



OUR VOTE, OUR POWER:

LIFTING UP DEMOCRACY'S VOICES
IN THE GARDEN STATE

A REPORT BY THE NEW JERSEY INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE



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The Institute's mission is to empower urban residents to realize and achieve their full potential. Established in 1999 by Alan V. and Amy Lowenstein, the Institute's dynamic and independent advocacy is aimed at toppling load-bearing walls of structural inequality to create just, vibrant, and healthy urban communities. We employ a broad range of advocacy tools to advance our ambitious urban agenda, including research, analysis and writing, public education, grassroots organizing, the development of pilot programs, and legislative strategies.

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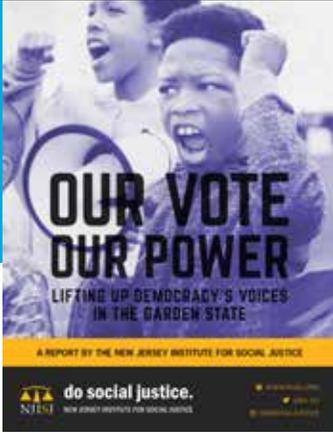
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OUR VOTE, OUR POWER: LIFTING UP DEMOCRACY'S VOICES IN THE GARDEN STATE

Low voter turnout is a persistent problem in this country, and New Jersey is no exception. This is particularly true for state and local elections. Consistent with the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice's core belief that the best way to understand behavior is by listening to the community – and that the best way to make policy change is “from the ground up” – we decided to ask people why they think their communities are not voting.

We partnered with Topos Partnership, a national research firm with experience in both election and voting research, to ask Newark residents about their thoughts on Newark, why they think people do not vote, and what they think of various civic engagement policies.

The interviews form the foundation of the Institute's report, ***Our Vote, Our Power: Lifting up Democracy's Voices in the Garden State.***

We combined the responses of Newark residents with in-depth research to identify four major barriers to democratic participation in New Jersey.

Then, to address these barriers, we recommended a number of policies.

BARRIER #1: Lack of Voter Knowledge

Many voters do not have knowledge about how each part of the government works, about when elections are, and about who the candidates are.

Policy Recommendations:

- Civics should be mandatory for high school and college students
- Consolidate all elections to November
- Eliminate barriers to candidate information and voting for non-English speakers and people with disabilities

BARRIER #2: Systemic Barriers to Voting

There are a number of obstacles to casting a vote, ranging from registration challenges to busy schedules on a weekday.

Policy Recommendations:

- Require employers to provide paid time off to vote
- Set minimum early voting requirements
- Institute same-day registration, including on Election Day

BARRIER #3: A Restricted Electorate

Artificial restrictions on who can vote have limited the democratic process.

Policy Recommendations:

