

## **Fighting Poverty at the Ballot Box**

Exclusive Interview with Sean McElwee of Demos

*It is well documented that voter turnout in the United States [generally lags behind turnout in other developed nations](#). But who isn't showing up to the polls? And what, if any, effect do lower turnout rates have on electoral outcomes and policy implementation?*

*In a recent [report](#), Demos researcher Sean McElwee argues that nonvoters tend to have more progressive views than the current electorate and are more sympathetic to policies aimed at helping middle- and low-income Americans. Spotlight recently talked with McElwee to hear more about his work and its implications for efforts to combat poverty and promote economic opportunity. The interview has been lightly edited for clarity.*

### **Can you briefly talk about the demographics of likely voters versus those who tend to not show up at the polls?**

Voters are older, whiter, and richer than the general population. And consequently, voters tend to be more ideologically conservative in their views.

In 2014, 46 percent of white voters turned out to vote compared to 40 percent of African Americans and 27 percent of both Asians and Latinos.

You see similar disparities with regards to income as well. And class gaps are magnified by age gaps. For example, in 2014 only twelve percent of 18-24 year olds with an income of less than \$30,000 voted. Whereas, the turnout rate was 65 percent for those over 65 and making more than \$150,000.

### **So what about the differences in public policy preferences between voters and nonvoters—how do their opinions tend to differ on questions of public policy, especially on questions related to the economic wellbeing of low-income Americans?**

In my report, I used data from the American National Election Study from the 2012 election to compare the views of voters and non-voters on policy questions related to the government's role in society. Nonvoters are more likely to say that government should increase services, increase spending for the poor, guarantee jobs and a standard of living, and reduce inequality.

I also looked at polling from Pew and YouGov broken out by voter registration status. On every issue that I examined, what we could see again was the non-registered voter populations are far more likely to take economically progressive views.

### **It's one thing to say that there are differing views between voters and nonvoters. But you go a step a farther and argue that higher turnout is likely to lead to noticeably different policy outcomes.**

There is historical, international, and state-level evidence that higher turnout leads to more inclusive policy.

In the US, women's suffrage led to increased spending on healthcare and subsequent decreases in child mortality, while the elimination of poll taxes contributed to greater welfare spending.

Internationally, numerous studies show that higher voter turnout in countries leads to greater redistribution and lower level of inequality.

More even turnout between different income brackets at the state level has also been linked to more liberal policy outcomes such as higher social welfare spending and an increased minimum wage.

### **What reforms would be effective to increase turnout?**

The US is an outlier internationally in that the Electoral College – with noncompetitive states – creates a disincentive to turnout.

But there are other restrictions we have created. The most important issue is voter registration requirements. Registration windows closer to Election Day or same-day registration lead to higher turnout. The best-case scenario is automatic voter registration, where eligible voters would be registered unless they chose to opt out. And fighting voter ID laws is important as well.

Reforms can help register individuals, but income is still an indicator of how likely you are to be contacted by a party, volunteer with a campaign, or make a political donation. So political parties and politicians need to target these potential new voters and give them an incentive to turn out to the polls and participate.

### **Given your analysis, would anti-poverty advocates and politicians do well to spend more of their time working on increasing turnout?**

Increasing turnout and campaigning for policy change are both important. When unions were campaigning for a \$15 minimum wage in SeaTac, Washington, one of the first things they did was help immigrants register to vote.

And there's a feedback loop as well. A higher minimum wage will likely increase political participation as people's wages rise. I would be very interested in having a political scientist study the effects that higher wages and access to wages have on political participation.

*Sean McElwee is a research associate with Demos. Follow him on Twitter at [@SeanMcElwee](https://twitter.com/SeanMcElwee).*

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