

Solving the “Youth Civic Engagement Problem”

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It's no secret that the 2020 election (and 2020 in general) was unusual; a surge of mail-in ballots and record-breaking early voters meant [we did not know who won](#) the election on November 3rd. Since Trump was up for re-election, political analysts compared poll numbers to the [2016 election](#), primarily focusing on minorities and young people. The [Census](#) notes that 70.9% of eligible voters 65+ voted in 2016, compared to just 46.1% of eligible voters between 18 and 29 years old. This is not a new trend. In 1996, only [39.6%](#) of eligible voters between 18-29 years voted. Historically, youth civic engagement is poor. It's key to understand why young people are less politically involved to most effectively address this discrepancy, thus, influence voter turnout and election outcomes in the future.

As a teen, I understand how my peers interpret politics and the power of our voice. When we express an interest in making a change, we are met with invalid criticism and ridiculed as naive or too inexperienced to have an opinion. It's not uncommon to hear countless Boomers and Gen Xers say that we don't have “real-world experience” or that “we don't know what we are talking about.” It is unjust and unintelligent to validate perspective with age, because everyone has a meaningful outlook on politics that is uniquely shaped by their experiences. Young people may not know everything, but we understand enough to hold opinions about policies for the future of our nation. After all, these politics/policies will influence us the most. Yet, virtually

every time we speak up, our voices are often overlooked or dismissed entirely. Young people are less civically engaged because our voices are not taken seriously, so we often don't bother expressing them at all.

I've always loved politics and the process of lawmaking. At age 9, I started following the 2012 election closely — diligently watching the Obama/Romney debates and changes in poll numbers, perhaps, more closely than most adults in my life. In my family, discussing politics at the dinner table is not unusual or rude; engaging in healthy debate, reconsidering our position, and understanding policies that influence us are strongly encouraged habits. Despite my interest in politics, my voice is still ignored in larger conversations. When I tried to debate my 80-year-old gun-owning neighbor and explain why I was going to the gun-reform protest, he told me that I “was too young to understand what the 2nd Amendment means” followed by “you don’t know what you are talking about.” Yet my peers are shot and killed in school every day. When I asked my aunt, who has a Ph.D. in Economics, to explain how the economy may change with the expansion or abridgement of the Affordable Care Act, she told me “you won’t get it.” The you-are-too-young-to-understand is the most common argument politically involved teenagers face. If we are “too young to understand”, wouldn’t we also be “too young” to ask the question? It is illogical to tie one’s ability to comprehend complex topics to age. This form of dismissal and gaslighting discourages young people from exploring their interest in politics. Other times, we are bullied out of the conversation altogether.

When Greta Thunberg marches alongside youth climate activists, protesting the lack of government action against climate change, they are bullied. Conservative Fox News political commentator, Michael Knowles, [calls her “mentally ill.”](#) Jeremy Clarkson, the former *Top Gear* host accuses her of killing the car show, and acting like a “spoilt brat.” He calls for members of

the Extinction Rebellion to simply “[go back to school.](#)” When Clarkson’s daughter steps in to defend the activists, he (along with countless other older people on Twitter) resort to [attacking her](#) instead. Trump mocks her passionate speech and [disfigures it as anger](#). Although most insults are aimed directly at Thunberg, the millions of young climate activists that stand alongside her also feel a sting; the insults are intended to dismiss a larger youth-led climate reform movement. Why is standing for environmental justice and caring about the health of all living beings controversial? Why do older people excoriate us when we criticize governments for failing to take effective and decisive action against climate change? Toxic attitudes towards young people, especially on an issue many of us are passionate about, establishes a hostile environment in which we feel uncomfortable expressing our perspective on political issues. As such, these behaviors discourage us from starting or continuing participating in civics.

Other young people are not politically active simply due to the overwhelming nature of the current state of the world. We already feel anxious and engulfed by catastrophe, as many of us are forced to battle multiple “once-in-a-lifetime” crises before we are 30 years old. The world in which we begin our adult lives is riddled with systemic racism, corporate greed, lack of affordable health care, massive student loan debt, climate change, a failing economy (for the second time), the COVID-19 pandemic, all while the [media blames us for every tiny](#) thing. We are burnt out, stressed, anxious, and don’t have any energy left to devote to politics-- especially in an ultra-polarized climate. [Uncontrolled yelling](#) and name-calling during the first presidential debate (and throughout Trump’s presidency), makes us feel clobbered by politics. Although these types of negative feelings towards party politics are not exclusive to young people, the current distasteful environment is most Gen Zers first exposure to civics. First impressions matter. Polarized politics establish a negative precedence and attitude towards future elections,

therefore, dispiriting civic engagement. In 2018, only [54% of eligible voters](#) between 18 and 21 were willing to vote, compared to “70% of adults overall.” Although this is an increase from 2016, it is still nowhere near the statistics of older generations.

Objectors may contend that young people are enigmas. We frequently organize protests on key topics, a classic way to be politically involved, to make our voices heard. Yet, we could do the same by simply voting. It is the easiest and fastest way to enact change in our democracy. Young people feel like we don’t have a voice because we are not expressing it in effective manners, thus, we become frustrated when they don’t see any change. To an extent, this is true. Voting is the best form of civic engagement. However, this argument dismisses the significance of youth-led protests, which have captured the attention of every politician and news outlets across the country. They shine a light on overlooked topics and highlight which issues will be most important to most voters in the future. In turn, these protests push politicians to draft ballot propositions in the first place. Furthermore, most Gen Zers are not of voting age yet; for now, protesting *is* the best way we can make our voices heard. The Parkland shooting survivors led gun reform efforts, inspiring countless others to protest in solidarity. Celebrities, politicians, and media outlets amplified the March For Our Lives movement. The result? Youth voice cemented in gun reform conversations and [“50 new gun control laws passed in 25 states.”](#) Protesting highlights the flaws in our society and voting helps us fix them. Bolstering youth civic engagement is not just about poll numbers. It is about ensuring the poll numbers match protesting efforts, because both are necessary for establishing effective change in any democracy.

The lack of youth interest in politics is not a perpetual issue. As more young people realize the power of their voice, partnered with the encouraging support of older generations, the

tables begin to turn. The Pew Research Center notes that Millennial voter turnout “doubled between 2014 and 2018.” For the first time in history, “Gen X, Millennials [a.k.a. Gen Y], and [Gen Z out voted Boomers](#) and prior generations” in the 2018 election. While more Gen Z members turn 18, continue to remain informed about politics, and the older voting population decreases, researchers expect these trends to continue. To ensure we maximize Gen Z and Millennial civic engagement, including voting in 2020 and future elections, we must continue to welcome fresh perspectives in politics. It is essential that we establish welcoming healthy environments where young people can debate with older people, allowing either side to reconsider their position or admit they were wrong without being “cancelled.” It is fundamental to understand that we have a different (yet equally valid) perspective, and that doesn’t make us naive. Bolstering youth civic engagement is not rocket science. It’s about treating young voices in politics with respect.