

Voting Rates and Alternative Methods of Voting:
A Study on the Low Voting Rates of Young Citizens in Michigan and Possible Alternate
Methods

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Abstract

In this thesis I will explore political apathy in those aged 18-24 (a group that generally does not vote in large numbers) in Michigan and how to improve voting rates among those age groups. In doing so, it also delves into the myriad of potential obstructions to voting (e.g. lack of quality information about candidates, lack of time available to spend at the polls, etc.) and presents some possible solutions to these problems (e.g. providing more information about voting/candidates, potentially through schools or organizations dedicated to distributing election information, providing alternative methods/changing aspects of voting to increase voter participation, etc.)

The questions tackled through this thesis are such: Why is voter participation so low in the 18-24 age group in Michigan? And, what reforms (like alternate methods, etc.) can be implemented in order to increase that turnout? The likely results and benefits go hand in hand for this project.

The solutions that I am able to research and provide, if they gain traction, will hopefully provide local and state governments distinct plans that may increase voter activity. The main benefit may be an increasingly democratic society where the politicians in power more accurately represent their constituents.

Keywords: voting, voting rates, alternatives, alternative voting methods, Michigan voters

Voting Rates and Alternative Methods of Voting

Voting has long been considered a civic duty of every citizen residing within the United States. Starting with the creation of the U.S. Constitution in 1787 and in subsequent amendments, voting rights have been expanded to nearly every adult citizen in America. However, the creation of these voting rights does not necessarily mean that every person will utilize them. In the 2016 presidential election, 55% of the voting-age population voted nationwide; put another way, 45% of eligible citizens did not vote. One major portion of the electorate that does not vote are young voters (typically grouped together from ages 18-29 for statistical purposes). As of 2016, this age group makes up nearly 31% of eligible voters in the voting pool, but continue to have the lowest voter turnout of any age group (Khalid, 2016). Turnout did not fare much better in the 2018 elections, but it was significantly improved from the previous midterms in 2014. Total turnout came out to just over 50% (Domonske, 2018) and youth turnout again lagged behind at just 36% of eligible voters in that section of the populace (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019); this compared to a 41% overall turnout and a 19% youth turnout in 2014 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Statistics for Michigan itself, the main focus of this research project, average around the national standard. The average voting rate across ten of the biggest universities within Michigan only averaged around 19% in 2014 (French, 2018), increased twenty percentage points to nearly 40% in 2018 (Institute for Democracy & Higher Education, 2019).

Why are young people not voting, and what can be done to increase their participation in the election process? These are the important questions that shaped the research for the thesis to come. The analysis of these important questions is separated into four distinct sections. The first section provides a broad overview of voting habits for the youth in Michigan, taking into

consideration any distinction where youth voting rates widely differ against the overall average rates (e.g. presidential elections vs. local elections, voting rates increasing or decreasing based upon the years, economic and/or education background, etc.). The second portion examines why the voting rates are so low for this portion of the electorate, utilizing reasoning from the youth themselves. Focus group data is supplemented with published research in order to gain insight into the major reasons why the youth are not voting in Michigan. The third section delves into alternative methods of voting that have been put forward as potential solutions to low voting rates for all citizens, although some will more directly impact a younger generation. These methods are split into two categories: structural changes, like expanding by-mail voting, and educational changes, like increasing civic education within schools. The fourth and final part of the analysis combines the previous three into a streamlined policy recommendation for governments as well as an overall summation of voting as it pertains to the youth population. This section will provide local and/or state governments a blueprint for increasing voter turnout as well as provide a reflection upon what option (or combination of options) would be most feasible to fundamentally and permanently increase informed voter turnout.

Background

In order to study the voting habits of the American youth, it is important to first outline and compare the voting rates of the other age groups against the youth demographic. In 2016, the latest presidential election, nearly 60% of 30 to 44-year-olds, more than 65% of 45 to 59-year-olds, and over 70% of individuals 60 and older voted in that election, compared to that 40% mark from the “youth” group (McDonald, n.d.). Similarly, in 2018, the latest “midterm” election, those three previous groups held 45%, 55%, and 65% turnout respectively, compared to the 30% of the 18-29 age group (McDonald, n.d.). According to McDonald, though, these lower numbers

(comparatively) are not anything new. Dating back to the 1986 midterm elections, the 18-29 demographic has lagged behind the other three previously-established groups by a considerable margin. These statistics also showcase that the “type” of election does not particularly shape youth turnout in any particular fashion. Presidential elections tend to garner more participation from the younger age group than midterm elections, but that is true for all age ranges. Plus, the increase in attention paid for those presidential elections has not escalated youth rates above the rates of those other age groups.

