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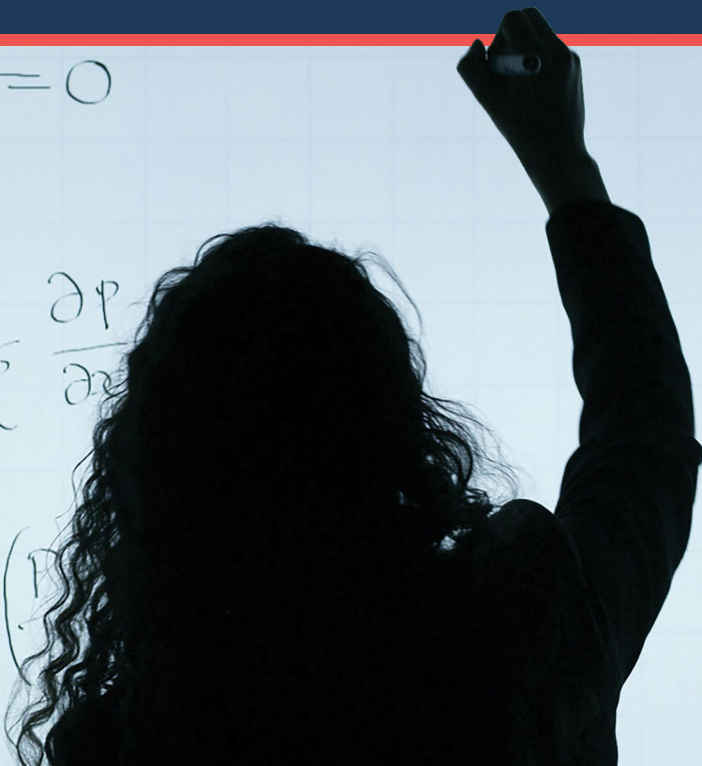
DOING THE MATH

How Voter ID Laws Affect Voter Turnout in Wisconsin

$$\frac{\partial p}{\partial t} + \frac{\partial}{\partial x}(pu) = 0$$

$$\frac{\partial u}{\partial t} + u \frac{\partial u}{\partial x} = -\frac{1}{\rho} \frac{\partial p}{\partial x}$$

$$\frac{\partial}{\partial t} \left(\frac{p}{\rho} \right) + u \frac{\partial}{\partial x} \left(\frac{p}{\rho} \right)$$





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Executive Summary

A proposed constitutional amendment to enshrine voter identification requirements in Wisconsin's constitution has revived longstanding debates about the potential impact of such laws. This study examines the impact of Wisconsin's voter ID law on voter turnout, with a particular focus on demographic groups that have been historically considered to be disproportionately affected. By analyzing historical voting patterns and conducting statistical analysis, this research seeks to determine whether the implementation of voter ID laws in Wisconsin has had a significant impact on voter participation. These findings will help inform the ongoing debate over the proposed amendment.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **No Evidence of Turnout Suppression.** The study finds no statistically significant negative impact of Wisconsin’s voter ID law on overall voter turnout. In fact, turnout has slightly increased since the law’s implementation, challenging claims that voter ID requirements lead to widespread disenfranchisement.
- **No Negative Effect on Minority Voters.** There is no evidence of a negative effect on turnout from the implementation of voter ID among non-white Wisconsinites.
- **No Negative Effect in Milwaukee and Dane Counties.** When analyzing these counties in isolation, no correlation was found between voter ID laws and changes in voter turnout over time.
- **External Factors Influence Turnout More Significantly.** Socioeconomic factors —such as poverty rates and education levels — have a stronger correlation with voter turnout than voter ID laws. The study found that higher poverty rates and lower education levels were associated with lower participation, independent of voter ID requirements.
- **Policy Implications:** The findings do not support the conclusion that voter ID laws are restricting the right to vote. This directly undercuts the argument that constitutionalizing voter ID in Wisconsin would lead to disenfranchisement.