- Restore the vote to incarcerated people
- Lower the voting age

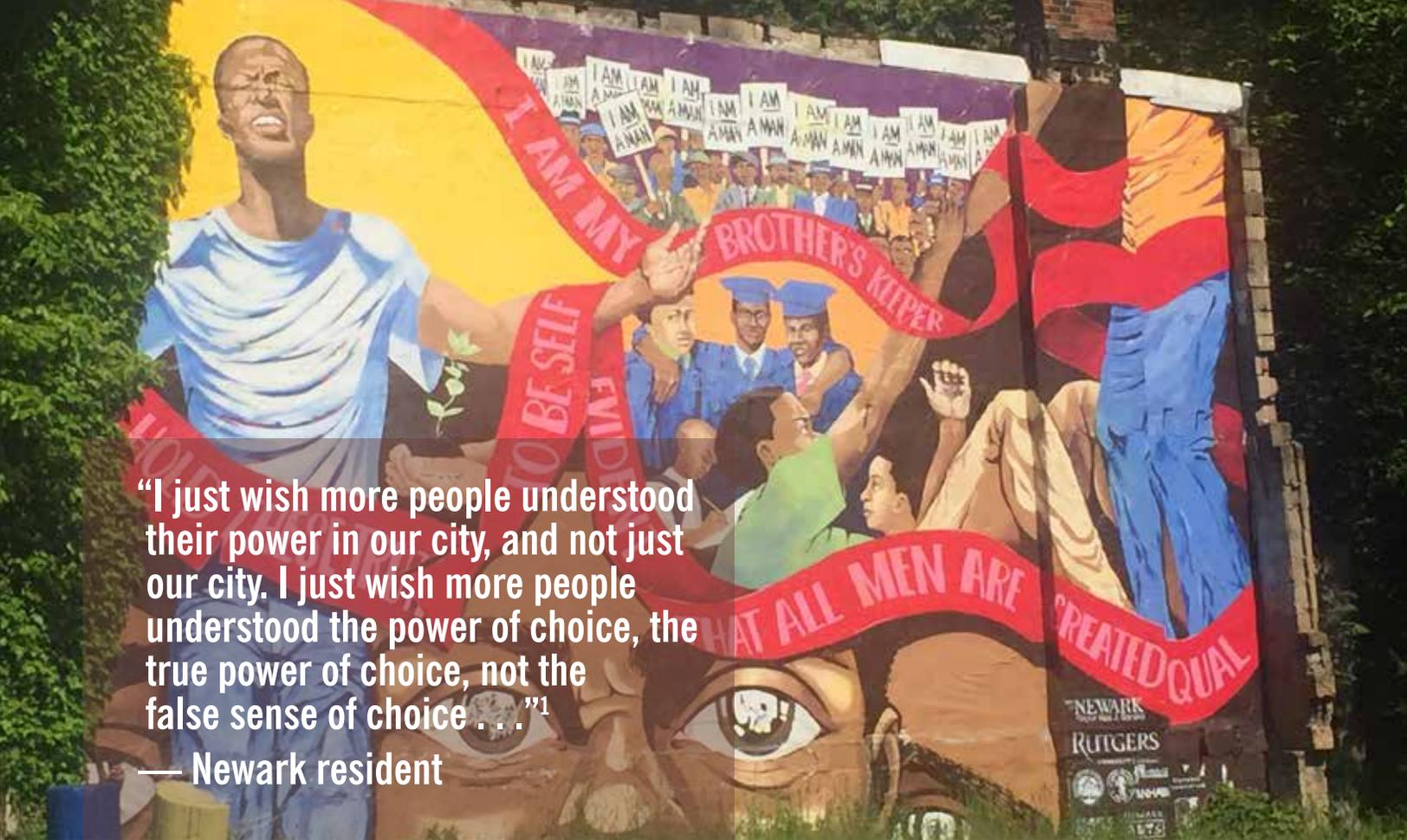
BARRIER #4: Limitations to our Representative Democracy

Too many people decide not to vote because they believe that the system is not responsive to them and the winners seem predetermined.

Policy Recommendations:

- End the party line
- Make our Legislature full-time and pay a full-time wage
- Adopt term limits for local offices

Our Vote, Our Power: Lifting up Democracy's Voices in the Garden State asserts that with the implementation of the recommended policy recommendations, New Jersey can build a robust, equitable, and representative democracy – a democracy where every person knows that our vote is our power, and our power is our vote.



“I just wish more people understood their power in our city, and not just our city. I just wish more people understood the power of choice, the true power of choice, not the false sense of choice . . .”¹

— Newark resident

INTRODUCTION

“This is an opportunity for us to seize the moment. . . This is an opportunity for us to choose a leader,”² said one Newark resident, excited about the City finally regaining local control of its school district in 2018 after 22 years under state control.

Despite the return of local control of the School Board and the years of advocacy by parents³ and students⁴ in support of it, fewer than 5% of Newark residents voted in the April 2018 School Board election.⁵

Less than 5% turnout? Why?

This report seeks to answer the question of why voter turnout in cities like Newark is so low, and makes policy recommendations to help dismantle systemic barriers that undermine maximum democratic participation in the Garden State.

The United States has some of the lowest voter turnout rates in the world,⁶ particularly in state and local elections. New Jersey is no exception, where low voter turnout is seen at both the state and local levels. At the state level, New Jersey only had a 39% turnout rate for the 2017 gubernatorial election.⁷ At the local level, in addition to the dismal turnout for the School Board election, Newark’s turnout in the 2016 presidential election was around 49%;⁸ the 2018 midterm elections saw a 40% voter turnout,⁹ and the 2018 municipal election turnout was only about 19%.¹⁰

There are a number of theories about the cause of low voter turnout – from people not believing their votes matter¹¹ to voter apathy.¹²

But the best way to truly understand behavior and motivation – and then to design systemic remedies – is to turn to our communities for answers. This is especially true during difficult times of national chaos when our communities cannot wait for change to come down from Washington D.C., but must build democracy **from the ground up**.

That is what we have been doing in New Jersey.

Through our collective advocacy, we recently achieved enactment of a historic law to restore the fundamental right to vote to 83,000 people who are on probation and parole.

