

# Let's Change Our Narratives about Youth Civic Engagement

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Young people are very interested in politics right now. In 2018, the voter turnout rate for youth between the ages of 18 and 29 doubled from the previous midterm election: from 13% to 28%.<sup>1</sup> This group has also made up a disproportionate share of those participating in recent demonstrations protesting racism and anti-Black violence nationwide.<sup>2</sup> Nearly four in five of them (79%) say that the COVID-19 pandemic has helped them realize that political leaders' decisions matter.

Even as the pandemic has highlighted for many young people the importance of politics, it has also made electoral participation more difficult and uncertain, especially for the youngest prospective voters who are new to elections altogether. Young people, especially youth of color and youth from historically marginalized communities, can face many barriers to voting, and we cannot assume that young people's political energy will automatically translate into voting this fall. The disruption of COVID-19 on students' regular routines and relationships, as well as on election procedures, means that young people will face more challenges than usual this election cycle. They need the support of educators now more than ever.

Encouraging and equitably expanding youth voter participation requires confronting and changing dominant narratives that hold young people back from robust election engagement. In the classroom we do this all the time, using "positive reinforcement" to bring attention to desirable behaviors students are engaged in that we want other students to emulate. It's time to do the same for voting and civic engagement.

In this article, we will introduce and interrogate two common narratives concerning youth civic education and engagement, suggest ways to upend

these narratives, and point to resources that K-12 teachers and administrators can use in their efforts to do so. We'll draw from the research of CIRCLE (the Center for Information & Research for Civic Learning and Engagement, part of the Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University), which has been investigating what promotes or discourages youth political participation for two decades. And we'll elevate materials from the Teaching for Democracy Alliance (TFDA), a national coalition of nonprofits, coordinated by CIRCLE, committed to helping K-12 educators advance civic learning within their communities. All referenced materials, as well as 150 other unique lesson and unit plans, games, and professional development tools, can be found on TFDA's website at [www.teachingfordemocracy.org](http://www.teachingfordemocracy.org).

## **Narrative #1: Young people don't vote because they're apathetic.**

This common belief is not just inaccurate, but perpetuating it does further harm by socializing young people to believe that voting is not expected of them. Teachers know, perhaps better than anyone, that young people are often passionate about improving the world, and research underscores that fact. In CIRCLE's 2020 youth survey, we found that 83% of respondents, ages 18–24, believed that

young people have the power to change the country, and nearly two-thirds (62%) felt like they were a part of a movement that would vote to express its views.<sup>3</sup> We saw this energy personified by the youth leadership and activism that arose in response to the Parkland school shooting in 2018 and in the commanding presence of young people in Black Lives Matter protests recently.

Yet a stubborn age gap in voter turnout remains. This gap is not a feature unique to this generation: young people have consistently voted at lower levels than older adults.<sup>4</sup> This is owing, in part, to a range of barriers that can make it harder for youth, especially newly eligible voters, to cast a ballot. In a 2018 study CIRCLE conducted with the nonprofit organization Opportunity Youth United (OYU), we learned, in part, that:

- 52% of young voters needed to rearrange their work or school schedule to vote;
- 39% didn't know where to vote;
- 26% needed help with their questions about candidates, ballots, and polls.

A 2020 CIRCLE survey further illuminated the need for voter education and support. A third of youth (32%) did not know if online voter registration is available in their state. The same number had never seen information about how to vote by mail, or wouldn't know where to go if their election were to shift to all mail-in ballots.<sup>5</sup>

We must replace our preconceptions about youth apathy with a recognition that too many youth lack access to basic information about and guidance in voting. Just like we don't expect students to know trigonometry or chemistry without being taught, we shouldn't expect youth to implicitly understand the importance and process of voting. Young people need specific, explicit instruction on when and how to register to vote and to cast a ballot, and they need ongoing support in navigating those processes.

This type of information and guidance will be even more critical during this COVID-induced era of rapidly changing elections procedures. Many states are

looking to expand vote by mail, which has the potential to broaden access to voting for those who can't make it to the polls because of health concerns or owing to other logistical barriers. Yet opportunity does not necessarily entail adoption. This process would be new for the vast majority of young voters—less than one in five young people (19%), ages 18–29, voted by mail in 2016—and young people would need clear guidance on how to request and complete mail-in ballots in their locality. Making this information available online is key but is also not enough to assume young people will access it. Our 2018 OYU study revealed that many youth prefer

to register to vote, for example, in the presence of trusted adults so that they can ask questions and make sure they're filling out forms correctly. We can expect young people to look for similar support when navigating vote by mail systems, likely for the first time.

