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Enfranchising American Youth

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Voter turnout among eligible Americans aged 18-29—and particularly among young minority voters— showed a significant increase in the 2008 general election. This marked the first time in many years that turnout rates among youth increased even while overall turnout remained relatively steady. These encouraging statistics belie the myth of the "apathetic" young American, and show that young people are eager and willing to participate in the democratic process when there are candidates that engage their attention and speak to their issues.

Yet even with this increase in youth voting, young voters still remain dramatically underrepresented in the U.S. electorate. Citizens under the age of 30 made up 21 percent of the adult citizen population in 2008, but only 17 percent of the voters, and a disproportionate 29 percent of the unregistered population. Approximately 21 million citizens under the age of 30 did not vote in 2008. Had younger citizens voted at the same rate as those aged 30 and over, seven million more votes would have been cast in 2008.

Far from being a question of "apathy," these disparities in participation are signs of serious barriers to voter registration and voter participation faced by younger voters, and in particular of disadvantages that disproportionately affect non-college bound youth and young people of color.

In this paper we review the voter registration and voting rates of 18- to 29-year old citizens in recent elections, and examine existing 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.

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Enfranchising American Youth

A Snapshot of the Youth Electorate in Recent Elections

About 51 percent of young people aged 18-29 voted in the 2008 presidential election, an increase of two percentage points since 2004. While this is a good sign of increasing electoral interest, voter participation among young people lagged behind that of the general electorate by 13 percentage points.[1] Despite increased turnout in recent elections, lower participation rates within the youth electorate can be attributed to the same social and economic factors that affect the general electorate.

Bias within the Youth Electorate

Although the youth electorate proved to be the most diverse in U.S. history in 2008, with increased participation among young citizens identifying as African American and Latino, the highest registration rates were still among white youth. In 2008, registration rates of voters of color 18-29 lagged behind that of whites by as much as 20 percentage points. Voting rates increased in 2008 among minority youth, though Latino and Asian voters still lagged behind their white counterparts by as much as six percentage points.[2]

Not only is the youth electorate disproportionately composed of white citizens, but also of citizens with college experience. About half of the 25 million voting eligible Americans between ages 18 and 24 have no college experience. A majority of voting eligible citizens without a college education tend to be African American or Latino. Between 1984 and 2004, youth without college experience lagged about 30 percentage points behind college-attending youth in voter turnout.[3] In 2008, the disparity in voter participation among college and non-college youth only improved by a mere four percentage points.[4]

The representational disparities in registration rates and voting rates within the youth electorate – despite increasing political interest – may be the result of multiple structural factors, particularly 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

Various state policies positively or negatively affect young voters and their ability to exercise their right to vote.

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.

Between 2007 and 2008, 18-29 year olds changed residences at a rate as high as 25 percent, 16 percentage points more than that of the general population, according to Project Vote's analysis of the November 2008 Current Population Survey Voting and Registration Supplement.[5] Like other highly mobile groups, young people are more susceptible to being disenfranchised due to strict voter identification requirements, irregular provisional ballot counting procedures ,and flawed list maintenance practices.

However, there are some policies, such as preregistration and Election Day registration, which may contribute to

lowering barriers to voter registration and voting and have a largely positive affect on turnout among underrepresented groups across the board.

Below, this brief discusses several policies and procedures that can affect the participation of this highly-mobile group.

Voter Identification Requirements

Strict voter ID laws make voting harder for the most disadvantaged Americans, including young people. Currently seven states either require or request government issued photo ID, including typically closely contested states such as Florida, Indiana, and Michigan. Several more states exceed Help America Vote Act requirements and request both photo and non-photo ID in order for voters to cast their ballots.

A 2006 study found that roughly 11 percent of voting-age Americans did not posses valid, government issued photo ID.[6] A 2008 Rock the Vote poll found the percentage was even higher among young people: 19 percent did not have government issued photo ID that included their current address.[7] This can largely be attributed to young people moving out of their parents' homes and entering the workforce or college. In particular, voter ID is a barrier for students who attend college away from home.