We stood together to make New Jersey the seventh state to end prison-based gerrymandering – the modern day “3/5 Compromise” – so that incarcerated people will be counted in their home communities for the purpose of legislative redistricting, instead of the location of their prison facility, where they are denied the right to vote.

We also instituted automatic and online voter registration to make the promise of democracy more accessible.

But our work is not yet finished.

Consistent with the Institute’s “from the ground up” approach, this report aims to build on this powerful advocacy to further expand democratic participation in New Jersey. To do so, we interviewed and learned from Newark residents about the causes of low voter engagement and turnout, and then centered those community voices in the development of policy recommendations to build a more inclusive democratic system in New Jersey.

What the Interviews Taught Us

As revealed through numerous interviews, low voter turnout is actually a result of a number of factors – including our system’s failure to meaningfully connect residents to democracy. Indeed, many of the residents interviewed for this report expressed deep affection for their city and an interest in developing new strategies and approaches to access the democratic process.

As one Newark resident said, “Just let the people vote for who they want to vote for.”¹³ This is a simple statement of democracy, but one that requires that we build a system free of the barriers that lead to low democratic participation.

Our interviews with Newark residents helped us identify **four broad barriers** to democratic participation. The **first** is a lack of knowledge about how each part of the government works, about when elections are, and about who is running. The **second** is a series of obstacles to casting a vote, including busy schedules, which particularly affect low income people, and registration challenges. The **third** is not seeing the importance of voting, which is a broader cultural problem that needs to be addressed. The **fourth** is potential voters opting out of the process because it seems like elected officials are preordained.

By contrast, states that do not have the barriers New Jersey does typically have higher voter turnout. Seven of the top ten states for voter turnout in the 2018 election have same-day registration.¹⁴ Maine, for instance, had one of the highest voter turnouts in the country in 2016,¹⁵ and has broad voting rights, including allowing incarcerated people to vote.¹⁶

This report proposes policies, supported by research and data, to address the four identified barriers of low voter turnout, which New Jersey and municipalities throughout the state should adopt. To finally have a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, we can and must teach, promote, preserve, and expand democracy.



BARRIERS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

I. LACK OF VOTER KNOWLEDGE

There is a significant and growing lack of civics education in this country and in New Jersey. A 2016 national study found that only 26% of people could name all three branches of government.¹⁷ A 2017 study found that 37% of people could not name any of the protections of the First Amendment and only 10% knew that it protected the right of assembly.¹⁸ Knowledge about state government is even worse. Less than 20% of people in a recent study could name their state legislators and a third could not name their governor.¹⁹ Over half the people did not know their state had a constitution.²⁰ In addition, while there is a great deal of attention paid to presidential election candidates, the same is not true for candidates in other elections and often people do not know enough about who is running and what their platforms are.²¹ For example, in the 2018 congressional elections, one-third of voters across the country did not know their candidates.²²

People also do not always know that elections occur outside of November, leading to particularly low turnout for off-cycle elections.²³ New Jersey not only has off-year elections,²⁴ but many local elections are still held in months other than November.²⁵ One study found that municipal elections held separately from state and national elections have, on average, over 30 percentage points less voter turnout than those elections held on the same day as presidential elections.²⁶



Indeed, the Newark residents interviewed consistently cited a lack of knowledge as a key barrier to their engagement with the democratic process.²⁷



- “I think more of the reason is that most people aren’t familiar with the people who are running.... And like a lot of people with any election, there’s a group of people who just don’t vote period, or only vote for what they know, and I think that’s what happened in the school board elections. People were completely unaware.”
- “I feel like there should be a website where you go and it’s the people that are running for whatever they’re running. It’s literally a background of, you click on the person, you look at them, you know when they were born, where they were born, what they did do, what school they went to, stuff like that. You know what I mean?”
- “No, I never really knew....I think that it is also a lack of information for people that perhaps were not informed on time. Perhaps they were never informed in several areas. Maybe, that is why they did not show up to vote.” (Translated from Spanish)²⁸
- “Just not enough information, honestly.”
- “A lot of people probably don’t vote because they have no idea.”
- “Probably less education on the voting process, ‘cause that’s what....It messes a lot of people up, because they’re thinking‘I vote, that person might not really get it,’ they already think it’s rigged.”
- “[A] lot of people don’t participate in political activities, is because they are not educated. And when someone is not educated, it’s just human nature, no one wants to look stupid doing something just for the sake of doing it.”
- “I think actually just awareness of it. I can tell you for a fact I didn’t vote because I didn’t know it was a school election going on. I really probably think it’s just the awareness and how much they made the community a part of it because I read the news every day. I can tell you what’s going on in politics, science, whatever, but as far as that five percent, I feel like only those people knew about it who were probably involved. Those were probably mostly the people involved.”
- “Like, what changes would you notice in your community if people get involved and knew how the system works? For example, I would like politicians to get more involved in the neighborhood, to come and talk more with the community and thus have a better understanding with them.” (Translated from Spanish)²⁹
- “For example, on the streets, or people disseminating information, such as, here in the park or in the most commonly visited areas by those of us who live here in Newark.” (Translated from Spanish)³⁰
- “The main [election] they’re looking in is in November.”

