From the high-profile race for president to the often-overlooked campaigns that will determine partisan control of state legislatures, voters have plenty of reasons to participate in this year’s general elections. But tens of millions of U.S. citizens almost certainly will not.

During the last presidential election cycle, 42 percent of the nation’s voting-eligible population did not cast a ballot. Two years ago, overall turnout rates fell to their lowest levels in nearly 75 years, and less than one-quarter of eligible young people (ages 18-34) voted in that off-year election. The historic lows of 2014 will not be repeated this year (a race for president always brings out more voters), but if recent history is any indication, the turnout rates in this country will still trail those of most of the world’s other developed democracies.

“Most people view high voter participation as a good thing,” says Michael Hanmer, research director for the University of Maryland’s Center for American Politics and Citizenship, noting that “a high level of turnout is a sign
At least on that measure, most states in the Midwest are “healthier” than the rest of the country (see voter-turnout map). And Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa typically rank near the top of U.S. states for voter turnout.

Myriad factors cause the big variations in turnout among states—from the age, education levels and permanency of their populations to the competitiveness of their elections. But another variable is the state laws themselves, particularly procedures for registering and voting that either add obstacles to participation or remove them.

‘Automatic’ voter registration

With an eye toward improving voter participation, state legislatures in the Midwest have passed laws to provide for early voting, pre-register 17-year-olds, and offer online and same-day registration.
But when asked which systems make it easiest for people to exercise their right to vote, turnout expert Michael McDonald points to two states outside this region: Colorado and Oregon.

In Colorado, he says, the state not only sends all voters a ballot in the mail, it now gives them the option of registering and then voting the same day at polling centers in their counties. Those centers are open for 16 days, including Election Day.

“I would not be surprised if Colorado is near the top of the turnout states this year,” says McDonald, who runs the U.S. Elections Project and is a nonresident fellow at the Brookings Institution.

One year ago, Oregon became the first state to adopt “automatic, opt-out” registration. Under this system, any person eligible to vote is automatically registered when he or she gets a new driver’s license (or updates an old one), a permit or state ID card. Oregonians are then sent a card giving them one of three options: 1) do nothing and be registered to vote in the general election; 2) join a political party in order to vote in the primaries; or 3) opt out of voter registration.

In the first year of its Motor Voter program, Oregon expects to add 250,000 new voters to its rolls. Earlier this year, Illinois came close to becoming the first state in the Midwest to adopt a version of
This type of automatic, opt-out registration system.

“It’s not going to solve every problem with voter turnout, but it certainly simplifies the process for some voters,” says Illinois Sen. Andy Manar, the sponsor of SB 250, which was passed by the General Assembly in May but vetoed by Gov. Bruce Rauner in August.
In his veto message, Rauner said the legislative proposal did not provide enough safeguards to protect ineligible people from voting. SB 250 did not comply with federal law or “ensure the integrity of our election system,” the governor said.

Whether the Illinois General Assembly can override the veto or fix the bill to Rauner’s liking remains to be seen. But Manar hopes his state eventually joins the four U.S. states that now provide for automatic voter registration.

“We should be looking to remove bureaucratic hurdles to voting and removing duplicative processes that cost state government,” he says. “Automatic registration does that.”

Illinois already is one of a handful of Midwestern states with laws allowing for same-day voter registration. Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin have allowed people to register on Election Day for several years now.

Illinois’ law is much more recent, and the 2015 measure was challenged this year as unconstitutional because of statutory language that has different rules based on a county’s population. For counties with populations of more than 100,000 people, voters must be able to register at their polling place. But in smaller-populated counties that lack electronic poll books, this requirement is waived. (Same-day registration must still be offered elsewhere in these smaller counties, however, such as at a county clerk’s office.)

According to the Chicago Tribune [2], Illinois will offer same-day registration this year. A final court ruling on the state law will come after the fall election.
When state policymakers look for ways to increase turnout, their focus often turns to young people, a group that is less likely to vote and more likely to run into voting barriers.

Same-day registration is one way to remove these barriers; another is to allow for online registration.

According to the Brennan Center for Justice, a vast majority of Midwestern states now have laws that allow people to register and update their records via a secure and accessible online portal. In this region, only Michigan and South Dakota lack online registration. (North Dakota is the only U.S. state where voter registration is not required at all.)

Iowa’s online registration system is up and running for the first time this election cycle, and Secretary of State Paul Pate says “it’s been a huge plus.” Many of the more than 20,000 users have been Iowans 25 and under, Pate says, but the system also has been a convenient way for older residents to update their election-related information.

