
The Voting Intentions and Opinions of Students

A Survey on What Keeps Some Students from Voting, and What Universities Can Do to Encourage Student Participation in Elections

While the youth vote has played a large and much-discussed role in recent elections, registration and turnout rates for young voters between the ages 18-24 still lag far behind older voters.

In the 2012 election, 62.2% of eligible young people between 18-24 years old were registered, and only half of them (50.8%) turned out to vote.ⁱ

The numbers were even lower in the last midterm. In the 2010 election cycle only 49.43% of eligible young people between 18-24 years old were registered to vote.ⁱⁱ

Young voters face more barriers to registration and turnout than older voters: Many of them are becoming eligible for the first time, they move frequently for school or economic reasons, and they are new to the ins and outs of the electoral process.

Why We Need to Engage More Students

Young voters have the most at stake with regards to many of the policy decisions of our government. Decisions on issues like the size of our debt, housing, our transportation and water infrastructure, and our environment will have impacts that will last for decades.

Students are younger and more ethnically and economically diverse than the state's traditional electorate.ⁱⁱⁱ Additionally, young voter participation has proven to increase turnout in the entire household, particularly in immigrant communities.^{iv}

Voting is also habit forming, and individuals who vote early on are more likely to become lifelong voters.^v

CALPIRG's New Voters' Project

CALPIRG's New Voters Project is a nonpartisan effort to help register young people and get them to the polls on Election Day. We believe that the full participation of young people in the political process is essential to a truly representative, vibrant democracy. We do not endorse any candidate or party and we do not take a stand on any legislation. Our job is to get young people to the polls.

We've been doing this work for a long time. In 1983, the PIRGs launched the National Student Campaign for Voter Registration, the nation's first major youth mobilization effort since the voting age was lowered to 18 in 1972. This initial effort helped register nearly one million students to vote throughout the 1980s. In 1994, working with Rock the Vote, Campus Green Vote, and Green Corps, the PIRGs launched the Youth Vote Coalition. The coalition eventually grew to include more than 100 organizations, helped to register well over a million voters through the participating organizations, and helped to ensure coordination and collaboration within the youth civic engagement community. The Student PIRGs then used the expertise gained through these efforts to launch the New Voters Project, which has helped to register more than 600,000 young voters and made 650,000 GOTV contacts since 2003.

CALPIRG Student Survey

This spring, CALPIRG's New Voters' Project conducted an informal survey of just over a thousand UC, CSU, and community college students, before the June primary. We asked students about their own voting history and intentions, what they thought motivates them and their peers to participate in elections, and what they thought colleges and universities could do to encourage student participation.

The survey questions were written to inform our own outreach plans for our non-partisan civic engagement program. The responses also help to reinforce best practices for institutions of higher learning, community groups, and elected officials who want to better engage California's students in the democratic process.

Who We Surveyed

CALPIRG conducted our informal survey by sending out an online request to about 80,000 students on our own email list. We also had volunteers gathering in-person survey responses from students at UC, CSU, and community colleges.

We gathered a total of 1,057 responses. 30 percent of the surveys came from our online outreach and 70 percent came from in-person outreach. 53 percent of respondents were enrolled at one of the UCs, 39 percent were enrolled in a California community college, 5 percent were enrolled in a Cal State, and 3 percent were from other schools.

Results

A majority of the students who self-selected to either respond to our online survey or stop for a volunteer on campus said that they voted in the 2012 election and intended to vote in the June primary. Permanent absentee voters are on the rise in California, comprising 43 percent of the total electorate,^{vi} but young voters have been slower to adopt the practice than older voters.^{vii}

How did you vote in the 2012 general election?

- 30%: "I wasn't eligible to vote"
- 28%: "I was living at home and voted at home"
- 17%: "I was living on campus, voted here"
- 14%: "I was eligible but chose not to vote"
- 11%: "I was living on campus and sent a vote-by-mail ballot."

75 percent of students that we surveyed intended to participate in the June primary – a startlingly high percentage when compared to the 25.2 percent of registered voters who actually turned out.^{viii} This likely reflects both the good intentions of students and a natural bias of the students who self-selected to participate in the survey.

Do you plan to vote in the June primaries?

