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Long Description

Participatory Voting: How do you create a compelling incentive to improve young voter engagement in local elections?

What is the Problem?

According to the NYC Campaign Finance Board (NYCCFB), only 4% of eligible voters under the age of 30 voted in the 2009 general election for Mayor.[1] CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) has suggested that over 50% of voters (under 30) self-reported that they did not vote in the 2010 midterm elections because they were "too busy/conflicting work" and/or "not interested/felt my vote would not count."[2] Unfortunately, this is not a new problem.

CIRCLE has suggested that over 50% of voters (under 30) self-reported that they did not vote in the 2010 midterm elections because they were "too busy/conflicting work" and/or "not interested/felt my vote would not count." So why is it important that young people vote? There are three main reasons why the youth vote is important.

- Voting is habit-forming – When young people vote, they are more likely to vote as they get older.

- Young people (18-29) are a major subset of the electorate – They make up 21% of the voting age population.

- Involving a young person in voter-related activities, inspires the entire household to vote.[2]

Given the low turnout, reasons for not voting and importance of going to the polls, how do you create a compelling incentive to improve young voter engagement in local elections? We are at a unique place in terms of available data and technology to address this problem through an incentive-based program unlike anything that has been done before. Consider, participatory voting.

Why is this a Compelling Problem?

Local politics more directly affect the daily lives of individuals than politics at the State or National level. For example, the Mayor's Office administers city services like appropriating funds to schools, the City Council is responsible for approving the City's budget and the Comptroller oversees all local government contracts. Given those responsibilities, and others like overseeing police and fire departments and ensuring fair business practices, it is expected that individuals would want to participate in the voting process to elect these officials. However, it has been proven time and time again that young people, in particular, still do not vote.

Voting is especially important at the local level because each vote matters more than a single vote in a national election. There is no electoral system at the local level, so each vote is counted on its own. This is particularly important for primary races and runoffs when the expected turnout is even lower than during the general election. For example, it was predicted that 100,000 to 175,000 votes were cast during the runoff for Public Advocate this past October versus over 125,000,000 votes cast during the Presidential election in 2012.[3,4] This difference clearly highlights the importance of each individual vote at the local level.

What data exists around voter engagement and turnout?

There are numerous websites and organizations that have been successful in capturing voting data on everything from which states have the highest turnout to the time of day that most people vote to the preferred ethnicity of a candidate. There is so much data around voting that election night has become the Super Bowl of events for CNN and other news outlets.

In terms of specific data around voter engagement and turnout, the information is mostly available at the National and State levels. This void may be due to a lack of funding, or the more systemic issue that people do not care about local elections. This disinterest creates an opportunity for groups like Rock the Vote, NYCCFB, Mediabistro, and CIRCLE to take the lead in this endeavor. However, some of these groups have produced easy to understand graphics to represent voter turnout, the use of social media and voter motivation.

What tools are currently being used to address this problem?

Mid-way through the semester I met with David Moore of the Participatory Politics Foundation to discuss the current landscape of current voter tools. He pointed me in the direction of a number of organizations that are trying to address voter engagement at the Federal and State level. There are number of organizations that are trying to address voter engagement in NYC through the use of applications, websites and social campaigns. Some of the most compelling are:

Rock the Vote: Non-Partisan organization to engage and build political power for young people in the United States:

- Registration Assistance

- Engages young people in the political process through grassroots programs

- Utilizes popular culture and technology to reach young voters

NYC Votes: Voter Guide and App for NYC elections:

- An easy-to-use app with basic info about elected offices and candidates

- Provides voting logistics

- Allows for direct campaign contributions

TurboVote: Voter Registration and Election Day Assistance:

- Registration Assistance

- Follow-up email and text reminders

- Help to get absentee ballots and vote by mail

While these tools provide voters with information on candidates, registration assistance, election-day instructions and direct campaign contribution tools, Rock the Vote is the only organization that engages and builds political power for young people in the United States. Basically, it's the first organization to enlist the "coolness factor" for voting.

What are the Options to Increase Voter Participation?

In considering how to increase voter participation among the under 30s, it is useful to think about the spectrum of possibilities to increase voter turnout. Below are three different options to contemplate.

Compulsory Voting[5]

a. In some countries, voting is considered a civic responsibility and laws are put in place to enforce participation. Some countries like, Australia and Singapore, go as far as to impose sanctions on non-voters.

Participatory Governing[6]

b. Give people a stake in local government by engaging citizens to participate in governing. NYC is experimenting with participatory budgeting with the City Council.

Policy Changes[7]

c. The commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge at CIRCLE has released its report "All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement." It is recommending a number of policy changes that are aimed to increase voter turnout for young voters.

