

UW-Madison: Poor health threatens voting in older age. Absentee and early voting can help maintain turnout.

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MADISON — Poor health — not aging itself — decreases older Americans' likelihood of voting, a new study finds, but early and absentee voting can help people continue voting even when they experience health challenges.

Access to these options may particularly benefit wealthier voters, who readily transition to early or absentee ballots when they face health problems. Low-income Americans are the most likely to stop voting when they experience mental and physical health problems that keep them from the polls, even when alternative voting methods are available.

The findings come as many states are considering or have passed new voting restrictions following the rapid expansion of alternative voting methods due to the COVID-19 pandemic during the 2020 presidential election.

University of Wisconsin–Madison sociology professor Michal Engelman led the study, published Oct. 15 in the *Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, along with sociology graduate student Won-tak Joo, sociology Professor Jason Fletcher and political science Professor Barry Burden.

The research team wanted to address a longstanding question in their field: How do voting patterns change as people age? One-time snapshots of different generations never provided a clear answer.

So, they turned to the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study, which Engelman directs. The WLS has followed more than 10,000 Wisconsin high school graduates since 1957, surveying them about once a decade. In addition to the original participants, the survey has interviewed their siblings and spouses and includes detailed data on wealth, physical and mental health, and a range of social activities.

By following the same individuals as they aged and voted from 2004 to 2018, the study team could tease apart the life circumstances associated with voting behaviors.

“This long-term study allowed us to show that people’s commitment to voting does not decrease as they get older,” says Engelman. “What does decrease voting turnout is often some kind of health challenge. That includes both physical limitations as well as mental health issues like depression.”

The healthiest individuals, on average, were those who voted at the polls or who transitioned over time to voting early. The wealthiest group tended to switch to absentee voting in response to declining health.

“These alternative voting strategies help ameliorate that decline in voting that we see in individuals with health problems,” says Engelman. “We notice that much more among wealthy people. Those who are richer and already politically engaged benefit more from these alternative voting strategies than people who are less wealthy.”

While the study is representative of white Americans with at least high school degrees in this age group, it does not capture the breadth of educational and ethnic diversity in the U.S. And WLS participants were also unusually strong voters, with turnout over 80 percent, so the findings may not be generalizable to other groups.

But the study does suggest that there’s room for improvement in helping more older Americans remain voters.

“If we want people — including those less wealthy — to vote regardless of their health, our findings suggest that these existing alternative methods (early and absentee voting) are important but may not be sufficient on their own. To include a broader set of voters, we need to consider more direct outreach,” says Engelman.

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