

MEMORANDUM

Date: May 14, 2021
To: All Interested Parties
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Rebuttal to April 3 New York Times article on voting reforms

In an April 3 piece for the *New York Times*, political journalist Nate Cohn draws on political science research to argue that making voting easier does little to improve voting rates or reduce turnout inequalities (Cohn 2021). Consequently, he claims, efforts to restrict voting access (such as Georgia's recent voter suppression bill) are less harmful than many perceive them to be, and attempts to expand access (such as passing HR1 and SR1) may not be worth Democrats' effort.

In this memo, I argue that this read of the political science literature is incorrect: many voting reforms do meaningfully boost voting rates. Moreover, they can do so in ways that mitigate long-standing turnout inequalities, making our democracy fairer and more participatory.

In the following sections, I challenge two of the article's central claims: 1) the voting process is easy enough that most anyone who wants to vote can do so, and 2) political science research consistently finds that making voting easier does not boost turnout. I cite research finding that important registration and voting barriers still exist and, in some states, are getting worse, and highlight data showing that reported voting costs are correlated with low turnout. I also point to research on the turnout-boosting effects of numerous voting policies and argue for a more nuanced and data-driven approach to democratic reform.

1) Registration and voting barriers still exist.

Cohn writes that "convenience isn't as important as often assumed. Almost everyone who cares enough to vote will brave the inconveniences of in-person voting to do so, whether that's because the inconveniences aren't really so great, or because they care enough to suffer them."

The idea that voting is easy is not new. Cohn cites a Stanford Social Innovation Review article by Adam Berinsky, who holds that "the changes [to voting and registration laws] over the last 40 years have greatly reduced the direct costs of registration and voting" (Berinsky 2016). Specifically, laws like the 1993 National Voter Registration Act (NVRA), popularly known as the "Motor-Voter Act" for allowing individuals to register to vote at their local Department of Motor Vehicles or via mail, have brought registration costs down dramatically. With the voting process

already this simple, Berinsky argues, reducing costs any further will do little to increase voting rates.

To be sure, there have been many clear improvements to America's voting process over the past four decades. However, voting—and especially becoming registered to vote—can still be quite complicated for Americans.

Lee Drutman and I describe this in some detail in a recent New America white paper (Drutman and Hill 2020):

Before you can vote, you must be registered—but this is not a straightforward process. To start, there is no national government communications effort geared toward getting new voters registered; rather, you must independently learn about your state's registration requirement and determine whether you are indeed eligible to sign up. You must then figure out how to register, a process that differs from one state to the next: 40 states offer online voter registration, while 10 still make people sign up in person. The deadlines also vary by state: 30 states require voters to register in advance of Election Day, while the remaining 20 allow you to register on Election Day itself. You will likely also have to present valid personal identification during the registration process, or when you go to vote for the first time—meaning you first need to figure out which type of ID is acceptable in your jurisdiction, and then obtain it in time. Finally, if you move to a new address at any point, you may need to complete this registration process over again, possibly in a place with wholly different registration rules.

Similar complexities plague other steps of the voting process. There is extensive variation across the United States in who is eligible to vote following a felony conviction, who can vote with an absentee ballot, where and when polling places are open, what personal identification is required to vote, how voters can track their ballots, and what sorts of remedies voters have if their ballots are rejected due to minor issues—such as a voter signing their ballot envelope or polling register using a signature that does not closely match the one in government files.

This state-based variation in how easily people can register and vote is quantified in Schraufnagel et al.'s Cost of Voting Index (2020). Oregon, with automatic voter registration and mail-in voting, tops the index as the easiest state in which to vote. Meanwhile, Texas—home to more than 1 in 12 Americans—comes in last place. The Lonestar State “has an in-person voter registration deadline 30 days prior to Election Day, has reduced the number of polling stations in some parts of the state by more than 50 percent, and has the most restrictive pre-registration law in the country.”

