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Year in School: Senior
Faculty Mentor: Dr. James Endersby, Political Science
Funding Source: Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program

Help! I've Voted But I Can't Get Up! Competency, Electoral Participation, and Assisted Care Living

Voting rights are guaranteed for all American citizens, but a tacit assumption is that citizens have the cognitive ability to make a choice and cast a ballot. Not all citizens, however, have such mental capabilities. Senior citizens have comparatively high levels of voter turnout, yet this age group also contains the largest concentration of citizens with impaired cognitive ability. Following the experience of Florida's tabulation of the 2000 presidential election outcome, health care professionals established a small but informative literature regarding competency and turnout among the elderly and those with dementia. Social scientists, however, have essentially ignored the issue of competency and electoral participation. As many older citizens rely on absentee ballots and assisted voting, the potential for abuse of proxy voting looms large. Issues relevant to mental competency and suffrage rights are important for a range of topics including constitutional scholarship and election administration. This paper 1) discusses theoretical and legal issues relevant to senior citizen voting, such as competency, 2) weighs the opportunities for abuse and corruption and the rights of seniors, and 3) analyzes turnout of seniors in nursing homes/assisted care facilities against other precincts and data on rates of senior participation.