INTRODUCTION

In the Spring 2025 election, Wisconsin will vote on a constitutional amendment to enshrine a voter identification requirement in the state constitution. Voter ID laws have been a point of contention across the United States, with proponents arguing that they ensure the integrity of elections, while critics contend that they disenfranchise vulnerable populations. This study seeks to explore the relationship between voter ID laws and turnout in Wisconsin, with particular attention to demographic groups that may be disproportionately affected. By analyzing historical voting patterns before and after the implementation of Wisconsin’s voter ID law, this research aims to contribute valuable insights into the ongoing debate over voter access and election security.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST VOTER ID

The most prominent argument against voter ID laws is that they can have a disenfranchising effect. For example, Milwaukee-area Representative Christine Sinicki claimed that the voter ID constitutional amendment was “about voter suppression.”¹ Others have made the argument that specific groups will be disadvantaged by such laws. A representative for Disability Rights Wisconsin recently argued, “A number of Wisconsin residents who have a disability don’t drive, they don’t have a driver’s license, they may not have other photo ID required to vote. Positioning the DMV as the primary place for Wisconsinites to get a photo ID increases barriers for a number of people.”² Still others have made the case that racial minorities will have their ability to vote reduced by ID requirements.³ But despite such strong claims, studies on the effects of voter ID have been far more muted in their findings of disenfranchisement—if any can be detected at all.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON VOTER ID

Nationally, there has been a significant amount of work on the relationship between voter ID laws and turnout. One recent comprehensive study covering elections from 1980 through 2020 found that turnout was not significantly different in states that implemented voter ID from what would have been expected had they not.⁴ While there are some studies that have found a modest relationship, an overall assessment of the research noted that the empirical evidence on voter ID laws “does not substantiate” the high political stakes often associated with such laws.⁵ Other research has shown that any minor negative turnout effects that do exist can be mitigated by informing voters about ID requirements.⁶

Another recent study was conducted by scholars from the University of Georgia and University of Oklahoma around Georgia’s 2022 elections.⁷ In 2021, the Georgia legislature passed SB 202, which included a number of provisions aimed at shoring up election integrity in the state, including new identification requirements for absentee voters.⁸ The controversial bill led to protests and even the removal of the MLB All-Star game from Atlanta. However, a survey of voters after the election found that more only 1.1% of respondents reported having any issue voting, and 90% of voters expressed faith that their vote was counted correctly.

One major study of voter ID in Wisconsin was conducted by Decrescenzo and Mayer (2017).⁹ This study surveyed 288 individuals who had not voted in the 2016 election according to voting records in Milwaukee and Dane county on their experiences during the 2016 election. When asked their main reason for not voting, 1.7% of respondents said they did not have an adequate ID, while 1.4% said that they were told at the polling place their ID was inadequate. This means a total of about 3.1% of their sample of 288 individuals blamed voter ID for their failure to vote.

There are several key problems with this approach. First, it is well known among political scientists that individuals have a tendency to lie to pollsters regarding whether they voted or not. One key explanation for this is what is known as social desirability bias.¹⁰ In general, people do not want to “look bad” to pollsters. As such, they may lie to the pollster about things that are perceived as socially undesirable, such as refraining from voting. Beyond misleading responses about voting, this bias has been used to explain the overperformance and underperformance of certain candidates in polls¹¹ and even things beyond political science, like the behavior of accountants.¹² Among those who acknowledge not voting, some may feel compelled to provide a more socially acceptable reason for their decision, rather than simply admitting a lack of interest or motivation. Instead of stating that they chose not to vote, they might cite external barriers—such as voter ID laws, long lines, or confusion about the process—as justification.

This possibility is further bolstered by the admission by the study authors that while 6.1 percent of respondents claimed that they did not vote because they lacked a valid ID, only about 3.0 percent actually did not have one.¹³ There are several other problems with this study, including a low response rate of 27.5 percent, which raises concerns about the representativeness of the sample.

In this paper, we take a different approach to examine aggregate turnout change at the state level over time and in key counties that have previously been argued to be most negatively affected by voter ID laws.

AGGREGATE DATA

Figure 1 represents voter turnout as a share of the state’s voting age population, based on data from the Department of Administration and U.S. Census Bureau.¹⁴ The redline represents the point at which voter ID laws were fully implemented, with the 2016 Presidential election in Wisconsin being the first conducted under the law. The figure shows there is no visible, directional relationship between the ID law and voting. Indeed, voting turnout went up after the law was implemented.

