Significant shifts have occurred over the past decade — including how people register, where and when they vote, and partisan control of state governments.

1. Fewer voters are waiting until Election Day to cast ballots

Between 2004 and 2016, the number of people in the United States who voted prior to Election Day more than doubled — from 24.9 million to 57.2 million. These federal statistics include votes cast by mail, via absentee ballots and at state-authorized early voting centers.

The Midwest has been part of this national trend. Nearly every state in the region now allows people to cast ballots early, in person and/or by mail, without having to give a reason for not being able to vote on Election Day.

In 2016, more than one-quarter of the voters in Illinois and Kansas cast their ballots at early voting centers, according to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission. That same year, absentee balloting (either done by mail or in person) accounted for 41 percent of all of Iowa’s votes.

Early voting, however, remains much more prevalent in some states outside the Midwest. In 2016, it accounted for 50 percent or more of the votes cast in 16 states. Leading the way were Colorado, Oregon and Washington; in each of those states, all registered voters receive ballots by mail.

2. States are giving voters more choices on when and how to register

In 2016, online voter registration accounted for 18 percent of all voter registration applications in the United States. That is triple the rate from 2012. Changes in state law have allowed this to occur. According to the Brennan Center for Justice, online registration is an option in every Midwestern state except Michigan and South Dakota; North Dakota is the only state in the country that does not require voter registration of any kind. (An online-registration bill was moving toward passage in Michigan as of September.)

The center notes, too, that 13 states now authorize “automatic voter registration”: Individuals who interact with a government agency are automatically registered to vote, unless they choose to opt out. Their registration information is then electronically submitted to state election officials. Illinois is the only state in the Midwest with automatic voter registration — the result of last year’s passage of SB 1933.

Another big difference in state voting laws is whether to allow for same-day registration. Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin permit voters to register, or change their registration information, on Election Day and cast a ballot. In contrast, voters must register in advance in Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Nebraska, Ohio and South Dakota.

3. Minnesota, Iowa and Wisconsin are near top for voter turnout

Voter turnout can vary considerably from one state to the next. In Minnesota, 75.3 percent of the state’s civilian voting-age population voted in 2016. That was second only to Colorado (76.9 percent). Indiana, on the other hand, had the lowest turnout rate among the Midwest’s 11 states (59.0 percent).
In addition to Minnesota, Wisconsin (69.7 percent) and Iowa (69.2 percent) have among the nation’s highest turnout rates. There also are striking disparities in participation among different demographic groups. For example, according to the U.S. Elections Project [5], the turnout rate two years ago among people ages 60 and over was about 70 percent; that compares to a little over 40 percent among 18- to 29-year-olds.

During the nation’s last non-presidential election year, 2014, the overall turnout rate fell to its lowest level in nearly 75 years.

4. Four states in Midwest rank in top 10 for election administration

In a recent evaluation of how well elections are being administered around the country, several states in the Midwest ranked near the top. Only Vermont placed ahead of Wisconsin (second) and Minnesota (third). North Dakota (fifth) and Illinois (eighth) also were close behind.

Researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology [6] ranked states and the District of Columbia using 17 different indicators, including: the use of post-election audits, access to voting for the disabled, the number of rejected or unreturned mail ballots, the prevalence of registration or absentee ballot problems, and voters’ wait times.

Here is how the other Midwestern states fared in MIT’s Elections Performance Index: Nebraska, 11th; Iowa, 15th; Ohio, 21st; Michigan, 24th; Indiana, 26th; South Dakota, 45th; and Kansas, 48th.

5. Over past 10 years, GOP has dominated Midwest’s legislative elections

Since 2008, Republicans have picked up more than 200 seats in the Midwest’s 20 partisan legislative chambers. The GOP currently has control over every chamber in the region outside of Illinois.

As of September, Governing magazine [7] did not expect any partisan flips to occur as the result of the November 2018 elections, though Democrats appeared to have the best chance of winning majorities in the Michigan House and Wisconsin Senate.

Nine of the region’s 11 states also have governor’s races this fall: Iowa, Kansas, Ohio and Wisconsin were listed in late September by The Cook Political Report [8] as “tossups”; Nebraska as “solid Republican”; South Dakota as “likely Republican”; Illinois and Minnesota as “likely Democrat”; and Michigan as “lean Democrat.”

By:

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