Research shows that teachers' impact on students' preparation and inspiration to vote is powerful. A recent CIRCLE survey revealed that young people who were taught about how to register to vote in high school were 15 percentage points more likely than their peers to know if their state had online voter registration and to say that they would know where to go to find information on voting if their

## 18 Ways Youth Under 18 Can Participate in Elections

### Support Your Family & Friends' Participation

1. Ask your friends and family if they are eligible and registered to vote, and if necessary bring them information to help them register. If they're not eligible, ask them how they are going to participate
2. Help friends and family find reliable information about the election, the candidates, and important issues that they care about
3. Watch and discuss a local or national debate/forum with your family and friends
4. Organize or support conversations at school about elections and voting
5. Bring the Teaching for Democracy Alliance checklist\* or commitment\*\* to school leaders and work with them to make a plan to support student learning

### Uplift Stories & Issues You Care About

6. Do research on an issue/policy you're interested in to find reliable information on the candidates' stances on the issue, and then share your viewpoint with those who can vote
7. Factcheck your research and then create media (e.g., images, videos, music) about candidates or issues you're interested in and share them with others
8. Evaluate a range of news media coverage of the issues and candidates to understand how journalists are covering the election
9. Contact local media outlets about the issues you care about and offer to share your opinions and insights
10. Create media about the people and issues in a community

that has few local media outlets or that you think hasn't been portrayed accurately in election coverage

11. Tell stories about how youth of all ages—especially those from communities of color—are engaging in the election and share it with news organizations and social media so that a wider diversity of young people are better represented

### Support a Candidate's Campaign

12. Volunteer on a local, state, or national political campaign
13. Attend a campaign event with a family member
14. Talk to those who are eligible to vote about your preferred candidates, what they stand for, and why it matters to you

### Be a Part of the Process

15. Find out if you can work at the polls on Election Day—many states allow 16- and 17-year-olds to do it!
16. Work with a local organization that is registering others to vote
17. Design posters with key information about how, when and where to vote, and put them up at school and in your community
18. Send your friends and family reminders of when and where to vote on Election Day—even drive them if they need a ride!

- \* [www.teachingfordemocracy.org/schooldistrict-checklist.html](http://www.teachingfordemocracy.org/schooldistrict-checklist.html);  
 \*\* [www.teachingfordemocracy.org/growing-voters-commitment.html](http://www.teachingfordemocracy.org/growing-voters-commitment.html)

Adapted from <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/growing-voters-18-ways-youth-under-18-can-contribute-elections> (January 17, 2020)

state's election was shifted to all mail-in ballots. Youth who had been encouraged to vote by a high school teacher were also less likely to agree with the statement "Voting is a waste of time" than students without such encouragement (12% vs. 26%).

The Teaching for Democracy Alliance offers multiple resources to facilitate instruction on elections and voting in their classrooms, whether in-person or virtual. On the TFDA website, teachers can find simple online voter registration resources, real-time updates on state election administration processes, and templates for virtual voter registration drives. At the bottom of each page of resources, videos and news articles highlight examples of what this work has looked like in schools and communities across the country. Educators can also leverage state and county election office websites and reach out to county boards of elections to explore opportunities to collaborate on youth voter registration or mobilization.

### **Narrative #2: Talking about politics is off-limits in schools, or appropriate only for soon-to-be voters.**

Simply put: it's not. In fact, teaching about politics and elections is necessary for a healthy representative democracy. We do not automatically become informed and empowered to vote and be civically engaged when we turn 18. Instead, young people begin to understand and experience democracy well before then, internalizing conceptions of their roles, their voices, and their power. That education comes in a variety of forms: observing role models engaged in civic behaviors, learning about and accessing community resources, receiving direct instruction in how government works, engaging with democratic institutions or processes, and developing a support network of peers and adults they can turn to with questions. At CIRCLE, we acknowledge this range of influences on youth civic development and call for a strategic shift: from funneling resources into "mobilizing vot-

ers" just before an election, to "growing voters" and developing young people's civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions early, intentionally, and over time.<sup>6</sup>

K-12 schools are one of the key contexts in which this extended civic learning can and does occur. One of the fundamental purposes of schooling is to prepare young people for active stewardship of democracy.<sup>7</sup> And more than any other system or strategy, public schools have the potential to reach a wide range of students—not merely those who self-select into civic learning and engagement opportunities. Creating space within curricula for open discussion about politics and current events may be especially valuable for young people experiencing, as referred to by educational researcher Beth Rubin, "civic disjuncture," whereby what students may read or hear about the structures and ideals of our democracy doesn't match their lived experiences with civic institutions, be it policing, schools, or local and federal government.<sup>8</sup> Offering all students the space, structure, and support for ongoing civic learning and dialogue is an essential element of expanding and diversifying a youth electorate that too often reflects some of the broader inequities in American life.

