

“Making Voting Work” for Eighteen Year-Olds

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Abstract

A 2008 voter registration mailing campaign conducted by the Office of the Secretary of State in Washington prompted many eighteen year-olds living in “vote by mail” jurisdictions to register earlier than they otherwise might have, thereby increasing participation in the presidential and state primaries. By the general election, the campaign had increased the overall registration level among eighteen year-olds by nearly ten percent over that of a control group that did not receive the mailing. The cost of each first-time voter registration ranged from \$2.74 to \$6.04, depending upon the mailing type.

Can a voter registration program conducted by election officials motivate eighteen year-olds to register and vote?

Introduction

The fact that young adults in America are far less likely to participate in elections than their older counterparts is well documented.² This study, funded by a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts, attempts to bring fresh insight into low voter participation in four ways. First, it focuses exclusively on teenagers who are newly eligible to vote, as opposed to the broader “youth” demographic that ranges into the mid-to-late twenties. Secondly, while there are many studies of the voter mobilization effect of candidates, campaigns, political parties, and private associations, this project sheds light on the efficacy of a voter registration campaign conducted by a state’s chief election official. Thirdly, the project used individual voter registration and voting history data from the Washington State Voter Registration Database (VRDB). The 2002 mandate in the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) for states to implement such databases has

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² For a recent discussion see Martin P. Wattenberg. Is Voting For Young People? Pearson Education, Inc. 2008.

greatly improved the accessibility of official registration and voting data, reducing the need to rely on survey response data. Finally, Washington State fielded the nation's second Online Voter Registration system just as this project began, so in addition to registering eighteen year-olds, the project had some public awareness impact for the new system as well.

Project Design

In Washington State, voters must be at least eighteen years old on or before the primary or election in which they vote. Seventeen year olds may be registered if they will be eighteen on or before the next scheduled primary or election.

In 2008, Washington State conducted its presidential primary on February 19 and its state primary on August 19. Local elections were also held in some jurisdictions on April 22 and May 20. The grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts enabled the Secretary of State's Elections Division to conduct a mailing campaign designed to help teenagers register to vote as they became eligible for the first time. Because of the timing of ongoing election events, the mailing campaign was divided into five mailings to ensure that no seventeen year old received an application before an election that he/she would not be eligible to participate in.

Washington's population estimate for its seventeen year old cohort in 2008 was nearly 90,000, but two factors kept us from including all 90,000 in this project. The first was the source of the mailing list. At the beginning of each of the five mailing cycles, we obtained name, address, date of birth, and driver's license number data from the state Department of Licensing, so any teenager without a driver's license or a state identification card did not receive the mailing. Each piece of mail was sent first-class so that undeliverable mail was returned to the sender; no certified mail was used. Additionally, no attempt was made to screen out non-citizens before preparing the mailing.

The second factor that significantly reduced our target population was a design decision to restrict the study to the 37 counties in Washington that had transitioned away from poll site voting to vote by mail. The state's remaining two counties - King County (which includes Seattle) and Pierce County (which includes Tacoma) – allowed no-excuse absentee voting, but still offered voting at poll sites in 2008. Since the turnout of Washington's "mail voters" and "poll voters" has proven to vary considerably at times, removing this difference from the registration campaign was necessary for making valid conclusions about the voting behavior of the eighteen year-olds in the study.³

³ See "Washington State's Vote-by-Mail Experience" at <http://secstate.wa.gov/documentvault/WashingtonStatesVotebyMailExperienceOctober2007-2066.pdf>

“Register to Vote” Messages from the Secretary of State

Once the decision was made to assign all seventeen year olds with driver’s licenses living in “vote by mail” counties to either a mailing group or a control group, the content and design of the voter registration mailing itself had to be finalized. The Voter Education and Outreach staff of the Elections Division crafted a “Happy 18th Birthday” theme, with images and content designed with the intended audience in mind, and appended that to the state’s mail-in voter registration application (see Figures 1 and 2). Dividing the campaign into five separate mailings throughout 2008 not only addressed the age prerequisite for registration, but it ensured that mailings were delivered in closer proximity to recipients’ birthdays.