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Civics should be mandatory for high school and college students

There are few policies more popular than mandatory civics education. A recent national study found that 89% of people favored “ensur[ing] that schools make civic education a bigger part of the curriculum.”³¹ This finding was echoed by the people in Newark, the vast majority of whom talked about the need for more education about the system.

Before the 1960s, most Americans had three separate courses of civics and government in high school.³² This changed as curricula narrowed in order to focus on the subjects in standardized testing and narrowed even further with the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001³³ and the increased focus on STEM subjects.³⁴ The loss of civics has led to multiple generations of Americans who do not know the basics of our government. We can, and must, remedy this.

New Jersey should join the increasing number of states across the country passing mandatory civics education legislation.³⁵ States with more rigorous civics curricula, such as Colorado, have higher youth turnout than New Jersey.³⁶ The curriculum in New Jersey should not be limited to one class and should not be tethered to a standardized test. Instead, it should include elements of community service and broader civics discourse. And quality civics education should be available to all students, regardless of income: One study found that low-income students are half as likely to study how laws are made, and 30% less likely to report having experiences with debates or panel discussions in social studies classes, than their higher-income counterparts.³⁷

Our civics education should correct this gap, with group projects and discussions regarding current events that are impacting the lives of young people.

Elected officials have started hearing the call for civics education. In 2018, Newark began a ten-session course for 11th graders³⁸ and there have been multiple bills introduced in the Legislature for state-wide mandatory civics education.³⁹ Colleges should also require civics courses as part of their core graduation requirements. It is time to finally have statewide requirements and resources to correct this major problem for all students in this state, regardless of race or income.

2. Consolidate all elections to November

New Jersey has created a system that reinforces the knowledge gap. As discussed above, many people do not know enough about how our government operates. One piece of information that is generally known is that elections are in November.⁴⁰ This is, however, not the case for local elections in New Jersey. New Jersey has already passed a law that permits municipal and school board elections to be moved to the November General Election.⁴¹ However, it is up to the municipality to decide. Opponents argue that off-month elections allow them to be non-partisan, because without state and federal level offices on the ballot, local candidates are not listed by party.⁴² However, moving elections to November would increase turnout and, additionally, save municipalities money, as counties pay for November elections but municipalities pay for off-month elections.⁴³ A change in timing in California’s school board elections to coincide the elections with state and national elections resulted in a 150% boost in turnout.⁴⁴ New Jersey should pass a law requiring all municipalities to move elections to November.





3. Eliminate barriers to candidate information and voting for non-English speakers and people with disabilities

It is time-consuming and often daunting to research all candidates, particularly for local races such as the school board.⁴⁵ There should be a state-run website, and corresponding “app,” that allows people to look up each candidate running for office. The information should include a photo, basic biographical information, experience, and a few sentences that allow candidates to share their platform. This should be part of the petition for candidates to get on the ballot.⁴⁶ This website/“app” should also be available in Spanish and other languages spoken by people in New Jersey, and, specifically, the languages spoken by people within the candidate’s district. Currently, the statewide voter registration application is available in 12 languages, including English.⁴⁷ This is required by federal law.⁴⁸ Candidate information should be just as accessible. While there are nonprofit organizations who try to provide this information,⁴⁹ the State should be providing this service, even for local elections. The State must also mail this information to all residents, with options for materials in other languages, including braille. This information and reminders should also be sent out through email and “app” notifications. We can use available technology to make voting accessible and convenient. We need to do all we can to help people become more informed voters.

