 points. By the 2010 midterm, it was nearly 30 points. In the presidential election of 2012, by contrast, the turnout gap was 10 points. In other words, older voters enjoyed a nearly 20 point greater turnout edge in the 2010 midterm compared with the 2012 presidential election. The swing between the 1994 midterm and 1996 presidential contest, by comparison, was just 5 points.

Older voters look like the America of several decades ago, not the America of today. Less diverse and less pressured by post-1970s economic strains, they are also less tolerant socially, more conservative fiscally (except when it comes to Medicare and Social Security), and much less supportive of President Obama's biggest policy achievement, the Affordable Care Act. They also constitute the base of the Tea Party movement that has reshaped the GOP and pulled the national debate to the right.

This skew affects not just House and Senate races, but all the down-ballot contests in midterm years, from gubernatorial and state legislative races to city elections. What's more, the restrictive voter identification laws that many states have adopted – which tend to depress minority and youth turnout – are likely to make this disparity worse, because the laws typically specify types of official photo identification such as driver's licenses or passports that older whites almost always have but which younger, minority people may not have or be readily able to get.

When citizens don't vote, their influence is diminished. More and more research studies show that politicians are much more responsive to higher-income and better-educated voters. The main counterweight, according to these studies, is the general tendency for less affluent voters to be represented by Democrats, who are generally more responsive to them. The sharp skew of the midterm electorate thus weakens the political voice of younger, less affluent, and minority voters – both directly, because people who do not vote have less influence on politicians, and indirectly, because the narrower midterm electorate hurts chances for Democrats to win office.

What's more, a growing divide between the preferences of midterm and presidential-year voters is likely to lead to greater conflict between the president and Congress and stronger swings of the governing agenda after midterms. It's hard enough to tackle pressing national problems given our government's many checks and balances and frequent elections. Add to this the clash between two fundamentally different electorates, and you have a system in which serious policymaking only happens – if it happens at all – in the first two years of a president's term.

We know how to fix this problem. For starters, restrictive voter identification laws should be labeled what they are: efforts at vote suppression, with almost no effect on the tiny amount of fraud by individual voters at the polls. Instead of restricting turnout, we should be expanding it through measures that make it easier to register and vote, that free up political organizations to do more voter education and mobilization, and that encourage donations and other forms of participation among younger, less affluent, and minority voters. According to a growing body of research, turnout efforts based on direct contact with voters are highly effective at bringing people to the polls. In the meantime, states and localities should be working to time their elections so the biggest races coincide with presidential elections when turnout is highest and most representative.

All this will help ensure that the broadest American electorate picks our leaders – every two years, not just every four