Figure 1 (voter registration application)

Figure 2 (mailing envelope)

But the mailing campaign was not limited to the modified voter registration application alone. Washington State became the second state in the nation to implement Online Voter Registration on January 7, 2008. To incorporate that new development, a 4 x 5 ½ inch postcard was created with the same thematic content as the mail-in application, but with a simple message (on each side) directing recipients to the web address for online registration (see Figures 3 and 4). Approximately one-third of all seventeen year olds with driver’s licenses living in “vote by mail” counties in Washington were selected at random to receive the postcard. Those not targeted with a postcard were divided randomly between a control group and the mail-in voter registration application mailing list. It is important to point out, however, that even the application form and its outer mailing envelope included a message that “registering online” was an acceptable alternative to completing and returning the mail-in voter registration form (see Figures 1 and 2).

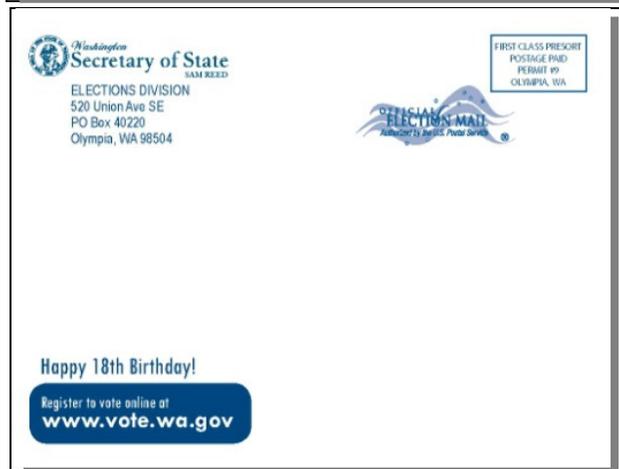


Figure 3 (postcard front)

Figure 4 (postcard back)

The “Political Mail” Environment in Washington in 2008

By 2008, registered voters in 34 of the 37 counties involved in this project had already been receiving their ballots in the mail for at least two years. (Island and Klickitat Counties transitioned to vote by mail in 2007 and Kittitas County became a vote by mail jurisdiction in 2008.) This fact, combined with the constitutionally mandated voter’s pamphlet that is mailed to every household in the state, implies that Washingtonians are accustomed to receiving election information by mail. What was unknown at the outset of this project was how many other organizations and candidates would be sending “register to vote” mail to households during the 2008 federal election cycle.

To answer this and other questions related to eighteen year-olds’ decisions to register and vote, the Elections Division turned to the Social and Economic Science Research Center of Washington State University for the design and conduct of a mail and web-based survey.⁴ One section of the survey asked if recipients had received mailings about registering to vote from “candidates,” “political parties,” “get-out-the vote campaigns,” “a government official or office,” or some other source. The response rates are shown in Table 1 below.⁵

Percentage of Survey Respondents Who Reported Receiving Mail in 2008 About Registering to Vote from the Sources Shown Below	Eighteen year-olds who were sent the Secretary of State's mailing	Eighteen year-olds who were <i>not</i> sent the Secretary of State's mailing (control group)
Candidate	23%	26%
Political Party	19%	20%
Independent "Get Out The Vote" Campaign	13%	15%
Government Official or Office	40%	20%
Some Other Source	3%	3%

(n = 739)

(n = 202)

Source: Washington Office of the Secretary of State - Elections Division

Table 1

⁴ After May 20, 2008, 268 survey responses came from 1,750 randomly selected participants who had turned eighteen in the first half of 2008 but had not responded to the mailing, and 49 responses came from 120 eighteen year-olds who had responded to the mailing by registering to vote in time for the February 19 presidential primary, but were not credited by their county elections offices with casting ballots in that primary. After the 2008 general election, 422 survey responses came from 1,535 randomly selected study participants who became registered and voted in 2008, and 202 responses came from 1,600 randomly selected eighteen year-olds who received no mailing from the Secretary of State.

This shows that the awareness of having received voter registration mail from a “government official or office” among those who were sent a mailing and a survey as part of this project was about double that of survey respondents in the control group.

