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## YOUNG ADULT VOTING SKYROCKETED IN 2018. WHAT CAN WE DO TO MAKE IT HAPPEN AGAIN?



In 2014, the voting rates for young adults plunged to their lowest point in close to 40 years, with less than 20 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds turning out at the polls.

Just four years later, an entirely different picture emerged as young adult voting rates jumped to 36 percent – a whopping 80 percent increase.

What happened? Why did these voting rates increase so much? Conversely, why have they historically been so low? To what extent does the young adult vote (also called the “youth vote”) matter and to whom? Who are today’s young voters, and how can we encourage more of them to participate in the electoral process?

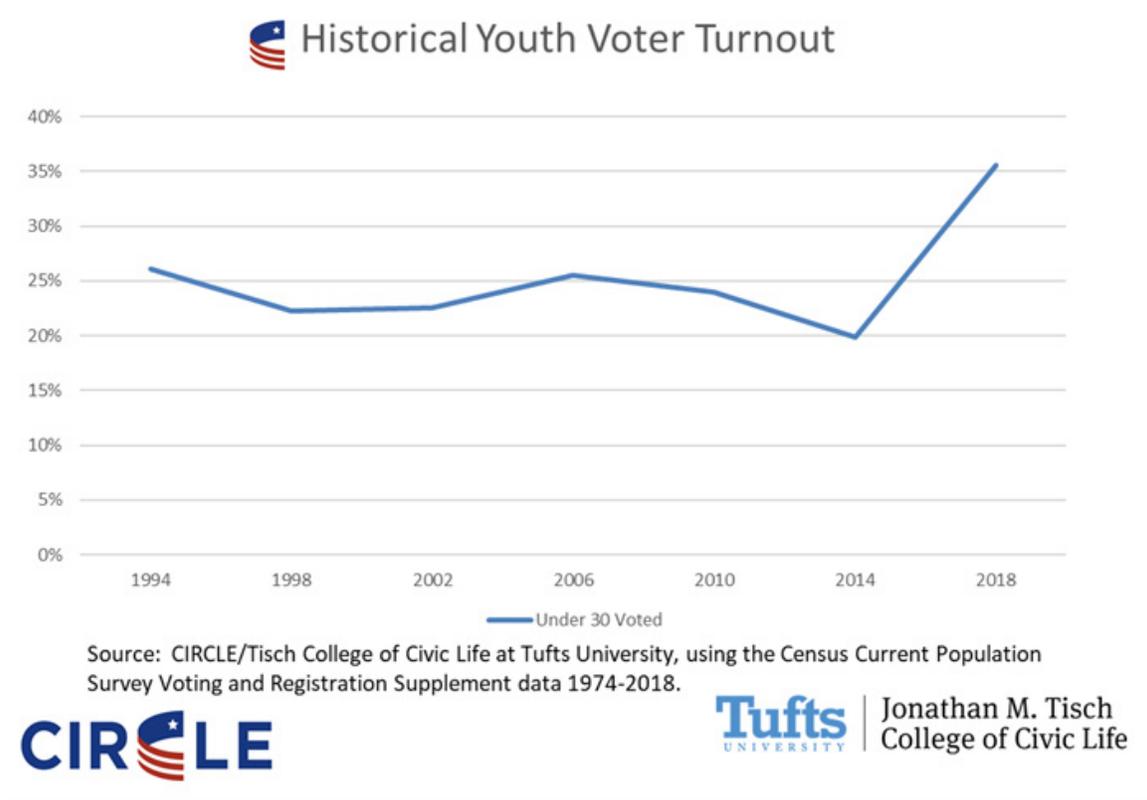
In the Q&A below, [National Education Policy Center Fellow John Rogers](#) of UCLA and his collaborators, [Joe Kahne](#) and [Erica Hodgkin](#) of the Civic Engagement Research Group (CERG) at the University of California, Riverside, address these and other questions about young people and voting. They conclude with practical ways that educators and policymakers can encourage more young people to vote.

[Hodgin](#) is the associate director of CERG. Her work focuses on the distribution, quality, and influence of youth civic learning and digital civic learning opportunities.

[Kahne](#) is the Ted and Jo Dutton Presidential Professor for Education Policy and Politics at the University of California, Riverside and the director of CERG. His research and writing focuses on ways that education and digital media influence youth civic and political development.

[Rogers](#) is a professor in UCLA’s Graduate School of Education & Information Studies and

the director of UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access. He also serves as the faculty co-director of UCLA's Principal Leadership Institute. Rogers studies public engagement and community organizing as strategies for equity-focused school reform and democratic renewal.



**Q: Is the “Youth Vote” a meaningful category?**

**A:** Sort of. The press and the public often talk about “youth” as though young people are quite similar. And, of course, in many ways they are. But when it comes to politics, different groups of young people are very different. Consider party affiliation. Many news stories have been written about the fact that young people are mostly supporting the Democratic Party. Overall, that’s true (those 18-29 years old went for Clinton over Trump by 18 percent). But this statistic masks huge differences by race. Lost in the 18 percent figure is the fact that White youth were 5 percent more likely to vote for Trump than for Clinton. The big Clinton/Trump difference was *due to the fact that African American youth were 74 percent more likely to support Clinton than Trump, and Latinx youth were 46 percent more likely to support Clinton than Trump.* Different groups of young people also hold different policy priorities. According to a *May 2019 survey by GenForward*, the issue that matters most to African American young people is racism. For Asian American youth it is health care, for Latinx young people it is immigration, and for White youth it is climate change. So there is no single or simple answer to the question, “What do youth really care about?” It’s crucial to ask: “Which youth?”

