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Enfranchising America's Youth

by Erin Ferns Lee

Today's youth electorate is more diverse than ever. In the 21st century, young people, especially historically underrepresented youth of color, have turned out to vote at increased rates, even while overall turnout remained relatively steady.

The encouraging voter turnout of young people in 2008 debunked the myth of "apathetic" young Americans. It showed that young people are eager and willing to participate in the democratic process, so long as the voting system provides access and their political interests are heard. That promising narrative took a turn for the worse in 2012, however, when voter participation among young people dropped for the first time since the turn of the century.

In the years since the 2008 election, a few significant events seem to have affected turnout among young voters. Voting rights have been under attack, and the passage of regressive election laws contributed to the long lines voters endured in 2012. The recent recession also harshly affected Millenials' economic stability and likely their political stamina.

Although there was a dip in youth participation overall, turnout among Black youth is on the rise. In 2012, young, Black voters still voted at a rate higher than the youth electorate in general and, surprisingly, at rates higher than white youth, who historically make up the majority of the young electorate. This increasingly diverse youth electorate may have many challenges to their right to vote ahead of them, however. In 2013, the United States Supreme Court gutted a key provision of the Voting Rights Act, which protected vulnerable voters against discriminatory voting practices across the nation.

In this paper we review the voting rates of 18- to 29-year-old citizens in recent elections, and examine laws that hinder or facilitate participation by young, non-college attending voters. Finally, we provide policy recommendations for improving voter registration and ballot access for all American youth.

The Youth Electorate in Recent Elections

About 45 percent of young people aged 18-29 voted in the 2012 presidential election, a decline of six percentage points since 2008.[1] Interestingly, turnout of the general electorate also declined by six points.[2] Although historically underrepresented young, Black voters have increasingly turned out to vote in recent years, voter participation of young people overall continues to lag behind that of the general electorate by 13 percentage points. The youth electorate's disproportionately lower participation rates can be attributed to the same social and economic factors that affect the general electorate, which, since 2008, have been amplified by the recession and the aggressive partisan attack on voting rights.

Bias within the Youth Electorate

Before the 2008 election, young white citizens were far more likely to register to vote and turn out to vote than young citizens of color. This narrative began to change in 2008 when young people identifying as Black and Latino turned out to vote in unprecedented numbers—though still not at the rates of young whites.

The trend of a more racially and ethnically diverse youth electorate held in 2012, when 54 percent of young Black voters turned out to vote, a rate historically notable for being both higher than young whites (46 percent) and higher than the youth electorate in general (45 percent).[3] Young Latino and Asian voters, however, continue to lag behind the youth electorate in general by as much as six percentage points. Despite the shifting voting trends among young Black voters, voter registration rates are still highest among young white citizens.[4]

While the racial and ethnic composition of the youth electorate is changing, other disparities remain the same. The youth electorate is disproportionately composed of college-educated citizens. About 60 percent of the 46 million voting eligible Americans between ages 18 and 29 have college experience, yet they represent 71 percent of young voters.[5] Young citizens who do not have college experience are underrepresented, comprising 40 percent of young citizens in general, but only 29 percent of young voters. These young voting-eligible citizens tend to be Black or Latino while young whites (who traditionally have higher voter registration and turnout rates) are most likely to have college experience.

The disparities in registration rates and voting rates within the youth electorate, despite increasing political interest, may be the result of multiple structural factors. Most prominent are the election policies that may or may not work to engage all young citizens—including those who do not attend college—in the democratic process.

Challenges to the Franchise for Youth

Restrictive voting laws and high mobility rates create more hurdles to voting for young people. Recently, voting restrictions, such as reduced early voting hours, have had great legislative success and have proven to negatively affect voters' experiences. A recent study by Advancement Project and Ourtime.org suggests that the long lines in 2012 may deter future voter participation among young people.[6]

Many of the same barriers that minority and low-income voters face at the polls also disproportionately affect young voters. Voter participation in all three groups appears to be affected by high geographic mobility rates, which in turn affect how frequently voters must update their voter registration information and identification. The recent recession, for example, disproportionately affects young people's economic stability, making them more vulnerable to voting policies like voter ID, which make long-term residency and disposable income factors in voting.

