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October 2018

# Expanding the Electorate

How Simple Changes in Election Administration Can Improve Voter Participation Among Low-Income Youth

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## Introduction

Low voter participation among young people is a persistent challenge to a healthy republic, which requires broad engagement by citizens from diverse backgrounds. Among youth, however, there is a large disparity in voter participation by educational attainment, which is highly correlated with social class. For example, according to Census data, the 2014 midterm turnout among young citizens aged 18-29 was 19.9%—the lowest ever recorded. However, among the same population, turnout was 11.5% for those who had not gone to college and 15.2% for young people whose family's annual income was below \$40,000. Even among registered non-college and low-income young voters, turnout was only about 33% in both of these groups. On the other hand, their affluent and highly educated peers voted at rates similar to that of older populations (46%). Interestingly, while media reports suggest young voters overwhelmingly vote for Democrats, CIRCLE data show this is not the case, with 18 to 29-year-olds having a wide range of ideological backgrounds.<sup>1,2</sup>

Low-income youth are often seen as a “challenging electorate” by campaigns and other political actors. Scholars have historically explored many reasons why low-income youth do not participate in elections, and in civic life overall, as much as their more socioeconomically advantaged peers. Some have focused on a lack of motivation, others on a lack of accurate information, and still others have explored how challenges related to having a low income make it more difficult to vote. Low-income youth often have to juggle multiple jobs with inflexible schedules, along with numerous personal responsibilities. These economic struggles can translate into multiple logistical barriers to voting, such as having to find a ride, securing childcare, or finding someone to cover a shift. While these and other myriad challenges have been posited by researchers, much less is known about how to concretely address them and actually improve voter participation among low-income youth.

We believe these young people are “opportunity youth”: individuals who, when given the chance for meaningful civic and political engagement, can make a significant positive impact in their lives and their communities. To address the critical knowledge gap about how best to increase their participation in democracy, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE) partnered with Opportunity Youth United (OYU) to conduct a study focused specifically on this question. CIRCLE, a leading research center on youth engagement at Tufts University's Tisch College of Civic Life, and OYU, a grassroots nonprofit dedicated to empowering low-income youth, jointly designed and conducted a survey of over 1,200 young people, ages 18-34, from six states across the country: Arizona, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, and Washington. Because researchers who are affiliated with OYU distributed the survey among the population OYU serves, the respondents are overwhelmingly youth from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. (Please see the appendix for a detailed methodology).

The survey results provide an in-depth look at how this particular population of young adults understands elections, their barriers to participation, and their interactions with the electoral system and election officials. They also provide a road map for promoting a discussion of how election administrators and other stakeholders can help opportunity youth feel welcomed, valued, and encouraged to fulfill their vitally important role in our democracy.

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<sup>1</sup> CIRCLE (2017). *Millennials After 2016: Post-Election Poll Analysis*. Analysis of youth attitudes, tendencies, and prospects for future engagement. Medford, MA: Tufts University. <https://civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Millennials-after-2016-Post-Election-Poll-Analysis.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> CIRCLE (2018) *Millennials' Diverse Political Views: A Typology of the Rising Generation*. Medford, MA: Tufts University. [https://civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/millennials\\_diverse\\_political\\_views.pdf](https://civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/millennials_diverse_political_views.pdf)

## Key Findings and Recommendations

Our study indicates that young people care about voting and understand its importance. The vast majority (88%) of those surveyed feel that voting makes a difference, and very few (7%) feel that it's "a waste of time." They are far from apathetic, but many have faced challenges or have not had the opportunities necessary to make voting a regular part of their lives. This report sheds light on some of those obstacles, and ways to address them.

The findings suggest that opportunity youth are often not asked or encouraged to participate, and have frequently grown up in a culture of low civic participation and distrust toward public officials. By and large, voting is neither a habit nor expectation in their communities; most do not hear about elections and politics in their everyday interactions with family, friends, and coworkers; and they lack role models who can provide accurate election-related information and demonstrate voting behavior. For instance, our survey finds that some young people fear they would not know how to fill out a ballot and would have no one to help them figure it out. Many lack information on the practicalities of successfully registering and going to the polls. They are confused about what identification documents—if any—they need to bring to the polls, and are unsure about whether previous arrests or convictions may affect their ability to vote.

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*"I learned that, although I am constantly battling misconceptions about young people, I had misconceptions of my own. I let what everyone was saying about young people get into my head. I was surprised with the results of the survey because, just like everyone else, I expected young people not to care about voting."*

—Survey Research Associate

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The effects of not coming from a community that expects or teaches voting can reach far beyond a lack of information. Research shows that having a "voter identity," a sense that voting is part of who you are, is a positive predictor of voting. Socialization activities, such as regular discussion of public issues and voting with family members, contributes to much of that identity formation.<sup>3</sup> Our study found that this type of socialization is not occurring among low-income youth. Less than half of young people surveyed thought that almost everyone in their families voted, and less than a third believed that their associates or colleagues voted. In addition, half of those surveyed reported that their peers don't even talk about voting during election time. Without these social cues and expectations, it becomes difficult to establish and develop norms that could drive voting behavior among low-income youth. Case in point: more than half of young people in our survey don't believe they have a responsibility to vote. The lack of a voter identity even transcends other important correlates of youth voting. Having a college education is a strong predictor of voting but, in our low-income youth sample, going to college alone did not make respondents more likely to consider voting to be a part of who they are.