Without surveying every addressee in the project, it was impossible to know if the mailing made it into the hands of each eighteen year old after delivery to the household by the Postal Service. However, out of 471 survey respondents who were sent the mailing and who registered in time for the 2008 general election, 400 (85 percent) remembered receiving either the mail-in voter registration application or the “register online” postcard. Of the 268 survey respondents who were sent the mailing and who did *not* register to vote before the November 4, 2008 election, only 134 (50 percent) recalled receiving the mailing. This difference in the two groups does suggest that the true impact of the Secretary of State’s invitation to register will be underestimated, since mail that is delivered to residences may not reach the intended eighteen year-olds.

Results for the “Happy 18th Birthday” Mail-In Voter Registration Application

The mail-in voter registration application used in this project was designed to minimize the effort required to register. “Name,” “address,” “date of birth,” and “driver’s license number” for each addressee were pre-filled by the Washington State Department of Printing before mailing. Upon receipt, the applicant need only check boxes indicating age and citizenship eligibility and sign the voter declaration required by state law. After marking and signing, the applicant could fold, seal, and mail the application; return postage was pre-paid using an agency postal permit.

Between January and September 2008, “Happy 18th Birthday” mail-in voter registration applications are assumed to have been delivered to the residences or post office boxes of 12,996 randomly teens. Access to the state’s voter registration database facilitated identification of the resulting registered voters among that list. Though some registrations were later cancelled, as many as 7,460 registrations were identified as having become registered before November 4, 2008.

Only 2,983 teenagers, however, are known to have returned the mail-in application to the Elections Division before the October 4 mail-in registration deadline for the general election. This equates to a 23 percent response rate. The other 4,477 who were sent the mail-in application and registered to vote did so by some other means. Using a reporting feature of the new Online Voter Registration system, Elections Division staff members were able to identify 1,178 of them as having registered online. The remaining 3,299 may have registered by visiting a public assistance agency or their county elections office, or by submitting a different mail-in registration application obtained from a library, a voter registration drive, or the Election

Division's website. Given the ease of completing and mailing the pre-filled, postage paid "Happy 18th Birthday" registration form, it is reasonable to assume that many of the 3,299 who registered by another method either misplaced the application that was mailed by the Secretary of State, or never received it.

It was hypothesized at the outset of the study that more of today's teenagers would reject the use of a mail-in voter registration form, preferring instead to register online. These initial findings cast doubt on that hypothesis. On the other hand, had the mail-in form not been pre-filled and the return postage not been pre-paid, individual decisions about using the form versus the online registration system would probably have shifted.

Results for the "Register Online" Postcard

Between January and September 2008, "Register Online" postcards are assumed to have been delivered to the residences or post office boxes of 12,850 randomly selected teens near the time of their eighteenth birthdays. Once again, access to the state's voter registration database proved invaluable in identifying 6,846 addressees as voters who registered before the general election. Elections Division staff identified 1,844 of those 6,846 registrants as Online Voter Registration system users. So while 14 percent of teenagers who may have received the "Register Online" postcard did register online at some point prior to the general election, 39 percent of the group became registered using some other method not associated with this project.

Summary of Registration Rates Throughout 2008

Before the February 19, 2008 presidential primary, nearly 8,000 new eighteen year-olds had either been mailed an invitation to register to vote from the Secretary of State, or were assigned to the control group. A January 2009 analysis using the state voter registration database revealed that 19-20 percent of those who received the mailing became registered in time to vote in the presidential primary, whereas only 8 percent in the control group did so. These results are shown in the first row of Table 2 below.

Percentage of Eligible Eighteen year-olds Registered	Eighteen year-olds who were mailed the voter registration application	Eighteen year-olds who were mailed the "register online" postcard	Eighteen year-olds who were <i>not</i> 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%

_Source: Washington Office of the Secretary of State - Elections Division

Table 2

By the time of the state primary on August 19, 2008, the number of eighteen year-olds tracked by the project had grown to nearly 31,000. The figures shown in Table 2 illustrate that greater percentages of eighteen year-olds who were sent the Secretary of State’s mailing had become registered to vote in time for the state primary than those who received no mailing.