- 75%: yes
- 25%: no

When the students who indicated that they planned to turn out were asked why, many of their responses included the phrases "it's my right," "it's my responsibility," and "it's my duty." Notably, many students said that they didn't realize that there was a primary coming up until they received the survey from us, but now that they knew about it, they intended to vote.

Why do you plan to vote?

"I plan to vote because I understand that by voting, I help shape our policy here in California and in the nation."

"I want to be able to affect the election process and I know I am blessed enough to have an opportunity to do so. I have beliefs about who would better represent my priorities so I want them to win."

"Because it is my duty as an American citizen. I am first generation Mexican-American and I feel that people do hold the power, we just don't know it."

"I feel as though my voice is lost among so many other, often louder, advocates. I feel as though my vote has largely been rendered ineffective by political corruption, wealthy lobbyists, and high campaign costs, but without my vote my voice is truly gone."

"To help make California a stronger state."

When students responded no, they did not intend to vote in the June primary, a majority of the responses reflected a lack of knowledge about the process, a lack of knowledge about the candidates and issues, and/or the sense that it didn't affect their lives.

Why don't you intend to vote?

"I don't know how and I don't really know how to look for more info."

"I don't feel adequately prepared to vote and don't have time to research the candidates."

"For one, I was unaware that elections were going on during that time and two, from my last time voting in 2012 it took so much effort just to find reliable information on what I'm voting for and because of that it is discouraging to vote."

"Neither political party is doing anything to benefit the people it is allegedly serving. Too much big money in politics. The entire system has to change before I feel like my vote will make a difference."

"Not registered ... need to get on that."

"I'm probably already past the date where I can change my registered address."

The students' responses about their own voting habits were also reflected in their responses about their peers.

Why do you think that some students choose not to vote?

- 37% chose "We don't know enough about who and what we are voting for"
- 31% chose "We don't think our vote matters"
- 12% chose "We don't have enough information on where to vote"
- 6% chose "The lines are too long at the polling places"
- 4% chose "We don't have enough opportunities to register to vote"
- 11% chose "Other"

Finally, two questions asked students about the appropriate role they thought universities should play in encouraging students to participate in elections. The first was a direct question about online voter registration.

Do you think that universities should send out all-campus emails reminding their students to register and vote?

- 86%: yes
- 14%: no

We also asked a second, open-ended question, asking students for suggestions for what universities could do to best encourage and facilitate students' active participation in elections.

“What else do you think universities should be doing to encourage students to participate in elections?”

“They should encourage them to sign up to vote by mail, which would make it much easier.”

“Promote making Election Day a national holiday.”

“They should make sure to publicize it as much as possible so students prioritize it.”

“I think the University should send out links of reliable information on the politicians and policies we will be voting for. There is too much partisan propaganda and many other facts that become twisted.”

“Putting up signs around campus and/or having information sessions about how to register.”

“Provide/recommend resources to students that give a non-biased perspective on election ballots, candidates, and platforms so we can make informed decisions and opinions. Gives us the chance to decide where we stand and with whom.”

“Help get info about the candidates, prospective laws, and other important info to the students.”

“Host debates or information sessions.”

“Encourage and remind students when they should mail in ballots if they're not registered for the city they're living in - a lot of my friends forgot about the mail-in deadline and missed their chances to vote. Fortunately, who they would've voted for, won.”

“Tabling in quads to have students register. Register students through dorms.”

“Make it more of a school engagement as far as opportunities to VOTE ON CAMPUS, or REGISTER BOOTHS on CAMPUS. Easy, Accessible, Efficient.”

“Sending out emails explaining both how to register and when/where people can vote.”

“I think that taking a Political Science class should be a mandatory class that students should take in their first year of college. Personally, taking the course has helped me understand how I could do my part in being an active American.”

“When recruiters are sent to High Schools, they should also share more information about the Student Government and Student Political organizations that are registered groups with the campus. The key is to attract them to politics in their teen years.”

Policy Recommendations

Colleges and universities in California are required by both state and federal statute to offer students opportunities to register to vote.^{ix}

The results of the survey support several policy recommendations and best practices. These recommendations are also consistent with our experience in engaging youth voters in elections.

