

The Student Vote Is Surging. So Are Efforts to Suppress It.

The share of college students casting ballots doubled from 2014 to 2018, a potential boon to Democrats. But in Texas and elsewhere, Republicans are erecting roadblocks to the polls.

By Michael Wines

Oct. 24, 2019

AUSTIN, Texas — At Austin Community College, civics is an unwritten part of the curriculum — so much so that for years the school has tapped its own funds to set up temporary early-voting sites on nine of its 11 campuses.

No more, however. This spring, the Texas Legislature outlawed polling places that did not stay open for the entire 12-day early-voting period. When the state's elections take place in three weeks, those nine sites — which logged many of the nearly 14,000 ballots that full-time students cast last year — will be shuttered. So will six campus polling places at colleges in Fort Worth, two in Brownsville, on the Mexico border, and other polling places at schools statewide.

“It was a beautiful thing, a lot of people out there in those long lines,” said Grant Loveless, a 20-year-old majoring in psychology and political science who voted last November at a campus in central Austin. “It would hurt a lot of students if you take those polling places away.”

The story at Austin Community College is but one example of a political drama playing out nationwide: After decades of treating elections as an afterthought, college students have begun voting in force.

Their turnout in the 2018 midterms — 40.3 percent of 10 million students tracked by Tufts University's Institute for Democracy & Higher Education — was more than double the rate in the 2014 midterms, easily exceeding an already robust increase in national turnout. Energized by issues like climate change and the Trump presidency, students have suddenly emerged as a potentially crucial voting bloc in the 2020 general election.

And almost as suddenly, Republican politicians around the country are throwing up roadblocks between students and voting booths.

Not coincidentally, the barriers are rising fastest in political battlegrounds and places like Texas where one-party control is eroding. Students lean strongly Democratic: In a March poll by the Institute of Politics at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, 45 percent of college students ages 18-24 identified as Democrats, compared to 29 percent who called themselves independents and 24 percent Republicans.

Some states have wrestled with voting eligibility for out-of-state students in the past. And the politicians enacting the roadblocks often say they are raising barriers to election fraud, not ballots. “The threat to election integrity in Texas is real, and the need to provide additional safeguards is increasing,” the state's attorney general, Ken Paxton, said last year in announcing one of his office's periodic crackdowns on illegal voting. But evidence of widespread fraud is nonexistent, and the restrictions fit an increasingly unabashed pattern of Republican politicians' efforts to discourage voters likely to oppose them.

“Efforts to deprive any American of a convenient way to vote will have a chilling effect on voting,” Nancy Thomas, the director of the Tufts institute, said. “And efforts to chill college students' voting are despicable — and very frustrating.”

The headline example is in New Hampshire. There, a Republican-backed law took effect this fall requiring newly registered voters who drive to establish “domicile” in the state by securing New Hampshire driver's licenses and auto registrations, which can cost hundreds of dollars annually.

The dots are not hard to connect: According to the Tufts study, six in 10 New Hampshire college students come from outside the state, a rate among the nation's highest. As early as 2011, the state's Republican House speaker at the time, William O'Brien, promised to clamp down on unrestricted voting by students, calling them “kids voting liberal, voting their feelings,

with no life experience.”

Florida’s Republican secretary of state outlawed early-voting sites at state universities in 2014, only to see 60,000 voters cast on-campus ballots in 2018 after a federal court overturned the ban. This year, the State Legislature effectively reinstated it, slipping a clause into a new elections law that requires all early-voting sites to offer “sufficient non-permitted parking” — an amenity in short supply on densely packed campuses.

North Carolina Republicans enacted a voter ID law last year that recognized student identification cards as valid — but its requirements proved so cumbersome that major state universities were unable to comply. A later revision relaxed the rules, but much confusion remains, and fewer than half the state’s 180-plus accredited schools have sought to certify their IDs for voting.

Wisconsin Republicans also have imposed tough restrictions on using student IDs for voting purposes. The state requires poll workers to check signatures only on student IDs, although some schools issuing modern IDs that serve as debit cards and dorm room keys have removed signatures, which they consider a security risk.

The law also requires that IDs used for voting expire within two years, while most college ID cards have four-year expiration dates. And even students with acceptable IDs must show proof of enrollment before being allowed to vote.

A polling place at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The state has imposed tough restrictions on using student IDs for voting purposes. Joshua Lott for The New York Times

“Universities have had to decide one by one whether they want to modify their IDs to make them acceptable, issue a second ID for voting purposes or do nothing,” said Barry Burden, the director of the Elections Research Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. “And they’ve all gone in different directions.”

While legislators call the rules anti-fraud measures, Wisconsin has not recorded a case of intentional student voter fraud in memory, Mr. Burden said. But a healthy turnout of legitimate student voters could easily tip the political balance in many closely divided states.