When the last group of teenagers who turned eighteen between August 20 and November 4 were added to the study, approximately 40,000 people had either been sent a voter registration application or a “Register Online” postcard, or assigned to the control group. Over 6,500 of nearly 14,300 control group members – about 46 percent - had registered early enough to vote in the general election. Roughly 50 percent of teens who had been sent the “Register Online” postcard, and 55 percent who had been sent the “Happy 18th Birthday” voter registration form, were registered in time to vote. The registration dates in the voter registration database indicated that about 2 percent of all three groups registered too late to participate in the general election.

In summary, three general inferences can be drawn from the response rates depicted in Table 2. First, the impact of the “Register Online” postcard mailing was generally not as strong as that of the pre-filled, return postage paid mail-in voter registration application. Secondly, many recipients of the Secretary of State’s mailing probably registered earlier than they would have had they not received the mailing, thereby enabling them to participate in primaries and local elections that occurred well before the general election. Finally, the mailing increased voter registration among eighteen year-olds. As Table 2 shows, 52 percent of the eighteen year old control group never appeared on Washington’s voter rolls in 2008. If that same rate were applied to those who received the mailing, about 13,460 would have remained unregistered. Instead, only 11,613 remained unregistered at the end of 2008: a 7 percent improvement. A

similar comparison between the control group and nearly 13,000 recipients of the pre-filled, return postage paid voter registration application indicates an improvement in voter registration of over 9 percent.

Did the Secretary of State's Mailing Influence Eighteen Year-Olds to Register to Vote?

It is obvious that the Secretary of State's mailing led to a voter registration when the addressee returned the pre-filled, mail-in application. Assessing the impact of the "Register Online" postcard is difficult because after a certain length of time, the fact that an eighteen year old registers online may have more to do with causes other than receipt of the postcard. A comparison of two different groups of recipients illustrates this.

After Washington's February 19 presidential primary, "Register Online" postcards were mailed to randomly selected teenagers turning eighteen between February 20 and April 22. The state primary was still over five months away and the general election seven months away. Only four percent of those recipients registered online within 24 days of the estimated delivery of the postcard. In contrast, 32 percent of postcard recipients with birthdays between August 20 and November 4 used the Online Voter Registration system within 24 days of the final postcard mailing in this campaign. These two statistics demonstrate that the influence of the "Register Online" postcard is not necessarily immediate, and may be co-dependent on the proximity to an election in which the recipient intends to vote.

The short survey administered by the Social and Economic Science Research Center of Washington State University sheds more light on the question of how the Secretary of State's voter registration campaign influenced the decision to register. Recipients were presented the images of the mailing (Figures 1-4) and asked if they recalled receiving the mailing. Those who did recall receiving the mailing were asked, "[w]hat influence did the mailing from the Washington Secretary of State's Office have on your decision about registering to vote?" Thirty-two percent indicated that the mailing had a "very positive" influence on their decision to register. When combined with those who indicated a "somewhat positive" influence, 57 percent of those who remembered receiving the mailing reported that it positively influenced their decision to register.

Later in the survey, eighteen year-olds were asked to identify the first, second, and third most influential individuals or organizations in their registration decision-making process. Parents, teachers, friends, and other adult family members all figured prominently as "influencers." Fewer than ten percent of respondents ranked a government agency, non-partisan "get out the vote" effort, political party, campaign, or athletic coach/club leader as

first, second, or third most influential in their decision to register.⁶ These findings suggest that perhaps a better way of thinking about the influence of the mailing from the Secretary of State is not as a primary source of influence, but as a tool or aid for those important adult family members in the home.

Findings about Voting

It is important to keep in mind that, unlike most voters in America, the eighteen year-olds in this study lived in “vote by mail” jurisdictions when they registered. Ballots are mailed to voters at least eighteen days before a primary or election. If an eighteen year old moved away from home after registering (to attend college, for example), others in the home may have assisted in updating his or her address information with election officials, or may have just passed the ballot on. As long as the return envelope with the voter’s ballot was postmarked by election day, and delivered to county election officials, it would be processed for counting.

