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## NEW RESEARCH FINDINGS

# Political Education of Young People

### *New analysis shows that state standards lag in preparing students to be informed voters*

Medford/Somerville, MA – The U.S. democratic system relies on informed civic actors, but a new study out today raises questions about whether state K-12 education standards are adequately preparing future voters. Today, the [Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement \(CIRCLE\)](#) – the preeminent, non-partisan research center on youth engagement at Tufts University’s [Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life](#) – in collaboration with nationally recognized civic education researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, released an [analysis](#) of whether state education standards prepare future voters to understand the basics of contemporary American politics, in particular, the role that parties and ideology play in our democracy.

While U.S. public school systems are not the only institutions that prepare citizens for elections, schools have a broad reach and significant potential influence. Analyzing data from state education standards, the new study and interactive map offer findings in response to important questions about informed voting in the U.S. just months before a presidential election.

#### ***Key findings include:***

- Forty-three states require students to learn about political parties; however, the language in the standards nearly always promotes a simplistic understanding of the *role* that political parties play in a democracy.
- Only eight states ask students to study the ideological underpinnings of the two major political parties.
- Only 10 states ask students to study controversial political issues *and their relationship* to political parties.
- There is very limited support for learning about political ideology. When states do include language about ideology, it is most commonly mentioned in history/social studies standards and very rarely linked to contemporary political parties.

**“This generation has grown up in a vitriolic and polarized political climate. In order to sort through the noise, young people need to have a deep understanding of the ideological values that divide us and how those values do, and do not, map onto political parties,”** reports Paula McAvoy, lead author of the study and program director for the Center for Ethics and Education at UW-Madison, who completed this study with Rebecca Fine and Ann Herrera Ward. **“Our team’s findings show that state standards stop short of asking students to make meaningful connections between partisanship, ideology, and the issues of the day. If schools are to fulfill their mission of preparing young people for political participation, teachers need to be encouraged to bring these ideas into the classroom.”**

**“Understanding what major political parties are and what they stand for is essential in navigating politics and elections in the U.S., but very little support exists. These findings emphasize the need to strengthen standards and support teachers in U.S. civic education,”** said [Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, Director of CIRCLE](#). **“Encouraging this type of learning about politics, elections and voting is a major reason why we are collaborating with other organizations to support teachers during this election year via the Teaching for Democracy Alliance.”** *For more on this Alliance see [here](#).*

For CIRCLE’s full briefing, please see [here](#) or the interactive map [here](#). More research and background on youth civic education can be found on CIRCLE’s [Quick Facts on Civic Education](#) page.

[CIRCLE’s 2016 Election Center](#) will continue to offer data products and analyses providing a comprehensive picture of the youth vote, including the [Youth Electoral Significance Index](#), which offers insight into key states where young people have the potential to shape the 2016 general election.

**CIRCLE youth vote experts are available for interviews and/or analysis. Media outlets should contact: Kristofer Eisenla at [kristofer@lunaeisenlamedia.com](mailto:kristofer@lunaeisenlamedia.com) or 202-670-5747**

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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.*

*The only university-wide college of its kind, the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life (<http://activecitizen.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.*

*Tufts University (<http://www.tufts.edu/>), located on three Massachusetts campuses in Boston, Medford/Somerville and Grafton, and in Talloires, France, is recognized as one of the premier research universities in the United States. Tufts enjoys a global reputation for academic excellence and for the preparation of students as leaders in a wide range of professions. A growing number of innovative teaching and research initiatives span all Tufts campuses, and collaboration among the faculty and students in the undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs across the university's schools is widely encouraged.*