

Issue At A Glance:

Voting and Health

Voting is a critical tool in shaping health outcomes by influencing policies, resources, and leadership that directly impact individual and community health. This brief provides an overview of how voting can impact various aspects of health, including the social determinants of health as well as individual and population health.

Introduction

Healthy democracies, where voter participation is high, lead to healthier communities because elected officials are held accountable by voters. In the United States, voter turnout is low due to factors such as apathy, distrust in the election process, complex regulations, and voter suppression.¹

The connection between voting and health outcomes is complex and touches nearly every facet of daily life, from housing to safety, education, and health, emphasizing the significant impact that civic engagement can have on overall wellbeing.^{2,3} Voting plays a key role in shaping public health policies that impact essential areas, such as healthcare access, reproductive rights, gun violence, and climate change, among others. Furthermore, voting is critical for influencing policies that address the social determinants of health, including housing, education, and food security. By voting, citizens can support leaders and initiatives dedicated to dismantling systemic barriers to health and wellbeing.²

This brief provides an overview of how voting can impact various aspects of health, including the social determinants of health as well as individual and population health.

Key Voting Dates for the 2024 Election Season

- 9/17** National Voter Registration Day²
- 10/7** Early voting sites open in California⁴
- 10/7-10/11** National Voter Education Week²
- 10/21** Last day to register to vote for the general election in California⁴
- 10/29** National Vote Early Day²
- 11/5** Election Day – voting polls are open throughout California from 7 am to 8 pm⁴

Bringing wholeness to individuals and communities, the **Institute for Health Policy and Leadership (IHPL)** strives to integrate health policy research and education with leadership development. Our goal is to improve the health of our communities by building on our strong heritage of health promotion and disease prevention.

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Voting as a Social Determinant of Health

The social determinants of health (SDOH) refer to the social needs and environments that influence health. According to Healthy People 2030, the SDOH are the “conditions in the environments where people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality of life outcomes and risks.”⁵ Many critical health outcomes are shaped by these non-medical factors, including income, access to healthy food, transportation, and affordable and safe housing.^{6,7} Research shows that the SDOH account for nearly 55% of health outcomes, significantly impacting people’s health and wellbeing.⁷

Voting and health outcomes are closely linked: marginalized groups often face poorer health, and reduced access to voting correlates with worse health outcomes. This cycle can result in lower representation of the interest of the marginalized and those with chronic diseases, perpetuating poor health, reduced political influences, and policies that overlook the needs of the sick and marginalized.⁸ Furthermore, research reports a consistent association between voting and health: people who regularly vote tend to report better health outcomes compared with those who do not vote. Additionally, those who vote have better mental and physical health than non-voters.⁶

Therefore in 2022, the American Medical Association (AMA) passed a resolution declaring voting as a SDOH. The Support for Safe and Equitable Access to Voting (H-440.805) supports federal measures to ensure safe and equitable access to voting as a way to protect public health. These measures include extending polling hours, increasing polling locations, extending early voting periods, providing free or prepaid mail-in ballot postage, and improving resources for the US Postal Service.⁹

Health and Democracy Index

The Health and Democracy Index was created by Healthy Democracy Healthy People, a nonpartisan coalition of public health and civic engagement organizations dedicated to advancing civic participation and public health. This index presents a wide range of health indicators and links the indicators with voting policies, using the Cost of Voting Index. It is a tool designed to offer a health equity analysis of voting policy. Furthermore, it aims to enhance civic health and voter participation.¹⁰ The results of the index show that states with increased barriers to voting and consequently lower voter participation rates tend to have worse public health outcomes.^{11,12}



Impact of Voting on Individual and Population Health

Policy Influence on Public Health

Health policy significantly influences overall health and wellbeing, and voting significantly impacts health policy by determining which leaders and policies are adopted. Elected officials, shaped by the preferences of their constituents, make decisions on health-related issues such as funding for healthcare services, public health programs, and regulations affecting health and safety. Through voting, citizens can support candidates and policies that prioritize public health improvements, such as increased access to healthcare.

Ultimately, voting helps shape the legislative agenda and ensures that public health needs and priorities are addressed in policy decisions.¹³ Therefore, one of the goals of Healthy People 2030 is to enhance safety and health through laws and policies at local, state, territorial, and federal levels. Research has shown that evidence-based health policies are effective in preventing disease and promoting health.¹⁴

Mental Health and Civic Engagement

While society has made significant progress in mental health awareness and visibility over recent decades, it remains a significant social issue.¹⁵ Civic engagement, including voting, involves the various ways citizens can take part in community life to enhance conditions for others or influence the community's future direction.¹⁶ Studies have shown that active

participation in civic activities, including voting and volunteering, has been associated with better physical and mental health outcomes.^{15,17} A sense of connection and belonging, which can be fostered through engagement in the electoral process, significantly alters how individuals interact with their communities and is crucial for mental wellbeing.^{3,17} Furthermore, voting can positively affect mental health by fostering a sense of agency and empowerment, reducing the feeling of helplessness and ensuring that everyone's voice is heard.¹⁸

Health Equity, Representation, and Advocacy

Voting helps address health disparities by supporting policies that aim to reduce inequalities in healthcare access and quality among different population groups. By promoting voter engagement among marginalized communities, such as low-income individuals, those with disabilities, and people of color, it can lead to more equitable health policies and reduce preventable health disparities. Incorporating voter engagement into health equity strategies can allow nonprofits and private health organizations to drive positive change through a more representative government and more equitable health policies.¹⁹ Furthermore, voting allows individuals to elect representatives that align with their health needs and concerns, ensuring that health issues are more likely to be addressed at the policy level.²⁰

Conclusion

Individual health and the health of the democracy are closely related. Voting empowers individuals to influence the decisions that significantly affect their own health as well as the health of their families and communities. Achieving individual health and wellbeing depends on creating a society where everyone has the opportunity to be healthy.²¹ Voting can lead to better health policies that positively affect both individual and community wellbeing. Therefore, strengthening the democratic process and increasing civic and voter participation are crucial for advancing health and equity.

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Did you know?

Approximately 22 million out of California's 26.7 million eligible adults (82%) are registered to vote in 2024.²²



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