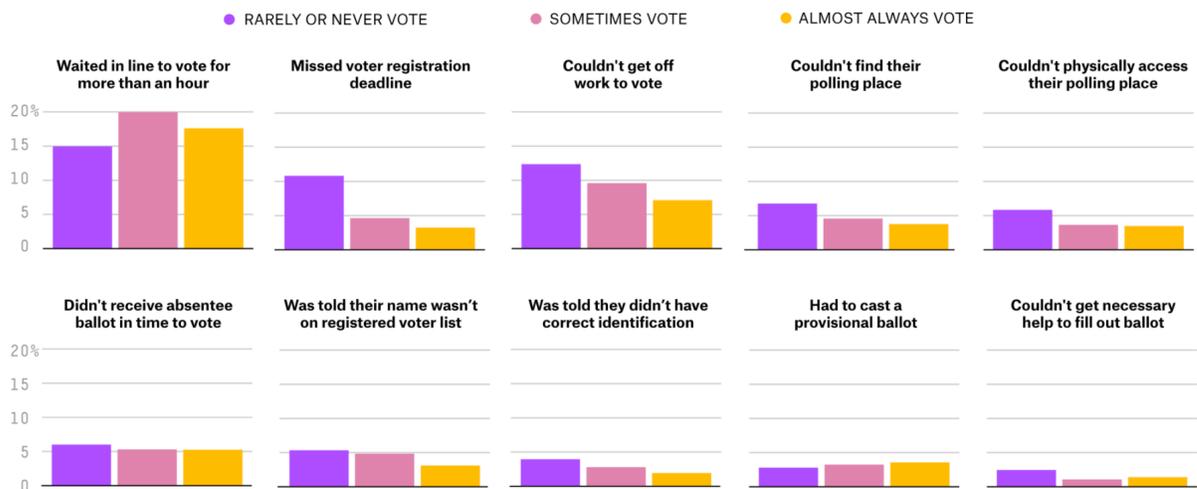
Schraufnagel et al. also emphasize that voting has not universally become easier over time. In recent years, several states have “maintained the status quo and failed to innovate when technological advancements afford the opportunity to make things easier for the voting public.” Worse still, a few states have made voting harder, “principally by reducing the number of polling stations but also by adopting new restrictions on absentee voting.” Relatedly, a new working paper by University of Washington professor Jake Grumbach details how the Republican Party has advanced an agenda of democratic backsliding over the past two decades; after testing numerous theories for state-level democratic declines, he finds “a minimal role for all factors except Republican control of state government, which dramatically reduces states’ democratic performance during this period” (Grumbach 2021).

2) Polling repeatedly shows a relationship between voting barriers and turnout.

In public opinion polls, there is an obvious relationship between people facing voting barriers and voting less often. As shown in Figure 1 below, a recent analysis from FiveThirtyEight found that individuals who rarely or never vote are particularly likely to report missing voter registration deadlines, being unable to get off work to vote, and struggling to find or physically access their polling place (Thomson-DeVeaux et. al 2020). Around 15 percent of those who rarely or never vote report having waited in line to vote for more than an hour.

Figure 1: Many voting barriers disproportionately affect low-propensity voters

Types of barriers to voting that respondents reported experiencing, by voting history



We used a voter file combined with survey responses to classify voters. ● Rarely or never vote: voted in no more than one election ● Sometimes vote: voted in at least two elections, but not all (or all but one) ● Almost always vote: voted in all (or all but one) election.

