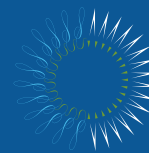


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THE  
**PEW**  
CENTER ON THE STATES

# Washington State's "Make Voting Work for 18 Year-Olds" Experiment

*The study showed that potential voters who received a mailing as their 18th birthday approached from the Washington Office of the Secretary of State that included information on voter registration were as much as 10 percent more likely to register than those who did not. Furthermore, those who registered did so when they became eligible, rather than waiting until closer to the registration deadline. However, these increases came at a cost—the state spent approximately \$6 per registration received as a result of the effort—and 43 percent of 18 year-olds who were sent a registration form pre-filled with their information and return postage paid by the Washington Office of the Secretary of State remained unregistered and unable to vote in 2008.*

As part of a series of reports and pilot projects focused on modernizing the antiquated U.S. voter registration system, the Pew Center on the States' Election Initiatives worked with officials in the Elections Division of the Washington Office of the Secretary of State (OSOS) and researchers at the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center (SESRC) at Washington State University to study the effectiveness of a state program to engage and register young people as they turn 18 years-old.



Starting in 2008, the OSOS mailed either a postage-paid registration form pre-filled with the recipient's information or a postcard with instructions for Washington's online voter registration system to young people nearing their 18th birthdays.<sup>1</sup> The SESRC then evaluated the project's effectiveness at increasing voter registration and participation of young voters as well as assessing its costs and potential for widespread replication.

Interestingly, the data indicates that young voters who received the paper registration form responded at a higher rate than those who received instructions for

the online registration portal. However, it's possible that had the registration form not been pre-filled with the voter's information and postage-paid, the outcome might have been different.

The study shows that mailing the voter registration forms boosted the percentage of eligible 18 year-olds registered in time for the 2008 general election by as much as 10 percent compared to the control group who received no mailing.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the registration mailing successfully prompted 18 year-olds to register as they became eligible, rather than wait until later in 2008, as more of those in the control group appear to have done. Not only did it qualify more 18 year-old voters to participate in the Washington presidential and state primaries, but it reduced the burden on election administrators by spreading the receipt of these registrations over time.

To achieve this increase, Washington spent \$1.12 for the production and mailing of each application form, plus \$1.14 per returned form.<sup>3</sup> In total, the OSOS spent approximately \$6 per application received back to the state. Costs could be reduced

by eliminating the pre-printed registration forms or requiring the respondents to pay their own postage, but this could result in a lower registration rate.

The report also investigated reasons young voters failed to register. Despite the clear influence that the mailing from the OSOS had on 18 year-olds, over 40 percent of recipients of a pre-filled, return postage-paid registration application remained unregistered at the end of a year that was saturated with media coverage of the presidential primary and general election. Survey results show that only one in five of those 18 year-olds who never registered purposely chose not to participate, the rest succumbing to other hurdles in the system. In responses that allowed for multiple answers, 60 percent of young voters who failed to register for the 2008 election did so because they did not have "time to register" and 29 percent of those who did not register "didn't know how to register."<sup>4</sup>

By proactively engaging young voters nearing their 18th birthdays, Washington saw a modest increase in registration rates for the demographic. However,

Percentage of eligible 18 year-olds registered	18 year-olds who were mailed the voter registration application	18 year-olds who were mailed the "register online" postcard	18 year-olds who were not sent the mailing (control group)
Registered in time for the Presidential Primary	20%	19%	8%
Registered in time for the State Primary	38%	28%	22%
Registered in time for the General Election	55%	50%	46%
Registered after the General Election	2%	2%	2%
Never Registered in 2008	43%	48%	52%

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The Washington pilot suggests a more cost effective means of registering voters. By relying on the Washington Department of Licensing (DOL) database, the OSOS was able to reach 17 year-olds that had qualified for a driver's license or identity card with its mailing. If existing data from the DOL and other official sources is used to automate the process and eliminate the mailing and paper registration forms, election offices could capture a much higher percentage of eligible 18 year-olds. Moreover, such a system has the potential to save—rather than cost—states hundreds of thousands of dollars in production and personnel expenses.<sup>5</sup>

Although Washington's experience resulted in more 18 year-olds participating in the election process in 2008, a fully modernized voter registration system could put a greater number of eligible voters on the rolls while ultimately saving the state money.<sup>6</sup>

## Contact Us

We welcome your advice and participation. For more information on Pew's Election Initiatives, please visit our Web site at [www.pewcenteronthestates.org](http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org) or contact:

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<sup>1</sup> The data on 17 year-olds in Washington State was obtained from the Washington Department of Licensing (DOL); subsequently, any 17 year-old who was not in the DOL system was not included in the study. Additionally, the study did not include any residents of Pierce or King Counties, as those two counties still used in-person polling places, as opposed to vote-by-mail.

<sup>2</sup> It is more difficult to determine the influence of the postcards, as other factors may have contributed to a voter's decision to register online.

<sup>3</sup> Comparatively, the postcards with instructions for registering online cost \$.38 each for production and mailing.

<sup>4</sup> The number of respondents who reported they "didn't know how to register" is in-line with the results of the Cooperative Congressional Election Study, 2008, in which Pew participated, which found that over one in four voters reported not knowing how to change their registration information or believed that the postal service or election office automatically updated it for them then they move. Cooperative Congressional Election Study, 2008: Pew Charitable Trusts Content. Washington, DC.

<sup>5</sup> For further information, see Pew's "Bringing Elections into the 21st Century: Voter Registration Modernization," which can be found at: [http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/Voter\\_Registration\\_Modernization\\_Brief\\_web.pdf](http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/Voter_Registration_Modernization_Brief_web.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



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