



Engaging Today's Young People in the Electoral Process

Monica Andrea Bustinza, Florida International University

Amanda D. Clark, Florida International University

Young voters' influence on election results has been increasingly evident in recent elections. With the 2024 U.S. presidential election approaching and both partisan and non-partisan groups preparing, various queries emerge. What motivates youth voter participation? What factors discourage young people from participating? Also, is there a link between increased youth voter turnout and higher civic engagement?

Conventional wisdom tells us that young people are inconsistent voters. Rates of voting participation by 18-24 year-olds range from a low of 39.6% (1996) to a high of 55.4% (1972). However, young voters have turned out in increasingly higher numbers in 2018, 2020, and 2022. Many have attributed the growth in their participation to youth-led movements that focus on addressing gun violence, climate change, reproductive injustice, and racial injustice through issue organizing. Others have suggested that the electoral success and involvement of young political activists have helped mobilize young people to be politically involved.

During the pandemic, local elections officials (LEOs) around the country saw a critical need to replace their traditional workforce of elderly Americans to work the polls. Significant amounts of poll workers decided not to put their health at risk during the 2020 presidential primary season, with dire consequences like polling place closures, long lines at open polling places, and slower reporting of results. Many national organizations jumped into the space, organizing and amplifying campaigns to encourage young people to work for their local elections offices and, indeed, by November, these efforts had netted big gains with young people stepping up.

Challenges to Youth Engagement

While the growth of youth participation in voting and working the polls continues to increase, there have been documented attempts that introduce new barriers to registering to vote and casting a ballot. Across the country, state legislatures are passing legislation that tighten voting laws about how, when, and where a voter can vote and what they need in order to request a ballot and physically vote. These kinds of restrictions create disparities in registration rates, particularly in historically marginalized communities.

Regarding youth voter participation, efforts have been made to remove direct access to voting. In Texas, House Bill 2390 has been introduced, which prohibits on-campus polling locations throughout the state. There have also been recent moves in Tennessee to enforce "decorum" on younger elected representatives, further souring young people's views of the legislative bodies that represent them. Other concerted efforts to limit participation include the removal of polling sites, restrictive ID requirements, or poor treatment of younger elected officials when they do make it to office which makes it more difficult to mobilize young people. In Florida, Senate Bill 7050 was recently signed into law, which also negatively impacts voter accessibility for young people as it reduces the time a voter has to request their mail-in ballot and opportunities to register to vote with Third-Party Voter Registration Organizations (3PVRs).

However, the challenges that young people face in being civically engaged can also serve as a powerful motivation for them to act. The climate crisis, for example, has made many young people across the country angry and determined to fight against the decisions made by older generations, which are negatively impacting their future. Some have been at the forefront of advocating for environmental policy changes and acting on climate issues.

Community-based non-profit organizations play a crucial role in states where registering to vote and requesting and casting a ballot has become increasingly difficult or is constantly changing. Some of these organizations possess the capacity and resources to bring together activists, experts, and community

members to address voting challenges. They have also earned the trust and established a strong presence that enables them to address these issues in their communities effectively.

Engage Miami Civic Foundation

Non-profits that focus on community-based efforts are essential in supporting and increasing youth civic engagement. Engage Miami Civic Foundation is a nonpartisan nonprofit organization that aims to promote fair civic leadership and encourage youth voter activation in Broward, Miami-Dade, and Palm Beach counties in Florida. To break down the barriers that impede young people from voting, Engage Miami uses a multifaceted approach that addresses the different challenges faced by young voters, particularly in Florida. Through initiatives such as voter registration, civic education, and issue organizing campaigns, Engage Miami empowers young people to voice their concerns and take action on the issues that matter to them. Since 2015, Engage Miami has registered over 25,000 voters, helped secure three early voting sites on South Florida campuses, hosted over 50 fellows, and celebrated all of the Civic Holidays on college and university campuses. Through the years, Engage Miami's Voter Engagement team has collaborated with several colleges and universities including Broward College, Florida Memorial University, Miami Dade College, Florida International University, Florida Atlantic University, to help students register to vote, obtain information about voting by mail or in-person, and ensure their vote is counted. Engage Miami also provides students with all the necessary information they need to make informed decisions when casting their ballots.

Although young people will continue to face both formal and informal obstacles in participating in elections, the impact of the youth vote remains significant due to the involvement of national, state, and local organizations that lead the way in empowering young voters. The continuous successes and influences of community-based non-profit organizations, like Engage Miami, also emphasizes the necessity of external support to sustain and enhance their programs centered around youth civic engagement.

What can be done to encourage more youth engagement?

To promote greater youth engagement and participation, several strategies can be implemented, including:

- Modifying state law to allow for 16 to 17-year-olds to work in certain poll worker positions
- Encouraging high schools and colleges to offer volunteer credit hours for students that work in elections
- Creating campaigns that specifically target the concerns of young voters
- Investing and supporting non-partisan civic engagement activities on high school and college campuses
- Developing formal partnerships between colleges and community-based organizations that can promote non-partisan civic engagement efforts year-round, including the Civic Holidays

All in all, increasing youth voter participation in elections calls for a collective and comprehensive approach that addresses the barriers encountered by young people, builds civic power amongst young voters, and cultivates collaboration among stakeholders, like the partnerships established by Engage Miami Civic Foundation. By uplifting the work of organizations like Engage Miami, other community-groups across the country can mobilize young people from diverse communities, which will help ensure our democracy remains vibrant and inclusive.