Between 2012 and 2013, 18-29-year-olds changed residences at a rate of 29 percent, 16 percentage points higher than that of the general population, according to November 2013 U.S. Census data.[7] Like other highly mobile groups, young people are more susceptible to being disenfranchised by strict voter identification requirements, excessively long lines on Election Day, irregular provisional ballot counting procedures, flawed list maintenance practices, and other restrictive measures.

Turnout and Change of Residency in 2012

Age	Voter Turnout as % of Voting Age Population	% Changed Residence in 2012
Under 30	45	29
30–65	62	11
Over 65	72	2

Strict voter ID laws make voting harder for the most disadvantaged Americans, including young people. Nineteen states have passed laws that require voters to show identification at the polls, and many are strict photo ID laws with no exceptions.

In general, eleven percent of voting-age Americans do not possess valid, government-issued photo ID.[8] This disproportionately burdens marginalized populations. For example, 18 percent of young Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 do not possess the required ID to vote.[9]

Several factors contribute to young people lacking photo ID, including income barriers and mobility. Many strict voter ID laws require the photo ID to show the voter's current address, which significantly affects young people and students who are the most mobile Americans. When they are moving out of their parents' homes and entering the workforce or college, updating ID between elections and residences is difficult due to lack of time, required underlying documents or inability to afford them, and bureaucratic obstacles.

In 2012, possession of correct ID was not the only issue with photo ID laws that young people experienced: the controversial national debate appears to have negatively influenced poll workers' and young voter's perceptions of the laws. Young people of color are more likely to be asked for ID at the polls, even in states where there are no voter ID laws on the books.[10] According to a 2013 study co-authored by Cathy J. Cohen of the University of Chicago and Jon C. Rogowski of Washington University, 66.5 percent of Black youth were asked for photo ID in states that do not require ID by law, compared to 42.8 percent of white youth. In states that do in fact require ID, the numbers went up by several percentage points.[11]

Voter ID laws also hamper turnout of young people who do not have college experience. In 2012, young people without college experience who lived in states with strict voter ID laws were less likely to vote than those who lived in other states. This was true even in states that had passed but not yet implemented restrictive voter ID policies.[12]

Repealing or Stunting Pro-Voter Laws

In 2012, voters faced hours-long lines at the polls, prompting President Obama to declare that "we have to fix that" in a speech following his re-election. Young voters waited disproportionately longer to vote in 2012.[13] These long lines are partially the result of a variety of laws that trip up voters and poll workers alike, particularly changes in voting laws such as early voting.

Florida voters in 2012 waited three times the national average to vote, an issue that likely could have been avoided had the state not passed a law to limit early voting the year before. Although Florida's long-line spectacle brought state lawmakers to pass a law to restore some early voting hours in 2013, other states like Ohio, Wisconsin, and North Carolina have since implemented administrative rules and new laws that limit early voting. The impact of these new laws remains to be seen, but the 2012 election demonstrated that young people and people of color benefit from the convenience of early voting and are also hardest hit when it is limited.[14]

Notably, President Obama created the nonpartisan Presidential Commission on Election Administration in response to the issue with "long lines"; one of the Commission's top recommendations was to increase early voting opportunities.

Other policies that have proven to benefit young voters—preregistration of citizens under the age of 18 and same-day registration—were repealed in North Carolina's 2013 controversial omnibus voting law.[15] Other states have proposed to do the same in recent years.

Provisional Voting Rules

Provisional voting is an option familiar to geographically mobile voters who think they are registered but cannot cast a regular ballot because they do not appear on the voter rolls at their current address. Some states use provisional ballots for other purposes: for example, in many voter ID states, voters without required ID are offered provisional ballots and must provide the ID later in order for their ballot to count. The Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA) provided states the opportunity to implement "fail-safe" provisional voting requirements, theoretically to maximize the chances that a provisional ballot cast by an eligible voter would be counted.

As practices vary from state to state, so do the number of ballots counted. In 2008, the rates at which provisional ballots were counted varied widely, from 100 percent in Maine to just 15.7 percent in Delaware. The most common reasons ballots are not counted are because the voter is unregistered, or because the ballot was cast in the wrong precinct: issues more likely to affect voters who frequently move.[16]

List Maintenance Procedures

Database and list maintenance procedures affect geographically mobile voters who are required to reregister in every new jurisdiction. The constant requirement to update information, coupled with poorly publicized registration deadlines, imposes a significant barrier to getting on the voting rolls correctly. Further, the consequence of outdated data across databases also means a higher probability of being purged from voter rolls.