There is another demographic grouping that provides some additional context into the lack of youth voting in America. Electproject.org also tracks the turnout rate of the voting-age population by level of education, but before we can dive into this data completely, there are a couple of caveats as it relates to this particular research project. First, this data includes all voting-age citizens, not just the 18-24 age group which is the focus of this thesis. Secondly, because these demographic-based data results are compiled independently of one another, there is no fool-proof way to tie together an age with a level of education. This may mean that the results based on education that will follow in this paragraph may not be indicative for the age group covered in this thesis. Nevertheless, the data is consistent enough to support the general idea of the trend that I wish to connect between age and education. In short, over the past 24 years, there have been consistent trends pertaining to voter turnout and the highest level of education one has. To single out the 2016 election in particular, those who had not completed high school (or a high school equivalent) turned out at over 30%, those who had completed high school were at just over 50%, those who had completed some college or were a college graduate voted at just under 70%, and those who had completed post-graduate schooling voted at around an 80% mark (McDonald, n.d.). There are some major trends that we can connect back to the

young voters, minus one very obvious outlier. Those that are 18-24 have very few, if any opportunity to be enrolled in nor complete a post graduate program, so that particular set of data has very little influence on this direct comparison. However, those four previous data points showcase this trend: the more education you receive, the more likely you are to vote. These data help inform the next several sections of this research, including why the voting rates for youth are low and the alternative methods section.

Unfortunately, this is where demographic breakdowns, for our purposes, stop being helpful. Besides age, we can really only tacitly assume education status based upon the average age that young people tend to enter into secondary education and receive their degrees. Attempting to presume and tie together age with other demographic measurements would be a tenuous connection at best. Take for example, data demonstrating the connection between socioeconomic status and voting rates. One could use this data and assume a number of things in order to make the claim that young people would be on the lower end of the economic spectrum. However, that correlation is not strong enough to be utilized in academic research. Unlike with education, where it is safe to assume that no 18-24-year-old has received a post-graduate degree and most, if not all fall into those other three categories, economic statuses are more difficult to forecast. The trends that economic/voting data could show us might not be the trend within the youth age group, nullifying the connections and correlations that we could pull from them. The same will go for gender and race and many other demographic measurements like them. Unless demographics could be cross-referenced with one another (which, due to the anonymity of voting, will never be able to be accomplished), it will be difficult for the research in this paper to pull from any of those statistics other than education.

Methodology

Shifting to my own personal research, there were several steps involved with conducting and collecting the focus group data. I created ten questions related to either voting in general or alternative methods and instructed the participants to write down answers for all of them. After all the participants were finished, discussion was prompted and any expansion of their written answers was noted by the proctor (myself) on a separate, blank questionnaire. If a participant was not comfortable sharing an answer with the rest of the group, they were not forced to participate on each and every question discussion. Before getting to the results, it must be noted that participation in this focus group was exceedingly low. Despite numerous promotions and an incentive (in the form of a free lunch), only four participants took part in the focus group. Despite the disappointing turnout, I believe these results are indicative for two reasons. First, despite the small sample size, the answers that the participants gave reflect some of the most prominent examples explored later on in this paper (both in the voting rate and alternate methods categories). Secondly, the low number for participants, I believe, proves the overall point of this thesis even further. For whatever reason, despite an incentive attached to it, the focus group was under-attended. This sort of finding potentially echoes the same concerns that young people have over voting (not enough time, voting apathy, etc.).

