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The Puzzle of Low Youth Turnout

Young citizens' track record of participation in American elections is dismal. Although young people comprise the largest block of voting eligible citizens, they turn out at significantly lower rates than older Americans – often *half* the rate of those 60 years and older in midterm congressional elections. The 2018 congressional elections raised hopes of a surge in youth participation. Outspoken young activists amassed millions of social media followers, organized political rallies, and dominated the news during the campaign. Headlines predicted a "youth wave" that would fundamentally shape the election outcome.

Estimates indeed showed a historic increase in voter turnout rate among eighteen to twenty-nine year olds – jumping from 21 percent in 2014 to 31 percent in 2018. Although a laudable increase from the previous midterm election, far more young citizens (almost seven in ten) sat out the election than cast a ballot. Moreover, a lingering question is whether this increase will be sustained in future elections or will become a temporary spike in youth participation. Unfortunately, history would suggest the latter. We've seen this pattern before. For instance, the 2008 presidential election saw an impressive increase in youth participation – the highest in three decades – but turnout levels sank again by the next election.[1] For all of the media attention to young voters in 2018, tepid levels of youth voting have long been, and remain, an intractable problem in the United States. Why is youth turnout so low? And what can be done about it?

[1] Less than half of young citizens voted in the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections and only one in five voted in the 2010 and 2014 midterms. See, "New census data confirm increase in youth voter turnout in 2008 election," *CIRCLE Report*, April 28, 2009.

Although there is widespread recognition of the enduring problem of low youth turnout, still too little is known about the basic reasons so few young people vote or, more importantly, possible policy solutions to promote higher levels of youth engagement. Most voting research is focused on identifying the correlates of participation among adults. Political surveys tend to include only those already old enough to vote, making it difficult to trace the development of civic attitudes and behaviors through adolescence. Without a better understanding of the factors that shape the development of civic engagement, we are left with an inadequate foundation for finding policy solutions. While there is almost certainly no silver bullet, the first step toward increasing political participation among young people is a clear understanding of the personal and contextual factors that contribute to youth turnout.

In this book, we develop a more complete theory of voter turnout that recognizes the action of voting requires both an initial civic orientation that creates a desire to participate *and* the ability to follow through on that participatory intention in the face of obstacles and distractions. The act of voting can take considerable time, effort, and planning. Citizens not only have to deal with the institutional hurdles – such as voter registration and voter identification – they have to do so while managing life's many other demands and distractions. These voting obstacles are magnified for those participating in the electoral process for the first time. As a result, there are a great many citizens – young people, especially – who fail to vote *even though they want and intend to do so*. The simple fact is that civic attitudes do not directly translate into civic action.

We propose that voting might not be so different from achieving nonpolitical goals, like exercising, healthy eating, or performing well on an exam. Those who are best able to follow through on their goals and intentions, political or otherwise, are those with strong *noncognitive skills* – competencies related to self-regulation, effortfulness, and interpersonal interactions. These noncognitive skills enable individuals to persevere in the face of anticipated and unanticipated obstacles. Whereas cognitive abilities – especially political knowledge and verbal capabilities – have traditionally been considered the cornerstone of theories of voter turnout and civic education policies, we argue that noncognitive skills are a missing piece of the turnout puzzle.

1.1 THE PROBLEM: LOW YOUTH TURNOUT

Young Americans have been underrepresented at the polls ever since eighteen-year-olds earned the right to vote with the passage of the

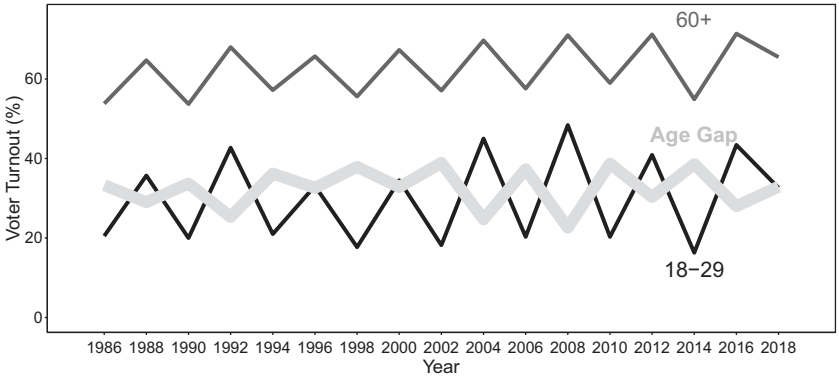

FIGURE 1.1 Age gap in voter turnout in the United States

Voter turnout by age. Source: Current Population Survey (CPS) November Supplement (via the United States Elections Project). The dark gray line plots turnout among citizens 18–29; the medium gray line is for those 60+; the thick light gray line plots the gap between these groups