Under HAVA and the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA), states are required to periodically remove ineligible voters from the statewide voter list by comparing voter registration data with other government databases. Purge practices, however, vary between states. Florida's purging of alleged non-citizens from voter rolls before the 2012 presidential election caused concern for its violation of federal voting law, its discriminatory impact on communities of color, and inaccuracies that could potentially disenfranchise eligible citizens. The NVRA stipulates that systematic voter list maintenance cannot happen within 90 days of an election, and Florida's 2012 purge procedures occurred within 90 days. The purge also disproportionately affected communities of color, including erroneously targeting eligible citizens.[17]

Recommendations

Adopt Policies that Engage Young People in High School

It is clear that young people are becoming a more important and reliable voting group in federal elections, but the registration and voting rates of this highly diverse group are still behind those of the general electorate.

Engaging young voters best begins in high school, when most students reach the age of registration. High schools are also most effective in reaching a broader range of young people, especially students who are not yet of voting age, as well as those who ultimately do not graduate or attend college. Effective policies include **preregistration**, **high school voter registration**, and **voter education.**

Preregistration

Currently, the extension of voter registration opportunities to young citizens is offered through preregistration. Most states allow certain citizens under age 18 to preregister to vote. Six of these states (Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Hawaii, Maryland, and Rhode Island) permit citizens as young as 16 to preregister to vote, and six (California, Louisiana, Maine, Nebraska, Oregon, and West Virginia) allow citizens who are at least 17 to preregister to vote. In these states, young people who have preregistered to vote are automatically eligible to vote upon reaching voting age. In Florida, for example, voter participation among preregistered citizens—particularly Black youth—was greater than that of young people who register at the traditional age of 18.[18]

Dropout rates in 12th grade exemplify the need for preregistration efforts at a younger age if it is to occur through schools. This problem is exacerbated among minority citizens, who are most likely to drop out of school before their senior year. The annual dropout rate

for white students in grades 10 through 12 is two percent, compared to six percent for Black students and Native American students, and five percent for Latino students.[19]

High School Registration

Public high schools are ideal locations to reach newly voting-eligible citizens, as the majority of American teenagers of nearly all socio-economic backgrounds attend high school. As dropout rates are higher for high school seniors, preregistration policies are even more effective when combined with high school voter registration activities. At least 21 states—five of which permit citizens under the age of 18 to preregister to vote—have policies requiring schools to serve as voter registration agencies or to facilitate drives on campus. Under these circumstances, voter registration applications may be available at high schools, at a central location that would accept completed forms and return them to election officials. High school officials may also provide access to outside groups that seek to provide registration opportunities to students.

States that Mandate Voter Registration Opportunities for High School Students

California
Connecticut
Florida
Georgia
Indiana
Iowa
Kentucky
Louisiana
Maine
Massachusetts
Mississippi
New Jersey
North Carolina
Oregon
Pennsylvania
Rhode Island
South Carolina
Tennessee
Texas
Washington
West Virginia

To measure success and assess compliance with these programs, public high schools should keep records of the number of students who are eligible to register to vote and track how many do so through the school. This yearly assessment should be handled by a designated registration coordinator at the school and should be reported to the county clerk's office or local board of elections. Yearly assessments would allow states to track voter registration numbers among our nation's youth, and will show progress in moving toward a system in which all eligible citizens are registered to vote and are engaged in the political process.

Voter Education

Civic education is a key component of engaging young people in the democratic process. Voter education programs for high school students who are eligible to preregister or register to vote is best conducted in collaboration between school boards and election boards. For example, in Kentucky, school principals must provide high schools and vocational schools with voter registration cards while the State Board of Elections is required to implement an education program.[20]

Reach Beyond the College Campus

Level of education also appears to be a factor in youth voter outreach, which has an impact on voter registration and participation. Studies show that voter registration drives designed to reach young people are skewed toward college students. A 2008 Harvard University Institute of Politics survey found that young voters without college experience were more likely (21 percent) to report that they were not enrolled to vote than those attending four-year colleges (14 percent).[21] In 2012, even fewer college students (13 percent) reported that they were not registered to vote.[22] Voter participation is also dominated by people with higher education attainment: in the 2012 election, 66 percent of people with college experience turned out to vote, compared to just 35 percent of those without college experience.[23]

Ultimately, millions of unregistered young Americans are likely overlooked in campus-based youth voter outreach programs because they do not attend college.