In addition, we must ensure that all polling places are language accessible, with poll workers who speak in languages spoken by significant members of the community, and forms and information available at polling places in multiple languages.⁵⁰ Poll places must also be accessible to people with disabilities, including for people with hearing and visual impairments, people with limited mobility, and people with mental or cognitive impairments. The turnout for voters in New Jersey with disabilities increased in 2018, but it still lags with a gap of -13.4% behind voter turnout for people without disabilities.⁵¹ About a quarter of non-registered people with disabilities cite their disability as the reason they are not registered to vote.⁵² It is the government’s responsibility to make voting easy and accessible for all people.

II. SYSTEMATIC BARRIERS TO VOTING

As discussed, the United States has some of the lowest voter turnout rates in the world.⁵³ Turnout is even lower in local elections.⁵⁴ This reality is driven by the fact that, for a host of historical and modern day racially discriminatory and other reasons, the story of America's democracy has been a contested one, characterized by expansion often followed by swift contraction.⁵⁵ For people of color in particular, gains in political participation by their communities have routinely been met with corresponding efforts to constrict the franchise.⁵⁶

One barrier to democratic participation is that we vote in the middle of the week – Tuesday, rather than Sunday when many other countries vote.⁵⁷

Another significant barrier is voter suppression: there is a broad push in many places in this country to actively make voting more difficult so that fewer people, particularly young people and people of color, can vote.⁵⁸ Other countries, on the other hand, have built systems to make democratic participation easier for residents.⁵⁹ Sweden and Germany, for example, automatically register all citizens.⁶⁰ In recent years, New Jersey has passed automatic voter registration and online voter registration, but it must go further.

The question we should ask is this: How can we collectively encourage more people to participate in the political process?

New Jersey must answer this question, as reflected in the statements by Newark residents below:⁶¹

- “Maybe [be]cause a lot of people are not ... a lot of people work, like parent-wise, and that they just don't have the time to go invest their time to their children like they used to, because, you know, both parents work. Or a lot of parents have to work two jobs to pretty much, you know, raise a household because of rent.”
- “Maybe because they're working. Maybe just tired. A lot of people get off of work and just be tired. And it depends what time they did it.”
- “I registered to vote the moment I got [to Newark]. I guess I came in the legal deadline but not the deadline when they printed the book. I had to wait at the school for literally 35 minutes, and then call the board to make sure that was...I think it's just that whole level.”



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Require employers to provide paid time off to vote

In 2018, 44% of US employers offered time off to vote.⁶² Twenty-three states allow people paid time off to vote, while another seven allow unpaid time off.⁶³ However, the laws vary⁶⁴ and most states do not require employers to inform employees about this right.⁶⁵ In New Jersey, whether employers offer paid time off to their workers is up to the company; the practice therefore benefits some people over others.

New Jersey should pass a law requiring paid time off and require employers to notify employees of this right. All people should be informed that they have the right to vote and should be able to take time off to do so. New Jersey should also ensure that the law does not allow for loopholes that allow employers to pay overtime pay in order to discourage employees from voting during work hours, such as a recent attempt by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority in New York.⁶⁶ While this can be disguised as an effort to encourage people to vote early, it would also just discourage people who did not vote early from voting at all. The law should also bar employers from not scheduling hourly workers on Election Day to avoid paying employees. Voting is not just an individual right, but a collective good. We must encourage everyone, regardless of economic circumstance, to vote.

