

Engaging Students Politically Goes Beyond the Voting Booth

Author: Elizabeth Beaumont, Research Scholar
The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

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Abstract: A timely examination of the role of colleges and universities in shaping the values, knowledge, skills and motivation that would ensure political and civic engagement of students over a lifetime.

Essay:

The troubling pattern of generational declines in voting is a common justification for civic engagement programs such as Carnegie's Political Engagement Project. Recently, I was asked what would happen to programs like ours if voting among young adults soars in the upcoming election. Would our programs lose their justification and fade away?

These are legitimate questions, and thinking through this hypothetical sheds light on the long-term challenges involved in promoting political participation. Even if all young adults who've reported intentions to vote appear at polling booths, we should not announce "mission accomplished" and dismantle our programs. The fact that young Americans currently vote less than their elders did at the same age is only one piece of a powerful set of reasons for encouraging engaged citizenship. The need for continued engagement efforts will remain strong even if voting among 18-30 year olds shoots up in November.

For starters, one pleasing data point showing voting increases among the young wouldn't necessarily represent a stable shift towards greater participation. Nor would it indicate that the problem of disengagement is solved for all time. Instead, sustaining civic engagement efforts could increase the likelihood that a high rate in 2004 will not become a lonely outlier, but rather will mark the beginning of a long-term trend. Even if old and young vote more frequently, it is still likely that certain groups of Americans will continue to be underrepresented at the polls, particularly Latinos, Asians, African-

Americans, and those with less education and less money. Rather than resting on our laurels, any upswing in voting among young adults should encourage further work, particularly outreach to youth from groups that tend to feel shut out of the political process.

Although voter participation is certainly important, there are other reasons to continue to look at and support civic and political engagement efforts. The reason we care about voting rates is that they hold particular social value: we consider them necessary for the legitimacy of democratic governance and for the strength of our pluralist democratic culture. In the excitement of a presidential campaign, however, we can forget that voting rates are only one key vital sign in the more complex picture of democratic health. Rather than focusing narrowly on whether young adults vote at lower or equally low rates as the rest of Americans, we need to also be concerned with the overall quality of participation.

Being concerned with the quality of participation means working to increase relevant political knowledge, skills, and motivations that can support engaged and effective citizenship. Even many faithful voters make political choices based on relatively little information or misinformation. Civic engagement efforts can help remedy this, as well as foster the kinds of civic values that can support political participation even when citizens know their actions are unlikely to achieve immediate success.

Even in the ideal scenario that voting rates among the young skyrocket in 2004, much important work on democratic citizenship lies ahead. If improving the overall quality of American democracy is understood as the definitive goal, we need to continue fostering voting and a variety of modes of participation that contribute to a vibrant democratic culture and citizen development. We also need to go beyond merely counting ("how many" or "how often") young adults' political acts and build our understanding of how and why they decide to exert political voice and influence.

And, if democracy means government by, of, and for all people, and not just a privileged few, we must be concerned about enhancing the inclusiveness of the voices and votes that exert influence in all political arenas. These tasks will remain for the Political Engagement Project and other civic engagement efforts even if we wake up November 3rd feeling jubilant by voter turnout among the young.

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51 Vista Lane
Stanford, CA 94305
<http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/perspectives/>

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