Getting Young People to Vote:
Seven Tips for the Classroom

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Youth participation in the 2018 election set a high watermark for midterms.[1] We estimate that 28% of eligible voters under age 30 voted last November. We previously estimated that just 13% of youth voted in 2014, meaning that turnout for midterms more than doubled. Although voter participation went up for the entire voting-eligible population from 2014 to 2018, the rate of increase in youth turnout was higher than the rise among older voters.

That said, it's not all good news. Disparities in electoral participation among youth remain persistent and significant, and these disparities have structural causes. One of them is a failure to build developmental paths for every young person to become a voter. Elections are an important and large-scale opportunity for building youth civic engagement, and we can do so by "growing voters." We must not think of voting as something that simply happens with age. Although young people are eligible to vote at the age of 18, they do not wake up on their 18th birthday suddenly knowing when, where, and how to vote, nor do they acquire the necessary motivation and information by merely seeing a social media post from a celebrity telling them to "go vote!" Young people must systematically learn to become voters, and this is especially the case for those who grow up with little to no access to structured civic opportunities like extracurricular activities[2] and community organizing.

With those principles in mind, and based on our 2018 research and experience with practitioners and partners, we share seven teachable moments on youth civic and political engagement.

1. Young voters were more active overall in 2018, but disparities persist. According to our new analysis of data from the 2018 Census Current Population Survey, young people from low-income households, "Opportunity Youth" (aged under 25, not in school or working), youth without college experience, and young Latinos and Asian Americans remain underrepresented in civic and political engagement. For instance, young people with a four-year college degree were four times as likely to vote in 2018 as young people without a high school diploma.

Moreover, the "youngest youth" (those aged 18 or 19) were the least likely to vote. This isn't a coincidence: research shows that contacting young people about voting increases their odds of casting a ballot. The survey data of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) suggest that, with the exception of full-time college students, the youngest members of this population were less likely to be contacted before the 2018 election.[3] If young people don't hear from anyone encouraging them to vote, or educating them on issues and candidates, that lowers the likelihood that they will vote,

which in turn reinforces the impression that youth are disengaged.

As important as it is to celebrate the rise in youth voting, it is paramount for students to "look under the hood," to discover who voted and who didn't, and question why these disparities persist. We find that young people (and even adults) often assume that non-voters are apathetic or even lazy, and that voting is easy and accessible for everyone. Challenging these myths and encouraging students to grapple with the implications of uneven representation in our system of government is an important step in young people's growth as civic actors.

2. High schools are not yet "growing voters" … but they should be. Voters are not born; they have to be grown. Just as young people have to be taught to drive, learn the rules of the road, and practice before they get behind the wheel, we need to help prepare youth to vote long before their first Election Day. We believe this learning and practice should happen in school, not just in families. High school is an indispensable time and place to reach and teach a vast majority of young people, and an ideal setting to encourage and facilitate voter registration. As of the 2018 midterms, 18 states allow 16- and 17-year-olds to "pre-register" to vote so that their record will move automatically to the voter roll on their 18th birthday. In these places, registering to vote is something most juniors and seniors can learn about in