Adopt Policies that Improve Voter Registration Rates of Mobile Communities

Despite the advantages of implementing high school civics education and voter registration, the logistics of dealing with thousands of public school systems may be daunting. Other systemic voter registration policies may be less challenging. Same Day Registration and Permanent Portable Registration demonstrate positive results for both youth turnout and turnout generally.

Same Day Registration

The high rate of geographic mobility of young people complicates their access to the ballot. Registration deadlines, voter purging, and provisional ballots are all greater challenges for people who move frequently. However, these barriers are lowered in states that allow voters to register to vote and cast ballots on the same day.

Ten states and the District of Columbia practice some form of same-day registration. (California has a law on the books, but it is currently unimplemented.[24]) On average, voter turnout in states that offer SDR is 10 percentage points higher than states that close the voter registration deadline before Election Day.[25] In 2008 and 2012, young people across the board, including traditionally underrepresented non-college youth, voted at higher rates in SDR states.[26]

Opponents claim SDR is costly, confusing, and conducive to voter fraud. However, surveys of election officials in SDR states found the opposite to be true. According to the surveys that were conducted by public policy group Demos, election officials report that current fraud-prevention measures are sufficient to ensure the integrity of elections. SDR states impose penalties for fraud and require proof-of-residency and in-person affirmation of identity and citizenship. Further, SDR provides voting opportunities for last-minute voters and helps "defuse confrontations" with voters who find their names missing from registration lists, a common issue among voters who move frequently and thus require updates to be made in advance in many states.[27]

Permanent Portable Voter Registration

Similar to SDR, but particularly useful for young people who have previously registered to vote and who frequently change residence is permanent portable registration. Permanent portable registration allows any voter who has previously registered in the state to stay registered and eligible to cast a ballot, regardless of whether they submitted an update or a new voter registration form before Election Day. On the day of the election, the voter would update their information and be given a ballot.

Studies show that Americans' mobility affects voter turnout: only 51 percent of voting-age citizens who moved in the last year reported voting in 2012 while 76 percent of voting age citizens who had lived in their residence for five or more years reported voting. Voter registration issues are more problematic for voters who move frequently. In 2012, 11.7 percent of nonvoters who had lived at their residence for less than a year reported registration problems as a reason for not voting. Only three percent of nonvoters who had lived at their residence for three years or more reported the same reason for not voting.

Currently, Delaware, Hawaii, Oregon, and Texas (limited ballot only) allow voters who move within the state to update their registration information and cast a ballot on Election Day. Florida also allows voters to cast a regular ballot if they moved to a new county, but only if the county "uses an electronic database as a precinct register at the polling place." Other jurisdictions have similar policies, except they permit voting by provisional ballot only: District of Columbia, Maryland, Ohio, and Utah.[28]

Conclusion

Despite significant gains in voter turnout over the last decade, young people still lag behind in terms of representation within the American electorate, and are among the populations most vulnerable to voting rights rollbacks.

The fundamental fact of our electoral process is that one cannot vote if one is not registered. The first step in ensuring that young people cease to be underrepresented in the electorate is to institutionalize access to voter registration.

According to a Rock the Vote report, a person who votes in one election is at least 29 percentage points more likely to vote in the next.[29] One way to foster this engagement and increase registration rates is by requiring voter registration and civics programs in high schools, an ideal location for reaching most of the younger population. Another is to enact policies, like same day registration, that keep this mobile group registered to vote and therefore eligible to cast a ballot in every election.

Since the 2008 election, the youth electorate has increasingly become more diverse and involved in the democratic process. With just over half of the youth population having access to the resources necessary to register to vote, including targeted registration drives and political campaigns that actively pursue the college student population, it is clear that civic education and engagement should be a systemic effort that begins before the young citizen is ready to cast a ballot.

By adopting policies that create access to voter registration and education for high-school aged citizens, the other half of the youth voting bloc may be better equipped to become involved in the electoral process, creating a strong, more balanced base of young voters in future elections.

Notes

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