Examination of Youth Voting Rates and Impediments to Voting

One way to examine why the voting rate for the youth population is so low is to talk directly to young people. This research will depend on two different types of sources that will enumerate some of the reasons: primary (my personal focus group data) and secondary (survey data from other sources, etc.). The focus group data that was collected first-handedly afforded

many insights to this research process; however, the more opinions and reasonings that could be offered to this project through the secondary data, the better. Both will be incorporated into the proceeding paragraphs and the source will be indicated in order to delineate between my own research and outside research.

Lack of Time

One of the overwhelming responses to the question “What kept you from voting in 2018?” from my own focus group data was some version of “lack of time to vote due to outstanding circumstances.” These outstanding circumstances were most commonly either school or work-related commitments. 50% of participants in the focus group sessions cited this as the biggest obstacle to them voting (Jacobs, 2020). Unfortunately, this is a problem for 18-24-year-olds across the country. Many young people either live away or commute far distances to their secondary schooling, and while some can obtain absentee ballots, others may not have been able to (especially before states like Michigan passed acts like Proposal 3 during the 2018 midterm elections). Also, the Tuesday of the election is not a federal holiday, so universities and colleges are not required to have the day off (recently, Michigan State University instituted a fall break that will include election day; opinions are mixed as to whether this will increase or decrease turnout) (Johnson, 2020). A good portion of the age group that was analyzed have at least a part-time job while in college, and 40% of undergraduates work 30 hours a week (Scholastica, 2018). Many students either have class all day or go to class and then to their jobs, limiting the window for them to go stand in line and vote. As previously mentioned, college students also maintain jobs in order to pay off student loan debt, housing costs, and other day-to-day expenses that come with their fairly new adult life. Some jobs are not accommodating to their young employees in order to let them stand in line and vote, and lunch breaks are often not

enough time to complete the process. For most, their academics and/or their monetary income are much more important in the immediate than the theoretical good that comes from completing a civic task in voting.

Processes Related to Voting

Unfortunately for young people, there are additional impediments to their ability to vote. These next examples, however, are related more to the process of voting itself rather than the individual's own commitments. One of the major hurdles that exists is registration. There are a number of reasons why young people have not registered themselves to vote. Some of them, like apathy toward the political process, will be covered later in this section. However, other reasons are tied directly to the voting process itself. Many might not know how to register or where to start the process. Again, as mentioned previously, many 18-24-year-olds lead busy lives with a combination of school and/or work. If an individual does not have the knowledge of how to register on hand, there may exist little time to put in the research. Another reason young people might not register may be due to false rumors associated with registering. For example, many from an older generation believed that not registering to vote allowed them to avoid being called upon for jury duty, seemingly a road block to one's personal life. Whether or not that had been true previously, states, like Michigan, now go about selecting citizens for jury duty in a different manner. However, many still hold that previous belief to be true. For registration in general, actions have been taken in order to make the process much easier. Civic-centered groups on college campuses have made concerted efforts to hold "registration drives" in order to register as many young people to vote as they can, like the Campus Vote Project group who work with 150 colleges/universities and over 2 million college students ("Campus Vote Project – About", n.d.). Furthermore, the 2018 midterm elections pushed efforts one step further in Michigan, making

registration automatic for all citizens 18 and older. It remains to be seen whether the automatic registration will increase voter turnout.

Another potential impediment to young people voting lies with information about the candidates themselves and the positions of government for which they are running. In this day and age, many different types of mediums exist for people to get local and national news items from, including information about political candidates. Social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter have become platforms where young people can get their news and receive information about candidates, with 75% of focus group respondents stating they receive news about candidates and/or elections through some type of social media (Jacobs, 2020). However, there is an innately bigger risk that false news reports and information about candidates can be shared to reach a wide audience of potential voters through the internet (Shearer & Grieco, 2019). The internet as a whole is a great tool for young people to use in order to stay informed as well, but it suffers from the same problems as the social media apps. More antiquated forms of media such as radio and print are not popular with younger demographics, so the possibility of receiving information from those sources remains minimal at best. Even cable television, still overall one of the more popular ways to receive information on candidates, is waning in its popularity with the younger demographic (Shearer, 2018). With young people no longer reading newspapers or even watching cable television, campaign staff for candidates have adjusted to utilizing advertisement space on websites in order to reach the 18-29 group. Unfortunately, static advertisements are rarely clicked upon (“Average Click-Through Rate”, n.d.), and video advertisements placed in front of videos on apps like YouTube are commonly skipped and ignored.

