A REPORT BY

INNOVATION OHIO

EDUCATION FUND

A Justice Agenda

OHIO'S MISSING VOTERS

Part 2: Policies To Promote Voter Participation

Acknowledgement Letter

Innovation Ohio Education Fund (IOEF) is thrilled to present another installment to our 2023 project, A Justice Agenda: "Ohio's Missing Voters" – Part 2. We hope this report will serve as a critical foundation for informed discussions and policy decisions. For this report, IOEF undertook a comprehensive analysis of policies in place in other states for promoting participation in elections to see whether they may play a role in why so many Ohioans aren't engaged in voting.

Our objective was to gain deeper insights into whether Ohio's laws are worsening Ohio's Missing Voters problem and how other states may point to a solution. This report was made possible by the dedicated staff at Innovation Ohio Education Fund.

Ohio has always played a pivotal role in shaping the nation's political direction, and it is our responsibility to ensure that every eligible citizen's voice is heard in our democratic process.

The findings in this report will shed light on why neighboring states have higher voter turnout than Ohio by comparing the laws the voters in each state must abide by. In response, Ohio can and should adopt successful voting policies from other states that promote justice, equity, and the true representation of our diverse population in our electoral system.

We would also like to thank all activists and thought leaders who have dedicated their lives to making the lives of others better. We hope to continue to dive into the research, data, and statistics in the coming months to advance solution-oriented change for a better Ohio.

In Solidarity,

Desiree Tims
President/CEO
Innovation Ohio Education Fund

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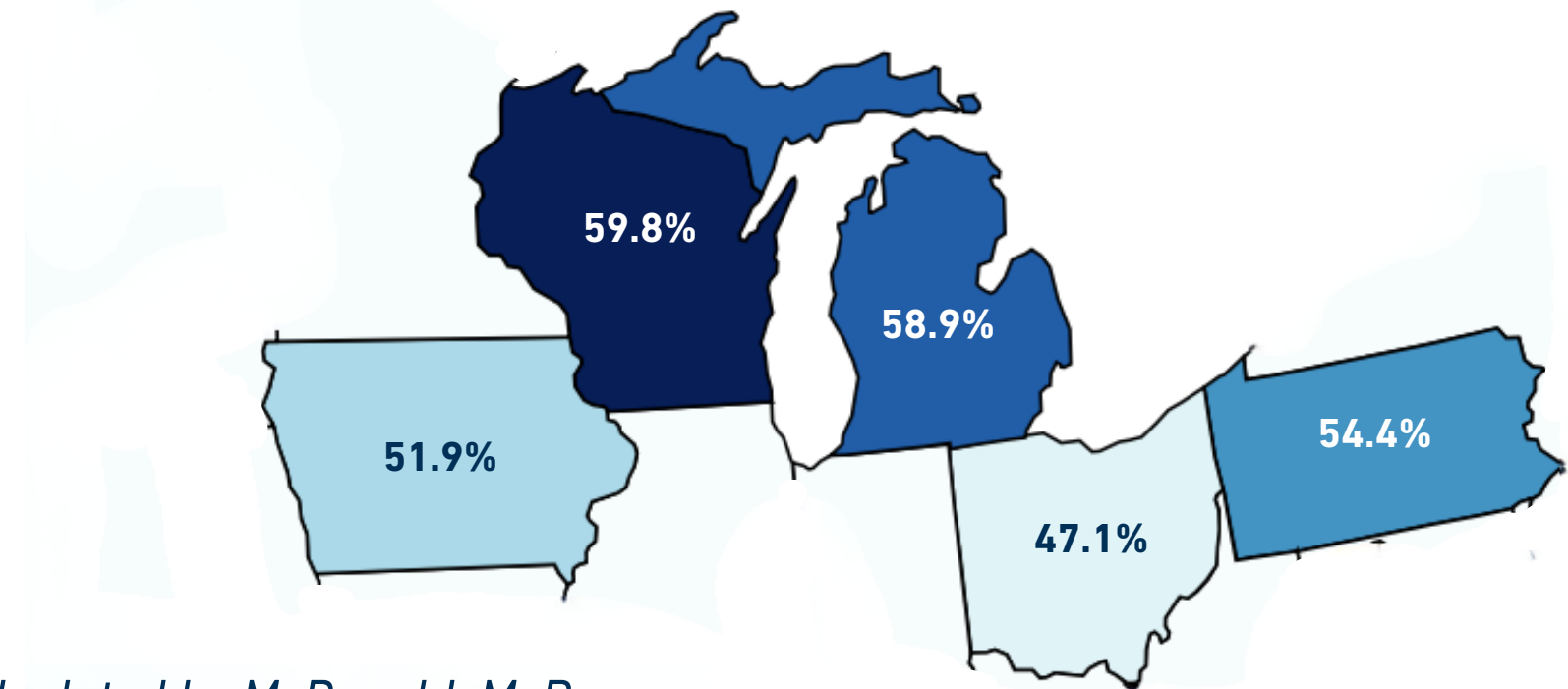
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Background