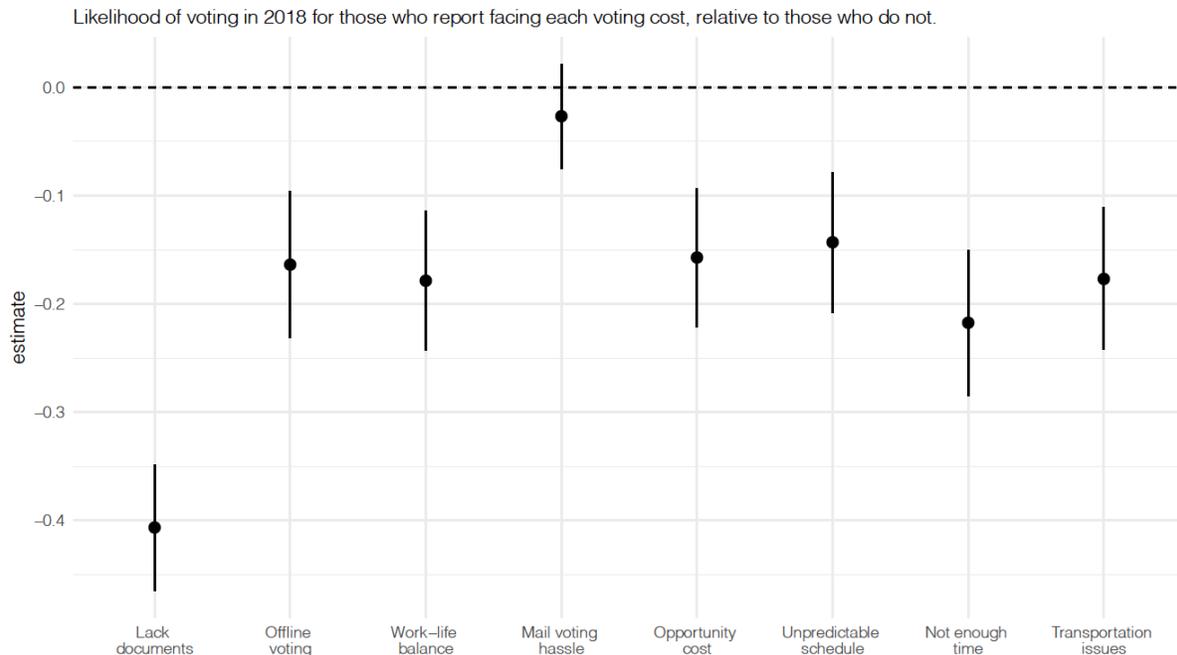
FiveThirtyEight

SOURCES: FIVETHIRTYEIGHT / IPSOS, ARISTOTLE

Similarly, my own research into voting barriers and turnout finds that costs are highly predictive of whether an individual turns out to vote (Hill 2021). Figure 2 shows that various voting costs—including lacking proper registration and voting documents, struggling to complete the parts of voting that cannot be done offline, not having enough time to vote, and facing

transportation issues—are all predictive of whether someone turned out to vote in the 2018 midterm election.

Figure 2: Higher voting costs predict lower likelihood of having voted in 2018



Note: Estimates and 95% confidence intervals are from a generalized linear regression on a binary variable indicating whether an individual faces a given voting cost, with controls for age, educational attainment, gender, race and ethnicity, and family income. The binary variable is coded as 0 for individuals who disagree that they face the cost in question, 0.5 for individuals who neither agree nor disagree, and 1 for individuals who agree.

Even among registered voters—who are far more likely to vote than their unregistered counterparts—voting barriers can stand in the way of casting a ballot. Polling conducted by the Pew Research Center found that a full 14% of registered voters did not vote in 2016 due to being too busy or having a conflicting schedule. Another 8% were out of town or away from home, and 4% faced registration problems (Lopez and Flores 2017).

3) Political science finds that making voting easier can indeed boost turnout.

Cohn spends much of his piece highlighting studies purportedly showing that making voting easier does not increase voting rates. “For decades,” he writes, “reformers have assumed that the way to increase turnout is to make voting easier. Yet surprisingly, expanding voting options to make it more convenient hasn’t seemed to have a huge effect on turnout or electoral outcomes. That’s the finding of decades of political science research on advance, early and absentee voting.”

This reading of the political science literature fails to account for a number of studies that do find significant turnout effects of cost-reducing policies. For instance, all-mail voting has been

found multiple times over to increase turnout (Bonica et al. 2020, Gronke et al. 2007, Karp and Banducci 2000). Election Day registration consistently drives up voting rates (Brians and Grofman 2001, Hanmer 2009, Knack 2001, Leighley and Nagler 2009). More recent research finds that pre-registration laws, which allow individuals younger than 18 to pre-register to vote, significantly increase voter turnout by up to 5 percentage points (Holbein and Hillygus 2016, Holbein and Hillygus 2017), that same-day registration boosts youth turnout by 3 to 7 percentage points (Grumbach and Hill forthcoming), and that internet voting can boost voting rates by more than 3 percentage points (Goodman and Stokes 2018).

Certainly, not all electoral changes regularly result in more voting across the board. Traditional absentee voting reforms are not especially promising (Gronke et al. 2007, Leighley and Nagler 2009), and research on early voting consistently finds no significant effect on aggregate turnout, with the reform's benefits primarily reserved for those who already vote (Fitzgerald 2005, Gronke 2004).