Candidate Information

This is all to say that many candidates, especially local ones, remain virtually unknown to many eligible voters, not just those residing within the youth demographic. Presidential elections are easier to get informed about; no matter how hard they may try to avoid it, many voters will at least learn the two majority candidates running for the presidency and some of their basic positions on issues from some source, whether it be through media or conversations with friends, family, or coworkers (Oliphant, 2016). Local and state elections tend to be a different story. Although an election for governor tends to fall into the same sort of recognition category as the presidency, many other races have candidates from both parties that are mostly unknown to their potential constituents (Tracy, 2010). In the focus group findings, only 25% of respondents stated that they had any interest in a specific local position and/or candidate (Jacobs, 2020). Unfortunately, there is no all-encompassing “one stop shop” for young voters to get vital information about their local candidates. Local newspapers tend to give overviews of the candidates in the lead-up to election day; however, as previously mentioned, many young people do not seek out national newspapers to get their news coverage, much less local papers. Websites such as vote411.org attempt to compile as much candidate information as possible in order to serve this online generation. Sites like this offer a great amount of information (including how to register and where your polling place is), but as far as candidate information goes, it suffers in two key areas. First, although these sites are great sources for compiled data about local candidates, it only goes as far as their contributors can take it. If there is a shortage of people who are able to provide candidate information to the website, those elections/candidates just remain uncovered, leaving voters just as uninformed as before. The second problem lies with name/brand recognition for these websites. Sites like [vote411](http://vote411.org) and [Ballotpedia](http://Ballotpedia.com) are not household names, despite their promotion by voting activist groups. With young people leading busy lives

and utilizing their free time in other ways, many do not know that these in-depth sources exist online. They may be forced to vote uninformedly or pass on voting all together due to their unfortunate lack of awareness that these nearly-comprehensive election websites exist.

Apathy

The other problem that can affect the youth demographic when it comes to voting is apathy. There is no effective way to truly measure the amount of apathy one has toward a particular subject, but suffice to say it is a real issue as far as voting is concerned. Twenty-five percent of focus group respondents cited lack of motivation as the biggest obstacle to them voting (Jacobs, 2020). As previously mentioned, the 24/7 news cycle has brought about much more attention to news than in previous generations. While this increased focus on news events has brought about burnout in some, others tend to ignore and not care about politics all together. Unfortunately, many young people live under the belief that voting, even in local elections, has no payoff (Perceptions of the public's voice in government and politics, 2019). Some believe they are ultimately unaffected by politics and government and warrant it no consideration in their day-to-day lives. Others tend to buy into the "my singular vote won't change the election", so they give up on voting all told. Many young people think government, whether local, state, or federal, does not "tangibly" affect young people the way that their schooling or work does, despite the fact that government constantly shapes and regulates the world around them. Many only care about their government when it affects them in a hugely negative fashion, such as road construction or spending the day at the Secretary of State's office to renew their license plates. Voting is still sometimes seen as an all-day affair, with negative consequences attached via missing school or work.

Alternative Methods to Potentially Increase Voter Turnout

Now that the potential roadblocks to voting have been discussed, one question remains: What can be done to remedy these issues? The following sections will delve into the possible alternative methods that can be applied to the voting process in order to increase the likelihood of the youth demographic voting (of course, these methods would be applied to all voting-eligible citizens, and the recommendations at the end of this project would hopefully increase participation across all age groups). As previously stated, the following changes can be classified into two distinct categories: structural and educational. These methods can cross over and at times be a mix of both, but in order to present them in an organized manner, they will remain in these categories.

Structural Changes

Beginning with the structural changes, one of the more popular suggestions for increasing voter turnout has been to change the actual date of the election. Calls for this type of change have manifested themselves in a number of ways. The first suggestion involves making election day a federal holiday. 50% of focus group respondents cited this as a particular addendum that could make voting easier for them (Jacobs, 2020). Giving citizens the day off from school and work would theoretically give them more time to go to the polls and vote, eliminating a major problem associated with the voting process. However, critics of this idea point towards other federal holidays such as Fourth of July in order to express their concerns with anointing yet another federal holiday. Fourth of July (and the surrounding weekend) is not primarily seen as an opportunity to celebrate the birth of the United States, but moreover as an opportunity to light off fireworks and hold backyard barbecues (these can be utilized to celebrate the US, but again, is

not the driving factor behind these activities). Many feel that making election day a federal holiday will encourage Americans to take the day entirely off and lose focus of the goal at hand: voting.