Taking on this work means teaching about elections in clear and compelling ways. But young people need instruction and practice in what civic engagement looks like beyond the ballot, especially considering not all of our students will be eligible to vote. TFDA offers a rubric illustrating how educators can comprehensively embed civics—including voter registration and direct instruction on elections but also media literacy training, classroom discussion, and Action Civics or other experiential learning opportunities—into their classrooms, schools, or districts.<sup>9</sup> These lessons can be and should be introduced early in students' academic careers and reiterated and deepened over time. We do not stop teaching reading once young people have mastered the alphabet. Preparing students for lives of active citizenship

takes time and scaffolding, as well.

One great on-ramp to engaging students in each of these elements of civic learning is building from issues they care about. Our analysis of youth participation in 2018 found that young people who said they supported or were actively involved with the post-Parkland movement were 21 percentage points more likely to report that they voted in the midterm elections.<sup>10</sup> CIRCLE research has shown that young people today prioritize a range of issues, (including the environment, racism, healthcare, policing, and COVID-19) meaning there is no shortage of entry points to civic learning and participation.<sup>11</sup>

Educators should help students make explicit connections between the issues they're invested in and elections. That's true for all youth, including those who may be undocumented, too young, or otherwise ineligible to vote, but can still play a role in elections. The sidebar on page 286 contains a list of 18 ways youth under 18 can contribute to elections, from educating others about registration and voting procedures to serving as poll workers or conducting get-out-the-vote drives. TFDA's website shares additional resources, including reference guides, reflection questions to organize issue discussions, and manuals for coordinating simulations of electoral activities such as mock elections or debate watch parties.

### **Your Role is Critical in Expanding Youth Voter Participation**

Teachers can play a key role in supporting young people's civic engagement. Recent CIRCLE research found that youth who reported having been encouraged to vote or taught how to register to vote in high school are more likely to vote and participate in other civic activities, are more knowledgeable about voting processes, and are more invested in the 2020 election.

That said, we know this work can be as challenging as it is important. Educators should take advantage of the resources outlined here to support

their teaching about elections. They also shouldn't take this all on themselves. Schools are part of an ecosystem within communities that influences young people's civic development. Find others and work together. Even better, create opportunities for students to lead these efforts, whether by organizing voter registration drives, creating and disseminating media with election information, designing voter education materials for friends and family, and more. Young people, so used to having others share often inaccurate portrayals about their disinterest in democracy, deserve to write their own narratives. We must all help them do it. 🌍

#### Notes

1. "28% of Young People Voted in 2018," (May 30, 2019), <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/28-young-people-voted-2018>
2. Amanda Barroso and Rachel Minkin, "Recent protest attendees are more racially and ethnically diverse, younger than Americans overall," Pew Research Center (June 24, 2020) [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/24/recent-protest-attendees-are-more-racially-and-ethnically-diverse-younger-than-americans-overall/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/24/recent-protest-attendees-are-more-racially-and-ethnically-diverse-younger-than-americans-overall/)

3. "Poll: Young People Believe They Can Lead Change in Unprecedented Election Cycle," CIRCLE (June 30, 2020), <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/poll-young-people-believe-they-can-lead-change-unprecedented-election-cycle>
4. United States Elections Project, "Voter Turnout Demographics," [www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/demographics](http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/demographics)
5. "Poll: Young People Believe They Can Lead Change in Unprecedented Election Cycle," CIRCLE (June 30, 2020).
6. "Growing Voters: Engaging Youth Before They Reach Voting Age to Strengthen Democracy," CIRCLE (August 14, 2019), <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/growing-voters-engaging-youth-they-reach-voting-age-strengthen-democracy>
7. "Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools," [www.carnegie.org/publications/guardian-of-democracy-the-civic-mission-of-schools/](http://www.carnegie.org/publications/guardian-of-democracy-the-civic-mission-of-schools/)
8. Beth C. Rubin, "'There's Still Not Justice': Youth Civic Identity Development Amid Distinct School and Community Contexts," *Teachers College Record* 109, no. 2 (February 2007), 449–481, [www.civxnow.org/sites/default/files/basic\\_page/Ruben.pdf](http://www.civxnow.org/sites/default/files/basic_page/Ruben.pdf)
9. Teaching for Democracy Alliance, "Checklist for School and District Leaders," [www.teachingfordemocracy.org/schooldistrict-checklist.html](http://www.teachingfordemocracy.org/schooldistrict-checklist.html)
10. "The Gun Violence Prevention Movement Fueled Youth Engagement in the 2018 Election," CIRCLE (February 15, 2019), <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/gun-violence-prevention-movement-fueled-youth-engagement-2018-election>

11. "Growing Voters: A Profile of the Youngest Eligible Voters in 2020," CIRCLE (July 13, 2020), <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/growing-voters-profile-youngest-eligible-voters-2020>; "Poll: Young People Believe They Can Lead Change in Unprecedented Election Cycle" (June 30, 2020).

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