In the 2008 primary election, a number of private college students were turned away from the polls in Indiana because their college IDs did not qualify under state law.[8] "Unless students are to change their out-of state drivers licenses or residency entirely, many young voters will be forced to vote absentee or provisionally, lowering voter efficacy and making the registration process more bureaucratic, time-consuming, and cumbersome," wrote the Student Association for Voter Empowerment on their Web site in response to the voter ID issues during the 2008 elections.[9] The youth-operated national organization added that obtaining new ID is not as simple as voter ID advocates assume, since "changing state residency can also create complications for out-of-state students on certain scholarship guidelines or financial aid contracts."

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 in their current precinct. Some states use provisional ballots for other purposes: for example, in voter ID states, voters without proper ID are often given provisional ballots. The Help America Vote Act of 2002 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.

However, 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 these ballots are not counted are because the voter is either unregistered or cast a ballot in the wrong precinct, issues more likely to affect voters who frequently move.[10]

Age	Voted as % of VEP in 2008	Changed Residence in 2008
Under 30	51%	25%
30 - 64	66%	9%
65 and Over	70%	3%

Enfranchising American Youth

In 2008, voters in other age groups had relatively high turnout rates coupled with low mobility rates.[11] Young people, however, showed the opposite, suggesting that provisional voting is largely utilized by young, mobile voters.

Although some states ameliorate problems associated with mobility by having provisional ballots double as voter registration cards, or by counting provisional ballots on a county or statewide—not precinct—basis, not enough states take these proactive steps, thus reducing the likelihood of having young voters' ballots counted.

List Maintenance Procedures

Database and list maintenance procedures affect geographically mobile voters who are required to re-register in every new jurisdiction. The constant requirement to update information, along with poorly publicized registration deadlines, not only impose a barrier to getting on the voting rolls correctly, but the consequence of outdated data across databases also leads to a higher probability of getting purged from voter rolls as a result of careless list maintenance.

Under HAVA and the National Voter Registration Act, states are required to periodically remove ineligible voters from the statewide official voter list by comparing voter registration data with other government databases. However, purge practices vary between states, some having implemented "No Match, No Vote" requirements that rely on inherently fallible database matching procedures, potentially disenfranchising thousands.[12] Several states implement "No Match, No Vote" policies, such as Florida, which had its version of the disenfranchising procedure upheld in a June 2008 court decision, just months before the November presidential election.[13]

"No Match, No Vote" policies deny voter registration applications if the information provided on the registration card does not exactly match other government databases. Many failures to match information on a voter registration application with another database, however, are due to errors in the database itself, including typographical errors.

Election Day Registration

Geographic mobility is a complicating factor for young voters facing barriers to participation. Meeting registration deadlines, voter purging, and casting of provisional ballots all become greater challenges for people who move frequently. However, these barriers appear to be eased in those states that allow voters to simultaneously register to vote and cast ballots.

Currently, 10 states practice some form of Election Day Registration (EDR), including North Carolina and Ohio, which restrict same-day registration to early voting periods. In 2008, 59 percent of young people in states that offered EDR voted, about nine percentage points higher than that of young people in non-EDR states.[14]

Opponents claim EDR is costly, confusing, and conducive to voter fraud. However, according to public policy research and advocacy organization Demos, a 2007 survey of election officials in EDR states found the opposite.[15] The survey found that EDR not only provides voting opportunities for last-minute voters, but it also helps "defuse confrontations" with voters who find their names missing from registration lists, a common issue among voters who move frequently and thus require re-registration.

Today, advocates are beginning to recognize the catch-22 of a difficult-to-reach constituency coupled with an election system that makes it difficult for highly mobile

citizens to stay active in the democratic process. Some of these structural issues are being addressed by adjusting methods of voter outreach and proposing legislation to expand registration and ballot access to young people.

Recommendations

Adopt Policies that Target Young People in High School

It is clear that the 18-24 year-old segment of the population has become a more important and reliable voting group in federal elections. Yet, the voter registration laws do not cater to the increased registration of 18-24 year olds due to lack of access to the necessary resources.