A second, similar suggestion to making election day a federal holiday involves moving the date from the first Tuesday in November to the first Saturday in November. This move to the weekend and away from a hectic, middle-of-the-week slot, has a number of positive ramifications. The main one being of a similar ilk as the previous suggestion: more time to vote. Instead of holding important elections during the week when, as previously established, many people have school and/or work, moving it towards the weekend would open up more time for people to vote. However, there are several drawbacks from this approach as well. First, many utilize Saturday as their only day off to go out, with the week confined to work and Sunday confined to worship (for some). Another drawback involves the fact that many schools and workplaces have added classes/shifts on Saturdays, limiting the effectiveness of moving the election to what was supposed to be a relatively work and school-free day. Both of these suggestions attempt to attack the logistical problem of time with voting, hoping to attract more voters in their time off instead of forcing them to fit it in to an already busy schedule. However, there are several potential drawbacks with the schedule change, the primary of which being that a day off will not incentivize potential voters to go out and vote, instead choosing to just enjoy their new free time (or already scheduled free time in the case of the Saturday election).

Another set of structural changes comes in the form of the actual method of voting. By far the most popular (and sometimes only way) to vote involves standing in line and casting a ballot at your local polling place. As previously discussed, however, busy lives often don't accommodate such an endeavor, especially in a heavily populated area. Moving the election date

has already been discussed, but what about re-prioritizing other methods of voting? There are three other options that, if implemented in the correct way, could both bring in new young voters and become healthy supplements to in-person voting. The first option that can be expanded upon (and has in several states already) is no-excuse absentee voting. Absentee ballots are obtained by voting-eligible citizens requesting them, and requires the voter to return the ballot either in-person or by mail. Unfortunately, the ease with which one could have access to these absentee ballots has not always been the forefront of election officials. Previously, in many states, an “excuse” was required in order to obtain such a ballot. These excuses could include: absence from one’s home county, illness or physical disability, being required to work during polling hours, religious observance, or a non-felony incarceration (Absentee voting, n.d.). Of course, there are many justifiable excuses not among those listed that could require a voter to miss their chance at voting. Prominently, child care or anything relating to children could be a major reason why mothers and/or fathers are not able to vote in elections (considering that, in many places, children are given the election day off from school in order for the government to utilize the school buildings as polling places). Fortunately, many states have moved away from excuse absentee ballots to no-excuse absentee balloting. In fact, twenty-eight states (plus the District of Columbia) have moved toward the no-excuse system, allowing any eligible voter to request and fill out an absentee ballot (Absentee voting, n.d.). In comparison, nineteen states still require an excuse for absentee ballots (and for reference, four states have all-mail voting, a concept this thesis will cover later on) (Absentee voting, n.d.). Specifically, Michigan just approved no-excuse absentee ballots along with a variety of other addendums with Proposal 3 in 2018. Of course, no data is available yet in terms of how successful no-excuse ballots are in Michigan yet, but hopefully the 2020 election will bring about increased numbers due to this change.

Another option for changing the actual method of voting comes by way of the mail. Similar to an absentee ballot, all-mail elections typically send every registered voter a paper ballot to fill out and send back during an “election period” (Lynch, 2019). This allows voters a significantly longer amount of time to complete and return the ballot than in-person voting and even absentee ballots can afford. As previously mentioned, four states (Oregon, Washington, Colorado, and Hawaii) hold all of their elections entirely by mail (Lynch, 2019). Other states such as Utah, Hawaii, and California have allowed certain counties to hold all-mail elections for their specific elections. Despite its exclusionary-sounding name, all-mail voting systems do not prohibit voters from casting their ballots in person. If a voter were to forget to fill out their paper ballot but find the time to make it to a polling place on Election Day, those services are still available to them. There are, of course, positives and negatives associated with shifting your state or even just a county over towards this system. As far as the negatives are concerned for the state or local governments, the largest may be financial. Printing a paper ballot for every registered voter in a particular district as well as having them available for in-person voting will certainly place more of a financial burden upon the Secretary of State or whomever the state’s chief election officer is. Aside from the financial aspect, this system would also place a heavier responsibility upon the postal service to deliver and return these ballots. Making sure that these ballots get to their registered voters could be difficult if they have a shared P.O. Box or if they are Native Americans who live on a reservation, for example.