In October, Innovation Ohio Education Fund released an analysis [1] of the Ohio voting population that showed 2 million Ohio residents, otherwise eligible to vote, who remain unregistered. The research found an additional 700,000 registered voters who were not actively participating in elections, putting them at risk of being purged from the rolls. Our latest analysis looks at the policies in place in other states for promoting participation in elections and what discrepancies exist in Ohio and whether they may play a role in why so many Ohioans aren't engaged in voting.

1. *(Innovation Ohio Education Fund, 2023)*

Voter Turnout by State

Ohio consistently ranks at the bottom in voter turnout compared to other midwestern battleground states. Ohio's low ranking could be a result of low registration rates, high rates of non-voting among registered adults, or both. We therefore wanted to see whether having more voter-friendly policies can lead to higher rates of participation. Our comparison group includes four other midwestern battleground states. We also looked at voter-friendly policies and turnout in battleground states outside the region that have GOP-controlled legislatures like Ohio.

Midwest/ Neighbor State	2018 Voter Turnout [2]	Rank	2020 Voter Turnout	Rank	2022 Voter Turnout	Rank
Wisconsin	61.4%	1	75.3%	1	59.8%	1
Michigan	57.7%	3	73.5%	2	58.9%	2
Pennsylvania	51.7%	4	70.1%	4	54.4%	3
Iowa	57.9%	2	72.9%	3	51.9%	4
Ohio	50.9%	5	67.0%	5	47.1%	5

2. Votes cast as a percentage of the total eligible voting age population, as calculated by McDonald, M. P.

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Only 65% of the eligible voting age population in Ohio is registered to vote, ranking it 26th among all states (US Census, 2023). Given the nearly 2 million Ohio adults who are eligible to vote but remain unregistered, we looked at policies that could remove barriers from the voter registration process, increasing the chances that these voters not only become registered but also stay registered.

To register to vote in Ohio, individuals can register using a paper form by providing their Ohio driver's license or ID card number or the last four digits of their Social Security number, along with their name, date of birth address. Online registration requires both a driver's license or identification card number and the last 4 of the voter's social security number, limiting its use to people with state-issued identification. New and updated registrations must be submitted at least 30 days before an election in order to be eligible.

Getting Registered

Automatic Voter Registration: Many states have begun implementing a process referred to as Automatic Voter Registration or AVR, in which an eligible voter is automatically registered to vote when they interact with a state agency, most commonly when renewing or applying for a driver's license. By making it easier to join the electorate, AVR policies have resulted in large increases in registered voters, particularly among the young, rural, and more ethnically diverse voters. A 3.5-percentage point improvement in youth voter turnout has been found when AVR policies are implemented.[3] In 2019, Ohio's Republican Secretary of State Frank LaRose stood with legislators from both parties to call for the adoption of AVR and other election modernization policies in Ohio (Pelzer, 2019). The goal, he explained, was to improve the accuracy of voter information and avoid the need for voter "purges," in which voters are removed from the rolls. Twenty-four other states and the District of Columbia have approved AVR,[4] but Ohio has yet to implement it.

