

Can Earlier Onboarding Increase Voter Turnout Among Young Voters?

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Introduction

A well-functioning voting and election system is essential to a healthy democracy. However, according to the Census Bureau's *Current Population Survey, November Voting and Registration Supplement* (CPS), the voting population in the U.S. is persistently older, whiter, richer, and more educated than the country as a whole. This lack of representation means that policies tend to cater disproportionately to those groups already benefiting from the status quo, rather than accounting for the needs of everybody.¹

One group that is most strongly affected by this problem is young people, particularly those between the ages of 18 and 29. As illustrated in Figure 1, young people vote in significantly lower proportions than other age groups. In a presidential year, voters in the 18-29 age group turn out at a 47-65 percent rate while those in their 60s exceed an 80 percent turnout rate. In midterms, there is even wider disparity, with voters under the age of 30 turning out at a rate of just 17-35 percent compared to 70 percent for voters in their 60s.²

There are many social, psychological, and cognitive factors that might explain the disparity in voter turnout across age groups. One of these is simply that young people have never voted before and therefore haven't had the opportunity to develop many of the habits and supporting attitudes that benefit older voters. This difference takes advantage of a well-documented phenomenon known as the status quo bias, or a preference for the way things currently are. When this bias is active, the person takes their current situation as a reference point such that any change from that baseline is perceived as a loss.³ In the case of young people who have never voted before, this bias manifests itself as a disposition to continue to not vote.

A second factor that may help explain low turnout among younger age groups is that young people are less familiar with the voting system, and therefore experience greater difficulty

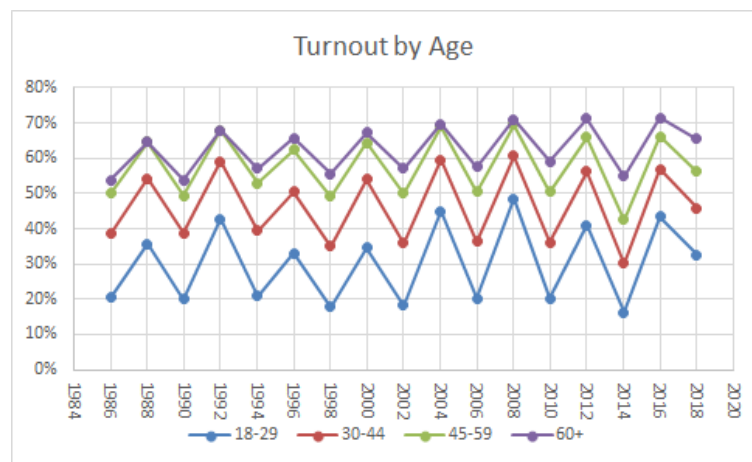


Figure 1. Voting turnout by age group, 1984-2018.

¹ Alper, Maya, and Dan Connolly, "It's Time to Rethink What Counts as a Voter Turnout Strategy," *Behavioral Scientist*, July 3, 2019. <https://behavioralscientist.org/its-time-to-rethink-what-counts-as-a-voter-turnout-strategy/>.

² Franklin, Charles. "Age and Voter Turnout." *Medium*. Feb. 25, 2018. <https://medium.com/@PollsAndVotes/age-and-voter-turnout-52962b0884ef>.

³ "Status Quo Bias." *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 4 October 2019. Web. 6 October 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Status_quo_bias.

navigating the voting process. This lack of familiarity means that young people must exert more effort to vote than their more experienced counterparts. This added difficulty acts to reinforce the status quo bias making it even harder for young people to cast that first vote.⁴

With fewer young people succeeding in executing that critical first vote, young people are deprived of another crucial advantage enjoyed by older voters—social pressure from peers. Contrary to classical economic models that conceive of voting as a quasi-rational decision made by self-interested individuals, more recent research suggests that voting is a fundamentally social behavior reinforced by social norms and a sense of communal identity. For example, Green and Gerber (2004, 2008) found that in campaigns aimed at Getting Out the Vote (GOTV), the more personal a mode of contact, the larger its impact on the contacted citizen. Similarly, studies by Rind and Benjamin (1994) and Posner and Rasmusen (1999) found that when people are merely made aware that their behavior will be publicly known, they become more likely to behave in ways that are consistent with how they believe others think they should behave (an expectation known as a descriptive social norm).⁵

This desire to conform to the social norm means that young people are more likely to do what they perceive their peers to be doing—which, when it comes to voting, is *nothing*. This point serves to illustrate how different factors affecting young would-be voters can combine to produce an effect that is larger than the sum of its parts.