Despite these potential negatives, there are several advantages that come with using this system. The first positive doubles as a solution for one of the youth demographic’s problems associated with voting: lack of time. Having a ballot to fill out at home allows young voters to do research at their own pace and take part in the democratic process without having to jeopardize

their school or work. The other advantage strikes at the very purpose of this research paper: turnout. Though the data is very limited due to the small amount of states who have this system and the recency with which they installed it, reports have indicated that all-mail ballots have increased overall turnout in the elections that they are used. In fact, a report about Utah's vote-by-mail system shows that the 18-24 age group (for both genders) voting in an all-mail county showcased a near 8% improvement in turnout when compared to the youths in a "standard" voting county (Lynch, 2019). Of course, this result only showcases a couple of counties in one state, but the trend is a positive one for the youths in terms of vote-by-mail.

The final alternative method to "standard" voting is the most reliant on current technology and perhaps filled with the most potential controversy: online/internet voting. This possibility has garnered a lot of interest in the eighteen-to-twenty-four demographic, with 100% of focus group participants interested in an online system (Jacobs, 2020). In this day and age, with technology playing a huge part in day-to-day life for many youths, it would make sense to look into an online system for voting. Now, a move to this system would not have to eliminate the other systems of voting if the states/counties wanted to keep them intact. Much like the vote-by-mail system, the polling places could be kept open for those that are not technologically inclined, for example. There are a number of countries outside of the United States that have employed an online system for their elections, including Australia, Canada, and France. In Estonia, citizens are given a smart ID card (similar to a national ID) in order to authenticate their vote through the system (Internet Voting Outside the United States, n.d.). In Finland, authorities utilize a kiosk system for citizens to vote upon, a system that the US Election Assistance Committee deemed the safest way for online voting to commence (Internet Voting Outside the United States, n.d.). However, with each of these systems employed in these countries, security

is and continues to be a huge problem with the results of these elections. Technology experts within the countries holding the internet elections have been able to hack into and change the results as a test, let alone having other countries attempt to invalidate elections. Hackers have also been able to gain access to these machines and invalidate elections, from within these countries and out. The fact of the matter is that online voting is still too unprotected to become a viable replacement for regular means of voting. Leaving pertinent information such as votes in an election up to the “cloud” or wherever the information gets stored is always allowing an open door to harmful people looking to affect the results of that election. Paper ballots, at this point in time, are much easier to secure and keep valid than online/internet ballots.

Educational Changes

Now that the more structural solutions have been analyzed in great detail, the more educational attempts to increase voter participation can be discussed. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Psychology defines civic education as “all the processes that affect people’s beliefs, commitments, capabilities, and actions as members or prospective members of communities” (Crittenden & Levine, 2018). This type of education through schooling for young people has a significant link to voter turnout (or lack thereof) for this demographic. CIRCLE (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) is an organization that has done research upon this supposed correlation. In their findings, sixty percent of respondents who recalled studying voting procedures in high school turned out to vote in 2012, as compared to a forty-three percent turnout for those who did not recall studying voting (CIRCLE High School Civic Education, 2013). Of course, it cannot be proven that a prominence in civic education causes a higher turnout of voters; however, as the findings report, “... active and informed citizens tend to be people who had good civic education” (CIRCLE High School Civic

Education, 2013). This statement may seem obvious, but civic education is not a guarantee for most students across the country. According to a report from the same organization, only 3 in 5 high schoolers had learned where they could vote and how they could register to vote within their state (CIRCLE Staff, 2013). Non-partisan organizations across the country have attempted to fill in the gaps of the public education as far as civics are concerned. According to americanprogress.org, Kids Voting USA “has seen some success in increasing voter participation... for low-income students and people of color” and the program contains “interactive lesson plans” in order to increase student involvement with subjects like elections (Root & Kennedy, 2018). Organizations like Kids Voting USA and Generation Citizen have produced tangible results, like in Kansas where counties that adopted Kids Voting showcased a two percent increase in voter turnout for eighteen-year-olds than in those counties without the program (Root & Kennedy, 2018). In addition, these programs have produced positive abstract changes, like with Generation Citizen increasing civic motivation by the end of the school year in sixty-two percent of respondents (Root & Kennedy, 2018).

