

I Plead the 26th: Suggestions for Combatting the Growing Apathy Among Young Voters

According to section one of the twenty-sixth amendment to the Constitution of the United States, “The right of citizens of the United States, who are 18 years of age or older, to vote, shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of age.” Since Richard Nixon ratified this amendment in July of 1971, young men and women eighteen years of age or older have been granted the right to vote. However, according to Scott Wells, “With few exceptions, the percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds that vote has declined with each succeeding election since 1972, when 18-year-olds were first eligible to participate” (1280). Scholars have discovered a number of reasons for the declining turnout among young voters, and primary among them is a growing apathy toward politics. Nevertheless, young voters have the ability to “make or break” an election, and thus have been targeted as an important audience to conquer. Partisan and nonpartisan efforts have been launched to counteract the growing apathy of young voters, and influential people like politicians, celebrities, and people in personal contact with the youth have been some of the leading figures in this cause. The youth of America have become apathetic to the political system in the last decade, but indentifying the causes behind their apathy and counteracting them through influential sources can positively change the outcome of an election.

Importance of the Young Electorate

Working against young voter apathy can bring positive results to our country’s political system. According to Demis Glasford, helping the young people to vote has two positive consequences, “First, research has suggested that early political participation predicts future electoral involvement (i.e., voting is “habit forming”...). Therefore, increasing turnout at a young age can potentially increase overall turnout in the future. Second, when large segments of

the population do not vote, the democratic system itself is weakened” (2649). Though some efforts that counteract voter apathy might not be nonpartisan or a complete success, it is still crucial to our political system that we keep targeting the young electorate. Glasford explains that “Increasing young adults’ voting behavior can potentially increase voter turnout in the future, as well as strengthen the current democratic system” (2650). It is important to help young people before they reach their voting age. According to Benjamin Highton... “Most Americans reaching voting age fail to take advantage of their first opportunities to participate in a presidential election. In v a g 1996, for example, votes were cast by just 40 percent of citizens aged 18 to 24,” (202). To counteract this apathy successfully, we have to understand what the main causes are.

Causes of Young Voter Apathy

Possibly the most well-known cause of voter apathy is the national media. Since the first televised presidential debate in the election of 1960 between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, the media has taken hold of publicizing the political world. Today, the media is the primary information source for politics as can be seen from coverage of the 2012 Presidential election. However, the negative publicity and biased commentary of the modern media has caused some youth to become cynical of the political process.

Another reason for apathy is that many younger citizens tend to judge politicians and form their political opinions based on how they feel rather than what they actually know. That is why so many do not care about politics; someone or something made them feel that politics is not worth their attention. Erica Weintraub Austin et al. explain, “Research findings indicate that citizens who are cynical lack confidence in and feel distrustful toward politicians and the political process.... As a result, cynical citizens typically are closed to the political process and uninterested in political participation” (423). Talking with someone that is cynical about politics

might sway a young voter to view politics dimly. This often results in further cynicism and a disinclination to vote.

Complacency is another major issue related to young voter apathy. Austin et al. highlight the relationship between apathy and complacency; “According to scholars, apathy refers to a lack of willingness to exert some degree of effort to involve oneself in the political process... whereas complacency refers to a lack of motivation to take positive or negative action because of feelings of satisfaction with the current situation” (423). Many American youth have become complacent with the way their lives are now and do not think that changes should be made in government or are not interested in taking action to affect change. This fact is not applicable for every case; however, surely it is a main cause of young voter apathy. Younger voters also tend to occupy themselves with their own problems and ignore other responsibilities. Sadly, political engagement tends to be one of the tasks that get disregarded. According to Wells, other causes might include less education, less financial stability, or little to no knowledge on political issues (Wells, 1280).

America’s youth have the potential to revolutionize our political system, but currently, this potential remains unrealized (Wells, 1280). According to Wells, “Specifically, youth turnout in elections remains rather dismal, with typically less than 40% participating in presidential elections” (1280). Edward Fieldhouse states a similar point: “Although between 2004 and 2008 turnout for electors aged 18–29 increased in the U.S. presidential elections, the rate of participation was still more than 10 percentage points lower than the overall voter eligible turnout rate” (856). With such low turnout rates, those who have the ability to affect change must realize that it is crucial to take action against voter apathy amongst America’s youth.