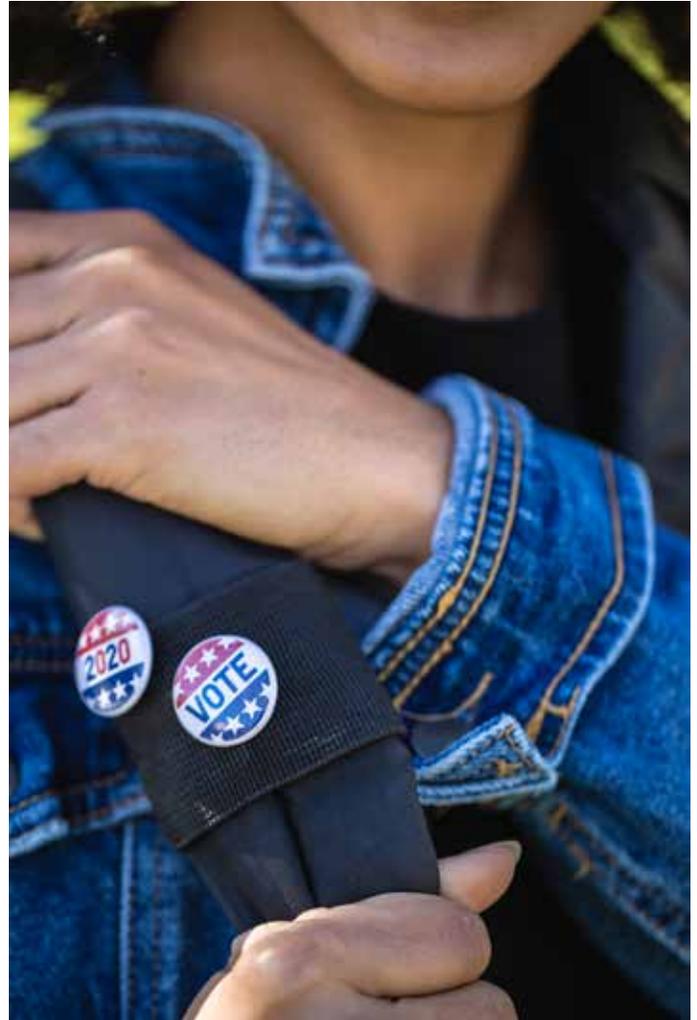


2. Set Minimum Early Voting Requirements

Early voting has numerous benefits, from greater access to voting, an increase in satisfaction with the voting process, and shorter lines on Election Day.⁶⁷ Currently, under New Jersey law,⁶⁸ a voter may cast a ballot before Election Day by mail or in-person by applying for and completing an absentee ballot at their County Clerk’s office.⁶⁹ However, there is only one such office in most counties, and while some counties provide an additional location and evening or weekend hours right before an election, this is not required by law.⁷⁰ A majority of states around the country have early voting options,⁷¹ including weekend voting.⁷² New Jersey must abandon unnecessary barriers and adopt a system with minimum early voting requirements. There has been pending legislation to address this issue for years,⁷³ and it is long past time for New Jersey to finally enact it.⁷⁴

3. Institute Same-Day Registration

Same-day voter registration, including on Election Day, allows voters to both register to vote and cast a ballot on the same day.⁷⁵ Twenty-one states and the District of Columbia have already enacted same-day registration.⁷⁶ Multiple studies have shown that same-day registration increases voter turnout, with an average of a 5% boost in turnout.⁷⁷ In the 2012 presidential election, four out of the top five voter turnout states offered same-day registration.⁷⁸ New Jersey should, like nearly half of the states in America,⁷⁹ adopt this practice.



III. A RESTRICTED ELECTORATE

The right to vote is the foundation of democracy. It is “preservative of all rights”⁸⁰ and the very “essence of a democratic society.”⁸¹ This understanding of the importance of voting extends beyond our borders and has been declared a human right by the United Nations.⁸² Yet, this country has placed historical restrictions on the right to vote from its founding,⁸³ and continues to do so today.⁸⁴

New Jersey should instead, as residents explained below, build a democratic system that extends the right to vote to more people.⁸⁵

- “I think everybody should vote. Even if they’re a criminal or not they still have a voice. . . . They probably feel like they’re not a part of the community and they’re going to continue breaking the law.”
- “I think that the people who are in prison are affected by political officials as well. So I don’t think that that right should be taken away from them. That form of enslavement shouldn’t also take away their right to vote. I think that if they’re affected, whether outside or behind bars, they’re still affected. So they still should have the ability to vote.”
- “A very vocal voice, a youth voice. I think that the youth is the next generation. I think a lot of times there’s just so many adults and the kids kind of get lost in it. But if there was some type of way that we could break it down so that these kids could start getting bits of pieces of information implemented into their minds, and then as they grow older they’re like, ‘Oh yeah, I remember when I was younger they talked about this,’ they’re more educated, they’re more informed. So I think a voice.”



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Restore the Vote to Incarcerated People

New Jersey should restore voting rights to incarcerated people. As outlined in our recent report, *Value to the Soul: People with Criminal Convictions on the Power of the Vote*, denying incarcerated people the right to vote serves no legitimate purpose, let alone a criminal justice one.⁸⁶ This archaic prohibition — dating all the way back to 1844, the same year New Jersey first restricted the vote to white men in its Constitution — does not deter anyone from committing a crime and has no effect on incapacitation.⁸⁷ It also does not serve the punitive purpose of criminal justice, as it is separate from sentencing, and is a collateral consequence.⁸⁸

Most importantly, denying people the right to vote does not further the most important criminal justice objective — rehabilitation.⁸⁹ Instead, it undermines this goal.⁹⁰ A major reason for high recidivism rates is that people feel disconnected from their communities when they return home.⁹¹ The right to vote would provide an important connection.⁹² These connections are crucial for the rehabilitation process.⁹³ In the same way that hospitals prepare to discharge a patient on the day of admission, successful reentry into society for people in prison must begin on the day a person enters prison.⁹⁴