Despite the work of these organizations, the majority of civic education (or lack thereof) exists within the school systems themselves. School tends to be where young people learn about the inner workings of government: the three branches, the constitution, the senate and the house of representatives, etc. However, this sort of fundamental learning about civics does not happen in a uniform way across the country (and in some states, hardly at all). According to a Brookings Institution report, 43 states and Washington D.C. require high schoolers to take one civic education course in order to graduate (Mann, 2018). A large majority to be sure, but that still leaves seven states culpable for leaving newly-eligible voters without the base knowledge they need to be fully informed citizens (as a note, these classes could and probably are offered within

the high schools in these states; however, speaking from experience, students tend to only take the classes that are required of them). Even in the 43 plus D.C. states that require civic education, there are many inconsistencies between districts in terms of the civic education allowed to their students. Now, to be fair, this portion of the Brookings Institute report is basing their findings upon official curriculum posted by specific state departments of education. There may be discrepancies from district to district, school to school, or even classroom to classroom that include some of what the Brookings report calls “proven practices” that are not listed on the official lesson plans. There is one “proven practice” that all 51 states plus D.C. have within their social studies/civic education curriculum: discussion of current events (Hansen, Mann, Valant, & Quintero, 2018). This is a very important part of civic education to be sure. In order to be engaged participants in civics in their day-to-day lives, students need to have an understanding of current events, both on a micro and macro scale, in order to put what they are learning about their governments into context. Not every current event needs to be brought up and not every student needs a “hard and fast” opinion about every story, but an encapsulation of the goings on in their state, the country, and the world is a good start as far as engagement is concerned.

The next categories, unfortunately, are not as unanimously taught amongst the different states. Forty of the 50 states/D.C. have a section of their curriculum dedicated to teaching “news media literacy” (Hansen et al., 2018). Eleven states are supposedly missing out upon teaching their students how to look for news sources that they can trust and how to “suss out” incorrect pieces of news. As discussed previously, many young people are obtaining their news online in some fashion. With internet news can come hoaxes and easily-spread stories that are either completely untrue or have many false elements about them. Teaching students about reputable sources and how to verify a news story are important parts of civic engagement and could

potentially help them in their everyday lives. The next practice involves “simulations of democratic processes”. Only twenty-seven of fifty states plus D.C. have any mention of this type of activity in their overall education curriculum (Hansen et al., 2018). Yet again, this is another important step in teaching young students about civic duty and how to exercise their voice in order to shape their government. Having a mock town hall, debate, or even a mock election could do wonders in teaching young people how and why their government works the way it does. For this thesis’s purpose, a mock election could show them what identification is needed when voting, what rights you are afforded while voting (secret ballot, etc.), and how to actually fill out a ballot, questions young people may be afraid to ask in fear of looking dumb. School may be the only reliable source that children can rely on to learn about voting before they can actually do so. The last practice noted by the Brookings Institute involves service-learning opportunities. This is perhaps the vaguest of the proven practices and it showcases that in the results: only eleven of the states/D.C. have this listed somewhere in their curriculum (Hansen et al., 2018). While it is not the most important aspect of civic education curriculum, it could still be a helpful tool for young people to truly put what they are learning into context. As research by Claassen and Monson has indicated, civic education has an impact on “some, but not all measures of political engagement” and what students do in the classroom to study the subject also matters (2015, 404). Any activity that puts a student into a situation where they are able to apply what they have learned about civics to the real world should be a mission for states and school districts if such opportunities can be achieved.