Online Voter Registration: As the name implies, online voter registration is a way for voters to register or update their registration using a computer and without the hassle and inconvenience of postage and mailing or of dropping off a form at an elections office. This particular policy has shown a big impact on youth voter participation: a 2020 study found that, after accounting for variables such as education and income, areas with online voter registration saw a 10-point increase in youth voter registration compared to other locations.[5] Ohio has had online voter registration since 2017, joining 42 other states and the District of Columbia in providing the convenience of registering to vote online.

Same-Day Registration: Twenty-eight states and the District of Columbia allow voters to register and vote at the same time, frequently known as "same day registration" or SDR (Voting Rights Lab). Currently in Ohio, voters must register to vote 30 days before an election or they are locked out of participating. This 30-day window is the longest allowable time period for voter registration prior to an upcoming election under federal law. But same-day registration would subject the registration to the same level of scrutiny to verify the user is indeed eligible to vote, and only counts any votes cast if the registration is found to be valid. Ohio recently enjoyed a "golden week," when voters could register and cast an early vote at the same time, but the legislature did away with it in 2013, shortening the early voting period to start after the registration deadline.

3 & 5. (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2022)   *4. (Movement Advancement Project, Automatic Voter Registration)*

Staying Registered

Voter Purges for Inactivity: The National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) of 1993 permits states to remove the names of ineligible voters by reason of death or filing a change in residential address form with the US Postal Service as long as efforts have been made to contact the voter and sufficient time has elapsed without voter activity. Ohio, however, is one of several states to have adopted a so-called "supplemental" process that removes voters strictly for inactivity. These "supplemental" purges were upheld by a decision of the US Supreme Court in 2018, and beginning in 2019, Ohio began the process of removing over 700,000 voters, including hundreds of thousands in 2019, 2020 and 2022 simply for failing to vote in a recent election. Ohio's most recent voter purge came after the voter registration deadline had passed and the early voting had begun, leaving purged voters with no recourse to participate in November's landmark election that included questions about abortion rights and recreational cannabis. Not only does Ohio remove voters for inactivity, it's one of only two states that cancel a voter's registration after having missed just two elections. Ohio's purge system effectively says "use it or lose it" when it comes to our most fundamental American right.

