

Increasing Voter Turnout: How do we get people to the polls?

by Afi Scruggs

Passion and faith in the system determine whether people head to the polls or ignore them, according to panelists at the voter turnout forum on Nov. 13. The 90-minute event was sponsored by the Shaker Heights chapter, League of Women Voters.

“Voters need to feel their vote counts, and that they’ll have an easy time casting that ballot,” said Mike Brickner. He directs [All Voting Is Local Ohio](#), works with local governments and activists to ensure access to the polls.

Brickner spoke to roughly 50 people attending “How Do We Increase Voter Turnout in 2020.” The other panelists were Anthony Perlatti, director of the [Cuyahoga County Board of Elections](#), and Jen Miller, director of the [Ohio League of Women Voters](#). Miller also moderated the panel.

Panelists discussed several topics while answering questions submitted by the audience. A primary concern was making voting convenient and secure. Miller said younger voters were especially stymied by the voting processes. She shared responses from focus group conducted last year.

“The through-line, why they weren’t voting was, ‘Voting is confusing; voting is hard; I didn’t know you had to have this right ID; I didn’t know I had to register by a certain point.’”

But Miller said that same group was more likely to vote if they grew up around voters.

“It wasn’t race, it wasn’t income...it wasn’t their education level. (It was) If they had someone in their life who was instilling why (voting) was important.”

Getting young voters involved: peer-led education campaigns work

Lack of knowledge may be one reason Ohio ranks lower than neighboring states when it comes to college-age turnout, Brinker said, adding he’d seen “really troubling examples” that showed gaps in the state’s system.

For example, Franklin County has the state’s highest rate of provisional ballots. The trend was concentrated around the Ohio State University, where one-tenth of voters cast a provisional ballot. Brickner said two-thirds of those provisional ballots get rejected.

A similar trend occurs in Greene County, home to Central State and Wilberforce universities. Brickner said students there have had “historic” problems getting their votes cast. In 2018, for example, only 15 percent of students voted and 45 percent of them cast provisional ballots - half of which were discarded.

All Voting Is Local Ohio investigated and found out-of-state and out-of-county students didn’t know the rules.

“They didn’t know that they had to update their voter registration. They didn’t know if they were registered in Detroit, they had to change from a Michigan to Ohio voter registration, and they didn’t think about it until it was too late.”

Brickner said students working with All Voting Is Local Ohio launched a campaign entitled, “CSWU Votes.”

“We kicked it off on National Voter Registration day. We got 125 new registrations, and a ton of absentee ballots.”

The organization also sent Election Protection volunteers to campus for the Nov. 5 general election. “It really shows that public education campaigns and also engaging the people who are actually impacted by some of these rules can help to lift up those communities,” Brickner said.

Protecting the ballot: making elections secure

Election security has become a major concern since news of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. Perlatti described the county’s efforts to ensure ballots themselves are safe and protected, while closing virtual loopholes that might compromise results.

“Anywhere we have ballots in our location, those are behind doors that have two locks: a Democratic lock and a Republican lock. We have a lockbox where a Democrat knows half the code, and a Republican knows the other half the code. People go to get the key, one’s a Democratic key, one’s a Republican key.

“No one can get in by themselves. You’ve got to have a person of the opposite political party to access the areas.”

A similar system maintains electronic security, Perlatti said.

“When you log into the computer, half the password is a Democratic password; half is a Republican password. And there’s audit logs that keep track of everything you’re doing.”

Additionally, the state gave all counties \$50,000 to implement its latest security directives from the secretary of state. The allotment covers one-fourth of local cost, so Cuyahoga County is raising the remainder, Perlatti said. The money will go toward firewalls and sensors monitored by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The county also replaced 90 outdated computers that couldn’t run the latest security software.

Miller noted new legislation strengthens election security by installing a cybersecurity officer in the secretary of state’s office, and giving the secretary of state a seat on Ohio’s homeland security council.

“(It) makes a lot of sense because elections are certainly critical infrastructure,” she said.

The law also creates a board of volunteer experts who can assist local governments, and state agencies maintain security.

Making voting easy and convenient

In 2020 Cuyahoga faces two major voting challenges: the presidential election itself, and the March primary - which is scheduled for St. Patrick's Day. Cleveland's celebrates is a huge parade, and its observance is the second-largest in the country, Perlatti says, so the county has already begun planning for the latter.

"A presidential primary is one of the most difficult to plan for because of all the different ballot styles and types... but that's the hand we were dealt."

The county has about 330 polling locations, but many won't be available because of the holiday.

"We have two (locations) that are virtually on the parade route, so we have to manage that," Perlatti said. He added that voting at union halls and churches in North Olmsted and Euclid will be moved, because those sites will be booked on the holiday. The county will also anticipate recruiting more poll workers on that day.

Early voting could help solve some of those problems, but state law prohibits multiple drop boxes for ballots, and multiple early voting locations.

"This is an issue that all three of our organizations have worked on," Miller said. "All are critical issues: having multiple early voting locations, being allowed to drop your ballot off in different places is critical."

Perlatti agreed that removing the prohibition would ease the logjam he expects next November.

"In the presidential general (election), I anticipate 45,000 people coming down through our doors (during early voting period). It would be easier if we were able to have multiple locations throughout the county," he said. "The more people we can get voting before Election Day, the less people would get discouraged."

He would also like to simplify vote by mail. He'd like to see a return to 2008, when almost 50 percent of county ballots were mailed. He'd also like Ohio to copy Oregon and Washington State, where ballots are placed in secure drop boxes.

"The more you get people to vote before Election Day, the less crowded the polls, the people will be discouraged to vote the next time."

Turning non-voters into voters: fighting misinformation

Misinformation plays a large roll in voter participation, especially when it comes to former felons. The belief persists that folks with a criminal conviction are permanently disenfranchised, Brickner said.

“There are three states that do permanently disenfranchise people with a felony conviction. For many people, when they hear that, it becomes something of an urban legend.”

In fact, he said, the vast majority of jail inmates can vote because they have not been convicted of a crime. In Ohio, inmates serving time for misdemeanors can vote while jailed. Felons can vote before being incarcerated - if they get probation for example - or upon release if they re-register with the county board of elections.

The myth destroys the faith in the electoral system that is so crucial to getting folks to cast a ballot.

“You have to feel like your vote matters, ” Brickner said. “It’s the feeling that ‘I’m included. That I’m a part of this broader community and my voice is going to be listened to.’”

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