twenty-sixth amendment in 1971. Although eighteen to twenty-nine year olds account for nearly 22 percent of the voting age population, they made up just 13 percent of the voting electorate in 2018, for example. Age gaps in turnout are especially stark. Figure 1.1 shows this visually, plotting voter turnout rates by age over the last three decades. For example, 65.5 percent of those 60+ voted in 2018 compared to 32.6 percent of those 18–29 years old. The age gap is stubbornly persistent – averaging 33 percentage points across all elections, 28 percentage points in presidential elections, and 37 percentage points in midterms. The age difference in turnout is even more dramatic in local elections, where the gap in turnout between old and young voters can be as high as 50 percentage points (see Hajnal and Trounstine 2016, figure 1). Our longitudinal analysis (see Figure A.2 in the book appendix) further finds that the gap has widened across generations, suggesting that young people today are less likely to becomes voters as they age.

The age gap in voter turnout in the United States is one of the worst among advanced democracies. Figure 1.2 compares the United States to other countries using self-reported turnout data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems – a highly respected source on cross-national voting behavior. In virtually all countries, young people report voting at a lower rate than older citizens, but the United States stands out.[2] In the

[2] Brazil and Greece – the two countries with higher rates of voting among younger than older voters – are exceptional in many ways, including an institutional context of compulsory voting.

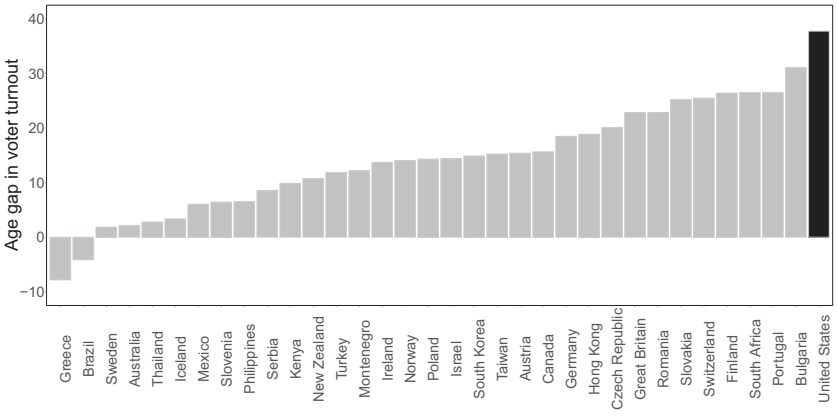

FIGURE 1.2 The age gap in voter turnout by country

The age gap in voter turnout across all of the thirty-four available countries in the CSES. Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (Module 4; 2011–2016). Bars indicate the turnout rate in the Lower House of the most recent election for those 60+ minus those 18–29 in each country, with the United States highlighted

United States, the age gap is more than twice as large as in other advanced democracies like Germany and Canada. The United States has the dubious honor of having one of the (if not the) very worst age-based participatory inequalities. This large age gap helps make the overall voter turnout rate in the United States among the lowest in the world (see Figure A.1 in the Appendix). If young people had voted at the same rate as older Americans in the last presidential election, the United States would jump from twenty-sixth to twelfth out of the thirty-two developed countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).[3] While there are surely a multitude of reasons for cross-national differences in turnout, scholars view the voter registration system in the United States as a key hurdle (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980) – a fact our analyses will confirm is especially true among young people.

1.2 WHY LOW YOUTH TURNOUT MATTERS

Before presenting our theoretical perspective and analytic approach, we first outline the reasons low youth turnout is so important to study. Beyond the normative perspective that civic engagement is critical to

[3] This despite the fact that six of the countries ranked ahead of the United States have compulsory voting. www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/21/u-s-voter-turnout-trails-most-developed-countries/.