Restoring the right to vote to incarcerated people is also crucial in light of the racist impact of the current law.⁹⁵ New Jersey has the highest Black/white incarceration disparity rate in America. A Black adult in New Jersey is 12 times more likely to be incarcerated than a white adult.⁹⁶ As a result, 62% of the people who are denied the right to vote are Black,⁹⁷ though Black people comprise just 15% of New Jersey's overall population.⁹⁸ New Jersey should aspire to join Maine, Vermont, Puerto Rico, and many western democracies⁹⁹ and fully sever the unjustifiable connection between the criminal justice system and the right to vote by passing a full

restoration bill. Maine and Vermont, demographically the two whitest states in the country,¹⁰⁰ have never denied the right to vote to people with criminal convictions.¹⁰¹ We must join them and finally put this racist law behind us.



2. Lower the Voting Age

There is no good reason why the minimum voting age is 18. That age was only set after a long national fight wherein young people argued that if they were old enough to be sent to fight wars, they were old enough to vote.¹⁰² This advocacy culminated in the passage of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment.¹⁰³ However, there is no legitimate reason to think that people younger than 18 cannot and should not vote. You do not have to be 18 to make financial contributions to a political campaign, volunteer in campaigns, write letters to officials, and attend political rallies.¹⁰⁴ The justification for 18 as the voting age is often competency or needing sufficient knowledge.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, there is no evidence that people over 18 are more competent or have more knowledge to vote. 16-year-olds, on average, have similar civic knowledge as adults.¹⁰⁶

Takoma Park, Maryland, lowered the voting age to 16 for local elections.¹⁰⁷ In the first election after that law passed, 16-year-olds voted at over 10 times the rate of those between 18 and 25.¹⁰⁸ Two other towns in Maryland and Berkley, California, have also lowered the voting age for local elections.¹⁰⁹ Various other jurisdictions are also debating lowering the voting age.¹¹⁰

Young people are affected by the same policies as adults but have no say in deciding their representatives. This is especially true for school board elections. Further, voting is habitual behavior.¹¹¹ Studies have shown that people who vote in the first three elections after they are eligible will likely vote for the rest of their lives.¹¹² If those elections are local elections, it could lead to a longer trend of higher turnout in local elections. New Jersey's young people are also inclined to vote. The student turnout in New Jersey for the 2018 midterm was above the national average.¹¹³

There is momentum for this issue. In March 2019, an amendment to lower the voting age to 16 was introduced in the House of Representatives ahead of a debate on major voting rights legislation.¹¹⁴ While the amendment did not pass, 126 members voted in favor.¹¹⁵ States are the laboratories for democracy — New Jersey should act on this momentum and become the first state to reduce the voting age. If we reduce the voting age and combine this with mandatory civics education, we can build a generation of informed voters who will regularly vote in local elections. We can build a healthy, active democracy.



IV. LIMITATIONS TO OUR REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

The foundation of our system is that we are a republic, or a “representative democracy.”¹¹⁶ This means that people elect officials to represent them and govern our society.¹¹⁷ In order to properly function, our system must not only allow people to vote and have easy access to the vote, but there must also be no unnecessary roadblocks to becoming a candidate. A true democracy is not a system where only some people can run for office and become elected officials.¹¹⁸

In New Jersey, both major parties practice “party line”¹¹⁹ voting, which undermines new voices from the government, and our “part-time legislature”¹²⁰ that meets year-round forestalls people from many working class and demanding professions from running for office. New Jersey should end these practices in order to become a more inclusive democracy.

Residents in Newark echoed these sentiments, sharing statements that showed just how insular our government feels to many people:¹²¹

- “And if you don’t have money to compete with candidates who have a machine and money behind you, then you can’t compare.”
- “We just see, oh vote line A, all the way, or this that and third, but at the end of the day we really don’t know the person. That’s basically how I feel about it.”
- “Politics is nasty. They’ll do...I don’t know. They just nasty. I don’t get involved with politics because I don’t want to be targeted for anything or beat down in my back for something I believe in. I’m a fight for what I believe in, but I don’t get involved in politics. It’s too dirty.”
- “They just didn’t feel the need [to vote]. I guess they feeled that there wasn’t going to be no changes.”
- “The more roles we have in the City, in the government, the better it would be for us.”
- “The government – I don’t think much of it right now. Because there are too many things that are happening that the government is not taking care of.”