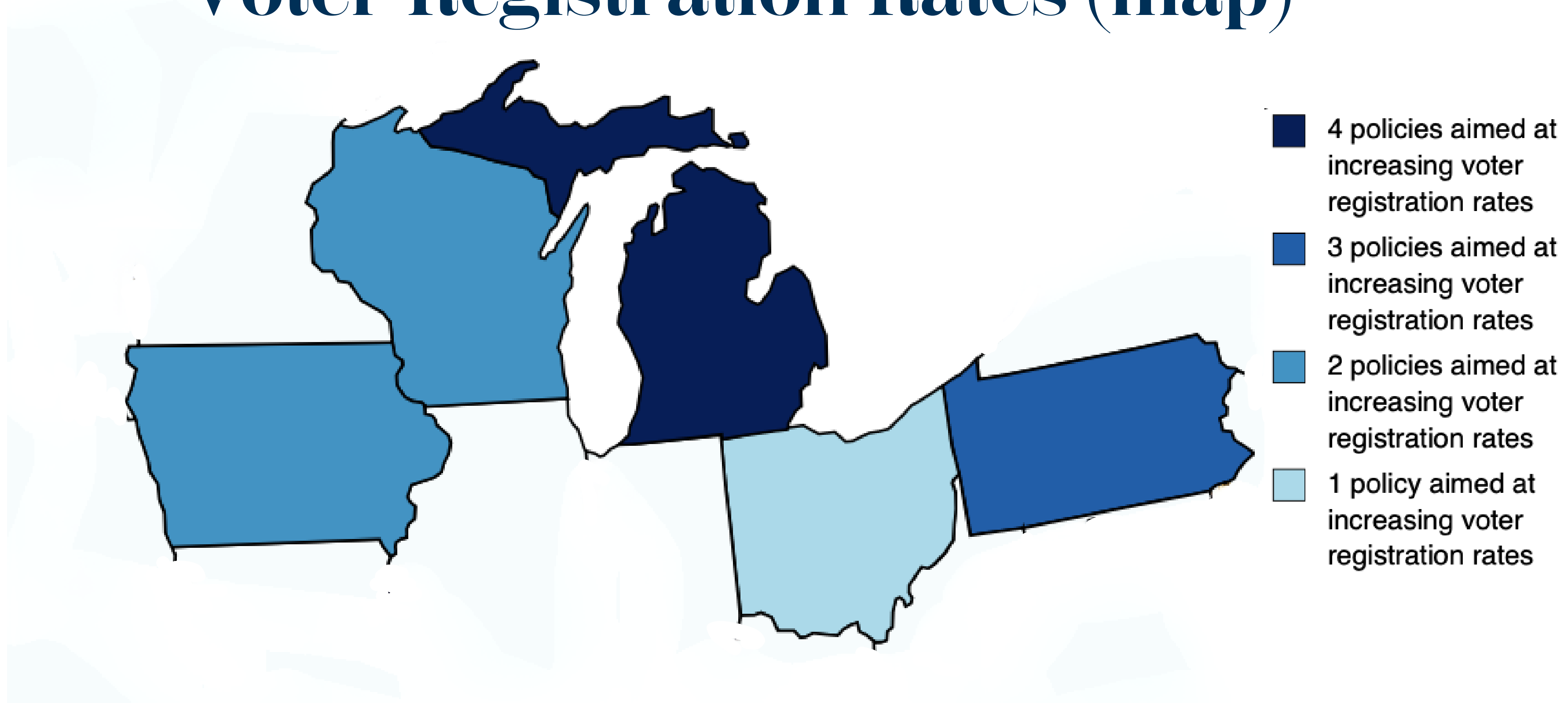# Comparison of Policies Aimed at Increasing Voter Registration Rates

There is recent evidence to suggest that reforms making it easier for voters to get and stay registered can lead to higher voter turnout. In particular, in Michigan, AVR and SDR were both adopted by voters in 2018, and since that time, both turnout and the overall number of registered voters saw big increases. According to scholars at Bowling Green State University, "these easier methods of registration may have corresponded with higher voter participation in the state. The increase in total votes cast in Michigan, from 4.8 million in 2016 to 5.5 million in 2020, suggests the 2018 registration changes had an effect."[6]

State	Online Voter Registration	Automatic Voter Registration	Same-Day Registration	Voters cannot be purged exclusively for inactivity	2018 Voter Turnout	2020 Voter Turnout	2022 Voter Turnout
Wisconsin	✅	❌	✅	❌	61.4%	75.3%	59.8%
Michigan	✅	✅	✅	✅	57.7%	73.5%	58.9%
Pennsylvania	✅	✅	❌	✅	51.7%	70.1%	54.4%
Iowa	✅	❌	✅	❌	57.9%	72.9%	51.9%
Ohio	✅	❌	❌	❌	50.9%	67.0%	47.1%

Among the five midwestern battleground states, Ohio has the least voter-friendly policies for getting and staying registered to vote. This correlates with Ohio consistently having the lowest voter turnout among similar states. Three of the four states we looked at offer Same Day Registration, while two of four allow same-day registration. And two states – Michigan and Pennsylvania – avoid purging voters for inactivity alone, requiring additional triggers to remove a voter's registration from the rolls.

6. (Jackson & Wells, 2023)

Comparison of Policies Aimed at Increasing Voter Registration Rates (map)

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In addition to 2 million eligible but unregistered voters in Ohio, our 2023 analysis found that there are approximately 700,000 registered voters who have not participated in recent elections. Just 47% of Ohio's eligible voting age population turned out to vote in 2022, ranking it 36th among all states (US Census, 2021). Our analysis of these registered but inactive voters showed they tend to skew much younger, more Black, and more female than the unregistered voters we identified. They also tend to be concentrated in the city's major urban centers.