During processing, the voter’s signature on the affidavit (printed on the envelope exterior) is compared to the signature image in the automated registration record. If the signatures match, the voter is credited with voting and the sealed affidavit envelope is forwarded for opening. After each election, the information for all voters who received credit for voting is relayed from county election management systems to the state voter registration database. Therefore, access to the individual voting history data in the state database eliminates the need to rely on surveys to gauge the level of voting by eighteen year-olds.

The first row of Table 3 below shows that only three percent of control group teens who received no mailing but turned eighteen years old in time to register and vote in the February 19, 2008 presidential primary did so. Even though the size of the age-eligible control group grew by the time of the state primary on August 19, the percentage of the group that participated in that primary was not much better (five percent). Not surprisingly, many more teens got engaged in the electoral process in time for the general election; 38 percent of 14,262 eighteen year-olds who received no mailing from the Secretary of State were credited with voting.

The eighteen year-olds who were sent the “Register Online” postcard and the “Happy 18th Birthday” voter registration form voted in somewhat greater percentages than the control group. Of nearly 26,000 teenagers who had received the Secretary of State’s mailing near the time of their eighteenth birthdays in 2008, roughly 42 percent (the average of the 40 percent and 44 percent figures shown below) became registered and voted in the general election. Thus it can be tentatively said that mailing by the Secretary of State was associated with a four percent increase in voting among eighteen year-olds in the 2008 general election.

⁶ This statistic can be generalized to all eighteen year-olds in the surveyed jurisdictions with 95% confidence.

Percentage of Group that Voted	Presidential Primary	State Primary	General Election
18 year-olds who were sent no mailing	3%	5%	38%
18 year-olds who were sent postcard	7%	6%	40%
18 year-olds who were sent registration form	7%	8%	44%

Source: Washington Office of the Secretary of State - Elections Division

Table 3

But Table 3 does not depict turnout, which is the percentage of *registered* voters that voted. Table 4, does depict the turnout of not only study participants but other voters in Washington State, and it reveals two interesting trends.

First, not only did a greater percentage of registered eighteen year-olds in the control group participate in the February 19 presidential primary than those who were sent the Secretary of State's mailing and became registered, but also a greater percentage of those who were sent the "Register Online" postcard voted than the group that was sent the mail-in voter registration application. One possible hypothesis is that those who became registered without the assistance of the Secretary of State's mailing were more committed to participating at their earliest opportunity. Certainly many other teens that turned eighteen in January and February of 2008 did not register until the general election approached. It may be that the pre-filled, return postage paid voter registration application provided by the Secretary of State made registering to vote easy for even those respondents who were not committed to consistent participation in the electoral process.

"Turnout" for Registered Voters	Presidential Primary	State Primary	General Election
18-24 year olds throughout Washington	23%	18%	68%
18 year-olds who were sent registration form	34%	20%	79%
18 year-olds who were sent postcard	38%	22%	80%
18 year-olds who were sent no mailing	40%	20%	82%
All voters throughout Washington	42%	43%	85%

Source: Washington Office of the Secretary of State - Elections Division

(Note: turnout percentages for all voters throughout Washington [bottom row] voters were derived from county reports. All other percentages were determined using the voter registration database.)

Table 4

The second interesting trend shown in Table 4 is the overall high turnout of eighteen year-olds in Washington's 2008 general election. Eighteen year-olds who voted by mail but became registered without the aid of the Secretary of State's mailing turned out at a rate only three percentage points less than the entire state's electorate combined. In addition, the turnout of all registered eighteen year-olds observed in this project exceeded the turnout of the broader 18-24 year old "youth" group statewide by over 11 percent. Part of the difference in participation might be explained by the fact that the statewide statistic for the 18-24 year old group included young people living in King and Pierce Counties, which required poll site voting for voters not registered as absentee voters. Another possible explanation for the turnout difference between the eighteen year-olds and voters in the broader "youth" bracket may be that voters in their early twenties are more mobile and therefore more likely to be registered at a prior residence than the first-time voters. More research of the disaggregated group of young voters is needed to reveal the true extent of these differences.