1. Many students are eligible to vote for the very first time in each election cycle, and most students move residences each year. Universities should actively provide students with opportunities to register to vote for the first time or update their voter registration to their current address.
 - a. Send out multiple all-campus emails to students, linking to online voter registration opportunities. CALPIRG's experience is that up to 10 percent of the campus will register to vote just by receiving emails with a link to online voter registration.
 - b. Add voter registration links to university webpages frequently used by students, such as the main login page for students to access info about their classes.
 - c. Incorporate voter registration into pre-existing orientation programs for incoming freshmen and transfer students. A similar program at Northwestern University resulted in greater than 95 percent of the freshman class being registered to vote.^x
 - d. Adopt policies that encourage student governments and non-partisan organizations to help register their peers to vote, for example, by letting volunteers access the dorms and providing voter registration tables at key events on campus where students gather.
2. Use online voter registration tools that facilitate follow-up election reminders.
 - a. Utilization of a voter registration tool that includes important election reminders and voting information has been proven effective in registering and ultimately motivating students to vote. That's why CALPIRG created www.CAstudentvote.org, which hosts an online registration tool powered by Rock the Vote. The tool enables us to send information about polling sites and what's on their ballot to students via email and text, and allows student volunteers to make follow up reminder calls as well. These follow-up messages allow trained volunteers to answer the most common questions students have about when, where and how to vote, and where they can access more information about what's on their ballot.
3. Work with registrars to provide visible, accessible voting options for students.
 - a. Universities, particularly those with on-campus residences, should have accessible, visible polling locations. Our experience is that polling locations that receive high student traffic, like student centers, also serve as a reminder to vote.

4. Remind students when, where and how to vote.
 - a. Universities themselves can remind students to vote on Election Day and provide helpful information to students about where to vote and how to learn more about what's on their ballot via email, text, newsletter reminders, website reminders, and signs on campus.

5. Empower voters with information about what will be on their ballot. There are many ways universities can help provide useful information to students who want to be educated about the issues and candidates before they vote.
 - a. Support student groups that work to hold educational events on campus by streamlining permits and when possible providing financial support.
 - b. Partner with non-partisan, non-profits — like MapLight and the League of Women Voters — to provide non-partisan voter guides to students.
 - c. Make non-partisan information on voting and the upcoming elections readily available in residential halls.
 - d. Sponsor candidate and issue forums. Host special opportunities for students to learn more, and encourage faculty to promote the events to their classes.

Endnotes

- ⁱ <http://regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ourwork/publications/ccep/ucdavis-ccep-brief-5-youth-voter-turnout>
- ⁱⁱ <http://regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ourwork/projects/ccep/new-california-voter-registration-tracking-file-2002-2010/2010-voter-registration-rates-youth-18-24/table-r11-2010-california-voter-registration-rates-youth-and-age-25-percent-gap/view>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.ppic.org/main/publication.asp?i=1083>
- ^{iv} <http://www.civicyouth.org/quick-facts/youth-voting/>
- ^v http://www.rockthevote.com/assets/publications/research/rtv_voting_is_a_habit-2007.pdf
- ^{vi} <http://www.calvoter.org/issues/votereng/votebymail/study/execsummary.html>
- ^{vii} <http://regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ourwork/projects/ccep-issue-brief-one-disparities-in-californias-vote-by-mail-use-changing-demographic-composition-2002-2012>
- ^{viii} <http://www.sos.ca.gov/admin/press-releases/2014/db14-057.htm>
- ^{ix} Higher Education Act of 1965, Section 487(a)(23); and California Elections code Div. 2 Chapter 2, Article 3.5, 2146.
- ^x <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/14/us/politics/more-colleges-take-a-leap-into-voter-registration.html>

Acknowledgements

This analysis was written by Garo Manjikian and Emily Rusch of CALPIRG Education Fund.

With public debate around important issues often dominated by special interests pursuing their own narrow agendas, CALPIRG Education Fund offers an independent voice that works on behalf of the public interest. CALPIRG Education Fund, a 501(c)(3) organization, works to protect consumers and promote good government. We investigate problems, craft solutions, educate the public, and offer meaningful opportunities for civic participation.

This survey was supported by a grant from The James Irvine Foundation.

CALPIRG Education Fund is a member of the Future of California Elections (FOCE), a collaboration between election officials, civil rights advocates and election reform advocates to examine and address the unique challenges facing the State of California's election system. Learn more at <http://futureofcaelections.org/>



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