

Voting Is a Choice and a Privilege – It’s Time For Our Youth to Exercise That Right.

Background

In 1971 with the passage of the 26th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the voting age was lowered from 21 years to 18. Student protests against the Viet Nam War played a big part in forcing this change. The protesters argued that if 18 year-olds could fight and die for their country, they should be given the right to vote.

Today, 18 – 29 year-olds are by far the lowest turnout voting bloc in the country. The question is: why, and what can be done about it?

A Brief History

There has always been a battle to secure the right to vote. In the 1700’s, only white male land-owners enjoyed the privilege. In 1870, following the Civil War, the 15th Amendment ensured that people couldn’t be denied the right to vote based on their race. Women fought hard for a place at that table, but lost the battle. It took until 1920, after a fifty year hard-fought campaign, that women finally gained the right to vote.

In spite of legal gains, multiple forms of voter suppression – including poll taxes, literacy tests, English language requirements, and outright violence – continued to persist. It took the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to eliminate many of the voter suppression tactics that states employed to limit access by African American and other targeted groups.

Voting rights have been expanded to protect language minorities and people with disabilities, among other disenfranchised groups. But blatant and petty attempts at suppression and intimidation – eliminating voting locations, shortening hours - continue today. *But without a civics education about the long struggle for the right to vote, young voters don’t have enough information to value this most basic democratic right - or to recognize that voting on issues they care about can impact them for years to come.*

Voting Barriers Unique to This Group

Shannon Salter teaches civics in her working-class public high school. She has found that the pandemic caused so much isolation that many students “barely

talked to anyone”. As a result, they couldn’t believe that their voice or opinion would make a difference. One student complained that social media and misinformation had “fried their attention spans”. Add to that, issues of poverty and racism, and what they see as “ego-driven and aimless politics” that do nothing to address their issues, makes it hard for these students to see how voting could help to change their lives.

On a more basic level, young voters who are willing to vote face confusing, logistical barriers including: missing the registration deadline; working while attending school; not knowing where to send an absentee ballot; not knowing where to find a polling place; not having access to public transportation; etc. When your life is fluid and unstable, and you don’t know where you’re going to be in the near future, it’s hard to make a voting plan.

Traditional political campaigns don’t reach out to this age group, cutting them off from basic candidate information. Political parties are still using old forms of media and communication and are completely ignoring the preferred social media platforms where young voters get their news.

What Do They Care About

Youth-focused issues can differ from those of older voters. According to a recent study at Tufts University, their concerns are; jobs with a living wage, abortion, climate change, and gun violence. Caryn Scheel is the Youth Engagement Coordinator for Minneapolis Elections and Voter Services. She would add the following issues from the highly diverse and marginalized youth she works with: mental health, public transportation, and homelessness as it relates to safety.

Opportunities to Engage

Jahnvi Rao founded the non-profit, *New Voters*, eight years ago at the age of 16, to address her age group’s lack of engagement. Rao has found registration to be the key to voter engagement and outcome. Her goal is to register 85% of eligible students in each of the 450 schools throughout the country that *New Voters* has targeted. Once registered Rao has found that 80% of those new voters will cast a ballot.

Rao has had to win over teachers and administrators who consider discussing the election process to be political. *New Voters* begins its engagement process by

holding non-partisan presentations in class home-rooms. Student leaders from clubs, sports, arts groups, etc., are identified to run each schools' registration drive. They are assigned a mentor or are partnered with a community group like The League of Women Voters, who guide them through the process and provide registration materials. By being in charge and hands-on, these students gain ownership of the process and are able to pass on their expertise.

Caryn Scheel's job in Minneapolis is to line up student election judges for 137 polling places, typically located in underrepresented communities with the lowest voter turnout. After years of COVID isolation, students have felt isolated, depressed, and lacking in social skills. Scheel says that being given a direct role in the election process not only helps to develop personal confidence, but also raises trust in how elections are run. An added benefit is that this sends a positive message to the families and communities of each newly engaged student.

Local Initiatives to Enlist Voters and Build Leadership

- [The MN Secretary of State](#) website offers a wealth of information for high school voters: A teachers guide for registering students to vote; a statewide mock election; high school student resources; registration materials; webinars; elections dictionary; and much more.
- [The MN Secretary of State](#) website offers support for college and university students, as well as for those serving in the military. These include: Elections resources; webinars; study abroad toolkit; and more.
- [The MN Secretary of State](#) website explains that based on accepting state and/or federal aid, postsecondary institutions are required to provide student housing lists to the county. The institutions must provide student registration forms to enrolled students in the fall and spring semesters. A campus vote coordinator must be appointed and the student government must be included in developing a voter engagement plan.
- [The Minnesota Youth Council](#) "envisions a state where decisions that impact youth are made WITH and BY young people." Its focus is on shaping policy and decision making, including in the area of civic engagement.

- [CityWide Student Leadership Board](#) employs thirty students from twelve schools with diverse backgrounds to identify projects, collect data from their schools, and identify solutions. They advise district leaders regarding the educational experience in the MN Public Schools.

Conclusion

The problems of low youth turnout and engagement are there, but once identified, with work they are solvable. Already there are positive impacts from pre-registration, automatic registration, and same-day registration. But one thing is clear; the political parties need to sit up and listen. Gen Z and Millennials are scheduled to become a majority of the electorate later in this decade. If they get mobilized, they have the opportunity to shape the future for all of us whether we give them a voice or not. So, take three young people to a polling place. You won't regret it!