Counteracting Efforts

The 2004 Presidential election marks a pivotal moment in which politicians began to realize the importance of the young vote. Lynda Kaid et al. write, “Young voters were among the most targeted segments of the electorate during the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign. Political parties, nonprofit organizations, issue groups, mass media, student organizations, and even popular entertainers joined efforts to convince young people to show up at the polls” (1137). The participation of youth in the 2004 campaign was crucial, but this segment of the population still represented an extremely low number of the overall vote. Wells explains this situation, “Even the often mentioned spike in voting in 2004 had fewer than 50% of registered voters between the ages of 18 and 24 going to the polls” (1280). Though these voters may not have had a significant impact on the actual results of the election, the campaigning for the 2004 elections gave birth to non-partisan efforts to persuade young voters to make their voices heard.

Celebrities have taken a huge role in this effort to bring young people to the polls. More and more we see celebrities endorsing political candidates or speaking at national conventions as occurred this year. According to Austin et al., “It ... makes sense that there has been a surge in nonpartisan promotions encouraging voter turnout targeting groups historically disengaged from the political process, including young adults” (423). Much of our society revolves around modern pop-culture, especially for younger generations. This means that celebrities have a significant impact on the lives of most young people. Austin et al. explain this well: “Celebrities have become primary role models for many people... and have functioned as successful advocates for products, issues, and causes because they are viewed as highly trustworthy, believable, persuasive, and likeable ...” (423). They later reason, “Given that the celebrity endorsement strategy garners success in arenas such as advertising and health, it seems likely

that similar endorsements would influence voting behavior positively.... If this is the case,” they continue, “then celebrities modeling political participation and making it appear rewarding should influence individuals who identify with those celebrities to become similarly active in the political process” (424).

Celebrities have launched different campaigns to try and influence young people to vote. Declare Your-Self was a successful non-profit campaign initiated in 2004 that rallied young Americans to vote through music and spoken-word concerts. Also in 2004, Christina Aguilera helped with the Declare Your-Self/Yahoo! online voter registration campaign (Austin et al. 424). Other celebrities like Ben Affleck and P. Diddy launched similar campaigns in 2004 (Payne, 1240). Rock the Vote was launched in 1990 with some success and Move on/Vote for Change was initiated in 1998 (Austin et al. 423). Though not all young people are influenced by celebrities, these movements have helped get a significant number of young voters to the polls.

In recent elections, politicians have joined forces with celebrities in hope of attracting more youth. In the campaign for the 2012 election, incumbent President Barack Obama strategically targeted the youth. The President appeared with rap/hip-hop artists like Jay-Z and Beyonce Knowles as well as strong celebrity supporters like George Clooney. Morgan Freeman narrated some of Obama’s campaign television ads while comedians and actors like Chris Rock and Samuel L. Jackson have publically endorsed the President on television and on social media. In addition, Obama has also made appearances on late night shows with Jay Leno, David Letterman, Bill Maher, and Jimmy Fallon—the only President that has made guest appearances on shows of that type while in office. All of this is significant to a generation that values celebrity endorsement more than any other in American history. Obama has understood that the

youth are cynical and apathetic towards politics in our country, but he has worked to counteract the causes of young voter apathy and has benefited from it in both the 2008 and 2012 elections.

As a direct result of celebrity endorsements of liberal candidates, scholars have noticed that in the three previous elections, young people tended to support the liberal candidates more than the conservative opposition. In the election of 2008, Barack Obama soundly won the election, and a contributing factor was capturing 66% of the youth vote (Greenberg, 74). John McCain had nowhere near as many young votes; Obama's youth, charisma, and liberal rhetoric captured most of the young vote. Anna Greenberg explains the reasons why young people appeal more to the liberal candidates when she writes, "younger people are the most racially and ethnically diverse generation in this country, at a time when the Republican Party is perceived as increasingly white. At the same time, changes in family structure—namely, the rise of divorce and the decline of marriage—are linked to an increasingly progressive worldview among younger people on a broad range of issues" (75). President Obama has tried to present himself to the youth as relatable and modern. This has also sparked a movement within the Republican Party, specifically towards young Latino voters. This initiative can be traced back to 2006, specifically when George W. Bush appointed Latino officials to his cabinet (Ellen R. Baik et al., 602). In each case, politicians recognize the importance of the youth vote and have increasingly worked to attract that particular demographic.

Positive Influences

While celebrity endorsements and a relatable candidate are important in combating apathy in young voters, parental and teacher influence on the young American electorate is crucial to the formation of their political opinions. People learn most of what they know from their parental figures at home, and many youth vote the way they do because of their parents.

