

Survey Highlights Challenges and Solutions to Engaging Young Voters

As part of our efforts to study and promote young people's political engagement, CIRCLE is partnering 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. CIRCLE and OYU staff worked with young leaders in six states—Arizona, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, and Washington—to understand youth voices through a survey about their experiences with, knowledge of, and perceptions of election and voting. The survey has a final sample of 1,147 racially and ethnically diverse youth, ages 18-34 (with half of those surveyed ages 18-22). Our initial findings, summarized below, point to particular barriers that youth face in casting a ballot, and point to specific action steps and remedies. A full report, produced in partnership with Opportunity Youth United and our youth researchers, will follow.

Some key takeaways:

- **Expectations and Identity:** Less than half of surveyed youth think voting is “a responsibility” for someone like them, and just 24% see voting as part of who they are. A minority believe that their family members vote and even fewer think their peers or coworkers do so. Those who do believe that people around them vote are more likely to see voting as part of their identity. Perhaps surprisingly, young people with more formal education are not more likely to consider voting part of who they are, though they are more likely to believe it's their responsibility and to hear about voting from family and friends.
- **Barriers and Restrictions:** Many young people perceive voting laws to be more restrictive than they actually are. Three-quarters of youth said they believe they need a photo ID to vote—most of them mistakenly, as just one of the six states in our survey has a strict photo ID requirement. This erroneous belief alone could drive down youth turnout; our previous research suggests that strict photo ID laws have a negative effect on voting by non-college youth (CIRCLE Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge, 2013). In addition, polling places can be hostile places for some youth: just a third of young people know what steps to follow to vote, just a quarter (26%) see people that look like them working at polling places and even fewer (13%) see young people. A small minority fear harassment by poll workers.
- **Analog Engagement in a Digital World:** Few young people are taking advantage of online voter registration (OVR) where available. Five of the six states where we fielded the survey allow OVR, but only 17% of surveyed youth in those states had registered to vote online. More common was registering at a Registry of Motor Vehicles office (29%) or another in-person location: social service agency, town hall, library, post office, etc. Likewise, only 5% of young people surveyed receive election information or reminders via text message.

These findings highlight some of the challenges Opportunity Youth face as they strive to be politically engaged. Somewhat paradoxically, we found that the less these young people know about voting and elections, the fewer barriers they see to voting. Furthermore, youth with less formal educational attainment identified fewer obstacles among the tasks they think they would need to complete in order to vote in a hypothetical election “next week.” Additionally, older survey participants were more likely to identify barriers to voting—which could suggest that they already have experience voting and/or that they have to contend with more issues like rearranging work schedules or arranging childcare. Lastly, the more formal education participants had, the more likely they were to know that people with non-felony offenses such as a DUI, or having a suspended license, can still vote.

Thus, our research suggests that voter education must go beyond merely providing information: it must identify what young people already do or don't know in order to address specific knowledge gaps, allay concerns about electoral engagement, and build comfort and trust where little may exist. For example, their beliefs about the restrictiveness of certain laws or the vulnerability of their voting rights may stem from past experiences being shut out of the political process or skepticism about policymakers' willingness to allow members of their communities to vote.

Other important findings:

Voter Registration

- A quarter of youth surveyed moved within the past year, and among those who had moved just 40% had changed their registration address, which suggests that this critical step is not on many young people's radar.
- About one in five (21%) youth have received a postcard reminder to register to vote, and 18% have received messaging about National Voter Registration Day.

Rights and Restrictions

- Issues of voter eligibility and voting rights are highly relevant for these young people: a majority (62%) of participants said that they personally knew people whose ability to vote was in doubt because of their criminal record or immigration status.
- Nearly half (47%) of young people did not know whether their state, workplace, or school allowed them to take time off for voting, and about half (51%) said they would need to rearrange their schedule if that were not the case.

Identity and Motivation

- Close to one in five (17%) young people felt they "did not know enough" to vote, and 10 to 15 percent believed their vote is unimportant, citing reasons like "elections aren't competitive" and "candidates are all the same and nothing will change."
- Youth can be turned off, or even intimidated, by a voting process they perceive as alien or even hostile. Less than half (41%) believe that election officials make an effort to ensure "people like themselves" can vote in their communities.

Access to Information

- A substantial percentage of youth (38%) said that they did not know where to vote and just one in five (21%) know how to get an absentee ballot. A quarter of young people felt they needed someone else to give them information about the candidates.
- A quarter of youth (24%) get election information on social media—especially Facebook—which carries both concerns about the spread of inaccurate information and potential to reach young people on a massively popular platform. For example, last year Facebook displayed a personalized voting guide on users' news feeds during local elections, with information on the offices being contested and how to vote.
- By and large, and consistent with previous research on young people, Opportunity Youth are most likely (66%) to get voting and election information from their peers. About a third (34%) have gotten information from their workplace, 29% from community nonprofits like health clinics or the YMCA, and fewer (18%) from civic organizations.