Across the country, too, state election officials were recently reminded about the power of social media. According to The Washington Post, when Facebook displayed a news feed encouraging people to register, states experienced a huge spike in activity. In Minnesota, for example, nearly 27,000 people used the state’s online registration system in a single day after the Facebook post.

Pate believes social media can play a major role in boosting participation by young people in his state; with that in mind, his office has teamed up with 38 colleges and universities to encourage students to sign up for a new app called My Iowa Vote. Once they register for the app, individuals get customized information on their polling place and their candidates for offices. They also can opt in to receive emails and text messages on when and where to vote.

Hanmer, too, see social media as a valuable tool to improve voter participation, but he offers a word of caution.

“One potential drawback is if participation on social media — say retweeting a politician — is viewed as replacing, not complementing, traditional forms of participation,” he says. “Because at the end of the day, it’s the traditional forms that decide elections.”

When it comes to engaging young people, McDonald points to work being done by the state of Florida, where individuals as young as 16 can pre-register to vote (for example, when they get their first driver’s license). The state complements this pre-registration law by holding registration drives at local high schools and by providing lessons on civics education.

Minnesota is another state going into its schools to encourage young people to get interested and involved. This election season, for example, the secretary of state’s office is holding a mock election for high school students and overseeing a voter-registration competition among the state’s college campuses. Secretary of State Steve Simon also has created a voter-education program to support the state’s high school civics and government teachers.

**Lack of competition, lack of interest**
U.S. election experts caution, however, that there are limits on what states can do to improve turnout.

% of general election races for state legislature in 2016 where one major party is not fielding a candidate

- 8.7%
- 34.3%
- 16.0%
- 33.3%
- 3.5%
- 47.0%
- 67.1%
- 46.4%
- 22.6%
- 0.0%

* Nebraska has nonpartisan elections for its Unicameral Legislature. That state's percentage is based on races where a candidate does not face general election competition.

% of population living in districts where winning candidates for both state senate and house won by 10 percent or less of the vote (2011-2014)

- 20.9%
- 16.4%
- 28.7%
- 19.9%
- 30.6%
- 12.1%
- 10.0%
- 8.4%
- 14.8%
- 25.3%
- 12.7%

* Nebraska only has a state senate (Unicameral Legislature)

Source: Ballotpedia.org
“There is a lot of opportunity for the states to facilitate the voting process, but if the voters decide not to take advantage of it — maybe because the campaign is not engaging or the candidates are not likeable or the issues are not something they’re interested in — that’s not something the states can control,” says Barry Burden, director of the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Elections Research Center.

Overshadowed by top-of-the-ticket races, state and local races get scant attention by the media and voters. The result is low information, low interest and, ultimately, low voter participation in these elections.

“When you look at the primaries and local elections, virtually no one is voting,” McDonald says. “That’s not good for democracy when we get to the point where so many people are disengaged.”

There is no easy fix, but McDonald and Burden both say making state and local elections more competitive would be a positive step. The dearth of competition is apparent this year in the number of candidates running unopposed.

According to Ballotpedia, in nearly 43 percent of this year’s state legislative races, one of the major political parties is not fielding a candidate in the general election. Even when the two parties have candidates on the ballot, the results are often lopsided due to factors such as incumbency advantage and the partisan makeup of the legislative district.

“When a campaign is competitive, the candidates, the parties and other groups invest more effort in getting voters out,” Burden says. “They make more phone calls, they run more advertisements, and they make more speeches. There is more intensity to reach out to people and get them to cast ballots. And that’s really helpful. It provides voters a lot of information about the candidates.”

To improve competition, some states have taken redistricting out of the hands of legislatures and put independent commissions in charge of the political maps. South Dakotans will vote this November on whether to create such a commission in their state. (Iowa’s unique redistricting process, which is led by its nonpartisan Legislative Services Agency, is also often cited as a model for other states to consider.)

The nonpartisan group FairVote has called for even more fundamental changes, such as “ranked choice voting.” Under this system, voters rank as many candidates as they want in order of choice. So in state legislative elections, for example, the use of winner-take-all, single-districts would be replaced by a form of proportional representation.

This type of change isn’t likely to be adopted by any state in the Midwest. However, in this region and across the country, legislators are implementing new laws and using new technologies to make it easier for their citizens to register and vote.

By:
Wednesday, October 19, 2016 at 05:12 PM

Attachment Size
Stateline Midwest: October 2016  1.95 MB

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