The Cost of the Secretary of State's Mailings

Except for the randomization and data collection work required to evaluate this registration project, there was little effort required from Elections Division members to conduct the eighteen year old registration campaign. As mentioned earlier, the Voter Education and Outreach staff created the application and postcard designs, the agency Technical Team compiled the data on eighteen year-olds using electronically-transferred data from the Department of Licensing, and the project manager submitted data and print requisitions to the Department of Printing.

Table 5 depicts the per-piece costs incurred for the preparation and mailing of the "Happy 18th Birthday" voter registration application and the "Register Online" postcard. The Department of Printing charged 3 cents, 27.8 cents, and 8.7 cents per piece to print 60,000 postcards, 15,000 blank applications, and 15,000 mailing envelopes. When the department prepared 2,692 applications for mailing in early September 2008, it cost 13.5 cents to pre-print each applicant's information on the application, 26.9 cents to prepare each application for mailing, and 34.8 cents per piece for mailing at the first-class pre-sorted rate. At the same time, 2,652 postcards were addressed and pre-sorted for 14.2 cents each; outgoing first-class postage cost 21.2 cents per postcard.

Per-piece Cost (\$)	Print Blanks	Print Envelopes	Pre-fill with Individual Data	Prepare for Mailing	Outgoing Postage	Total
Application Form	0.278	0.087	0.135	0.269	0.348	1.117
Postcard	0.03	0	0	0.142	0.212	0.384

Source: Washington Office of the Secretary of State - Elections Division

Table 5

The business reply mail account used by the Elections Division for pre-paid return postage of the mail-in voter registration application was charged the standard rate by the Postal Service: 44 cents postage plus 74 cents handling charge, per piece. Using these data, and the 23 percent return figure reported earlier in this summary, a mailing of 10,000 similar mail-in voter registration applications would yield 2,300 registrations at a cost of \$13,884, or \$6.04 per response. If one assumes that the 14 percent response rate seen in this project would continue for a similar mailing of 10,000 postcards, the cost per resulting online registration would be \$2.74.

Conclusion

The eighteenth birthday voter registration mailing campaign conducted in 2008 by the Elections Division of the Office of the Secretary of State of Washington helped many first time voters become registered. The pre-filled voter registration application was more likely to prompt a registration than a postcard promoting the use of the new Online Voter Registration system. Many mailing recipients may have registered on their own later in 2008 without receiving the mailing, but were prompted to register earlier than they otherwise might have, enabling them to participate in the presidential and state primaries. Others – perhaps as many as ten percent – would not have become registered in 2008 had the campaign not occurred.

The influence that the mailing had on the eighteen year old’s decision to return a mail-in ballot is less clear. While more registrations led to more votes overall, the turnout rates of those who were provided a “path to registration” were in some instances lower than eighteen year-olds who registered without the benefit of the mailing. On the other hand, roughly 80 percent of the eighteen year-olds who were sent the Secretary of State’s mailing and registered eventually cast ballots in the November 2008 general election. They came close to matching the 85 percent turnout rate of all registered voters in the state, and easily surpassed the 68 percent turnout of all registered Washingtonians below the age of 25.

Refining the methods used in this project might lead to improved results. States that are now developing their own online registration systems could try mailing a postcard that is larger and glossier than the one used in this project. An enhanced postcard might still lead to a lower “per registration” cost than the \$2.74 figure cited in this project if there was a greater response. (Please note that any “spillover” affects of the “Register Online” postcard mailing on unregistered adults and younger children in the home are still unknown.)

Another way of modifying this program, especially in the current fiscally constrained environment, is to disconnect the timing of the mailing from addressees’ birth dates. By delaying the mailing until closer to an election event and mailing only to unregistered teens, election officials would save the cost of mailing to those who would have registered on their own without the mailing. Of course, requiring a postage stamp for return of the mail-in application would lower costs as well, but response rates might also suffer.

Overall, this study offers evidence for optimism, but at the end of a year that was saturated by media coverage of the presidential nomination and election process, 43 percent of nearly 13,000 eighteen year-olds who were sent a pre-filled, return postage paid voter registration application by the Secretary of State of Washington remained unregistered. It is clear that more work must be done to determine effective ways to engage all eighteen year-olds in the electoral process.