Figure 1. Turnout Percentage in Wisconsin Before & After Photo ID Requirement

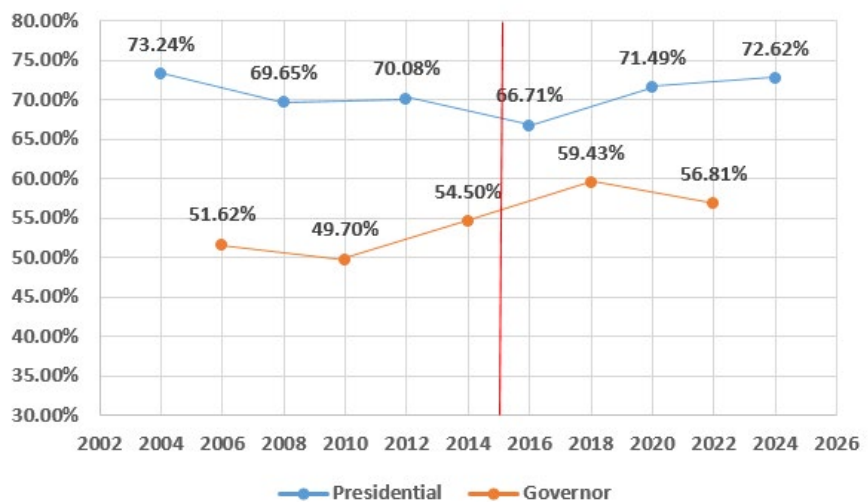
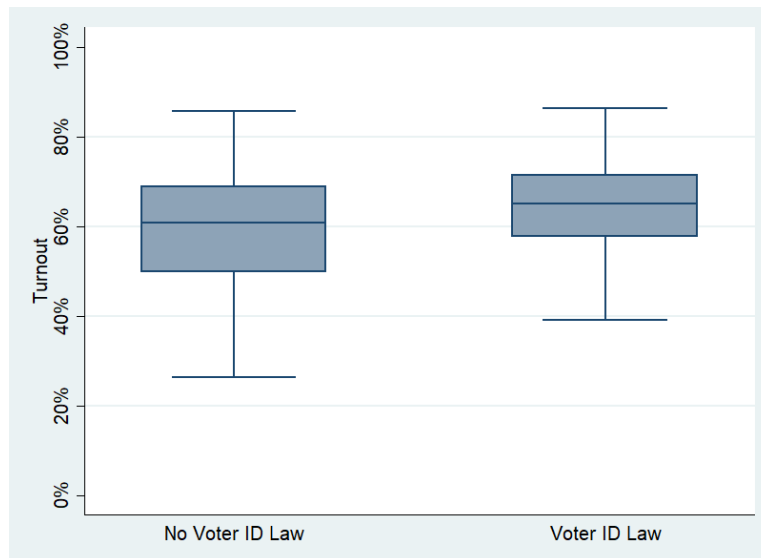


Figure 2 displays a boxplot of turnout in elections with and without Voter ID laws. The boxplot includes a confidence interval, which illustrates the distribution of turnout rates. Notably, we see that turnout was slightly higher and more consistent (indicated by a smaller box) after the implementation of the Voter ID law.

Figure 2. Turnout Elections Before and After Voter ID Implementation



But some meaningful changes can be hard to discern from aggregate data. Moreover, there could be impacts on the turnout of certain communities that do not show up in these analyses. In the following section, we conduct a statistical analysis of turnout data to look for any of these harder-to-find impacts.

METHODOLOGY

To determine if voter ID laws decreased turnout in Wisconsin, we used a statistical model to compare turnout before and after the voter ID law went into effect. Control variables included the poverty rate, education, and racial composition.

To measure whether the voter ID law has negatively impacted turnout, we compare turnout in Wisconsin over a twenty-year period, beginning with the 2004 Presidential election and ending with the 2024 Presidential election, while also including Gubernatorial elections in the years between. Turnout can be impacted by many factors beyond voter ID laws, so we included these key control variables to ensure we isolated the law's true impact. The reason behind each of those variables is described in Table 1.

Table 1. Control Variables for the Analysis

Factor	Why It Matters
Poverty Rate	Lower-income individuals may face more barriers to voting, such as transportation challenges or inflexible work schedules.
Education Level	Voters with higher education levels tend to participate in elections at higher rates.
Racial Composition	Some critics argue that voter ID laws disproportionately impact non-white voters, so we tested whether turnout changes were different in areas with more minority residents.
Election Year	Turnout is naturally higher in presidential election years and lower in midterm elections, so we accounted for this.

Our dependent variable is the percentage of the voting age population that voted in each of our elections of interest. From 2010 to 2024, estimates of that population were provided by the Wisconsin Department of Administration's Population and Housing Units Estimate.¹⁵ Estimates from prior to 2010 were no longer available, so a line was fitted from the 2000 census data on the voting-age population in each county to the 2010 census data on the same datapoint.

Formally, we estimate the following model for each county y in year c :

(eq 1)

$$Turnout_{yc} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 (VoterID_y) + \beta_2 (Poverty_{yc}) + \beta_3 (NonWhite_{yc}) + \beta_4 (Education_{yc}) + \beta_5 (Year)$$

If voter ID laws negatively impact turnout, we would expect a negative coefficient on β_1 . To examine whether this effect differs for non-white voters, we include an interaction term in Equation 2. An interaction term tests whether the effect of one factor (e.g., voter ID laws) is different for certain groups (e.g., non-white voters). In our model, we used an interaction term to see if voter ID laws influence minority turnout differently on white voters. This approach provides an estimate of the marginal effect, which quantifies how much a small change in one variable (like the presence of a voter ID law) impacts another variable (like voter turnout), while keeping other factors constant.