While each of the above options holds merit, I believe that aside from participatory governing, it would be very difficult to gain political support and even harder to implement. While we've seen participatory budgeting work as a tool for citizen engagement, it has not proven to be a successful method for improving voter participation. That said, given the current election rules, I believe there is an alternative way to engage citizens to vote in local elections. Create an incentive that is compelling enough for someone to choose to vote on Election Day.

Why Incentive-Based Participatory Voting?

I began the process by focusing on social media and its proven success of engaging young people for a myriad of reasons. However, I had the process reversed. I

started by focusing on the tool instead of the incentive. I proposed repurposing an already successful application among 18-30 year olds for voter engagement. According to statisticbrain.com, of the 54 million people in the United States, 40 million have tried online dating. So why not use this proven method to match voters with the candidate that he/she is most likely to support? I argued that this could serve as the platform for engaging people on the issues that matter to them in a format that they have already accepted. I thought I had my entire project laid out in front of me. That lasted until I came to realize that I was not addressing the root of the problem; why people are not showing up at the polls on Election Day. This epiphany forced me to change course mid-way through the project.

Since then, I have shifted my approach to an incentive-based program. I began by researching successful tools that offer compelling incentives. A few of the best incentive structures that I across were the following:

- **OKCupid**– Finding a partner and falling in love
- **Fourquare** – Badges and the possibility to become Mayor of your favorite bar
- **Cycle for Survival** – A great workout and giving back
- **Challenge.gov** – Cash prizes and recognition among your peers

So, what is (or could be) the incentive for voting?

What is the Pilot Program?

Why not build on Rock the Vote's success at the national level and use music, pop culture, new technologies and grassroots organizing to create the incentives for voting at the local level?

Putting it all together:

- Build a **social campaign** to increase voter engagement through **team competition.** Engage young voters to mobilize teams of their neighbors and peers to **compete for the highest % of voters** for their group through an interactive mobile application that allows teams to pledge money, recruit friends and engage with sites like instagram, facebook, twitter and tumbler.

- **Recruit young voters in a specific neighborhood in NYC between the ages of 18-29. Rock the Vote would sponsor the program**; utilizing its infrastructure, name recognition, proven success at the national level, access to musicians and other celebrities to launch the program.

- **Utilize existing technology for web-based platforms and mobile apps with the following attributes:**

    - Ability to Create Teams (ie. Cycle for Survival, ZogSports)

    - Capability to sort information (ie. Okcupid, Kayak)

    - Online Fundraising Tools (ie. gofundme.com)

    - Ability to Track Progress/Results (ie. Myfitnesspal)

- **And most importantly, create the incentive.** Each team member will pledge $10 of dollars to participate. The team that registers the most votes is the winner. There are TWO DISTINCT prizes for the winning team:

    - **Community Reward**: The winning team will have the opportunity to decide how the money raised is spent on their local community. Some ideas are: cleaning up a local park, repainting a community center, buying new supplies for an elementary school.

- **Personal Reward:** The winning team will receive tickets to a concert in NYC for a Rock the Vote musician. (Some artists include, The Black Keys, Christina Aguilera, N*E*R*D and Sheryl Crow.)

What are the Next Steps?

The next phase of the project is to further clarify the details of the Pilot Program. In order to do that, there are a number of steps that need to be taken.

- **Research:** neighborhoods that have a high population of registered voters between 18-29, upcoming local elections (ideally a run-off election) and website and App Developers that have been successful in this space.

- **Contact:** Rock the Vote to present the concept and NYCCFB to be a program supporter.

- **Produce:** Action Plan for recruiting team leaders, a team leader handbook and mock-ups for the landing page and team pages (on the Rock the Vote website and Mobile App.

What is the final result?

The end goal is to prove the power of demonstrated action to persuade more people to be engaged voters in local elections. The program would measure voter habits, level of participation in local government and outreach within local communities to assess the long-term effects of participatory voting.

The ultimate goal is to prove the power of demonstrated action to persuade more engaged voters in local elections. We already know that young people enjoy participating in team activities, especially when it's for a cause (ie. cycle for survival,

trivia nights, city year charity days, etc.). Additionally, there is a surge in neighborhood

peer-to-peer activities like airbnb and snapgoods that target collaborative consumption.

The growing success of this idea further supports the idea that young people are

interested in engaging with their local peers. Building on these ideas, why couldn't

participatory voting be successful?

[2] [2] The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.http://www.civicyouth.org
[4] Associated Press Election Research Group, George Mason University
[5] http://www.idea.int/vt/compulsory_voting.cfm
[6] participatorygoverning.org. - http://www.participatorybudgeting.org/blog/new-york-election-results-participatory-budgeting-wins-big/
[7] All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement. The Report of the Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge. http://www.civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/CIRCLE-youthvoting-individualPages.pdf