

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE YOUTH VOTE: Fostering the Next Generation of Democracy

THE YOUTH VOTE IN THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

In 2008 an estimated 22 million young people (ages 18-29) voted in the national election. This was the third highest turnout of young people since the voting age was lowered to 18 [in 1971] and was one of the highest turnouts of young people ever recorded. Two million more people under the age of 30 voted in 2008 than in 2004.¹ While young voters typically represent the smallest percentage of votes in an election, they are a major subset of the electorate. Young people represent 24% of the eligible voting population. As a result, their voting power (hereinafter referred to collectively as the "youth vote") is significant in terms of its potential impact on an election. The increased youth turnout in the 2008 election has inspired many researchers and advocates to explore the reasons for

this increase and ways to further youth voting and engagement in future elections. A confluence of factors such as extensive voter outreach measures, civic education and increased public interest are important contributors to increasing voter turnout.

Voter turnout among young people in 2008 can be analyzed by different factors such as race, gender and education. Looking at the youth vote through these lenses reveals some interesting trends. Young women aged 18 to 29 were more likely than men to vote in 2008. Fifty-eight percent of African American youth voted in 2008, which was the highest turnout of any minority group since 1972. Also, young people with college experience were twice as likely to vote as those without college experience, a trend that has remained relatively constant over time.¹ Political

analysts have suggested that the youth vote was crucial to President Obama's victory. Although youth voter turnout rose to 51% in 2008, it still lagged behind the turnout of voters who were over 30 years old. Young people may represent 24% of the eligible voting population, but their votes in the 2008 election only represented 9.3% of the electorate. In most states, voter turnout among people 30 and older was at least ten percentage points above voters aged 18 to 29 years old.¹

The results of the 2008 election highlight the need to understand how and why youth vote, and how to increase youth participation in the democratic process. The youth vote is not homogenous. Not all young people who voted in 2008 voted for Obama, and how they voted

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varied by gender, race, education and other demographics. A recent survey of registered youth voters from the Garfield Institute for Public Leadership at Hiram College reveals some interesting findings about how they are currently thinking about politics and the upcoming national elections.² The Democratic Party is viewed favorably by 56% of registered youth voters surveyed and the Republican Party is viewed favorably by 42% of youth voters. In the current presidential race, at the time of publication, President Obama leads former Governor Romney by 13 points among youth voters, but this is much lower than Obama's performance in 2008, when he beat John McCain by 33% among voters under 30. Looking back at the past four years, only 57% of young voters surveyed said that Obama met their expectations. Looking forward, young people see the Democratic Party as the party that best understands the problems of people under 30 and will make education affordable. However, youth voters surveyed also think that the Republican Party is more capable of protecting the economy and America's ability to compete with other countries.² These results highlight some of the differences in how youth voters are currently thinking about American politics.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AS CONTEXT FOR YOUTH VOTING

Civic engagement refers to all the ways we participate in our society by identifying and understanding common problems in our communities, nation and world.³ It is not limited to voting but encompasses a variety of other activities such as volunteering and organizational involvement. Civic engagement is core to a democracy as it promotes the involvement of people impacted by public policies in the democratic process and creates opportunities for system and political accountability.

As future public leaders, civic engagement is especially valuable for young people, even if they are not old enough to vote. Developmentally, their experiences in adolescence shape their attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviors in regards to politics and civic engagement.^{3,4,5} Moreover, because young voters make up a large percentage of the eligible voting population, engaging them early on in their community may encourage further civic involvement.

Research suggests that today's college educated Millennial generation (born after 1985) is more engaged than Generation X (born between 1965 and 1985).⁶ While Millennials are more engaged in service on the local level, they have mixed feelings about formal politics and dislike what they view as a polarized debate with little room

for compromise. Again, youth voters should not be seen as a uniform group, as they bring different life experiences and differing levels of civic engagement. Very recent research from the PEW Center shows that youth engagement in and registration for the 2012 election has fallen among both Republicans and Democrats.⁷ Encouraging civic engagement in adolescence can be important to fostering adolescents' future participation and interest in the democratic process. This is an area that merits further study.

ADOLESCENCE: A VITAL PERIOD FOR FOSTERING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Although the youth vote is generally characterized as voting among people aged 18 to 29 years old, there is no age requirement for becoming a contributing member of society. As such, civic engagement offers a broader framework to consider the kinds of factors that may contribute to voting when young people become eligible at age 18. Adolescence is an especially important time for social, moral and identity development, all of which are relevant in the development of a civically engaged individual. The ages between 16 to 24 provide a unique window for shaping a young person's political and civic engagement and identities.⁸ Studies have shown that non-participation can

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perpetuate a cycle of civic exclusion. If young people do not vote it is likely that their children will neither vote nor be otherwise civically engaged.^{3,5} Adolescence is a dynamic phase for forming positive civic and voting habits. As adolescents develop a deeper appreciation of the world around them, they can become more aware of ways they might have a positive impact in their neighborhood, school, faith-based or other kind of community. Not only is adolescence a ripe time for fostering civic engagement, but civic engagement can contribute to overall youth development as well.