Party/Campaign Contact in 2018, By Age and College Status

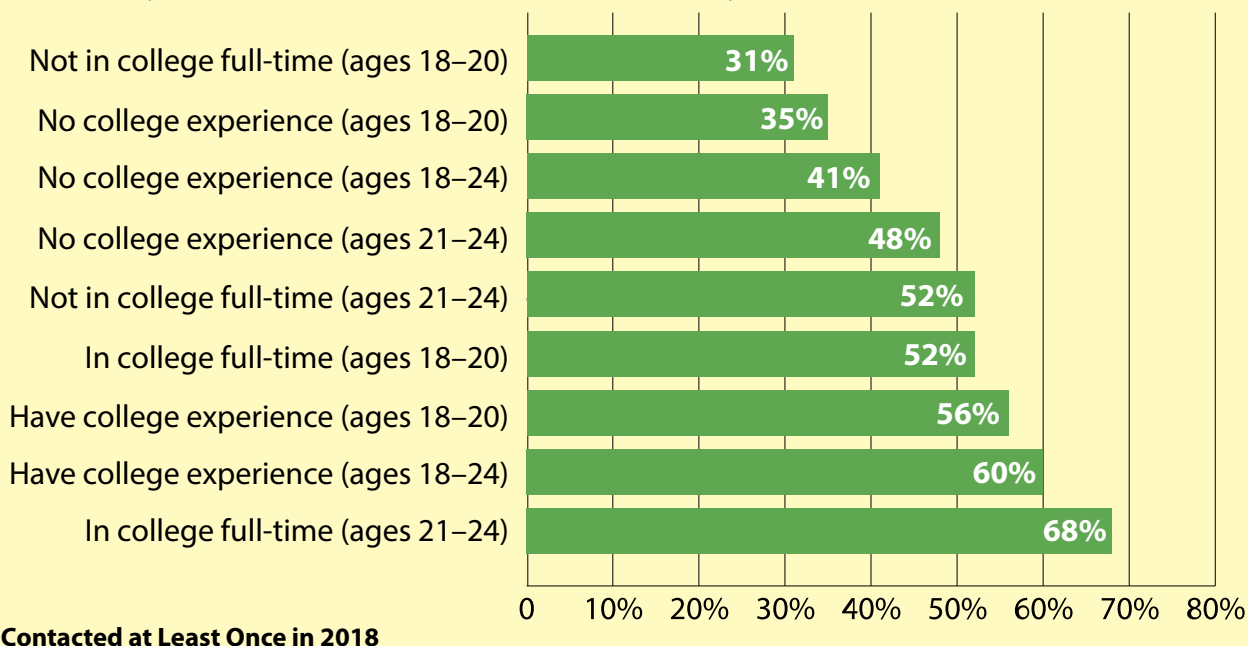| Category	Contacted at Least Once in 2018
Not in college full-time (ages 18–20)	31%
No college experience (ages 18–20)	35%
No college experience (ages 18–24)	41%
No college experience (ages 21–24)	48%
Not in college full-time (ages 21–24)	52%
In college full-time (ages 18–20)	52%
Have college experience (ages 18–20)	56%
Have college experience (ages 18–24)	60%
In college full-time (ages 21–24)	68%

Figure 1: Party/Campaign Contact about Election in 2018 by Age and School Enrollment. (Source: CIRCLE pre- and post-election 2018 polls)

the classroom and immediately do.

Despite that, high school students are far less likely to be registered to vote than the rest of the youth electorate—less likely even than young people who aren't in school. According to our analysis of the Census data, only 24% of high school students in November 2018 who were at least 18 years old were registered to vote, and just 18% said they voted. By contrast, 34% of youth who were not in school at the time, and 42% of young (age 18–29) college students cast ballots in the 2018 midterms. We know from our data that college students hear from campaigns and issue groups often (and therefore register and vote at higher rates), partly because many young people are in one place, and easy to reach. Though it must be handled differently, a similar dynamic could occur in high schools.

3. The Youth Apathy Myth should be dispelled and replaced with an understanding of systemic barriers. It may be facile to assume that youth who don't vote are simply apathetic,

Voting and Registration Rate by School Enrollment, 2018

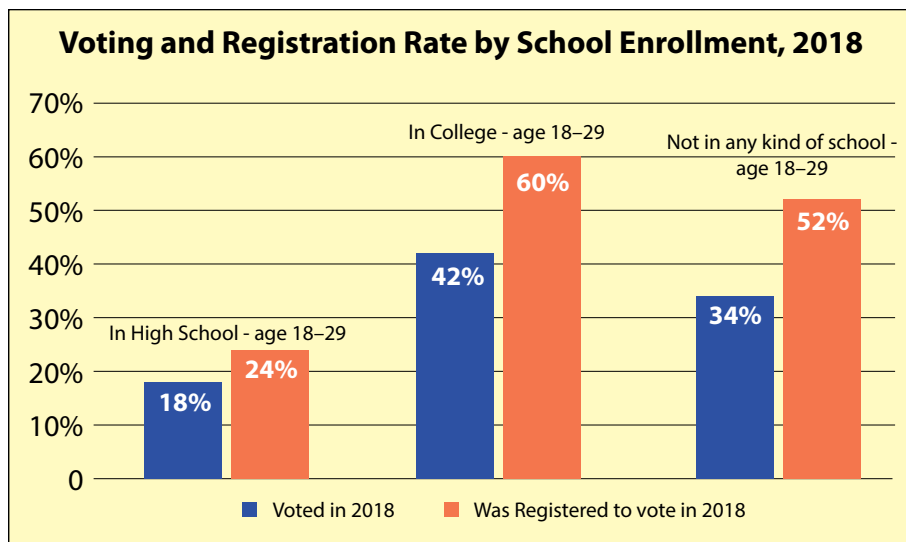| Group	Voted in 2018	Was Registered to vote in 2018
In High School - age 18–29	18%	24%
In College - age 18–29	42%	60%
Not in any kind of school - age 18–29	34%	52%