The Importance of Onboarding

The points above paint a picture in which people's default condition is non-voter. Therefore, in order to *become* voters, they must undergo some sort of conversion. We can call the process by which this conversion occurs onboarding. In summary, this framework predicts that prior to successful onboarding, a person is inhibited from transitioning due to an innate preference for the way things currently are (status quo bias) compounded by the pain of having to learn to an unfamiliar system. With so few young people able to overcome these obstacles in the first rounds of elections, the population of young voters fails to reach the critical mass necessary to exert social pressure on those who have not yet converted, resulting in low overall turnout. After successful onboarding, however, the whole system reverses itself. Having overcome the initial obstacles inhibiting their first vote, inertia

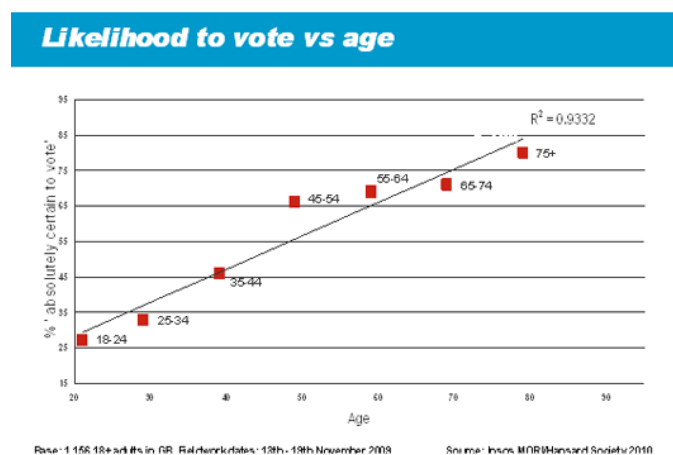


Figure 2. Likelihood to vote by age

⁴ Kahneman, Daniel, *Attention and Effort*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1973.

⁵ Syal, Supriya, and Dan Ariely, "How Science Can Help Get Out the Vote: Research offers several proved strategies for boosting turnout on Election Day," *Scientific American*, September 1, 2016. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-science-can-help-get-out-the-vote/>.

shifts in favor of voting in subsequent elections.⁶ The system no longer feels so unfamiliar, so there is far less pain to deter the prospective voter. Eventually, enough young people make it through that new social norms begin to emerge creating a pressure gradient that helps the remaining members transition, leading to turnout rates that are more representative of the population as a whole.

The following experiment aims to test the accuracy of these predictions by measuring the effect of a high school onboarding program on turnout rates of young voters.

Intervention Design

The onboarding program will be implemented as a two-arm randomized controlled trial (RCT) aimed at addressing the following causal question: *What is the effect of participating in the two alternative onboarding programs relative to not participating on voter turnout for first time eligible voters in the test voting district?*

In the first arm of the study, first year high school students will be guided through a compulsory mock election designed to mirror as closely as possible the actual voting system in their district. For maximum effect, special auxiliary voting systems will be set up within the district's existing voting infrastructure to facilitate the mock election. Students will apply for a mock voter ID, be transported on election day to their designated polling location, pass through processing, and cast their ballot just as would any legitimate voter. To minimize the strain on the district's voting system and prevent any interference with actual voters, the schools should work with the election staff to provide the necessary staff and logistical support. Furthermore, the mock voting should be scheduled as to minimize any interference with actual voters.

In the second arm of the study, students will do all of the above plus, upon graduation from the program, be enrolled in a Facebook Group made up of other program graduates. This condition is designed to measure whether being presented with depictions of one's peers engaging in voter behaviors may generate social pressure to vote when one becomes eligible, as predicted by theories that conceive of voting as a fundamentally social behavior.⁷

Policy Evaluation

To test whether the policy works, the voter turnout of the two treatment groups should be measured and compared to one another and against the control condition to determine if there is a statistically significant difference. Because assignment of the treatments was randomized among schools within a single voting district, we should expect no systematic differences between the three groups to confound the results. Internal validity should therefore be strong. However, the choice to limit the experiment to a single voting district may impair the external

⁶ Hummel, Patrick and David Rothschild, "Fundamental Models for Forecasting Elections at the State Level," *Electoral Studies*, Volume 35, September 2014, 123-139.

⁷ Rogers, Todd, Craig R. Fox, and Alan S. Gerber, "Rethinking Why People Vote: Voting as Dynamic Social Expression," *Behavioral Foundations of Policy*. Ed. Eldar Shafir, Princeton University Press, 2012, 91-107.

validity of our results, since the test district will likely have features that don't generalize to the larger population. To address this issue, the experiment could later be repeated across states as well as districts.