These challenges are compounded by the fact that, based on our experiences attending convenings of election officials, relatively little is known about the needs of young voters in low-income communities; partly because relatively few election administrators are in that age group, and partly because young people in those communities hardly ever contact their offices. Thus, we conclude that if election administration professionals better understood the needs and priorities of low-income youth—and, vice versa, if low-income youth better understood the information and support that election administrators can offer—both could make changes together to encourage greater voter participation.

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<sup>3</sup> The Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge (2013). *All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement. The report of the Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge*. Medford, MA: Tufts University. <http://www.civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/CIRCLE-youthvoting-individualPages.pdf>

Our study reveals that many of these changes are simple additions and adjustments that can increase young people's access to voting and improve their perception of the electoral system. At the same time, research suggests that voter education must go beyond merely making information available on an existing website: it must meet young people where they are, identify what young people already do or do not know in order to address specific knowledge gaps, allay concerns about electoral engagement, and build comfort and trust where little may exist.

We believe the recommendations below can serve as a jumping-off point for this important work, which may require partnering with youth groups and other forms of substantive engagement with low-income youth:

- 1. Expand Access to Essential Information:** Young people should be aware of all the ways they can register to vote, especially where online registration is available. This information should be highly visible and easily accessible, especially on mobile devices, not buried in PDFs or other documents that youth must download or print.<sup>4</sup>
- 2. Understand that Young People Move a Lot:** Youth move around more frequently than older voters, but are often unaware that they must be registered at their current address to vote at the nearest polling place. This information must be communicated to them when they register to vote for the first time, and via regular reminders. Encouraging local companies, nonprofits, and educational institutions to remind people to update their registration address when they interact with young people could be an efficient strategy. Concentrating on companies in sectors that tend to employ many young people (such as fast food, retail, sales, etc.) would help focus these outreach efforts.
- 3. Decode the Precinct Lingo:** Young people need to know how to easily identify and verify their current voting precinct. When precinct locations are communicated with numbers, abbreviations, or other ways that aren't easily understood by new members of a community, it can create more confusion for young voters.
- 4. Deliver the Voting Schedule to Youth:** Youth need to know the dates of various elections and the opening hours of polling places, but they may not be able to locate key information on an official website—or may not even know there is such a website where they can find that information. Be sure to provide these vital facts through multiple channels and emphasize details that may help them vote; for example, whether polling places will be open into the evening hours.
- 5. Tell Youth What They Need to Bring:** Young people need clear information regarding what documentation, if any, must be presented at the polls. Be sure to emphasize exactly what is required in these documents (e.g. exactly matching names, address consistent with registration address, etc.). As with all of these recommendations, do not simply assume that they already know this information.
- 6. Get Them Back on The Rolls:** Many youth are unaware that, in some cases, they do not lose their right to vote for any period of time after a misdemeanor or felony arrest and/or conviction. Where that's not the case, youth need access to state-specific information on voting rights restoration after a felony or misdemeanor arrest or conviction.

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<sup>4</sup> National and local groups such as the [Code for America Brigade](#) can help government agencies provide digital access to their services.

7. **Recruit Young, Paid Poll Workers:** Young people rarely see election officials and poll workers who “look like them.” Having young, diverse poll workers could increase low-income youth’s comfort at the polls, and/or their comfort communicating with an election office. At the same, many young people who are struggling economically cannot afford to volunteer their time, so it is important to carefully recruit and remunerate poll workers.
8. **Work with Young Leaders to Create a Culture of Voting:** Low-income youth need encouragement and assistance to establish voting norms for themselves, and thereby become role models for their peers and family members. Young peer leaders can influence culture through social media and their direct interaction with youth. Working to establish a positive connection between young leaders from diverse backgrounds, and arming them with useful electoral information, could influence this culture over time.
 

*“I wish adults and elected officials understood that young people care. We want to create change. We want to learn. We just need to be heard. If we constantly tell young people that they’re unreliable, they’re going to become unreliable.”*

—Survey Research Associate
9. **Support Community Conversations:** Although it is not usually an election administrator’s job to plan or host candidate and issue forums of any kind, supporting these events by spreading information about them through your channels could help young people, many of whom, according to our survey, felt “too uninformed” to vote, feel more knowledgeable about candidates and issues.
10. **Make Yourself Available to Young People:** Youth who are new to the voting process may have questions, run into technical problems while trying to register online, or otherwise require support. Have processes and avenues to communicate with young people and answer inquiries, especially on platforms that youth typically use to communicate (i.e. text messages, messaging apps, and social media).