Those opportunities best begin in high schools, where most students reach the age of registration in many states. High schools are also more effective in reaching a broader range of young people, especially younger students who are not yet of voting age, and particularly 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 increasingly offered through preregistration. Multiple states allow certain citizens under age 18 to preregister to vote, while Hawaii, Florida, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and Maryland have enacted dedicated preregistration laws that permit all citizens as young as 16 to register to vote. In these states, young people who have preregistered to vote are automatically able to vote upon turning 18. In long-time preregistration state Florida, for example, voter participation among preregistered citizens, particularly young African Americans, was greater than that of young people who register at the traditional age of 18, according to a 2009 report by George Mason University associate professor Michael McDonald.[16]

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 more likely to drop out of school before their senior year. According to the 2009 Statistical Abstracts of the United States, the annual dropout rate for white students in grades 10 through 12 is 3 percent, compared to 4 percent for African-Americans and Asians, and 6 percent for Latinos.

High School Voter Registration

Public high schools are ideal locations to reach newly voting-eligible citizens, as the majority of American teenagers of nearly all socioeconomic backgrounds attend high school. As drop-out rates are higher for high school seniors, preregistration policies are even more effective when combined with high school voter registration activities.[17] At least 10 states—five of which permit citizens under the age of 18 to register to vote—implement policies requiring schools to serve as voter registration agencies or to facilitate drives on campus. Under these circumstances, voter registration applications may be available on high

States That Mandate Voter Registration Opportunities in High School

California	Massachusetts
Connecticut	New Jersey
Georgia	North Carolina
Kentucky	Ohio
Louisiana	Rhode Island

school campuses, at a central location that would accept completed forms and return them to election officials. State high schools may also provide access to outside groups that seek to provide registration opportunities to students.

To measure success and assess compliance with these programs, public high schools should keep records of the number of students that are eligible to register to vote and 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 their 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 citizens are registered to vote and are engaged in the voting 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.[18]

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.[19]

Studies show that voter registration drives for the youth electorate are skewed toward college students. A 2008 Harvard University Institute of Politics study found that young voters without college experience were more likely (21 percent) to report being unregistered to vote than those attending four-year colleges (14 percent).[20] Voter participation is also dominated by college goers: in the 2008 election, 62 percent of young people with college experience turned out to vote, compared to just 36 percent of those without collegeexperience, according to a 2009 fact sheet by the Center for Information and Research and Civic Learning and Engagement.[21]

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

Conclusion

The fundamental fact of our electoral process is that one cannot vote if one is not registered. While mobile technology now allows for greater contact with young voters, the first step in ensuring that young people cease to be underrepresented in the electorate is to institutionalize access to voter registration.

Studies show voters who become politically engaged at a young age become lifelong voters.[22] According to a Rock the Vote report, a person who votes in one election is 29 percentage points more likely to vote in the next. 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 targeting most of the youth population.

Despite the advantages of implementing high school civics education and voter registration, the logistics of

Enfranchising American Youth

dealing with thousands of public school systems may be daunting. Other systemic voter registration policies address this shortcoming. Preregistration and Election Day Registration, for example, demonstrate positive results for both youth turnout and turnout generally.

Taking that concept a step further, automatic voter registration, as well as "paperless registration," are policies that many state legislatures are looking at in an effort to modernize state voter registration systems. A handful of states have already adopted similar programs in compliance with the National Voter Registration Act, automatically updating the voter registration status of driver's license and state identification applicants at motor vehicle departments.[23]

The youth vote is no longer unstable and inconsistent. Every election cycle, more young people become involved in the democratic process. However, with less than 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 systematic 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 assert become involved in the electoral process, creating a stronger, more balanced base of young voters in future elections.

Enfranchising American Youth

Notes

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Project Vote is a national nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that promotes voting in historically underrepresented communities. Project Vote takes a leadership role in nationwide voting rights and election administration issues, working through research, litigation, and advocacy to ensure that our constituencies can register, vote, and cast ballots that count.

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