Figure 2: Voting and Registration Rates by Youth, by School Enrollment (Data source: The Census Current Population Survey, November 2018 Voting and Registration Supplement)

but that's an incomplete and inaccurate understanding of the myriad reasons and barriers that keep some youth away from the polls. In 2018, CIRCLE conducted a survey[4] of youth who experience poverty.[5] Despite the fact that they're among the least likely to vote, very few said that their reason for not voting is because

they don't care about elections. Instead, our survey revealed that voting puts a far greater burden on low-income individuals than on individuals with fewer economic struggles. Low-income families often face systemic barriers such as having to forego pay in order to go vote (because they don't get paid time off or

they work in the gig economy), being unable to vote because they are taking care of family members, or not having transportation to the polls.[6]

Disparities in voter turnout can serve as a useful case study for centering conversations on these and other race- and geography-related systemic barriers, which can help break down the youth apathy myth and build students' understanding of how our electoral and political systems affect different communities. This will sharpen their critical thinking skills and, especially, their ability to identify and address how these challenges play out in their own communities.

4. Young people can benefit from concrete lessons about practical aspects of voting and help in gaining confidence to go and vote. In our survey of youth from low-income backgrounds, we found that they are often concerned that they don't know how to register and vote, and that they might do it wrong. Lessons on practicalities like how to fill out a voter registration form, what to do at the polling place, and how to fill out the ballot or use the voting machine can be extremely useful. This is especially true if young people are "first-generation voters" in their family or community, meaning their relatives and neighbors don't regularly vote or talk about voting.[7] Mock elections are a good way to help students get used to the act of voting. Even better, some municipalities offer to let students try out the voting machines and/or conduct school elections using a sample ballot. In Connecticut, for example, town election clerks visit every local high school to help provide this type of voter education (and to help register eligible students), which has the added benefit of connecting young people with local officials.

Other youth may feel that they know the ins-and-outs of how to vote but that their lack of knowledge of issues and candidates prevents them from doing so. In our survey, one in five young people said they *should not* vote because they

A high school student serving as an election judge.

"don't know enough" to vote. We hear comments like "I might mess up the results if I vote without knowing everything on the ballot."[8] These fears can and should be assuaged by talking about the importance of participating and telling students it is fine to leave some sections of a ballot blank if they really don't feel equipped to make a choice, while at the same time encouraging them to educate themselves on candidates and issues they care about.