## Survey Findings

### Time, Transportation, and other Logistical Challenges Deter Youth

It can be very challenging for young people who are struggling economically to find time to go to the polls. More than half (52%) of youth in our survey reported that they would have to rearrange their work schedule to vote; 16% said it would be even more difficult because they would have to find someone to cover their shift. Most young people were not sure if their school or employer would allow them to take time off to vote: only a quarter reported that their employers allowed them to go vote without taking personal time, a fifth reported that their school allowed them to take time to go vote, and just 16% of respondents reported that their state law allows them to leave work without taking personal time.

Transportation presents an additional challenge for low-income youth: a quarter of young people in our survey said they would need a ride to get to the polls. In short, many low-income youth found voting to be a daunting task involving them asking for multiple “favors” because they do not live and work in an environment where voting is part of the culture.

**Takeaway:** Where states allow it, election offices can encourage local employers and educational institutions to explicitly communicate workers' and students' rights to take time off to vote. They can also proactively let young people know about community resources like ride sharing programs that may be available to help get people to the polls.<sup>5</sup>

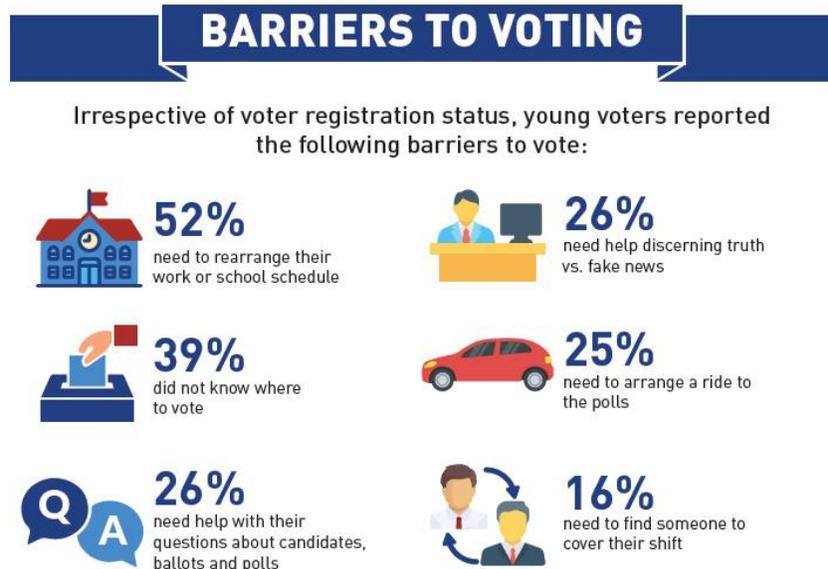


Figure 1. Reported barriers to voting.

## Youth May Not Know What They Don't Know

Only half of surveyed youth were confident that they would be fully prepared to vote if an election happened “next week.” More than a quarter were registered to vote in a precinct other than their current one, and about the same number were unable to travel to the precinct where they were registered. Another 11% were unsure where their precinct was located. This confusion is exacerbated by the fact that young people are highly mobile and don't always know to, or follow through with, updating their address in order to vote at their current location. Among the young adults who participated in this survey, 70% reported that they were registered to vote, but a quarter of them moved last year and only 40% of them had changed their voter registration.

The young people surveyed were also largely unfamiliar with online access to voter registration: although five of the six states where participants were surveyed offer online voter registration, only 17% of youth living in those five states registered to vote online. More frequently (38%) they registered at in-person locations such as a library, community organization, post office, town hall or, most commonly, at the DMV. Community leaders who have deep experience with opportunity youth report that young people often value face-to-face voter registration opportunities, since they can ask questions and ensure that they have completed the registration form correctly.

<sup>5</sup> Based in part on the results of our survey, the ride sharing service [Lyft will start to provide free or reduced-cost rides to the polls](#) in underserved communities.

The data also revealed a unique challenge for young voters who are unfamiliar with the voting process: they don't know what they don't know. We found that, perhaps counterintuitively, the less young people in our survey knew about voting and elections, the fewer barriers they saw to voting. Youth with less educational attainment also identified fewer obstacles among the tasks they believed they would need to complete to vote in a hypothetical upcoming election. On the other hand, older survey participants (aged 23-34) were more likely to identify barriers to voting, which could suggest that they already have experience with the process and are more aware of potential challenges, and/or that they must contend with more personal or professional issues like rearranging work schedules or arranging childcare. This group of youth who are less likely to identify barriers warrants particular attention, because their lack of understanding makes them less likely to actively seek out specific information about where, how, and when to register and vote. Thus, they may face a completely unfamiliar or unanticipated barrier that prevents them from voting.