The reality is that political scientists have found all sorts of turnout effects from voting reforms. This is precisely why it is risky to paint voting reforms with too broad a brush: depending on which cost they reduce, and which types of people currently bear the burden of that cost, electoral reforms may boost turnout, have little effect, or even shrink voting rates—and these effects can vary meaningfully across demographic groups.

The solution is not to abandon the project of making voting easier, but to be intentional about which electoral reforms are pursued in the first place. By prioritizing the policies that aim to reduce those costs faced disproportionately by low-propensity voters, we will maximize our chances of expanding democratic participation and reducing turnout inequalities.

In his piece, Cohn focuses on two reforms that have not been found to meaningfully increase turnout: early voting and no-excuse absentee voting. But these policies do not reduce costs that primarily face low-propensity voters. Absentee voting and early voting are “opt-in” reforms, meaning that voters must learn about and decide to take advantage of them; this makes them more likely to benefit higher-information individuals who are aware of the voting policies in their state. The reforms are also future-oriented: they help prospective voters make an alternative voting plan in advance of Election Day. As such, they are well-suited to people who pay early attention to elections and can envision their Election-Day schedules well in advance—a description that does not easily map onto underrepresented voting groups, especially young people. And, of course, they only benefit registered voters, who are already far more likely to vote than unregistered individuals.

In short, Cohn focuses on the reforms *least* likely to benefit those who need the most help. Yes, the research he highlights finds that early voting and no-excuse absentee voting do little to

boost overall turnout—but why would they? They target those individuals already most likely to cast a ballot.

Of course, when it comes to absentee voting, 2020 could be different. Nearly all of the research on the effect of expanding absentee voting was conducted in a pre-2020 era, and no research has studied the impact of *contracting* absentee voting—especially in the year following a massive increase in absentee voting take-up. This contraction could very well have a disproportionate impact on low-resource voters, many of whom voted absentee for the first time this last year, overcoming a giant hurdle—lack of experience with a new system. These same voters are likely to be the last to learn about the new changes to the rules, understand how to navigate around them, and so forth.

There are other voting reforms that Cohn does not discuss in his piece: those that target costs disproportionately held by low-propensity voters. These include registration reforms like same-day registration, automatic voter registration, and pre-registration—all of which, importantly, are promoted by HR1 and SB1 (Sarbanes 2021). Research consistently finds these do boost turnout—sometimes substantially.

My research, for instance, finds that the step of registering to vote is especially difficult for young Americans (Hill 2020). Consequently, when states make it easier for individuals to register to vote by permitting same-day registration, youth turnout goes up significantly (Grumbach and Hill forthcoming). Similarly, taking time from work to travel to a polling place, wait in line, and cast a ballot are all disproportionately costly for lower-income people. As a result, when a state like Colorado opts to mail ballots to registered voters' homes, this disproportionately increases turnout among low-income individuals (Bonica et al. 2021).

Importantly, even these voting reforms do not increase turnout equally for all groups. Reducing or eliminating a given cost of voting will boost turnout more for those groups that are especially likely to bear that cost. Looking at aggregate turnout effects misses the real story.

Cohn and Berinsky also ignore the documented effects of voter suppression laws, which aim to reduce turnout among certain groups by restricting their voting access (Ross and Spencer 2019, Wang 2012). The most commonly investigated form of modern voter suppression is the requirement that individuals present personal identification when attempting to vote. The most stringent states require individuals to present a valid photo ID—often one issued by a government agency—in order to vote. While a robust debate has broken out in the literature on the turnout effects of strict photo ID laws (Grimmer et al. 2018, Hajnal et al. 2017), there has emerged some consensus that, at a minimum, these policies disproportionately burden racial and ethnic minority groups (Hajnal et al. 2018). If suppressive laws threaten to shrink turnout, it stands to reason that cost-reducing laws can *raise* turnout levels.

Conclusion

The April 3 *New York Times* piece created the perception that voting reforms cannot boost voting rates, but this is not the case. The right reforms can make it easier for low-propensity voters to register and cast a ballot. The most prominent democracy bill in front of members of Congress today—HR1 and its Senate counterpart, SR1—includes many of these policy changes. Individuals concerned with expanding the US electorate should feel optimistic about HR1's potential impact on voter turnout and the representativeness American democracy.

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