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. End the Party Line

Almost every county in New Jersey organizes their ballots around “the line,” wherein the county branches of both major parties list their endorsed candidates in a vertical column or horizontal row.¹²² State-wide elections are, by state law, at the top of the line.¹²³ This means that whoever ends up on the line below the most known candidates often win.¹²⁴ Other candidates are placed on other lines, sometimes far away from the main line, minimizing visibility.¹²⁵ This is particularly a problem during primary elections.

Ballot placement has a major effect on who wins an election, because when voters do not know information about candidates, which is often the case for low profile races, they often vote based on ballot placement.¹²⁶ It is, however, against the principles of democracy to stack the deck to favor one candidate simply by their positioning on a ballot. Voters are denied the ability to make informed decisions on candidates without the county party weighing the scale. It is also completely unnecessary. For example, Salem County does not have the line and has maintained successful elections.¹²⁷ As Salem County’s Deputy County Clerk has said, “A poor guy might be a good candidate, but he doesn’t have a chance unless he’s on the line. That’s kind of the way it is. I like the way we do it, it gives everyone a fair and equal chance.”¹²⁸ Every county should follow this example and abandon the “line.”





2. Make our Legislature Full-Time and Pay a Full-Time Wage

Legislative form varies from state to state, with some states having “citizen” legislatures that meet for a few weeks every other year, while others have full-time legislatures that are paid full-time wages.¹²⁹ New Jersey’s current system is a “hybrid”¹³⁰ system because our legislature meets “part-time” year-round.¹³¹ This means that legislators meet on Mondays and Thursdays for most of the year, but because the pay is a part-time wage, most legislators also have other employment.¹³² New Jersey’s Legislature has also had a number of changes over the years, from becoming more “professional”¹³³ with full time staff, to no longer permitting dual office holding.¹³⁴

New Jersey legislators earn \$49,000 a year in salary with no per diem or travel expenses.¹³⁵ Those legislators elected after 2010 are also required to pay the full cost of health care coverage.¹³⁶ Considering the cost of living in New Jersey,¹³⁷ this is simply not a livable wage. In order to do this job, members need to be independently wealthy, retired, or have other employment. For the latter, however, one must consider how few jobs would permit an employee to spend one-two days a week in Trenton. As a result, currently there is only one legislator who is a public school teacher,¹³⁸ while over 25 legislators are either retired or list “legislator” as their profession.¹³⁹ There are dozens of attorneys, but most are partners or well into their careers.¹⁴⁰ There are also owners or executives of real estate, insurance, and other companies in industries that would benefit from having a say

in state laws,¹⁴¹ or employees of county governments.¹⁴² Only seven legislators are millennials, compared to 42 that are baby boomers.¹⁴³ Roughly 72% of the Legislature is white,¹⁴⁴ even though New Jersey is 45% people of color.¹⁴⁵ While paying elected officials more is unpopular,¹⁴⁶ our current system favors wealthy, older candidates. By contrast, young, working class people – predominantly people of color – are financially disincentivized from running. We must change this. New York pays its full-time legislature \$110,000 annually, as does California.¹⁴⁷ Pennsylvania pays over \$88,000, and Michigan pays over \$71,000.¹⁴⁸ All four states also provide travel and per diem expenses.¹⁴⁹

New Jersey should change to a full-time legislature that pays a full-time wage, with benefits, as a significant step toward creating a government that does not have barriers to running for office.

3. Adopt Term Limits for Local Offices

In municipalities like Newark, local offices with a great deal of power, such as city council seats, are held by the same officials for decades.¹⁵⁰ As famed Newark historian Bob Curvin argued in his seminal book, *Inside Newark: Decline, Rebellion, and the Search for Transformation*, this can be discouraging to voters who often feel that nothing ever changes.¹⁵¹ Newark should lead the way by piloting a term limit program with two-term limits for City Council seats and three-term limits for mayors.¹⁵² This can inspire greater participation from voters.¹⁵³

V. CONCLUSION

There are a number of reasons why people do not vote, ranging from structural barriers, to a lack of education, to distrust in our system.

To continue to build our democracy, particularly in this difficult national moment, we embrace the forward-thinking policies set forth in this report to further expand it. We are seeking to build a democracy in New Jersey that is the most inclusive in America.

That work – of empowering people to use the power of their vote in our democracy – continues from the ground up in our communities.



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