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## Campus voting access not making the grade

By: [Ben Adler](#)

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If you're a candidate counting on those enthusiastic college voters, don't. For some college students, getting to the ballot box can be as difficult as registering in that Nobel laureate's honors seminar.

Turnout on college campuses has been depressed by some simple but strong barriers. Some students are unable to register where they attend school. Others encounter long lines or are likely to have their right to vote challenged. Still others face identification requirements they cannot meet or are given confusing and sometimes intimidating information.

"Many of the problems that can prevent anyone from voting fall disproportionately hard on students," says voting rights expert Tova Andrea Wang, Democracy Fellow at The Century Foundation, a progressive institution.

Some of these problems can be resolved in time for the 2008 elections. But for others, it may already be too late.

Voters aged 18-29 leaned Democratic in 2004 and 2006, according to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. Two Democratic presidential candidates who might benefit from a high youth turnout — Sens. Barack Obama of Illinois and Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York — are pushing measures to eliminate voting barriers, including some that fall hardest on students. And the Supreme Court recently agreed to hear a challenge to Indiana's 2005 law that requires voters to present government-issued photo identification at the voting booth.

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Voter ID laws are likely to disenfranchise young people, said Jonah Goldman, director of the National Campaign for Fair Elections at the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. In Milwaukee County, 74 percent of African-Americans and 66 percent of Hispanics aged 18-24 did not have a valid driver's license — the most common form of voter ID — according to [a study by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee](#).

These laws often require that the ID shows that the voter's street address and voter registration match. That

would stop students who want to vote on campus but whose driver's licenses show their hometown address.

But advocates of voter ID laws say they help prevent fraud and don't disenfranchise anyone. States that have passed such requirements have seen people simply obtain the ID they need to vote, said David Muhlhausen, senior policy analyst at the conservative Heritage Foundation in Washington.

He argues that young people who do not get an ID in order to vote presumably would not have voted anyway. "People respond to incentives," Muhlhausen said. "They're going to get an ID because they want to buy a case of beer. It's a question of priorities."

Goldman hopes that in considering the Indiana case, the Supreme Court "will honor the principle it has held for generations that there is a right to vote and there must be protections." But he worries that any ruling made between the primaries and the general election could create chaos at the local level as states rush to implement it.

The issue of out-of-state students voting from campus came to a head in Maine earlier this year, when Republican state lawmaker L. Gary Knight proposed legislation that would have made it illegal to register to vote using a dorm as one's primary address. Knight contends this is necessary to prevent the political domination of college towns by transient college students.

Students rallied to fight the bill, led by Henry Beck, a junior at Colby College in Waterville, Maine, his hometown, where he also serves on the city council. Noting that over 90 percent of Colby's students come from out of state, Beck, a Democrat, argued that requiring those students to vote absentee "put an extra burden on one part of the community."

The student opposition worked: The bill was defeated and Knight has no plans to reintroduce it.

Another problem for some student voters is long lines at the polls. At Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, students waited up to 13 hours to vote in 2004. Election officials had not allotted enough machines for the surge in turnout.

Officials there addressed the problem in time for the 2006 elections, but students at the University of Maryland in College Park had a similar experience last year. Lines at the student union, where most students vote, were several hours long. Polling places had to remain open until 10 p.m. to accommodate all those in line — even though many races, including the gubernatorial election, had already been called.

"Undoubtedly we lost people" to the long wait, said student body president Andrew

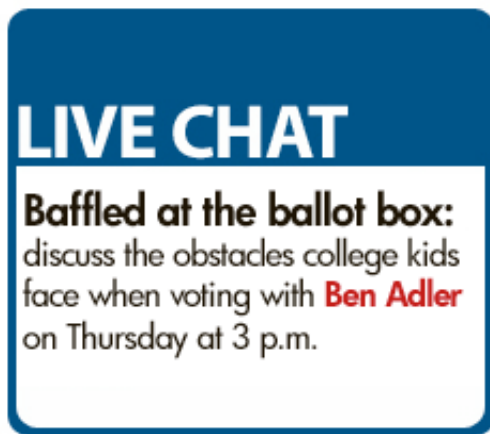
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Friedson. He blames a process that sets the number of voting machines before the registration deadline. On college campuses, where students arrive in September and may not register until the last minute, it can result in having too few voting machines.

Student leaders are pushing a state bill to make more machines available on campuses. It would also give each student a fixed in-state address for the purpose of voting. It remains under consideration by Maryland state lawmakers.

Another source of student disenfranchisement is the distribution of misleading information. For example, in 2004, a local district attorney was reported to have told some students at Prairie View A&M University, a historically black university near Houston, they were not eligible to vote in the county.



Obama has since introduced a bill to criminalize such practices. It passed the full House and Senate Judiciary Committee. Clinton, meanwhile, has proposed an electoral reform package that, among other things, would require states to mail registration forms to every 18-year-old and would create a federal holiday for Election Day. (The measure has been referred to the Senate Rules Committee.)

Clinton's bill would also require states to adopt Election Day registration — something both its supporters and opponents say increases youth voter

turnout.

Dan Berman, a member of the Bates College Republicans in Maine, opposes Election Day registration because “it makes the student population very attractive to [formal] get-out-the-vote efforts. [Voter turnout volunteers] aren't sufficiently careful about making sure everyone didn't vote absentee somewhere else.”

Other barriers to student voter turnout don't necessarily invite Washington solutions. In Iowa, for example, few college students participate in the caucuses because they require a commitment of several hours in the evening and do not allow absentee voting.

But Iowans are about as likely to give up their cherished caucus traditions as they are to turn against ethanol.

Still, some see proof of a good thing in the student-led fights against voting barriers. “In many ways, it's a story of inspiration,” says Matthew Segal, a senior at Kenyon College who founded the Student Association for Voter Empowerment after witnessing the long lines there in the 2004 elections.

Those lines, he said, showed “a lot of students persevering to verify their commitment to

democracy.”

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