(eq 2)

$$Turnout_{yc} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 (VoterID_y) + \beta_2 (Poverty_{yc}) + \beta_3 (NonWhite_{yc}) + \beta_4 (Education_{yc}) + \beta_5 (VoterID_y * NonWhite_{yc}) + \beta_6 (Year)$$

In this equation, we are concerned with the marginal (combined) effect of voter ID, Non-White, and the interaction term. If that effect is negative, the claim that such laws have a stronger negative effect on minority voters would be supported.

We also include a smaller analysis of just Milwaukee and Dane counties, as these are the counties that are often argued to have the largest negative impacts from these laws.

RESULTS: STATEWIDE

In our statistical analysis, there was actually a positive relationship between voter ID laws and turnout. The presence of the voter ID law was associated with 1.5% higher voter turnout on average. In a second model, we tested whether voter ID laws had a distinct impact on non-white voters, as is often claimed. The results showed no significant effect in counties with high minority populations.

The results for an expanded look across Wisconsin from Equation 1 are included below in Table 2, which depicts a simplified analysis of the results. The full results are available in Appendix Table A1. It is worth noting that other variables work as expected. Taken together, a higher share of non-white voters has a significant, negative effect on turnout. This effect is strongly correlated with the rate of poverty— when excluding the non-white variable from the model, poverty has a significant, negative relationship with turnout. Also, the full results in Appendix 1 show that the negative coefficients on turnout are larger in the non-Presidential years (2006, 2010, 2014, 2018, 2022) than in the Presidential years, relative to the baseline 2024 turnout.

Table 2: Voter ID & Turnout: Statewide

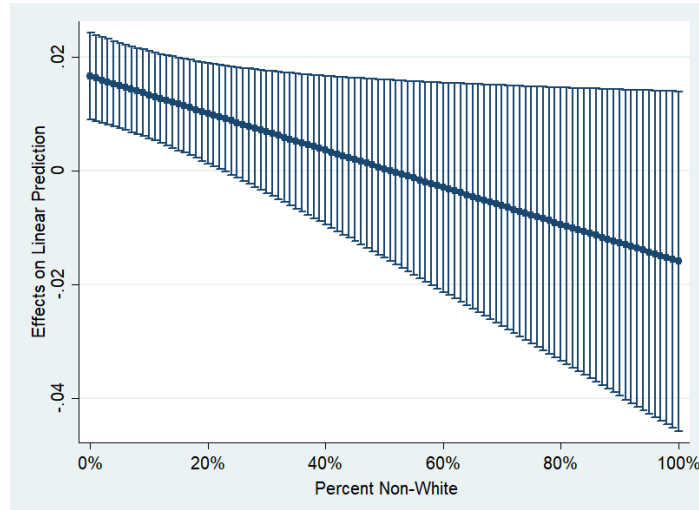
Factor	Effect on Turnout	Statistically Significant?
Voter ID Law (Eq 1)	+1.5%	Yes
Education Level (Eq 1)	Higher education → Higher turnout	Yes
Poverty Rate (Eq 1)	Higher poverty → Lower turnout	Yes
Interaction between Non-White & Voter ID Law (Eq 2)	Positive at low levels of non-white, insignificant at high levels of non-white	N/A

On our variable of interest, recall that a negative coefficient would be evidence that voter ID negatively affected turnout. However, we see the opposite. Since the implementation of voter ID, turnout in Wisconsin has increased by about 1.5% on average after controlling for other factors.

This is an interesting result. While it is likely too large of a leap to say voter ID has increased turnout due to the correlational nature of our analysis, it seems that there is no negative relationship.

In the second equation, we looked for a negative relationship between voter ID and turnout that is only present with large numbers of minority voters in a county. This analysis is depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Marginal Effect of Voter ID as Racial Composition Changes



At low levels of non-white residents, we observe a positive relationship between voter ID and turnout. As the share of non-white residents increases, the positive relationship decreases. However, the confidence interval on this relationship always crosses 0—and indeed gets extremely wide as we move up to a hypothetical 100% non-white county. In other words, the results show no negative effect on turnout for minorities, and a slightly positive relationship in the counties with the lowest number of minority residents.