notions of citizenship and the general health of democracy, targeting young people should be the most effective path to increasing overall voter turnout rates in the United States. Research suggests that voting is habitual and persistent. For experienced voters, voting is less challenging and going to the polls becomes routine through behavioral repetition. Individuals who participate when they are young are more likely to continue voting throughout their lives, while those who don't are often locked-in as perpetual nonvoters (Coppock and Green 2016; Fujiwara, Meng, and Vogl 2016; Gerber, Green, and Shachar 2003; Meredith 2009). The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) – the leading nonprofit organization focused on youth voting – puts it this way: "Voting is like any other habit: it must be taught, facilitated, and nurtured .... Like most habits, the earlier one develops it, the easier it is to keep at it later in life."[4] Political scientist Mark Franklin similarly concludes, "Older people are, on the whole, too set in their ways to be responsible for social or political change ... [b]ecause young people hold the key to the future, any reform that primarily affects young people can have large effects on voting behavior" (Franklin 2004, 216). Franklin's analysis of voter turnout across established democracies finds that aggregate changes in turnout are primarily attributable to the way new cohorts experience their first election. All of this research suggests that the easiest way to increase overall turnout in American elections may be to focus on young people.[5] Thus, setting young people on a path toward civic engagement is critical to current and future turnout rates in American democracy.

Low and unequal turnout levels also matter because of distortional impacts on representative government. It is well-documented that the policy preferences of voters and nonvoters differ markedly (Leighley and Nagler 2013). Extensive research has shown that turnout inequalities shape not only who gets elected but also what policies get implemented (Anzia 2013; Berry and Gersen 2011; Bertocchi et al. 2017; Fowler 2013; Lee, Moretti, and Butler 2004; Madestam et al. 2013). This means that age-based gaps in voter turnout act to bias public policy toward the preferences of older citizens.[6] It is perhaps no wonder that Social

[4] "Teens and elections," Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), January 23, 2018.

[5] Some have also found evidence of household spillover effects (Dahlgaard 2018; Nickerson 2008), suggesting that increasing turnout among young people could potentially mobilize older household members as well.

[6] It is often assumed that young people will overwhelmingly vote Democratic, but research shows their preferences are less predictable and more complex than often assumed, with

Security is considered the "third rail" of American politics, even as public education spending takes deep cuts (Campbell 2003). If young people fail to show up at the polls, elected officials have little incentive to pay attention to their concerns.[7] As political philosopher William Galston puts it, "[Youth] disengagement increases the already powerful political tilt toward the concerns of the elderly" (Galston 2004, 263). More colorfully, former Congressman Barney Frank (D-MA) once quipped, "Elected officials pay as much attention to those who are not registered to vote as butchers do to the food preferences of vegetarians."[8]

Understanding youth turnout is also worthwhile because voting may be a proxy for or may influence other desirable social attitudes and behaviors. Voting has long been used as a marker of social cohesion and social capital (e.g. Putnam 2000). Places with low voter turnout – the logic goes – are also likely to have lower levels of social connections between individuals, making transactions more difficult and depleting society from the inherent value of interconnectedness. Scholars speculate that there is a reciprocal relationship between various civic attitudes and behaviors, so that voting is both fostered by and reinforces attitudes like social trust, tolerance, and humanitarianism, and promotes other civic behaviors like volunteering, belonging, and donating (e.g. Lijphart 1997). While the empirical literature on this topic is rather sparse, the general theoretical underpinning is straightforward. Increasing youth turnout may serve to broadly improve the communities in which young people live.[9]

Finally, focusing on young people can help shine light on other disparities in voter turnout. Age is not the only dimension by which voter turnout is vastly unequal – indeed, we know from previous research that massive gaps by race and socioeconomic status exist (Fraga 2018). These gaps are already present when young people come of voting age (see Figure A.3 in the Appendix). Even in their first voting experience, those who are poorer,

many self-identifying as independents and having policy attitudes that buck traditional two-party categorizations (see "The generation gap in American politics," *Pew Research Center*, March 1, 2018).

7 For evidence of the nuances of how youth public opinion differs from other adults, see for instance "The generation gap in American politics," *Pew Research Center*, March 1, 2018.

8 See, "Barney Frank: Here's how to not waste your time pressuring lawmakers," *Mic.com*, February 7, 2017.

9 For empirical work that explores the effects of voting experiences on broader social attitudes and behaviors, see Shineman (2018); Braconnier, Dormagen, and Pons (2017); Loewen, Milner, and Hicks (2008); and Holbein and Rangel (Forthcoming).

less educated, and nonwhite are much less likely to vote than their more advantaged counterparts. This suggests that stubborn inequalities in voter participation have their roots in the experiences that predate adulthood. Studying what causes these disparities requires examining citizens before they become eligible to vote.

