



Youth Voter Registration Talking Points

Summary

- Millions of eligible young American voters fail to turnout for elections and participate in our democracy, with many of these citizens not even registered to vote.
- Many groups address the problem of low youth voter participation with varying degrees of success, but even the most effective efforts have significant limitations.
- The result of our ad-hoc, patchwork voter registration system is the creation of a process that encourages misconduct and results in voter rolls that are both incomplete and inaccurate.
- The governments of the vast majority of modern nations provide a clear model for reform, as they see registering citizens to vote as one of their critical responsibilities.
- Universal youth voter registration can only be attained by having the government automatically register youths to vote, or by creating a systematic process, such as making voter registration a graduation requirement.

Millions of eligible young American voters fail to turnout for elections and participate in our democracy, with many of these citizens not even registered to vote. The problem of low voter turnout in the United States is not a new one; there has been only one presidential election since 1972 where more than 60% of the young voting age population went to the polls. Turnout rates among those reaching voting age in recent elections suggest that this problem will continue in years to come. In the 2006-midterm elections, less than a quarter of young voters participated and, even in the hotly contested 2004 presidential election, less than 50% of the eligible 18-24 year-olds turned out to vote. One of the most basic reasons is voter registration – for all ages, only seven of ten citizens are registered, and the rate is even lower for those under 25 at less than 60% registered to vote.

Many groups address the problem of low youth voter participation with varying degrees of success, but even the most effective efforts have had significant limitations. First, these voter registration initiatives alone are incapable of achieving universal registration, because by leaving the root causes of under-participation intact, they require constant mobilization of personnel and financial resources *every* election cycle. Second, many voter registration and mobilization efforts are partisan and therefore overtly exclude a major percentage of the population – all prospective voters in areas that are not competitive and voters in their targeted areas that quite plausibly vote against their party of choice. Third, although nonpartisan efforts will not avoid registering voters regardless of political leanings, they typically seek to maximize their influence by following the partisan model of focusing on targeted districts and states, thereby similarly ignoring large regions of the country. Fourth, these registration and mobilization efforts generally take place only in election years – with large-scale efforts only every four years in presidential election years – and thus can miss those reaching voting age in the years between elections. Finally, many youth registration and mobilization efforts focus on mobilizing those deemed most likely to vote, meaning they do not spend the time and resources necessary to educate and engage those voters who now are most significantly underrepresented in the political process.

The result of our ad-hoc, patchwork voter registration system is the creation of a process that encourages misconduct and results in voter rolls that are both incomplete and inaccurate. In Nevada and Wisconsin in 2004, for example, private registration organizations were found responsible for failing to submit valid registration forms and creating false names and addresses to boost their registration numbers. Although some laws have been passed to limit these fraudulent activities, these are only topical remedies that do nothing to prevent the opportunities or incentives for indiscretion. Apart from these malicious problems, the current registration system often results in a backlog of registrations turned in close to registration deadlines, resulting in innocent mistakes when attempting to add these registrants to the voter rolls. These voter rolls increase the likelihood that citizens will either not be allowed to vote at all on election day or will need to cast a provisional ballot, the counting of which have been notoriously problematic in recent elections.

The governments of the vast majority of modern nations provide a clear model for reform, as they see registering citizens to vote as one of their critical roles and therefore automatically register their citizens. The fact that this dismal voter registration rate puts the United States far outside the international norm is clearly tied to the fact that our voter registration processes themselves are completely outside the international norm. In contrast to the global norm, within the United States, the default setting of society is to assume nonparticipation in our civic process, and citizens, either through the work of NGO's or by themselves, must opt-in to our election systems. America's voter participation crisis cannot rely wholly on charitable groups or partisan groups as the solution. Even the National Voter Registration Act (the "motor voter" bill) limits the governments' role to making voter registration more accessible, leaving the responsibility for registration solely to individuals. Through our youth voter registration initiative, we can break through this negative perspective on voting and instead create bold and innovative initiatives to bring youths closer to a 100% registration rate.

Universal youth voter registration can only be attained by having the government automatically register youths to vote, or by creating a systematic process, such as making voter registration a graduation requirement. In order to treat voting as a fundamental right that deserves full protection, we must advocate policy proposals designed to produce complete and accurate voter rolls. Policymakers should create a high school-based system designed to automatically register every young person as they reach voting age regardless of their party inclination, what state they live in or the date of the next major election. Creating a new graduation requirement, mandating registration to register for classes, or adding voter registration to existing community service requirements can accomplish this. Additionally, state or federal laws should allow voter registration as soon as when people turn 16 years old, as is already the case Hawaii, thereby allowing youths to be added to voter rolls automatically when they reach voting age. The idea is to ensure that these youth registration policies reach as many young people as possible, even those who leave high school before they are old enough to register. Equally important, youth voter registration must be combined with an educational component designed to boost voter turnout among newly eligible voters as the first step toward a lifelong practice of civic engagement in local, state and national government.

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