



**Elections are decided by the people who show up at the polls.** In the United States, the oldest citizens are the most likely to cast their ballots, which gives them political clout beyond their numbers alone.

Some 61 percent of citizens age 65 and older voted in the November 2010 election, the best turnout of any age group. More than half (54 percent) of those ages 55 to 64 also cast a ballot. People under age 45 are much less likely to vote. Just 37 percent of 25- to 44-year-olds made it to the polls in November 2010. And not even a quarter (21 percent) of the youngest citizens—ages 18 to 24—entered a voting booth in 2010. Here's

a look at some of the reasons senior citizens are more likely to vote than younger people.

Protect Social Security and Medicare. Senior citizens have a vested interest in protecting the valuable benefits they receive from the federal government. "A lot of the benefits of our government go to older people," says Julian Zelizer, a professor of history and public affairs at Princeton University and author of *Governing America: The Revival of Political History*. "If you look at the major domestic benefit programs, from Medicare to Social Security to Medicaid, the older people just have a greater interest in voting than younger people who don't see the same benefits."

If these popular government programs for senior citizens were to change, it would dramatically affect the lives of most retirees. "Social Security and Medicare are conferred on the basis of age. That creates, for this otherwise disparate group of people, an identity that then becomes a basis for mobilization," says Andrea Louise Campbell, a political science associate professor at MIT. "Because senior citizens vote at very high rates, many politicians feel they need to be very careful about the stances they take on Social Security and Medicare, and those issues can dominate the conversation. Programs that benefit working-age people are often more hidden."

Less mobility. The voter registration process is another reason older people vote in greater numbers than younger people. Every time a person moves to a new address, they must re-register to vote. Young people who forget or don't get around

to re-registering at their new address may be kept from voting. "Older voters tend to be more stable in where they live, whereas younger voters tend to be more mobile," says Leonard Steinhorn, a public communications professor at American University and author of *The Greater Generation: In Defense of the Baby Boom Legacy*. "Younger voters may be doing any number of things and may be sort of scrambling to register to vote. Voters who are away at college are at an incredible disadvantage."

Since young people move to new residences in far greater numbers than older people, they are much less likely to be registered to vote, according to a recent study by a trio of Harvard and Yale researchers. "We have a residential-based election system and if you are less tied to a place, you are less likely to vote. You need to re-register in states that don't have election-day registration, which is potentially a hassle," says Eitan Hersh, an assistant professor of political science at Yale University and coauthor of the report. "People over 65 have more residential stability. The longer you are in a place, the more ties you have to the community and the more campaigns that are likely to mobilize you."

More time. Working-age voters must often squeeze in a visit to their voting location early in the morning on their way to work or late in the evening. Retirees don't face the same time crunch. "They have the time to participate in politics," says Campbell. "Most of them are retired, largely thanks to Social Security, and they have the disposable income to make

campaign contributions, and the skills to write letters to politicians."

Social norms. Senior citizens are more likely to be longtime residents of their communities, and may be influenced by friends and neighbors of the same age who are also voting. "With older folks, there is a norm to vote. They think of themselves as voters, and they care about being a voter," says Hersh. "People who are detached from the election system are perfectly willing to say they didn't vote."

Older people in some states are considerably more likely to vote than others. People age 65 and older are the most likely to vote in Washington (77 percent), Maine (76 percent), and Montana (75 percent). But even in the states with the lowest older voter turnout—Georgia, Virginia, and Indiana—more than half of citizens age 65 and older voted.

In terms of the actual number of older people who cast ballots, California tops the list with 2.4 million people age 65 and older who voted in 2010, followed by 1.7 million older voters in Florida and 1.4 million senior-citizen voters in New York. Texas and Pennsylvania also had more than a million older voters each in November 2010. Alaska, Wyoming, and the District of Columbia had the smallest number of senior-citizen voters, with less than 50,000 older residents voting in each place.

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