A variety of official policies can impact the ease and convenience of voting, which, along with the challenges of registering to vote, can have a big impact on the rate of participation. Voting activity among registered but inactive or infrequently active voters could be impacted by policies that cut down on voting hours and locations or that increase friction at the polling place, such as requiring certain harder-to-obtain forms of photo identification.

Policies To Improve the Ease and Convenience of Voting

Voter ID Requirements: Most states require some form of identification from a voter in order to cast their vote. But the state-specific rules about which forms of identification are allowed can make a huge difference in who gets to vote. Starting in 2023, with the enactment of House Bill 458, Ohio became home to the country's strictest voter identification laws. Ohio is now one of only 10 states with a strict photo identification requirement,[7] though Ohio's policies provide the most stringent list of allowable forms of identification with the narrowest leeway for voters to get around the requirements.

This new law means voters can no longer provide proof of address in the form of a bank statement, utility bill or other official document, and instead must present a valid, unexpired state-issued identification document (driver's license, identification card, military ID or passport) in order for their vote to count. It was passed despite a lack of evidence that voter impersonation - the problem the law purports to solve - is occurring in Ohio.

Just 17 states in the country absolutely require identification to vote; the remaining 33 states either do not require any identification to vote or offer various workarounds, like allowing voters to cast provisional ballots, to provide other forms of identification, or to sign affidavits affirming their identity, like Michigan allows.

What makes Ohio's policy so difficult to navigate for voters is barriers that exist keeping them from obtaining one of the just three types of identification that can be used to vote. A 2011 analysis showed, for example, that nearly 938,000 Ohioans of voting age lack a driver's license or state-issued identification card (Robbins, 2011). Younger and older Ohioans as well as people living in poverty or experiencing homelessness are particularly vulnerable to losing their voting rights as a result of lacking state-issued identification. And while HB458 allows for the issuance of free state identification cards, the underlying documents necessary to obtain them are not free.

Early Voting In Person: Voting early can provide essential flexibility for voters whose work or travel schedules make voting on Election Day impractical. Thirty-six states and the District of Columbia permit no-excuse early voting, while 14 others do so if a voter provides proof of their absence on election day.[8] While Ohio law allows no-excuse early voting both in-person and by mail during the four weeks prior to the election, a number of restrictions limit participation by these methods. Namely, Ohio law says voters can only vote early in-person at a single location per county, despite its size or population, and voting is limited to weekday business hours in all but the final week of early voting.

7. (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2023)

8. (Movement Advancement Project, Availability of No-Excuse Absentee Voting.)

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Early Voting By Mail: Voting by mail provides a convenient way to participate to voters for whom casting a ballot in person is inconvenient or impossible, such as is the case for overseas and military voters and voters with disabilities. Oregon was the first state to conduct all of its elections by mail, but several others have followed suit. Adoption of mail voting was greatly accelerated in many states in 2020 to avoid crowding at polling places during a global pandemic.
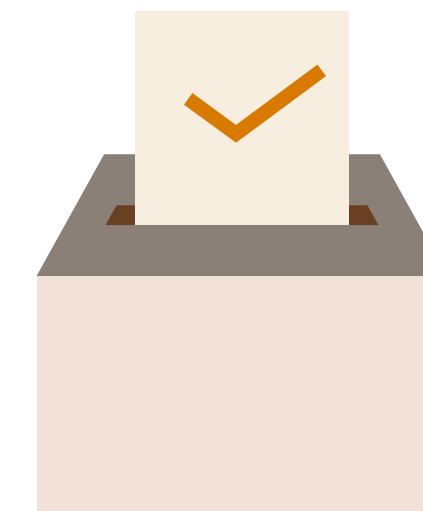
Offering voting by mail has been shown to have positive effects on turnout, and not just for military and disabled voters. According to a study by The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, in 2020, states that had robust mail voting options had the highest (57%) voter turnout among young voters compared to other states.[9]

Online absentee ballot request: Requesting a ballot online offers a flexibility for voters seeking to avoid the hassle and inconvenience of postage and mailing or of dropping the form at an elections office. 31 states allow voters to request absentee ballots online[10] but Ohio still does not offer online ballot requests, even though doing so would be permitted under existing law. Instead, voters must either print a ballot request form online, fill it out and return it by mail, or go to the elections office in person.