In this initial test phase of the intervention, only behavioral interventions are employed; no more orthodox economic tools are required. However, if the program was found to be effective and the decision was made to deploy it at a larger scale, more traditional economic policies would come to play a more significant role, particularly in ensuring that the program was deployed equitably. This scenario is examined in more detail in the next section.

Expected Costs and Benefits

If either of the treatments was found to be effective at improving voter turnout, it would lend support to the hypothesis that young people vote in lower proportions in part because of insufficient or ineffective onboarding. In the most general terms, this insight should encourage policymakers to increase their investment in interventions targeting the non-voting age and voting eligible populations. In more specific terms, this finding should encourage more widespread adoption of onboarding programs by high schools—and even, perhaps, middle and elementary schools as well. While such programs may be costly to deploy (both in absolute terms as well as foregone opportunities to invest those resources in alternative programs), these costs would be greatly outweighed by the benefits of having a more robust and representative electorate.

A more critical concern in relation to program costs is where the money will come from once it is deployed at a larger scale. Currently, most public-school funding is garnered through the collection of property taxes. But because property values vary so drastically from place to place, the resource that schools have to invest in programs like this one also vary dramatically (see Figure 3).⁸ For many schools, the cost will simply be too high. Without alternative funding sources for lower resourced schools, any benefits deriving from the onboarding program will flow disproportionately to the more

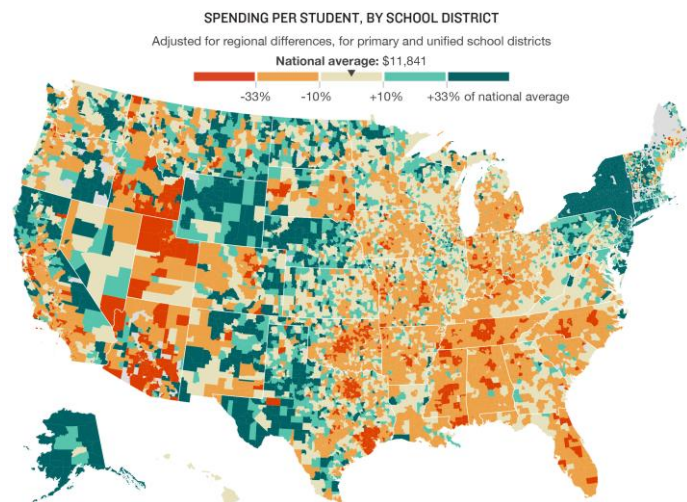


Figure 3. Spending per student by school district.

⁸ Turner, Cory, et al., "Why America's Schools Have A Money Problem," *NPR Morning Edition*, April 18, 2016. <https://www.npr.org/2016/04/18/474256366/why-americas-schools-have-a-money-problem>.

affluent districts, further widening the participation gap and creating an even more lopsided electorate.

Assuming these challenges can be met, however, the potential benefits of the program would be substantial. With more young people engaged in the political process, politicians from both sides of the aisle will be compelled to adjust their platforms to better represent this group's unique concerns and priorities, likely giving greater urgency to such hot button issues as gun control, educational financing, economic opportunity and mobility, and climate change. This increased attention and representation in the policies subsequently pursued may, in turn, have a further warming effect on the younger electorate, leading to even greater levels of political interest and engagement. We may also find that many of the issues that are important to young voters are also important to other underrepresented groups, providing a new point of entry for policies seeking to integrate these groups more fully into the political process.

Political Feasibility

A final set of concerns has to do with the political feasibility of the new policy: will it find enough support among the republican and democratic parties to get off the ground? As noted above, liberals will likely be concerned about the challenges related to deploying these programs in a way that is equitable given the current disparities in funding across school districts, and the possible effects the program will have on the representativeness of the electorate if this equity cannot be achieved. Conservatives, meanwhile, are more likely to be concerned about the cost of the program and its effect on the federal budget and taxes. Objections of this sort are more likely if the program's results are modest or strongly skewed. If the program's effects are more significant and reasonably balanced, however, both conservatives and liberals would likely favor the programs for the access it provides to new, more impressionable voters.

Conclusion

As Alper and Connolly (2019) observe, "inequality in voter participation distorts the representativeness of government."⁹ Addressing the problem of low turnout among the youngest voters would go a long way toward restoring government to its proper shape. Research from the field of behavioral economics suggests that turnout among young voters may be improved by onboarding programs designed to reduce the social, psychological, and cognitive factors that inhibit young people from casting their first vote. By introducing these programs in high school, policymakers can potentially hasten the uptake of older age voting behaviors and attitudes by young voters to achieve a more diverse and representative electorate.

⁹ Alper and Connolly 2019.

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