Some jurisdictions are already addressing this problem in innovative and accessible ways. For instance, the City of Minneapolis Elections & Voter Services office's website has a comprehensive section dedicated to voter outreach and education. The resources therein assume no prior knowledge of registration and voting, and provide visual and written information to anyone who's interested in learning about registration, understanding the ballot, and voting. These web pages include important information we don't often see in many other voter education sites and materials, such as accurate information on [the rights of voters](#), and [a video](#) showing exactly how to fill out and vote via a mail-in ballot in Minnesota.

**Takeaway:** It is crucial to never assume what young people do and do not know about elections, and to be proactive about providing information—especially about options like online registration (where available) that youth are evidently unfamiliar with. At the same time, election administrators should not over-rely on digital tools, since low-income youth may prefer to register in person so they can get help and ask questions, which underscores the importance of being available and responsive. Understanding and embracing young people's mobility is also vital in order to ensure that they know their precinct and are registered correctly.

### Confusion over Voter ID and Voter Disenfranchisement is Widespread

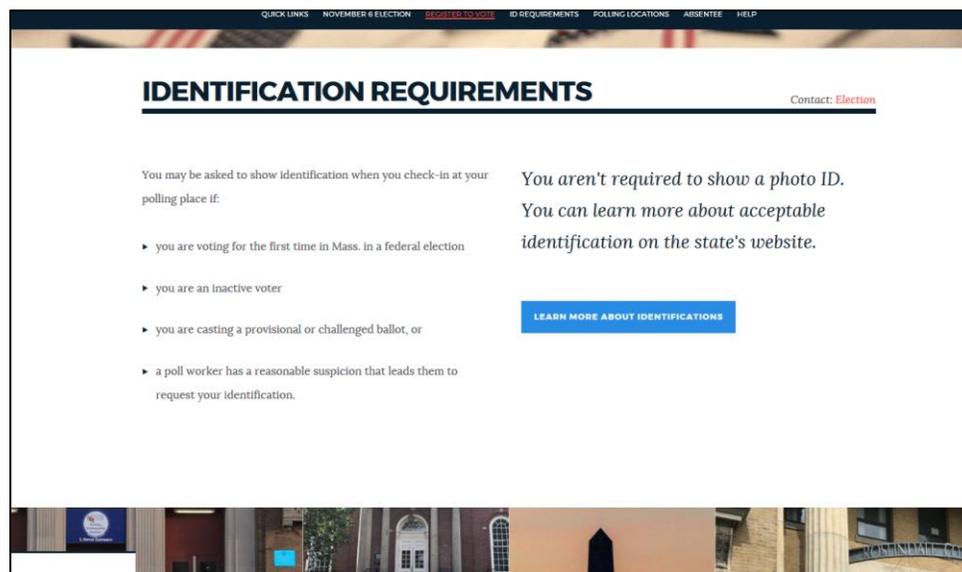
Young people today are far less likely to drive than young people were a few decades ago, so they are less likely to possess a driver's license. While 34 states request or require a form of ID for voting, only six actually have a "strict photo ID" law that requires a driver's license, passport, military ID, or Tribal ID card,<sup>6</sup> and many other states accept non-photo IDs such as utility bills and bank statements. This combination of disparate state laws on photo ID, and the federal Help America Vote Act's mandate for all states to require identification from all first-time voters, make it difficult for youth to understand exactly what they need in their jurisdiction.

Our data reflect that uncertainty: by and large, survey participants found voter ID rules to be confusing, and they often assumed the laws to be more restrictive than they actually are. A vast majority (88%) of the young adults in our study thought they had to show a photo ID when voting even though only one state in the survey (Mississippi) has a strict photo ID law. Incorrectly believing that one must show a driver's license or similar form of identification to vote could drive

<sup>6</sup> Underhill, W. (2018). Voter Identification Requirements and Voter ID Laws. <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/voter-id.aspx>

down youth turnout; our previous research<sup>7</sup> suggests that strict photo ID laws have a negative effect on voting among youth who had not attended college. Without a clear understanding of what documents, if any, are needed at the polls, young people could fear being turned away and feel discouraged from going to vote, especially if they already find the process daunting, as many low-income youth do.

The City of Boston's official online voting guide is a strong model of how to provide information about voter ID in a clear yet comprehensive manner. It states, in a visible font, that voters are not required to show an ID. It also lists some conditions under which voters may be asked to present identification at polling place. All of this information is presented directly on the web page—rather than on a PDF document—which makes it easier to access on a mobile device.