Dropboxes: Dropboxes provide a convenient and safe alternative to returning vote-by-mail ballots, avoiding postage and concerns about mail delivery problems. In all, 34 states either allow or require local elections officials to offer secure ballot drop boxes,[11] but availability varies greatly. Ohio is one of just five states that restrict the location of dropboxes to just one per county. Twenty-nine states permit dropboxes to be more broadly accessible. Indeed, at the onset of the pandemic, voting rights advocates sued to allow county Boards of Elections to stand up additional ballot drop boxes across their counties to better and more safely serve their communities. Despite a favorable court ruling, LaRose refused to lift his directive. The issue was dealt with when the Republicans passed HB458, which changed Ohio law to limit dropboxes to a single location in each county. Ohio's restrictive voting hours and lack of convenient ballot drop box locations could contribute to long lines at polling places on election day, another factor that may depress overall turnout.

9. (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2021)

10. (Movement Advancement Project, Online Absentee Ballot Application)

11. (Movement Advancement Project, Ballot Drop Box Policies & Availability)

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Paid postage: Many states and jurisdictions will prepay the postage for returning a ballot in the mail so that voters aren't required to obtain postage and to ensure mail delivery of ballots when insufficient postage was affixed. 19 states provide postage while 31 states and the District of Columbia do not. However, Ohio has gone even further, passing legislation to prohibit local Boards of Election from paying for postage on ballot return envelopes. In 2020 when the state sought to use $3 million in federal pandemic funds to prepay postage on mail ballots, legislative Republicans on the State Controlling Board blocked the expenditure (Buchanan, 2020), and lawmakers have introduced (but not yet passed) multiple bills to make the prohibition permanent.
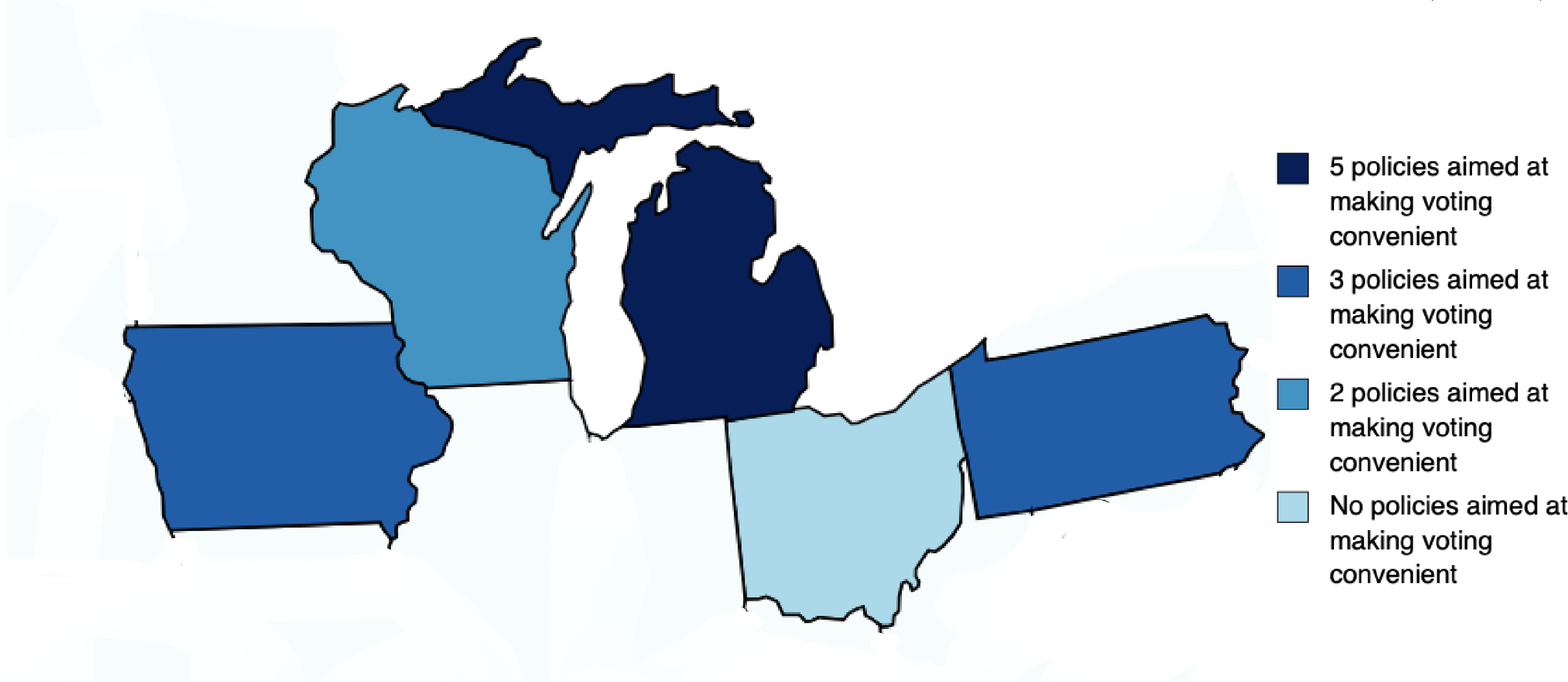
Comparison of Policies Aimed at Making Voting Convenient

