



Ensuring Democracy: Promoting Civic Education in Schools

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Civic participation is the founding ideal of American democracy, yet it is one of the most unattainable tenets of representative government in the 21st century. A web of convoluted information and unequal resources have reduced voter turnout. This brief will cover how voters often face struggles when it comes time to vote and will go over how various policies can aim to fix this issue starting from an early age.

II. OVERVIEW

Roughly 20% of Americans are under 18, and these people often go on to represent the bulk of the voting population in the future. However, constituents often face struggles turning out to vote regardless of age. This can be attributed to a lack of education on the voting process, various political issues, and a lack of resources. That is why only 1 in 4 youth voters cast a ballot, setting the stage for worse long-term civic engagement in adults. A lack of learning opportunities coupled with inadequate resources often set back many minority and young voters from casting their ballots in the most pivotal elections of the country. State-specific legislature, location constraints, and a lack of policy knowledge all impeded greater turnout in previous elections. The Safeguard American Voter Eligibility

(SAVE) Act, reintroduced to the House of Representatives, creates hurdles to voters who lack proper identification, reducing turnout by 140 million Americans. This brief delves into the systemic issues surrounding civic engagement, explores why young people specifically face struggles approaching the voting booth, and breaks down barriers between upcoming voters and a more fortified democracy.

A. Relevance

Civic participation is key to any functional democracy. Unfortunately, the US has comparatively low voter turnout compared to other democracies globally. Many voters believe that their vote doesn't matter, which is why voter turnout has decreased since the 2020 election, in turn eroding government trust. The Pew Research Center finds that only 17% of Americans trust the government to make accurate decisions due to current politicians who don't truly understand their constituents' desires. Consequently, civic deserts, areas where no opportunities exist to address political issues, have sprung up across the United States due to complacency in voting and a decreased emphasis on promoting civic participation and growth. Brookings explains that political dysfunction and actively polarizing media demands intervention to protect the foundations of democracy. In a time where young people decide the future of politics, depressing turnout restricts democratic

potential in the next generation, leading to more fatalistic viewpoints and low youth engagement in political issues. The contentious debate surrounding the current political stage begs the question of how to advance nonpartisan engagement in policymaking.

III. HISTORY

A. Current Stances

The foundation of America was built on the idea of representative government and leadership by the people. Consequently, progression of voting rights and expanded access to the ballot has grown over centuries. From the removal of land-owning requirements to the reduction of segregationist education requirements, voting access in America has become more equitable and accessible over time.

Although voter turnout has been slowly rising over the years, it doesn't preclude the fact that many young adult constituents lack critical knowledge when taking the first step as newly eligible voters. Many states have advocated for increased voting education. Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Montana have implemented Automatic Voter Registration where citizens are automatically registered to vote when interacting with state agencies, expanding to allow same-day registration. Other avenues for voting opened to early registers and mail voters. Overall, arguments for increasing voting education programs favor increased participation and adherence to traditional core values of accurate representation.

On the contrary, many proponents for placing more restrictions on voting regulations argue for

the limiting of certain voters' ability to vote. Many argue that loose restrictions can amount to greater fraud and decreased overall representation. Current bills, like the SAVE Act, also aim to deck voter turnout. Education in schools is argued against by those who view such curriculum as divisive or going against civic values. Overall, arguments exist both for and against increasing voter education in schools, but the policy around the issue remains watered down.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

American democracy built its backbone through the idea of equal representation. In the heart of America's future lies the youth, who are the most affected by voter education policies. By not understanding the mechanics of voting and being unable to make informed decisions, we risk losing engagement at every level of government, from local to national. Because voting is crucial to electing politicians which make good decisions for the majority of America, having educated voters that pick representatives who are considerate of the public's needs is a necessity that affects various demographics of all genders, races, and backgrounds.

While the voters are important, those who are responsible for educating them are just as important. Teacher and authority figures within communities are not only responsible for the cultivation of the richest minds of younger generations, but they are also responsible for raising educated and involved citizens. Without educators playing a significant role, we cannot aim to reach the ideal democracy.

Beyond just local community members, it is the job of local, state, and national leaders to push forward the founding ideals of American democracy and make this ideal possible. These leaders are responsible for responding to community concerns and shaping legislation to meet the needs of each community while also installing a critical, nationwide solution to declining rates of voting.