Source: City of Boston <https://www.boston.gov/voting-boston#id-requirements>

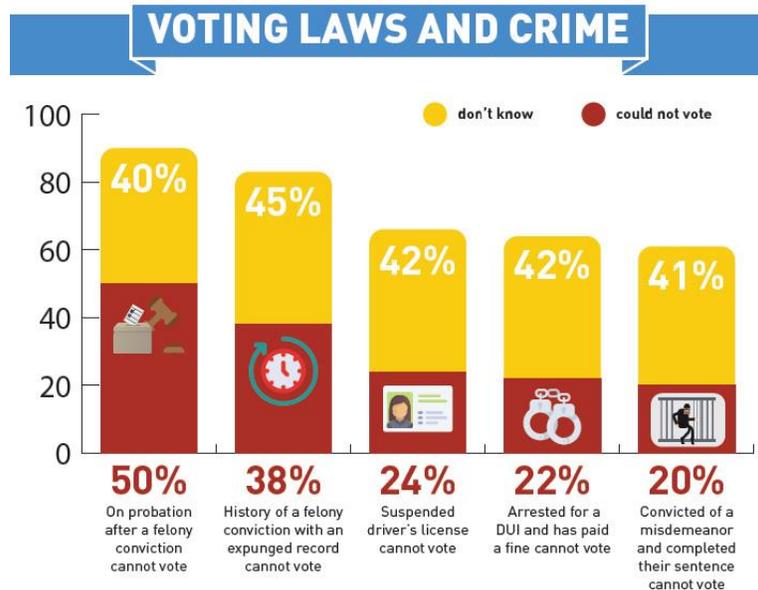
Young voters are also confused about voter disenfranchisement related to past criminal arrests or convictions. For example, 40% of the young people surveyed reported that they didn't know if someone on probation after a felony conviction could vote, and 45% said they didn't know if someone with a previous felony conviction but an expunged record could vote. About 42% weren't sure if someone who paid a fine for a DUI could vote, if those convicted of a misdemeanor who completed their sentence could vote, or if someone with a suspended driver's license could vote. Youth with less formal education expressed even more confusion about these possibilities.

That uncertainty is not exclusive to young voters. A decade ago, a study found that election officials were themselves confused about voter eligibility rules and registration procedures for people with criminal convictions.<sup>8</sup> That's not surprising, given the wide range of relevant (and frequently changing) laws across the country. Case in point, among the six states we surveyed, only Kentucky permanently disenfranchises individuals with a felony conviction, while Arizona

<sup>7</sup> Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge (2013). *All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement*. Medford, MA: Tisch College of Civic Life. <https://civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/CIRCLE-youthvoting-individualPages.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Wood, E. & Bloom, R. (2008). *De Facto Disenfranchisement*. Brennan Center for Justice: <https://www.brennancenter.org/publication/de-facto-disenfranchisement>

and Mississippi have some crimes that result in permanent voter disenfranchisement. Louisiana and Washington fully restore voting rights to felons, but only after they have fully completed their sentence, while Massachusetts restores voting rights to felons as soon as they are released from prison.



In all five situations, people are legally allowed to vote in most or all states.

Figure 2. Percentage of youth who think (or don't know whether) the listed offenses disqualify them from voting.

**Takeaway:** We encourage election officials to create a simple concrete guide for first-time voters that clearly outlines the state or jurisdiction-specific laws regarding voter ID requirements and the voting rights of people with a history of arrests, convictions, and/or incarceration—including, where applicable, the specific steps individuals need to take to restore their voting rights. It is important to not only share accurate information in an accessible manner, but also to specifically identify and target groups who do not actually get disenfranchised for their offense; for instance, if a state does not revoke the voting rights of people who are convicted of a DUI and have paid a fine, they should be told explicitly that they can still vote. When shared widely, these guides can give young voters an authoritative source of information on how to “do it right” and give them confidence that their votes will be counted.

### Polling Places Can Intimidate Young People

Our study indicates that polling places can feel like unwelcoming and even intimidating places to low-income youth. Only a quarter of youth surveyed saw poll workers who “looked like them,” and even fewer (13%) saw young people working at the polls. Less than half (41%) reported that they thought election workers made an effort to ensure that young people like them could vote, and 15% reported that they believe poll workers didn't care about them or understand them. Those with more challenging economic situations, and with lower levels of formal education, were even more likely to harbor negative views of poll workers and polling places.

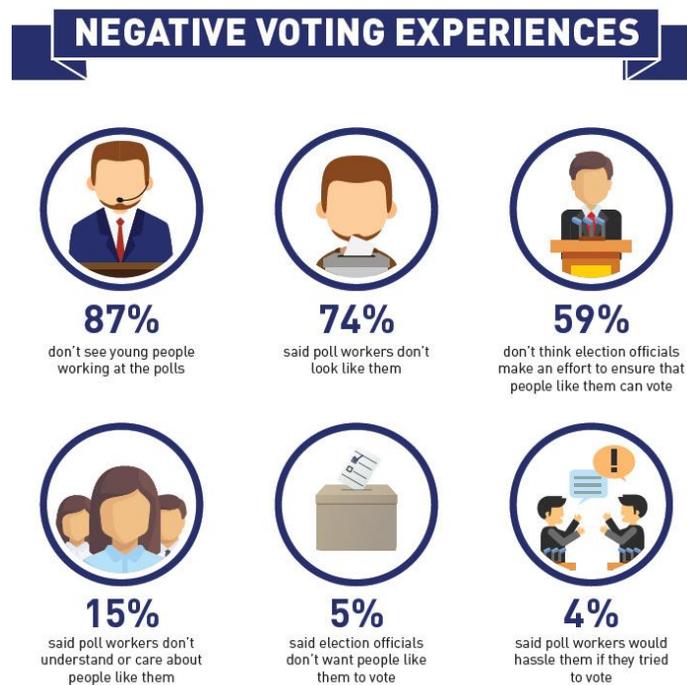


Figure 3. Negative voting experiences reported by youth.