Policy Recommendation and Conclusion

Now that the potential structural and educational changes have been discussed, the final step to this thesis involves a policy recommendation for local, state, and/or the national

government(s) to utilize to increase youth participation in any and all elections. Theoretically, the easiest way to fix the problem would be to craft a one-size-fits-all, singular solution that would increase the eighteen to twenty-four-year-old voting rates. However, as with many things in life, the easiest and quickest fixes are often not the most reliable in the long term. As Born states, “there is no silver bullet for increasing turnout” (2016). This is the case no matter what demographic rates one is trying to increase. Every person has a different personality and a different set of circumstances surround their life, so a singular solution that works for some people may not convince others. Despite there not being a singular solution, there are several options (both structural and educational) discussed previously that, combined in tandem, could move youth participation significantly in the right direction. To begin with, the automatic registration of those eighteen and older significantly increases the amount of people registered, which in turn gives a better chance for people to actually vote. The more seemingly useless hurdles we can remove from the voting process, the more likely it is that people will make the effort to go and vote. Unfortunately, not all of the structural changes are likely to move the needle in a significant way. Making election day a federal holiday or moving it to a weekend slot is unlikely to improve voting conditions enough to make more young people vote, despite their concern over a lack of time to vote. Time off for voting will more likely be utilized for recreational relaxation or earning more money at work rather than its intended use. As far as actual voting systems go, the more avenues people have to vote, the more likely they are to utilize one of them in order to perform their civic duty. Whether it is financially possible to support many multiple systems is up to the individual government levels that implement them, but switching completely to an online system or an all-mail system by itself does not seem to significantly increase voter participation.

Moving to the educational side, no plan to increase voter participation rates should be complete without a plan to also address civic education in general. All of the structural changes mentioned previously, like automatic registration or better access to alternate voting systems, are steps in the right direction for increased voter participation. However, if the population at large has little else to go on except for “it’s your civic duty” as a purpose, the expanded avenues will ultimately go unused. Two aspects of civic education can be improved that could fundamentally affect voting rates: providing and promoting easy access to information (like platform positions) for candidates running in the various elections and increasing focus upon civic education courses within public school systems. Addressing the first aspect, there exist already websites that house candidate information and local/state newspapers try their best to cover the elections in great detail. However, it is safe to say that the internet sites remain unknown to most citizens nationally and newspapers are a dying medium for young people to receive their news. A government-issued candidate information pamphlet covering the candidates in a non-partisan manner could, with the right promotion, make many more citizens informed about what they may be voting for. Transforming civic education in the school systems is another key part of increasing the likelihood of voter participation in young people. Taking American government classes, making sure to reinforce the importance of civics and participating in local/state government, or creating a new class altogether to teach the same subjects are just some examples of strategies school districts could take to instill voting/participation habits early in young peoples’ lives. Recent studies have shown that over seventy percent of people within the 18-24 age group believe that high schools and colleges should be responsible for teaching them how to be voters (Streator, 2019). Districts are even taking separate measures to make sure students

learn about and can participate in civic engagement, as one Virginia school district is allowing an excused absence per school year per student for participation in a civic event (Schwartz, 2019).

All in all, voting has long been considered a civic duty not only in the US, but worldwide. Although it is only one of a variety of ways that citizens can get involved with their local, state, or federal governments, voting is a direct pipeline for constituents to display their satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with the direction their government has taken over a certain period of time. For a number of years, however, the youngest members of the voting populace have failed to turn out in equivalent percentages to older age groups. There are a number of reasons why this particular trend exists with the 18-24 age bracket. Many times, it is due in part to a lack of something: lack of time (to vote), lack of information (on candidates), or lack of caring (about government in general). Despite these impediments, there are potential solutions that can be installed to encourage younger demographics to make their voices heard. Structural changes, like making voter registration automatic and increasing access to no-excuse absentee ballots are good starts to eliminate time concerns related to voting. Secondly, educational changes like an increased focus on civic education at all levels of public school can help young citizens understand why government matters and how the different issues and candidates can affect their lives. Obviously, there is room for the United States to improve its voter turnout within the 18-24 age demographic. A streamlined, multifaceted approach like the one suggested in this paper will go a long way in encouraging young voting-eligible citizens to actively participate in their local, state, and federal governments.

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