The developmental concept of self efficacy sheds light on how youth can become more civically engaged.⁹ Self efficacy is the confidence in one's ability to control and execute behaviors that are required to address current and future situations. Participating in a successful public

demonstration is one example of how self efficacy can lead young people to have greater civic and political engagement. If youth see positive outcomes from their behaviors they may be more likely to become engaged again in the future. Researchers suggest that one reason why the youth voter turnout is historically low may be because young voters believe that their vote will not contribute to real change. Thus, demonstrating the connection between personal action and tangible results can strengthen self efficacy and potentially encourage civic activity among adolescents.

Empirical studies have shown that specific kinds of civic engagement, such as service learning, relate positively to later civic engagement and foster feelings of personal efficacy.¹⁰ Service learning refers to a specific style of classroom engagement that mixes community service with traditional classroom learning. Research on service learning programs

on college campuses has shown that students feel a greater sense of personal efficacy, increased awareness of world problems, heightened awareness of their personal values and a heightened sense of civic responsibility after completing a service learning course.¹⁰ However, there is a lack of empirical research showing that these positive outcomes extend to actual voting behaviors.

Social media and the Internet have also been important tools for involving adolescents. Non-profits, grassroots organizations, political campaigns and even young people themselves, have used the Internet in creative and powerful ways to educate, mobilize, fund raise and civically engage the youth vote. While a full discussion of this literature is outside the scope of this brief, social media plays a key role in understanding the nature of youth engagement in the political process.¹¹

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INEQUALITY AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

The youth vote is a diverse group with varying levels of civic engagement. Examining these differences in voter turnout reveals a variety of disparities in political participation. Every year there are differences in voter turnout among youth subgroups such as college educated versus non-college educated voters and minority versus white voters. While political organizations and campaigns have spent considerable time and money on college campuses to get youth to vote, fewer resources have been focused on encouraging low-income and non-college bound youth to vote. Low income and non-college bound youth lag behind in levels of civic engagement. Research suggests that 37% of non-college youth are completely disconnected from civic life.³ Increases in voting and volunteering are usually the result of young people from higher-income communities and college bound youth getting involved. As the length of adolescence has lengthened, some researchers suggest that college has become the central institution for civically engaging the younger generation.³ Thus, non-college bound youth lack access to institutions and opportunities that would encourage civic participation.

Traditionally, civic engagement of people who did not go to college was tracked through their participation in church groups, unions and social movements. However, participation in these institutions has declined dramatically.⁴ Between the 1970s and the 2000s, self reports of church attendance, union membership and participation in community groups fell by 5 to 15 percent.⁴ Researchers now suggest that the military and programs such as AmeriCorps may represent the most effective ways to engage low income and non-college bound youth.⁴ Even so,

increasing involvement in civic programs is not the same as getting young people to register and turnout to vote. Indeed, research results are mixed; some results indicate that there is not necessarily a relationship between participation in these groups and increased voting, while others do demonstrate a correlation.^{12,13}

Addressing the disparity in political participation among youth voters, and engaging low income and non-college bound youth is an important civic matter for a variety of reasons. Low income communities may lack the resources necessary to provide or promote opportunities for civic engagement. For example, schools in low income neighborhoods are less likely to offer school based civic learning programs and opportunities.¹⁴ As was mentioned, research has shown that non-participation in civic institutions can perpetuate a cycle of civic exclusion. Encouraging children to vote and modeling civic engagement behaviors can address this cycle. Moreover, non-participation among certain groups of voters indicates that our democracy is not a truly representative democracy. Historically, these disadvantaged groups have become highly engaged citizens when afforded the same opportunities as other groups. Some researchers believe that this change in engagement is often due to increased access to institutions and opportunities for civic engagement. The inequality that is evident in the youth voter demographics has implications for practice and policy efforts to increase the political and civic engagement of these groups.⁵

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YOUTH VOTE ORGANIZATIONS

- 1 **Rock the Vote:** Rock the Vote is a private organization that uses music, popular culture, new technologies and grassroots efforts to register youth voters and encourage them to participate in all elections. www.rockthevote.com
- 2 **Kids Voting USA:** Kids Voting USA is an organization that partners with schools and election officials to provide students in kindergarten through high school with access to a civic education. The program uses classroom instruction, family dialogue, and a mock election to promote long term civic engagement. www.kidsvotingusa.org
- 3 **Project Vote:** Project Vote is a non-profit organization that works to educate and mobilize low-income, minority, youth and other marginalized voters. They have developed innovative voter registration programs, which have helped them to register over 5.6 million voters. www.projectvote.org
- 4 **Black Youth Project:** The Black Youth Project works to educate, mobilize, and provide a voice for black youth as it relates to their civic engagement. www.blackyouthproject.com

POLICY & PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

For the Youth Vote

There are a number of factors that can influence youth voting habits. Young people who are personally contacted through canvassing or other voter mobilization techniques are more likely to register and subsequently vote.¹⁵ In 2008, 84% of registered youth voters actually voted.¹⁶ Civic education, providing youth with access to information about political candidates and ease of access to polling stations also impact voting habits.¹⁶ The following are examples of policies and programs that foster civic engagement and encourage adolescents to vote.