**Q: Are some youth more likely to vote than others?**

**A:** *Not all young people are equally likely to turn out. For example, young people with college degrees or who are enrolled in college vote at far higher rates than their peers with less formal education. Data compiled by Circle show that in 2018, 21.1 percent of 18-24 year-olds with no experience in college voted in the election. By contrast, people in that age group were roughly twice as likely to vote that year if they had at least some college experience. This disparity underscores the importance of ensuring that all students have access to quality civic education during their K-12 schooling.*

**Q: What leads young people to vote (or not)?**

**A:** *Like American adults of all ages, youth electoral participation turns on a variety of factors, including motivation, real and perceived barriers, and eligibility. By far the most common explanation among young people for why they did not vote in 2016 was that they didn't like the candidates or the issues that were addressed during the campaign. Non-voting youth also cited time conflicts (due to work or school), difficulty getting to the polls, and challenges with registering to vote. Some barriers are more salient for certain groups of young people. Lower SES youth were more likely than their peers to cite lack of transportation as a barrier to voting. Youth of color were most likely to report that they had been deterred from voting by Voter ID laws.*

**Q: What strategies are likely to encourage more youth voting?**

**A:** *Policies that facilitate voter registration of young people while they are still in school appear to be effective in supporting youth voting. So too are efforts to target communication and outreach to young people.*

*And schools matter. Over the course of the past 15 years several rigorous longitudinal studies have found that particular educational practices can promote a greater commitment to vote and higher voting rates. These practices include: instructional content focused on American government and current events, discussions of controversial issues, participation in extracurricular activities, and required and voluntary community service. Because voting is habit-forming, efforts to increase the first vote of young people are likely to have a particularly powerful effect over the longer term.*

**Q: Beyond turning out young people, are there related issues that need to be addressed?**

**A:** *It is important for schools to help students understand that the question of who is qualified to vote has been contested throughout American history. Many groups have been excluded from suffrage in the past (on the basis of property, gender, race, and much more) and some continue to be excluded today. Ideally, educators will support students to grapple with this difficult history and expose students to contemporary movements to expand access to voting.*

*Moreover, it's important to consider how young people are making sense of pressing societal issues. Fortunately, the same civic education practices noted above (discussion of*

controversial issues, etc.) have also been found to promote more informed and reflective civic and political actors.

Finally, civic education must expand to respond to our new digital reality. For example, recent studies show that adults and young people struggle a great deal to distinguish real from fake information. A [2016 research study](#) showed that many youth have difficulty judging the credibility of online information. At the same time, as recent social movement activity has made clear, many youths strategically use social media to learn about issues, inform their networks, and mobilize others. Clearly schools have a new and important role to play in supporting critical media literacies that enable youth to consume, create, and share information and perspectives.

**Q: What can school-level educators do?**

**A:** Educators can play a role in “growing voters” by helping young people understand and experience democracy well before they reach voting age. This can happen through a variety of curricular experiences, school-wide efforts to increase student voice and participation in decision-making, as well as voter registration and electoral engagement.

Check out the Teaching for Democracy Alliance’s [checklist and self-assessment matrix](#). The Alliance is made up of a number of national organizations that each have [related resources](#) to support educators.

**Q: What can school districts and states do?**

**A:** School districts can provide guidance, resources, examples, and encouragement for schools in their region to promote engagement with voting and elections. For example, the [Social Science and Civic Engagement Department in Chicago Public Schools](#) created an [Elections Participation Guide](#) for schools and teachers that highlighted five ways students can participate in the elections, regardless of age, citizenship, or other voting criterion. These included activities such as learning about issues, educating others, registering and mobilizing voters, and advocating in the community. In order to galvanize energy and attention, the Department also put out a “[Call to Action](#)” to schools and educators in the district to get involved and then share what they did, so the district could celebrate examples of students and schools increasing voter turnout in their neighborhood.

In addition, many cities across the country have considered (and even passed) [measures](#) allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in local elections. Statewide measures in places like California, Louisiana, and Hawaii have also been advanced to allow 16-year-olds to pre-register. These policies help ensure that eligible youth are included on the voter rolls when they turn 18 and may ease the pathway to voting.

**Q: How does promoting informed electoral engagement fit with the broader democratic purposes of public schooling?**

**A:** Public schools, with their emphasis on evidence-based inquiry and their reach across all sectors of society, are ideally positioned to support more informed and equitable electoral participation. Further, such efforts will invite students to consider how electoral politics

sits alongside and interacts with many other strategies for effecting social change.

**Q: Are there other recommendations for educators who might be interested in learning more about how to promote informed and equitable voting in their schools?**

**A:** *Educators can sign up for an online course we (the LEADE Initiative) are offering in partnership with CIRCLE titled [Educating for Informed and Equitable Voting](#) starting September 23rd through November 18th. The four-credit, eight-week course is for educators in all grade levels. Participants in the course will learn about trends in youth voting, key approaches in voter mobilization and civic education, as well as resources and models for teaching about elections and voting in a non-partisan way. The course will culminate with participants developing an action or unit plan that they will implement in their classroom, school, or district aimed at promoting informed and equitable voting. [Note that the course cost is \$495 with the Early Bird Discount, which ends on September 13<sup>th</sup>; \$545 after September 13<sup>th</sup>.]*

## NEPC Resources on Democracy and Education

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