One additional area where accurate information is paramount is voter eligibility. Our research suggests that some young people who have interacted with the criminal justice system, and/or whose communities routinely experience injustice and discrimination, assume that their right to vote may be in question. These assumptions are often incorrect. For instance, our survey of low-income youth found that some believed that having their driver's license revoked or having an expunged misdemeanor record could make them ineligible to vote. Educators must seek out official and reliable sources[9] to understand their local and state laws and be prepared to help guide students with accurate information. If some students are indeed ineligible, for whatever reason, they can still be encouraged to find meaningful ways to participate in the electoral process.
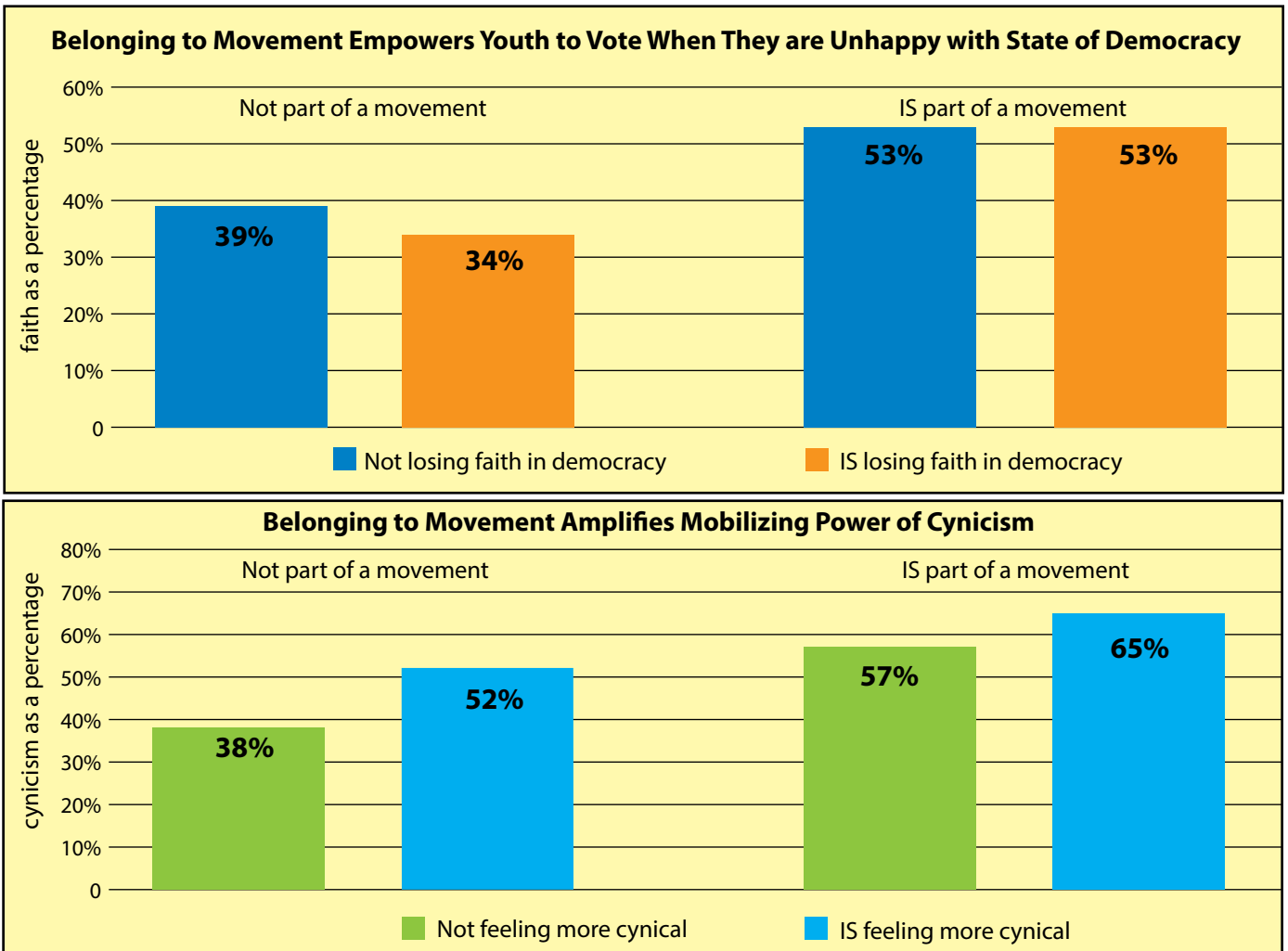
Belonging to Movement Empowers Youth to Vote When They are Unhappy with State of Democracy

faith as a percentage

Not part of a movement   IS part of a movement

- **39%**
- **34%**
- **53%**
- **53%**

■ Not losing faith in democracy   ■ IS losing faith in democracy

Belonging to Movement Amplifies Mobilizing Power of Cynicism

cynicism as a percentage

Not part of a movement   IS part of a movement

- **38%**
- **52%**
- **57%**
- **65%**

■ Not feeling more cynical   ■ IS feeling more cynical

Figure 3: Rates of Voting by Sentiments (Cynicism and Doubts about American Democracy) and Sense of Belonging in 2018