The survey also found that, for various reasons, some youth are apprehensive about the experience they may have trying to vote. Five percent were worried that they did not know how to fill out the ballot, and 4% reported believing they would be “hassled” by poll workers. Again, those who had more challenging economic situations were much more likely to say that they felt intimidated by election officials at polling places. Although only a relatively small minority of youth harbor these feelings, it is a grave concern, because having a negative experience as a first-time voter can have a lasting impact on future voting behaviors.

**Takeaway:** Given some young people's apprehensions about the voting process, election officials must make a concerted effort to make them feel understood, valued, and welcomed when trying to cast a ballot—especially when there are stark demographic differences between poll workers and low-income youth. When possible, administrators should actively recruit local youth as poll workers, through high schools and community organizations. However, it should be noted that low-income youth will often need to be compensated in order to spend their time on the requisite trainings and actually working on Election Day. It is important to consider “hidden costs” such as transportation and childcare, which can possibly be addressed by offering childcare or holding training in a convenient location.

### Lack of Election Information is a Persistent Problem

In our survey, 17% of young people said that they don't think they “know enough” to vote. Even if election systems are running smoothly, polling places are more welcoming to youth, and information about voter IDs is clearly presented, there may still be young people who simply will not vote because they are not sure if they are getting the right information about the election, or they feel that they are uninformed about who is on the ballot and exactly what their votes will mean.

Young, low-income voters rely heavily on word-of-mouth from the people around them and from social media to gather election-related information. Sixty-one percent get election information from their family, and 35% from co-workers. Respondents with higher levels of education were more likely to get voting information from family and friends, likely because their peers and relatives are also more likely to discuss elections, issues, and candidates.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, respondents with more challenging economic situations were less likely to get voting information, including from family and friends. In addition, social media play a significant role, with 60% getting information from Facebook, followed by other social media platforms such as Instagram (19%), Twitter (16%), YouTube (15%), and Snapchat (14%).

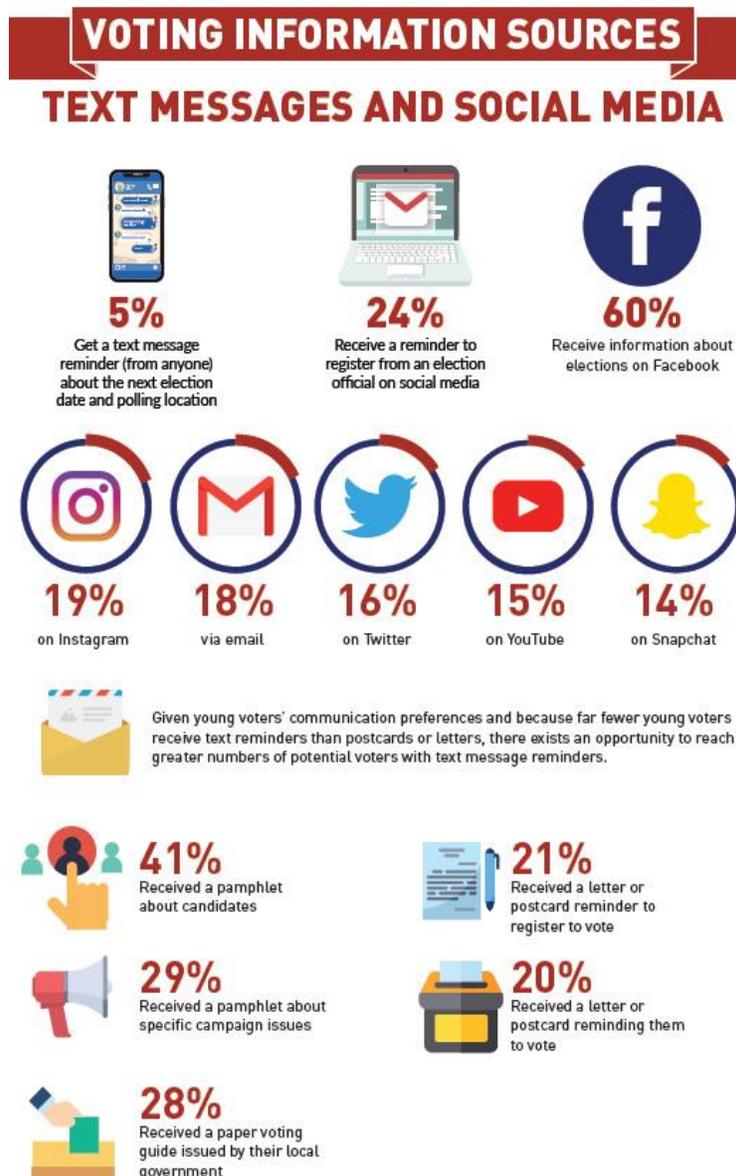


Figure 4. Where and how youth receive information about voting.