Senator Maggie Hassan of New Hampshire, a Democrat, won election in 2016 by 1,017 votes over her Republican rival, Kelly Ayotte. Gov. Roy Cooper of North Carolina, a Democrat, won that year by about 10,000 votes in a state with nearly 500,000 undergraduates. And Donald J. Trump carried Wisconsin by fewer than 23,000 votes; the University of Wisconsin system alone enrolls more than 170,000 students.

Some critics suggest that opposition to campus-voting restrictions is overblown — that students can find other IDs to establish their identities, that campus polling sites are a luxury not afforded other voters.

But local election officials generally put polls where they are needed most, in packed places like universities and apartment complexes or locations like nursing homes where access is difficult.

Repeated studies have shown that making voting convenient improves turnout. And while it is difficult to say with certainty what causes turnout to decline, anecdotal evidence suggests that barriers to student voting have done just that. Nationwide, student turnout in the 2016 presidential election exceeded that of the 2012 presidential vote — but according to the Tufts institute, it fell sharply in Wisconsin, where the state's voter ID law first applied to students that year.

Hurdles to student voting are hardly limited to politically competitive states. Most notably, the voter ID law in deeply Republican Tennessee does not recognize student ID cards as valid for voting, and legislators have removed out-of-state driver's licenses from the list of valid identifications.

A Tennessee law requiring election officials to help register high school students is commonly skirted via a loophole, said Lisa Quigley, the top aide to Representative Jim Cooper, a Tennessee Democrat and voting rights advocate. And cities like Nashville and Knoxville, with large concentrations of college students, have no campus early voting polling places, she said.

Tennessee ranks 50th in voter turnout among the states and the District of Columbia. "We're terrible at voting," Ms. Quigley said. "And it's intentional."

Only Texas' turnout is worse. And as in Tennessee, voting is particularly difficult for the young.

Texas law requires educators to distribute voter registration forms to high school students, but the requirement appears to be ignored by most of the state's 3,700 secondary schools. And while many states allow students to preregister at 16 or 17, and even vote in primaries if they turn 18 by Election Day in November, Texas bars students from registering until two months before their 18th birthday, the nation's most restrictive rule.

The state's voter ID law — among the most onerous, though softened by court rulings — still excludes college and university ID cards and only allows the use of out-of-state driver's licenses that many students carry if voters sign a form swearing that they couldn't reasonably acquire an accepted ID and explaining why.

Some Texas schools have sought for years to lower those barriers. At the University of Texas at Austin, a group called TX Votes has greatly increased turnout by rallying students against voting restrictions and enlisting scores of campus groups in voting and registration campaigns.

Austin Community College, whose 39,000 full-time and 33,000 part-time students sprawl over campuses in four Texas counties, pursues a similar strategy. The system's student body is drawn largely from working-class and minority families.

Students at Austin Community College. Texas' voter ID law excludes college and university ID cards and out-of-state driver's licenses that many students commonly carry. Ilana Panich-Linsman for The New York Times

In addition to sponsoring the campus voting, it gives its employees two hours off during every election to cast ballots.

It is not the only Texas college to set up campus voting. North of Austin, Southwestern University collected ballots from more than half of its 1,500 students last November in a one-day visit by a mobile polling place. Tarrant County, whose largest city is Fort Worth, racked up 11,000 votes at mobile campus sites; Cameron County, in southern Texas, opened three campus sites and reaped nearly 2,800 votes.

Dollar for dollar, mobile voting sites were “the most effective program we had,” Dana DeBeauvoir, the Travis County clerk and chief elections official, said.

State legislators took a dimmer view. Last spring, State Representative Greg Bonnen, a Republican from suburban Houston, filed legislation to require that all polling places remain open during the whole early-voting period, eliminating pop-up polls. He argued that local politicians were using the sites to attract supportive voters for pet projects like school bond issues.

The Texas Association of Election Administrators opposed the change, and Democratic legislators proposed to exclude college campuses, nursing homes and other sites from the requirement. But Republicans rejected the changes and passed the bill on largely party-line votes.

There are efforts to push back at the restrictions on student voting. The elections administrator in Dallas County, Toni Pippins-Poole, decided after the Legislature outlawed temporary polls to spend the money needed to make pop-up voting sites on eight college campuses permanent.

In New Hampshire, the state chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union is suing to undo the State Legislature’s domicile law. The League of Women Voters and the Andrew Goodman Foundation, a Mahwah, N.J., nonprofit group focused on protecting voting rights for young people, are contesting Florida’s parking requirements for polls in federal court.

Purdue University said last month that it would temporarily not charge out-of-state students a fee for ID cards, which are valid for voting in Indiana. Mitchell E. Daniels Jr., Purdue’s president and the state’s Republican governor from 2005 to 2013, said he wanted to encourage civic literacy among students.

Advocates for student voters argue that those are the exceptions.

“Everyone 18 years and older has a right, if not a duty, to participate in our electoral system,” said Maxim Thorne, the managing director of the Goodman Foundation. “We should be having conversations about how to make it easier, how to make it more welcoming, how to make it worthy of our time and effort. And what we’re seeing is the reverse.”