The responses to the survey showed that belonging to a movement made youth more likely to vote. The lowest voting rate (34%) was among youth who were not part of a movement and were "losing faith in democracy." In contrast, among young people who were part of a movement and were "losing faith in democracy," a higher proportion (53%) voted. (The same voting rate was found among those who were part of a movement but were not "losing faith in democracy.") Interestingly, among those respondents who were part of a movement and felt "more cynical" than two years earlier, 65% voted compared to 52% who were part of a movement and did not feel more cynical than two years earlier.

For example, some local election offices welcome local high school students to volunteer or work on nonpartisan voting and registration efforts, including paid work as poll workers. They can also dedicate themselves to motivating and facilitating the voter participation of their eligible classmates.

5. Many young people care about issues like gun control, reproductive rights, and climate change, but youth are ideologically diverse and complex. There is no one "top issue" for all young people. They are passionate about a wide range of topics, and their concerns can vary by their backgrounds, interests, and locations. For instance, Black Lives Matter and immigration/border issues are key among black youth and Latino youth, respectively. Thus, the most important thing is to forsake assumptions and find out what *your* students see as important issues, which can vary within a community from neighborhood to neighborhood and even from school to school.

Talking about both local and national issues is an important tool for engaged and engaging teaching and learning. We find that young people are most likely to become civically active when they can connect with issues and movements that are directly relevant to them. For high school students, most accessible civic opportunities are often local. Yet young people often feel that their viewpoints are not represented in local media,[10] and relatively few find local news media to be trustworthy. While those are problems that need and deserve their own solutions, the classroom can be a place where students can begin to identify local issues that matter to them and learn to use their voice to pursue real solutions.

6. Apps, technology, and social media won't register students by themselves—school can be an ideal place to provide face-to-face support. In recent years, online voter registration, text message reminders, and a whole host of apps and websites aimed at youth with information about candidates and issues have become widely available. These are all helpful tools, but they do not address the needs of all voters. In our study of low-income, out-of-school youth, we found that only 10 percent of young people used online voter registration and just 5 percent used text reminders.[11] These young people want to be able to ask questions and receive guidance to make sure, for example, that they are completing a registration form correctly. Thus, many preferred to register in person at nonprofit organizations or community events where they could receive support. School is an ideal place for educators and trained peer leaders to provide this kind of support.

7. Young people are powerful— especially when they come together. Cynicism and doubts about American democracy did not dissuade youth in 2018. Perhaps the most visible youth engagement trend of 2018 was political action and movements led by young people themselves. A large number of youth registered their friends and classmates, invited them to political events, engaged in nonpartisan voter engagement activities, and encouraged them to vote.[12] One of the driving forces behind this trend was the visibility of diverse young people in civic and political roles. This helped create a notable cultural shift that, combined with other factors, helped to boost youth voter turnout.

Interestingly, our research has found that this drive to greater political action may have happened not in spite of, but because of, young people's skepticism about American politics and the state of our democracy. Just before the 2018 election, we found that over half of youth felt "more cynical" than they were two years earlier, but we also found that cynicism actually made them more likely to say they would vote. In our post-2018 election polling, when we asked youth whether they had indeed cast a ballot, we confirmed that "feeling more cynical" was in fact correlated to greater likelihood of voting. We found a similar dynamic when we asked youth whether they were "losing faith in American democracy." Losing faith in American Democracy seemed to have suppressed voting if youth did not identify with any group or movement but it did not affect those who identified with a movement.