<sup>9</sup> A large survey of young people by the Commission on Young Voting and Civic Knowledge (2013) found that family discussions about social and political issues was highly correlated to young people's political engagement and informed voting. The more a family discussed social and political issues at home, the more likely the young adults were to be civically and politically engaged and vote in a way that demonstrated their understanding of issues and candidates' priorities.

Relatively few young people receive information from officials like election administrators, including Secretaries of States, through the platforms that they most frequently use to communicate: texting and social media. Fewer than 10% of them received texts from public officials, and fewer than 6% received a text message reminder about the next election date or polling location. One notable exception: a quarter of youth received reminders to register to vote on social media, thanks in part to the election administrator community's strong commitment to National Voter Registration Day. Although the official state election page in each state has all the information voters need in order to vote, only 43% of respondents in our survey thought they would be able to find information about where and how to vote.

Regardless of the source, it was generally more common for youth to receive information in traditional ways, like mailed pamphlets about candidates (41%) or issues (29%). More than a quarter of youth (28%) also reported receiving a voter's guide in the mail, but less than a fifth of respondents reported receiving mail reminding them to vote or register to vote. While youth may be receiving these materials, and mail-based voting can be extremely effectively in some communities, election administrators may benefit from asking young people directly whether they actually read "snail mail." The researchers that collected data in local communities for this study—who are low-income youth themselves—said that they would not regularly open such mail and voter guides often remain unopened in their households. Email, another common form of communication, goes almost completely ignored by young voters.

Many young people are also unaware that they can find important voting-related information from official online sources like a state's elections website. Only around half said that they could learn what was on the ballot and what form of ID, if any, they needed to bring to the polls. Less than half felt that they could learn how and where to vote (43%), polling place hours (39%), what steps to follow at the polling location (33%), how to find an election official responsible for their polling location (26%), or how to get an absentee ballot (21%).

As with other aspects of voter information and outreach, some election offices go beyond providing the basic facts about voting and make concerted efforts to reach and engage young people and others who may be unfamiliar with, or skeptical about, the electoral system. The election office of Maricopa County, Arizona, serves a diverse population of 2.2 million voters and provides residents all relevant information in English and Spanish. Moreover, voters can easily sign up for text alerts about upcoming elections. That system also allows Maricopa County voters to track what happens to their early voting or provisional ballots, which may increase voters' understanding and trust in exactly how and when their votes are counted.

In King County, Washington, the county elections office provides a series of educational videos that are not only aimed at voting-age residents, but also at students who are not yet eligible but can start to familiarize themselves with important topics, such as how ballots are collected and tabulated, and the [history of voting rights](#). These types of resources allow residents of diverse backgrounds to obtain critical, logistical information about registration and voting, as well as gain a sense of the importance of voting in the United States, past and present. In addition, much of the information on their website is offered in the five most-commonly spoken languages among county residents.

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what steps to follow at the polling location (33%), how to find an election official responsible for their polling location (26%), or how to get an absentee ballot (21%).

**Takeaway:** Young people rely heavily on familiar and accessible sources of election information, such as family, friends, and Facebook. However, the information they get from these sources could potentially be inaccurate, especially among low-income youth whose relatives and peers may not be regular voters. Likewise, although social media companies are now making attempts to provide more accurate election-related news and information, these efforts are far from what is needed to effectively counter disinformation. As the official, authoritative sources of nonpartisan election information, election offices have a unique responsibility to increase the visibility of this information, to understand how best to communicate it to young people, and to undertake direct and sustained outreach that can help youth feel informed and ready to vote.

## In Closing

This report was developed with the goal of emphasizing key findings that have implications for election administration professionals, community organizations, and community members who work with election offices. There is a parallel effort by Opportunity Youth United to disseminate the survey's findings widely throughout their network and partner organizations, in order to educate young leaders and young people overall about election information that is commonly misunderstood, and to encourage young people to proactively reach out to local election offices so that they can receive and share accurate, nonpartisan information about elections and voting with their family, neighbors, and friends. We hope that election administrators will find these takeaways and recommendations useful as they make plans for youth engagement in upcoming election cycles and beyond.

## Methodology

Many of the foundational ideas behind this research come from previous studies conducted by both organizations, notably CIRCLE's ["That's Not Democracy": How Out-of-School Youth Engage in Civic Life and What Stands in Their Way](#) and OYU's [Increasing Voter Engagement among Low-Income Young Adults](#).