ENHANCING ACCESS TO CIVIC EDUCATION

Interest in civic education has increased recently after studies have shown that while schools have the potential to increase civic development, most could do more to promote civic engagement.¹⁴ Kids Voting USA is an example of a program aimed at providing civic education to students in grades K-12. The education initiative includes a mix of classroom materials and experiential learning that allows children to vote in a mock election. Independent research has shown that the Kids Voting educational approach positively impacts the long-term civic engagement of young people.¹⁷ Additionally, this program has been shown to effectively narrow the civic education gap among low income and minority students. Notably, Kids Voting USA increases civic engagement among parents as well, by encouraging discussion and conversation about the democratic process at home.

While many civic education initiatives are run by private organizations, there have been some public efforts to increase access to education and information about civic duties. AmeriCorps is a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service, which is an independent agency of the federal government. AmeriCorps aims to strengthen communities and increase civic engagement through service and volunteering. Assessments demonstrate the program's long-term impact on the civic engagement of its volunteers, particularly in engaging low income and

minority youth. Participants are more likely to continue volunteering and have careers in public service after their year of service is completed.¹⁸ Other public initiatives to increase civic engagement include the Youth Corps Act of 2012, a bill sponsored by Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown, which aims to provide a grant to create a Youth Corps program that would provide youth ages 16 to 24 with education and training to instill a sense of civic engagement and to build career skills.

NONPARTISAN VOTER REGISTRATION AND VOTING EFFORTS

When young voters receive information about candidates and voter registration, they are more likely to vote.¹⁶ There are a range of national organizations and programs, such as the Rock the Vote campaign, that are focused on showing people how to register to vote and encouraging them to participate in elections. In Ohio, the Grads Vote Ohio program, run by the Secretary of State's office, aims to increase the number of 18 year olds who are registered to vote. This program provides graduating high school seniors with information about how to register and become an active Ohio voter.¹⁹ Locally in Cuyahoga County, the Board of Elections has a community outreach effort that organizes student registration drives at local colleges to encourage college students to register and vote.

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The setting of the voting age itself is also an important factor in understanding the youth vote. In 1971, the Twenty-Sixth Amendment was passed, which lowered the voting age from 21 to 18. This was in part a response to Vietnam War protests, which argued that soldiers who were old enough to fight should be old enough to vote. In some states, such as Ohio, young people who are under 18 can register to vote and vote in a primary if their birthday falls between the primary and the general election. Lowering the voting age is a topic of both national and international interest. Most countries have a voting age of 18, but Australia, Scotland and Brazil are a few of the countries that have a voting age of 16.²⁰ Lowering the US voting age to 16 has become a campaign topic for organizations such as the National Youth Rights Association. The NYRA supports local and state legislative efforts to lower the voting age. Supporters of lowering the voting age argue it is fair for a number of reasons, including because working youth pay taxes and because all young people, whether working, not working or emancipated, are impacted by public laws, funding and policies.²⁰

IMPROVING VOTING ACCESS: BALLOTS, HOURS, AND ID LAWS

Policies that restrict or increase access to polling stations can have implications for how and when youth vote. In 2012, laws concerning voting hours and the need for photo identification (IDs) have become an important point of debate. This past year 41 states have introduced legislation aimed at restricting voter rights.²¹ Nineteen states have successfully passed legislation to curtail registration or restrict voting hours.²¹ However, many of these laws are being contested in the courts. In August of this year, a federal judge ordered that early voting the weekend prior to the election be restored in Ohio, after the Secretary of State removed all night and weekend hours for the early voting period.²² Seventeen states have also enacted voter ID laws, which now require a person to show photo identification when they vote.²¹ Debates have centered on the constitutionality

of these laws and the potential for disproportionately disenfranchising minority and low-income voters. The Black Youth Project, an organization that supports minority civic engagement, issued a report suggesting that voter ID laws will disenfranchise minority youth, because minorities are less likely than their white counterparts to have a government issued ID.²³ Many courts have agreed that voter ID laws are discriminatory, and have ruled against the new laws.

State voter laws can also have a positive affect on youth voting. For instance, seven out of the top ten youth turnout states had laws that allowed for Election day registration, voting by mail and/or did not require registration to vote.²⁴ In 2008, on average, 59% of youth voted in states with Election Day registration, which is nine percentage points above youth who lived in a state without such laws.²⁴ While some policies restrict youth voter turnout, others, such as election day registration, can have an important positive impact on the youth vote.

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