There is an important teachable moment here. The issue is not whether teachers should encourage students to get involved in a political movement. Being actively involved in a movement, according to our data, provides opportunities for involvement, but it is just one way. Instead, we believe it is important to recognize that when they can find purpose and belonging through their civic engagement, young people are incredibly "resilient" in the face of disappointment or cynicism about a seemingly dysfunctional democratic system. This is crucial, because we know that there are educators who fear that thorough and clear-eyed teaching about our politics, and even historical narratives, with all their challenges, could discourage students from becoming involved in future. Instead, the evidence suggests that understanding our system of government, warts and all, may indeed lead to cynicism or disappointment, but that those feelings can go on to ignite a passion for improving our communities and our democracy. Cynicism and disappointment can be a powerful engine for positive change, when paired with a thorough understanding of issues, root causes and systems, and

a sense of connection to others who are trying to make positive change. We encourage educators to engage their students in these critical conversations about what is and isn't working. Teachers can embolden students to explore issues and find ways to connect with others who are involved, so that they can find their purpose, look for like-minded peers, and begin a journey as civic actors that will take them far beyond the classroom. 🔵

Notes

1. Readers may note that there are multiple estimates of voter turnout for the under-30 voters. Estimates depend on the source. Youth turnout estimate sources range from the Census Current Population Survey (36%) to exit polls (31%), and voter files (28%). We have used the voter file records. Regardless of the source, youth turnout hit the high watermark compared to the historical Census estimates of youth voting dating back to 1974.

2. Studies show that students who engage in extracurricular activities are more likely to be civically involved later in life. See, for example, the following sources: Commission on Youth Knowledge and Voting, *All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Civic Engagement* (Medford, Mass.: Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, 2013), https://civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/ 2013/09/CIRCLE-youthvoting-individualPages.pdf; K. Kawashima-Ginsberg, *Harry, Hermione, Ron and Neville–Portraits of American Teens' Leisure Time Use* (Medford, Mass.: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, CIRCLE Working Paper #80, 2014), https://civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/WP_80_KawashimaGinsberg.pdf; J.T. Reuben and D.A. McFarland, *Joining Young, Voting Young: The Effects of Youth Voluntary Associations on Early Adult Voting* (Medford, Mass.: Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, *CIRCLE Working Paper* #73, 2010). However, it is important to note that involvement in extracurricular activities is associated with social class.

3. CIRCLE, *Political Outreach to Youth Effective in 2018 Midterms but Many Still Left Out* (March 2019). Blog post retrieved July 13, 2019 at https://civicyouth.org/political-outreach-to-youth-effective-in-2018-midterms-but-many-still-left-out/

4. This survey was conducted in conjunction with Opportunity Youth United (www.oyunited.org), an organization led by "opportunity youth" to combat cycles of poverty through community engagement and advocacy.

5. Our target participants in this survey were opportunity youth, who are defined as 16 to 24 year-olds who are not working or in school. The survey outreach was through neighborhood and social networks in specific cities and rural counties where the study took place. As a result, some youth in the survey were in school. 71% of our participants identified as people of color (29% identified as White, 41% as Black or African American, 13% as American Indian or Alaskan Native, 8% as Asian or Pacific Islander, and 13% as Latino or Latina. The percentages add up to more than 100% because participants were allowed to choose more than one identity group).

6. R. Junco, K. Kawashima-Ginsberg, L. Amado, V. Fahlberg and L. Bliss, "Expanding the Electorate: How Simple Changes in Election Administration Can Improve Voter Participation Among Low-Income Youth" (2018), https://civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/guide_election_participation_low_income_youth_v2.pdf.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Latest updates on state laws are available at www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/elections-legislation-database.aspx. A state-by-state overview of election laws is accessible at www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/election-laws-and-procedures-overview.aspx. The federal government also offers a brief overview at www.usa.gov/voting-laws. Secretary of state office websites often have educational resources and videos created for the public.

10. A. Kiesa, "The Impact of Local News on Youth Political Engagement" (October, 2018). Blog Post retrieved on July 13, 2019 at www.22x20.org/circle-poll-the-impact-of-local-news-on-youth-political-engagement/.

11. Junco et al. (2018).

12. CIRCLE, *The Gun Violence Prevention Movement Fueled Youth Engagement* (February 2019). Blog post retrieved on July 13, 2019 at: https://civicyouth.org/the-gun-violence-prevention-movement-fueled-youth-engagement-in-the-2018-election/.

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