Both recent legislation to shorten the absentee ballot request window and moving up the deadline to submit absentee ballots as well as the state's ban on prepaid postage on ballot return envelopes combine to make it more challenging for Ohio voters to participate in mail-in voting.

Midwest/ Neighbor State	Days of Early Voting (weekend days)	Allows more than 1 early vote location per county	Allows more than 1 ballot dropbox per county	Online absentee ballot request	Prepaid ballot postage	No Strict Photo ID Law	2018 Voter Turnout	2020 Voter Turnout	2022 Voter Turnout
Ohio	20 (2)	❌	❌	❌	❌	❌	50.9%	67.0%	47.1%
Iowa	20 (0)	✅	❌	❌	✅	✅	57.9%	72.9%	51.9%
Michigan	9 (4)	✅	✅	✅	✅	✅	57.7%	73.5%	58.9%
Pennsylvania	31 (0)	❌	✅	✅	❌	✅	51.7%	70.1%	54.4%
Wisconsin	12 (up to 4)	❌	❌	✅	✅	❌	61.4%	75.3%	59.8%

Three of the four midwestern battleground states we reviewed allow voters to request an absentee ballot online. Three of the four also include prepaid return postage for mail-in ballots. And Ohio is one of only 2 states out of the 5 we reviewed that has a strict photo ID law on the books. **All have higher voter turnout than Ohio.**

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Comparison of Policies Aimed at Making Voting Convenient (map)

Legend:
- 5 policies aimed at making voting convenient
- 3 policies aimed at making voting convenient
- 2 policies aimed at making voting convenient
- No policies aimed at making voting convenient

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Ohio vs. Battleground States With GOP-Controlled Legislatures

Even GOP-controlled or "red" states outside the midwest have adopted several of the voting reforms associated with high-turnout battleground states. In addition to online voter registration, Georgia offers AVR while North Carolina provides same-day registration. Both lead Ohio in voter turnout.