According to Fieldhouse, a “significant body of research has shown that both the household and the neighborhood are sources of contextual influences on voting.... Contextual voting theories hold that people follow similar patterns of political behavior when they live in close proximity, interact, share day-to-day experiences, and belong to the same social networks” (856). Therefore, parental influence is crucial for young people, especially before they are eligible to vote. If the parents show their kids the importance of voting early, it will be a habit for them once they are eligible to vote. On the other hand, if youths perceive that their parents do not value voting, they might think that not voting is normal or important (Glasford, 2651). Fieldhouse states, “A crucial part of this argument is the role of habit. If voting is a habit, then the initial engagement of first-time voters in the electoral process will resonate throughout those voters’ lives (Franklin 2004)” (856). A similar situation may occur with other influential figures like teachers. Students usually form their opinion about academics based on certain teachers. When this idea is applied to politics, one can surmise that if teachers make an effort to show students the importance of voting, they will possibly perceive it as important. This is why mock elections in schools are so important; students need to learn about voting from an early age to understand the important role they play in our democracy.

A college campus, where mostly everyone is eligible to vote, is another influential place for young voters. College students are in an unusual situation because most of them are away from home for the first time. They are preoccupied with adapting and prioritizing their responsibilities, so often they do not pay much attention to politics or to the world outside of campus. Scholars know that most college graduates do vote after college, but ignoring the political system during college seems to affect them (Niemi, 302). The point is that college students are in the process of forming their own lives and political opinions in a society that

needs their participation. Adrian Popa explains, “This impressionable developmental period is marked by moments of defining oneself apart from parents, developing personal and vocational identity, and the onset of developing political attitudes” (29). Of course, these facts are not applicable to all college students because of the variety in age and experience. Newer students generally do have most of these problems, but as they grow older and accustomed to the college life, they might be able to add other responsibilities and priorities such as voting.

After talking to students at Milligan College during election night this year, other reasons for not voting were also mentioned. For example, if a student knows that he or she has to skip an important class to vote, the student might not be as encouraged to vote. Also, if students go to school outside of their home states, they have to go through the absentee ballot process. Some students do not even know that there is a way to vote outside of their home states, so they decide not to. Others do not know how to register back home, so they are not able to apply for an absentee ballot. All of these obstacles prevent college students from practicing their voting rights, so in effect, the full voice of the electorate is not heard.

Without a doubt, college students are in a special situation, but there are ways to help them get more involved. Among the most influential are professors, students, and student groups. Professors have much the same effect on students that parents do back home. They are the leading figure in the classroom, and students tend to respect titles as well (i.e. Ph. D, M.D, J.D). If students perceive that their teachers value voting and prioritize politics, they might be more encouraged to get involved and vote. The staff also has the power to bring guest speakers such as politicians or political activists to the campus. These events might succeed in convincing students to vote a certain way or simply to become involved in the political process. Students also have the power to influence other students, whether it is by personal interaction or student

groups. Some youth were taught at home that voting is a priority, and when other students see that their friends prioritize politics, they might be more interested. Student political groups are also an important source of influence on a college campus. Groups like the College Republicans or the College Democrats have the power to influence students directly with politics. These groups also have the support of their respective national offices (CRNC, CDA), and therefore have more resources to try and influence students to become active in politics.

Cherry Ceridwen notes the potential of young voters, “In the 2008 general election, had Americans under the age of thirty voted at the same rate as the general population, an additional seven million votes would have been cast. With so many races determined by tiny margins, the votes of these younger Americans could have changed the political landscape in many districts” (1). Efforts like these propose a new way to counteract young voter apathy through positive means. Ceridwen understands that this generation is different from the past ones, but the voting youth still have the same potential and the same importance in our political process as a democratic republic. Interacting with the youth on a personal level and guiding them into the political process will inevitably have a positive influence on young voter outcomes.

Conclusion

Since the ratification of the 26th Amendment in 1971, which allows citizens eighteen years of age to vote, the number of young voters between the age of eighteen and twenty-four has had the lowest turnout in elections. Scholars have concluded that though there are many direct causes to voter apathy, there are also many ways to successfully counteract the growing cynicism. Scholars have also determined that helping the youth to vote affects our nation positively because our democracy relies on the continuing practice of our right to vote. This means that the younger generations must learn about the political process and vote once they are

eligible. Although apathy toward the political process has continued to grow in young voters, politicians, celebrities, teachers, and parents can combat these feelings by becoming more relatable to young voters and modeling good political practices and engagement. Through these positive influences, young voters will learn the importance of voting and will be increasingly willing to join the growing community of voters that celebrates our political process.

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