1.3 THE PUZZLE: IT'S NOT FOR LACK OF POLITICAL MOTIVATION

Apathetic, disengaged, narcissistic, selfish, entitled, shallow, lazy, impulsive, confused, lost, impatient, and pampered: all of these words are frequently used to describe young people. These descriptions have not been restricted to the youth of the current generation; for hundreds of years, young people have faced the contempt of their elders. At least as far back as ancient Greece, youth have been described as hellions detached from society:

> The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers.
>
> —Socrates[10]

This hypercritical view of young people has spanned the decades – from concern over the rebellions of baby boomers, to worries that Generation X would fail to be as engaged as the great generations that proceeded, to apprehension over the disconnected nature of millennials.

These descriptions also hint at a common explanation for low levels of youth voter turnout: Young people just aren't politically motivated. The conventional wisdom is that young people lack an interest in politics, a sense of civic obligation, or the other attitudes that create a desire to vote. As one journalist bluntly put it, "Young people don't care about voting."[11] This narrative of a disinterested youth is also apparent in scholarly work (e.g. White, Bruce, and Ritchie 2000). Political scientist Stephen Bennett laments that "today's young Americans on and off campus have a visceral dislike of politics" and they show a palpable "indifference to public

[10] Attributed to Socrates by Plato, according to William L. Patty and Louise S. Johnson, *Personality and Adjustment*, p. 277 (1953).
[11] "Young people don't care about voting," *Bloomberg*, October 31, 2014.

affairs" (Bennett 1998).[12] Philosopher Marshall McLuhan observed that "American youth attribute much more importance to arriving at driver's license age than at voting age" (1994, 194).

It is a truism that those who don't want to participate in politics usually don't. Abundant research has shown that markers of political motivation – most commonly, self-reported political interest or a sense of civic duty – are strong predictors of voting, volunteering, and belonging.[13] Political interest is a motivation that "nourish[es] the willingness to go to the polls" (Blais 2007, 632), while a lack of interest poses an "obstacle to a widely informed . . . and participating electorate" (Prior 2005, 578). Whether measured as a desire to fulfill one's civic duty (Blais and Achen 2018; Campbell 2006b), a general interest in politics (Prior 2010, 2018), an orientation toward politics that is driven by hobbyism (Hersh 2017) or one's shared social interests (Stoker 1992), political motivation plays a foundational role in existing theories of political behavior.

Certainly, it might not be surprising if young people were turned off by the rampant political polarization and animus in the country today. It's easy to imagine that cynicism about the current state of American politics could depress general interest in and enthusiasm about politics. In a recent report, the Institute of Politics (IOP) at Harvard University argued that "the hyperpartisanship and gridlock that has befallen Washington, D.C. is having a traumatic effect not just on our nation's status at home and abroad, but on the political health of tens of millions of once (and hopefully future) idealistic young people."[14] Perhaps the nature of politics today is leading young people to avoid politics altogether. Though this explanation seems plausible on its face, other scholars counter that "cynicism and negative attitudes toward politics and politicians" are unlikely to account for the discrepancy in turnout between the young and old because cynicism affects all citizens in the same way (Rubenson et al. 2004, 407).

[12] For recent popular examples, see: "Why young people don't vote," *The Economist*, October 29, 2014; or "Apathy or antipathy? Why so few young people vote," *The Guardian*, April 19, 2015.

[13] Prominent examples of such work includes Blais (2000); Blais and Achen (2018); Blais and St-Vincent (2011); Blais and Young (1999); Rubenson et al. (2004); Söderlund, Wass and Blais (2011); Theiss-Morse and Hibbing (2005); Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995).

[14] As reported in "For 'Millennials,' a tide of cynicism and a partisan gap," *New York Times*, April 29, 2013.