State	Days of Early Voting	Allows more than 1 early vote location per county	Allows more than 1 ballot dropbox per county	Online absentee ballot request	Prepaid ballot postage
Georgia	16 (1)	✅	✅	❌	❌
North Carolina	12	✅	❌	✅	❌
Ohio	20 (2)	❌	❌	❌	❌

State	Online Voter Registration	Automatic Voter Registration	Same-Day Registration	Voters cannot be purged *exclusively* for inactivity	2022 Voter Turnout
Georgia	✅	✅	❌	❌	51.9%
North Carolina	✅	❌	✅	❌	47.5%
Ohio	✅	❌	❌	❌	47.1%

While both of these state legislatures are controlled by Republicans, they offer more convenient early voting options than Ohio, demonstrating that **these policies are not partisan** and can lead to higher turnout.

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Key Findings

- **Low Turnout**: Ohio consistently ranks at the bottom in voter turnout compared to other midwestern battleground states. Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Iowa, and Michigan all saw higher participation in 2018, 2020, and 2022 General Elections. Ohio's low ranking could be a result of low registration rates, high rates of nonvoting among registered adults, or both.
- **Low Registration:** Among the five midwestern battleground states, Ohio has the least voter-friendly policies for getting and staying registered to vote. After enacting Automatic Voter Registration in 2019, Michigan now has a more people registered to vote than Ohio, with 6-11% higher turnout, despite having a smaller population. States with same-day voter registration: Iowa, Michigan, and Wisconsin experienced 5-11% higher turnout than Ohio.
- **Strictest Voter ID**: In 2023, Ohio became home to the country's strictest voter identification laws. Ohio is now one of only 10 states with a photo identification requirement. Just 17 states in the country absolutely require identification to vote; the remaining 33 states either do not require any identification to vote or offer various other options. Unlike Ohio, states like Iowa, Michigan, and Pennsylvania do not have a photo ID requirement and they experience 2-11% higher turnout.
- **Limited Early Vote Centers**: While Ohio restricts early voting locations to one per county regardless of population, Iowa and Michigan have no such restriction and experience 6-11% higher turnout.
- **Hurdles to Vote By Mail**: Ohio has banned online absentee applications, limited drop boxes, and does not provide postage to ensure voters' ballots are delivered. The other four midwestern battleground states offer at least one or all of those options to their voters, and see turnout 8-12% higher than Ohio. In 2020, states that had robust mail voting options had the highest (57%) voter turnout among young voters compared to other states.
- **Solutions are Not Partisan :** Battleground states with GOP-controlled legislatures outside the midwest have adopted several of the voting reforms associated with more progressive battleground states. In addition to online voter registration, Georgia offers AVR while North Carolina provides same-day registration. Both lead Ohio in voter turnout.

These findings underscore the urgent need for reform to combat Ohio's Missing Voters problem. Republicans and Democrats in these other states provide more convenient early voting options, demonstrate that these policies are not partisan and can lead to higher turnout. Ohio can work toward revitalizing its democratic process, offsetting recent turnout declines, and ensuring a more inclusive and representative electoral system.

Conclusions

A study by Tufts University found that states that offered a combination of 4 or more of the types of policies outlined here (AVR, SDR, online voter registration, no-excuse absentee voting) saw higher combined youth turnout in 2020, than those with only some or none of the policies.[12]

Despite abundant evidence that election modernization policies such as those outlined here can improve overall voter participation, **on metric after metric, Ohio stands in the minority of states that have more barriers to voting.** And rather than advancing pro-voter policies that would change that reality, for too long politicians have worked in overdrive to erect even more, often discriminatory, barriers to the ballot box.

Given the fact that Ohio is home to nearly 2 million unregistered and 700,000 inactive voters, **our examination underscores the need for Ohio to join other states in modernizing its election system with policies that will increase both registration and turnout rates.**

Doing so would inherently help boost civic engagement rates across the state, ultimately building a more people-powered democracy. The downstream impact of these policies is the ability for Ohioans to build a future where our government works for and serves all of us, where we can elect leaders who actually reflect our values, and where we can implement the policies that reflect the needs of our communities. Implementing the pro-voter policies we have identified in this report is necessary to build a stronger and more representative democracy in Ohio.

12. (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2021)

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