B. Risks of Indifference

When undermining the need for voter education, we risk losing the heart of the American government: the people. When bypassing the need for critical voter education, we risk allowing complacency and detachment from real political issues that affect every single American. When younger students and adults alike experience a lack of urgency when it comes to voting, the issues being discussed at the table don't accurately represent the needs of the people. When we detach from political issues and don't exercise the right to vote, we begin to lose a grip on the founding ideals of American democracy. A lack of accurate representation in government translates into poor policy, leading to a decrease in public support and eroding trust in our democracy. These issues are critical because for America to remain a fortified nation within geopolitics, we need to maintain strong support at home, and that begins and ends with representation of the American people.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Voter education not only affects the younger generation but also impacts long-term voting trends. Because civic education programs are essential to promoting active participation in American society, they are integral in shaping how we influence decision-making at the

political level. Some of the benefits of awareness include but are not limited to the following:

- 1) **Civic engagement:** Studies have found that civically engaged youth are more likely to vote. The correlation between community engagement and voter participation is apparent. By educating students about issues that affect them and others, they are bound to develop a passion for changing the political sphere. That is why civic education is critical: because it gives youth an opportunity to form long-lasting connections within their communities. Participation gives students the opportunity to speak out about the issues that directly affect them and provide politicians with diverse perspectives, formulating more inclusive initiatives.
- 2) **Reduced polarization:** By increasing opportunities for voters to get involved in their community's policymaking processes, the government can begin to understand that more universal policy is ultimately the most successful. In a study where opportunities to join local representation increased, it was found increased voter turnout provided an incentive for Congress to create more universally pleasing campaigns rather than divisive slingshot policies. By educating the youth, American education systems can begin to set a precedent for more collaboration by promoting engagement in representative assembly beyond just voting. By encouraging participation in civic forums and town hall meetings, not only do people expose themselves to

diverse viewpoints but we set a political precedent that collaboration is the best path to an inclusive policy sphere.

- 3) **Better policy:** Every single American is affected by the decisions made in the offices of the higher-ups in government. Promoting civic education is not just in the best interest of the ballot box, it also translates into higher quality policymaking efforts. When voters are knowledgeable about current issues, they are more likely to be able to hold representatives accountable through elections, motivating those in positions of power to stay vigilant and true to their campaign promises. By putting politicians in power who are best able to represent their constituents, the resulting legislation will be able to improve the socio-economic standings of people locally and at the national level.

V. TRIED POLICY

Education in schools has begun to expand. The Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002 prioritized young voters, establishing young voter programs across the United States. However, this act was not enough to circumvent structural barriers to voting. As proven by numerous studies, while voter turnout has slightly gone up in the past few years, overall turnout remains drastically low among the younger generation. This is because of the act focusing more on improving technology all while increasing identification requirements, something that restricts a lot of access for voters due to unawareness and a lack of proper assistance. Additionally, the Texas Secretary of State runs

Project V.O.T.E. to provide access to classroom resources for teachers. However these initiatives remain insufficient due to administrative barriers on the state level which hinder compliance. For example, requesting voter registration forms to hand out to eligible students is impossible due to administrative hurdles despite prepositioned policy alongside a lack of enforcement. Additionally, Texas laws are particularly restrictive, placing barriers pertaining to race, felony convictions, and ID requirements, discouraging many young people from even attempting to register.

VI. POLICY OPTIONS

Enforce existing legislations surrounding registration for new voters and education programs

Currently, the Texas Secretary of State lacks the proper resources to ensure compliance with the mandatory distribution of voter registration forms and the teaching of how to use them. Because of an inadequate system, the State lacks contact information of school officials to distribute forms and doesn't regularly send forms out. Thus, state policy, and national policy alike, should mandate the regular update of school registration and contact information submission. Additionally, the implementation of designated state officials to monitor the compliance of schools would further the agenda of the policy.

Push for greater reform at the state level to encourage more diverse registration options

In the status quo, burdensome voting restriction policies deter many voters from ever setting foot in a voting booth. Thus, restoring voting rights for former incarcerated individuals and implementing automatic voter registration programs when individuals interact with agencies like the Department of Motor Vehicles could

promote better turnout. Additionally, promoting online registration and same-day registration would improve turnout, reducing the effects of Senate Bill 1.

Provide nonpartisan education about policy issues and current events

While many people are concerned that bringing political topics into the classroom might corrupt the youth, providing nonpartisan access to discussion about current events can actually prevent the spread of misinformation and motivate students to vote on issues they are passionate about. By including discussion on current events within school curriculum and regulating teacher involvement, we can begin to allow students to formulate their own opinions.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has discussed many of the barriers to and reasons to implement greater voter education programs in schools. Specifically, this paper has detailed the current legislative and knowledge barriers to greater awareness and discussed potential options for combatting this issue. Out of these options, the most feasible is to push for greater enforcement of existing regulations and education programs. While reforming registration requirements would provide more leeway for new voters, it is less feasible and requires a lot of bureaucratic leaps. Conversely, measures like enforcing Project V.O.T.E. is more feasible in the long run because it engages younger people at higher rates and builds on existing progress, furthering the momentum around building the American government for the future.

In order to shape the future of American democracy, it is imperative that the right to vote

for citizens is secured first. However, this right does not just begin with citizenship; it begins with understanding how to cast your ballot in the best manner possible, and it involves reducing bureaucratic obstacles for those who face them. All in all, voting is essential to the idea of American freedom and representation, and implementing structural solutions, removing physical hurdles, and providing incentives for exercising the right to vote can pave the way for more educated and involved generations.

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