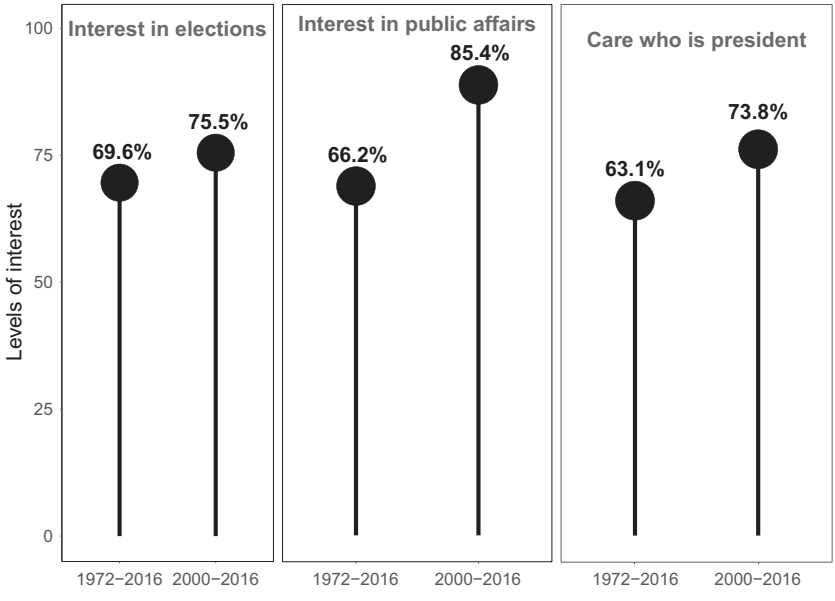

FIGURE 1.3 Political interest among young people

Levels of political interest among young people, ANES cumulative file (1972–2016). Young people defined as those aged 18–29

A more fundamental problem with the narrative of disinterested young citizens is that it simply is not empirically true. By multiple metrics, most young people *are* politically interested and motivated. And, despite the increased rancor in American politics, some measures find young people to be even more interested in politics in recent years than in the past. Figure 1.3 displays young people's levels of political interest from the American National Election Study (ANES) – one of the longest running and most respected political surveys of the American electorate. The figure graphs three different measures of political interest – expressed interest in elections, caring about who is president, and interest in public affairs – shown separately for the entire time series and for elections since the turn of the century, when political polarization has been most pronounced.[15]

[15] Each of these measures is available in only some of the ANES waves. Interest in elections was not asked in 1974. Caring who is president was only asked in Presidential election years. Interest in public affairs was asked in all years. The ANES has only measured civic duty sporadically over time – last doing so in 1992 – so we do not include it in our visualization.

As can be seen, despite having low levels of voter turnout, young people do have a civic orientation. Across these various measures, a dominant majority of young people show signs of political motivation.[16] In recent years, the number of young people who express an interest in elections (76 percent), care who is president (74 percent), have interest in public affairs (85 percent), and intend to vote (83 percent) is especially high.[17] We see no evidence in the aggregate that today's polarized political environment has depressed the attitudinal precursors to political participation. Moreover, when compared to older citizens, we find a much smaller gap in political interest by age compared to what we saw in voter turnout: We see a 10 percentage point age gap in political interest, compared to the 30 to 50 percentage point age gap in voter turnout.[18]

These patterns are also apparent in other data collections, including the General Social Survey (GSS)[19] and UCLA's annual survey of first-year college students in the United States, which found in 2015 that political interest had "reached the highest levels since the study began fifty years ago."[20] By some measures of political interest, young people are virtually indistinguishable from their older counterparts. According to an analysis by the nonpartisan Pew Research Center, measures of election interest show that Millennials are tied with Gen Xers, and only 2 percentage points behind Boomers. And when directly asked why they don't participate in politics, only a small fraction (20 percent) of young people attribute their lack of engagement to "there not [being] any issues they care about."[21] It seems clear that young people are not turned off by politics – they are politically motivated and interested – and yet they are not voting in US elections.

[16] Those who are above the median value are coded as interested. In practice, this means those who say "somewhat" or "some of the time" are coded as interested. Theoretically, we take the position that individuals need at least a minimal level of motivation. Empirically, this group also looks more like the highest category ("very much interested" and "most of the time," respectively) than the lowest categories in terms of their validated voter turnout.

[17] Over the entire time series a majority of young people express an interest in the election (70 percent), care who is president (63 percent), have interest in public affairs (66 percent), or intend to vote (74 percent).

[18] See "The generation gap in American politics," *Pew Research Center*, March 1, 2018.

[19] See Russell Dalton, "Why don't millennials vote?" *Washington Post* (Monkey Cage), March 22, 2016.

[20] See CIRP Freshman Survey; "College students' commitment to activism, political and civic engagement reach all-time highs," *UCLA Newsroom*, February 10, 2016.

[21] See "Diversity, division, discrimination: The state of young America," *MTV/PRRI Report*, January 10, 2018.