For this project, CIRCLE used a community-based participatory research (CBPR) strategy which allowed for the recruitment of hard-to-reach youth. Specifically, CIRCLE partnered with OYU to recruit young leaders from their peer-based network to work as "research associates." These young leaders were opportunity youth from urban and rural cities across the country.

Twelve research associates (two per city/town) provided guidance on the outreach and survey method and questions. Using this information, CIRCLE researchers developed the survey and piloted it with the research associates. Once the survey was finalized, research associates distributed it to their network of friends, family, and acquaintances who then reached out to their networks to recruit more participants. This method leverages the power of social networks to reach young people who are disengaged from elections using the power of degrees of separation. The research associates used a variety of ways to connect to their social networks, including digital outreach using email, Facebook, and text messages, as well as more traditional methods such as inviting peers to gatherings or meeting with them informally.

## Participants

CIRCLE partnered with Opportunity Youth United (OYU)—a national network of young people who experience poverty and who engage in their communities and advocate for policies to strengthen pathways out of poverty—to distribute the survey. The survey had a final sample of 1,127 racially and ethnically diverse youth, ages 18-34 (with over half of those surveyed ages 18-22). These young adults came from six states—Arizona (377), Kentucky (150), Louisiana (111), Massachusetts (138), Mississippi (188), and Washington (144). A total of 31% came from homes where a language other than English was spoken, 36% were students, 27% were unemployed or underemployed, and 31% had never attended college. Although our respondents could choose multiple racial and ethnic categories, 29% identified as White, 41% as Black or African American, 13% as American Indian or Alaskan Native, 8% as Asian or Pacific Islander, and 13% as Latino (total will exceed 100%). Economic struggles were quite common: among working youth, 41% of them said they have to work more than one job at least occasionally and two-thirds of all respondents (67%) expressed some degree of economic struggle.

Once the surveys were completed, CIRCLE researchers analyzed the data and reported back the results to OYU partners and research associates. During a follow-up conference call, the research associates provided insight into some of the more surprising findings. In addition, CIRCLE developed an infographic that conveys the research findings in an organized and user-friendly format that will be helpful as partners and research associates disseminate the findings.

In a second conference call, partners and research associates strategized about different ways to share survey findings and best practices in the communities where the surveys were conducted. CIRCLE and OYU are developing additional dissemination plans for non-profit, academic, and other interested stakeholder groups.

## Acknowledgements

This document is a co-production of CIRCLE at Tufts University's Tisch College of Civic Life, Opportunity Youth United, and young people who care deeply about their community of low-income youth and worked tirelessly to reach their peers and seek their input. We are deeply grateful for the efforts, for the passion they brought to this project, and for their expertise and experience related to low-income young people and electoral participation, which produced data that could not otherwise be obtained. We'd like to thank our Associate Researchers from six diverse cities and towns across the United States:

<b><u>Associate Name</u></b>	<b><u>City/Town</u></b>
Julie Darlene Jent	Berea, KY
Billy Deveriks II	Berea, KY
Amanda Shabowich	Boston, MA
Jair Ferreira	Boston, MA
Shaquonda Epton	Greenville, MS
Michael Starks	Greenville, MS
Kyle Knox	Phoenix, AZ
Philan Tree	Phoenix, AZ
Geoffrey Adams	New Orleans, LA
America Lenox	New Orleans, LA
Hikma Sherka	Seattle, WA
Freda Crichton	Seattle, WA

This project was generously funded by the Democracy Fund, a bipartisan foundation established by eBay founder and philanthropist Pierre Omidyar to help ensure that the American people come first in our democracy. We are grateful for the financial support as well as expert advice we received from the Democracy Fund staff.

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**CIRCLE** ([www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org)) is a nonpartisan, independent, academic research center that studies young people in politics and presents detailed data on young voters in all 50 states. CIRCLE is part of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University.

The only university-wide college of its kind, the **Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life** (<http://tischcollege.tufts.edu/>) offers transformational student learning and service opportunities, conducts groundbreaking research on young people's civic and political participation, and forges innovative community partnerships. Its work is guided by two core beliefs: that communities, nations and the world are stronger, more prosperous, and more just when citizens actively participate in civic and democratic life; and that higher education has a responsibility to develop the next generation of active citizens.

**Opportunity Youth United** ([www.oyunited.org](http://www.oyunited.org)) is a national multi-racial movement of young leaders from low-income communities and their adult allies, united to increase opportunity and decrease poverty in America. OYUnited is organizing youth-led Community Action Teams and outstanding young Community Leaders across the country to transform their local communities and influence policy, speaking up and bringing their recommendations for ending poverty and injustice to their elected officials, mobilizing their peers to vote, and organizing community improvement projects of their own design. The movement's leadership body is the National Council of Young Leaders, current and former Opportunity Youth who have transcended poverty with the help of our Sponsoring Organizations.

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