RESULTS: MILWAUKEE AND DANE

Because Milwaukee and Dane county are often discussed as focal points for the potential harm of voter ID laws, we examined the change in voting in those counties specifically before and after voter ID. There was no statistically significant relationship found.

Table 3 examines turnout over time in just Milwaukee and Dane counties. The full results are presented in Appendix Table A2. With only two cities and eleven elections we have 22 total datapoints, it would be challenging to add more variables to the model. However, this is less important when looking at a small subset of counties. In this model, while the coefficient on voter ID is negative, it is statistically insignificant. This means that any relationship between voter ID laws and turnout cannot be differentiated from no relationship at all based on this analysis.

Table 3. Voter ID & Turnout: Milwaukee & Dane County

Factor	Effect on Turnout	Statistically Significant?
Voter ID Law (Eq 1)	-4.4%	No

Conclusion

This paper aimed to answer the question of whether voter ID law in Wisconsin has had negatively impacted turnout—either in general or among minority voters. This paper does not support a negative impact. Indeed, Voter ID had a positive relationship to turnout in our data. This could be due to an increase in confidence that elections are safe and secure, or simply because elections since the passage of the law have garnered more public interest.

Some might also argue that turnout increased despite voter ID laws due to elections that seem more important to the general public or increased get-out-the-vote efforts. This paper cannot fully address those claims. But those potential mitigating factors are an argument in favor of voter ID laws: if we can increase faith in elections by having these laws while also undertaking mitigation efforts to eliminate negative turnout effects, it seems like a win-win.

While concerns about voter suppression exist and are important to consider, they should be tested empirically rather than assumed. Researching the effects of voter ID laws is undoubtedly hard because any impacts will be on the margins. But when it comes to whether the state constitution should be amended to enshrine voter ID laws, this research is compelling evidence to counter the narrative that such provisions are discriminatory or result in disenfranchisement.

Appendix A1. Turnout over Time and Voter ID Law

VARIABLES	(1) Turnout	(2) Turnout
Voter ID Law	0.0151*** (0.00384)	0.0166*** (0.00389)
Non-White	-0.175*** (0.0427)	-0.154*** (0.0443)
Voter ID * Non-White	--	-0.0325** (0.0155)
Educational Attainment	0.267*** (0.0551)	0.254*** (0.0553)
Poverty Rate	-0.138* (0.0761)	-0.163** (0.0771)
Population (10,000s)	0.000278 (0.000333)	0.000291 (0.000334)
2006	-0.213*** (0.00346)	-0.213*** (0.00344)
2008	-0.0456*** (0.00346)	-0.0456*** (0.00344)
2010	-0.234*** (0.00396)	-0.235*** (0.00397)
2012	-0.0395*** (0.00401)	-0.0404*** (0.00402)
2014	-0.186*** (0.00401)	-0.187*** (0.00402)
2016	-0.0749*** (0.00387)	-0.0751*** (0.00386)
2018	-0.154*** (0.00387)	-0.155*** (0.00386)
2020	-0.0206*** (0.00343)	-0.0206*** (0.00342)
2022	-0.163*** (0.00343)	-0.163*** (0.00342)
Constant	0.701*** (0.0141)	0.706*** (0.0142)
Observations	789	789
Number of counties	72	72

Standard errors in parentheses
 *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table A2. Voter ID and Turnout in Milwaukee and Dane Counties

VARIABLES	(1) Turnout
Voter ID	-0.0440 (0.0898)
2006	-0.215** (0.0898)
2008	-0.0285 (0.0898)
2010	-0.215** (0.0898)
2012	-0.00550 (0.0898)
2014	-0.169* (0.0898)
2016	-0.0155 (0.0898)
2018	-0.0755 (0.0898)
2020	0.00350 (0.0898)
2022	-0.138 (0.0898)
Constant	0.743*** (0.0635)
Observations	22
R-squared	0.615

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Endnotes

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- 2 GOP lawmakers move quickly on effort to enshrine Wisconsin's voter ID law - WPR.
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- 8 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/georgia-election-changes-signed-into-law-by-governor-11616715033>
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<https://www.nationalreview.com/2017/09/wisconsin-voter-id-study-flawed-unreliable/>
- 14 DOA provided estimates from 2010 onward. The voting age population prior to 2010 was estimated by comparing the 2000 and 2010 census numbers and creating an evenly-spaced increase or decrease in each election. For instance, if there were 10 voters in 2000 and 20 voters in 2010, we would have 14 voters in 2004, 16 in 2006, and 18 in 2008.
- 15 DOA Population and Housing Unit Estimates. https://doa.wi.gov/Pages/LocalGovtsGrants/Population_Estimates.aspx



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