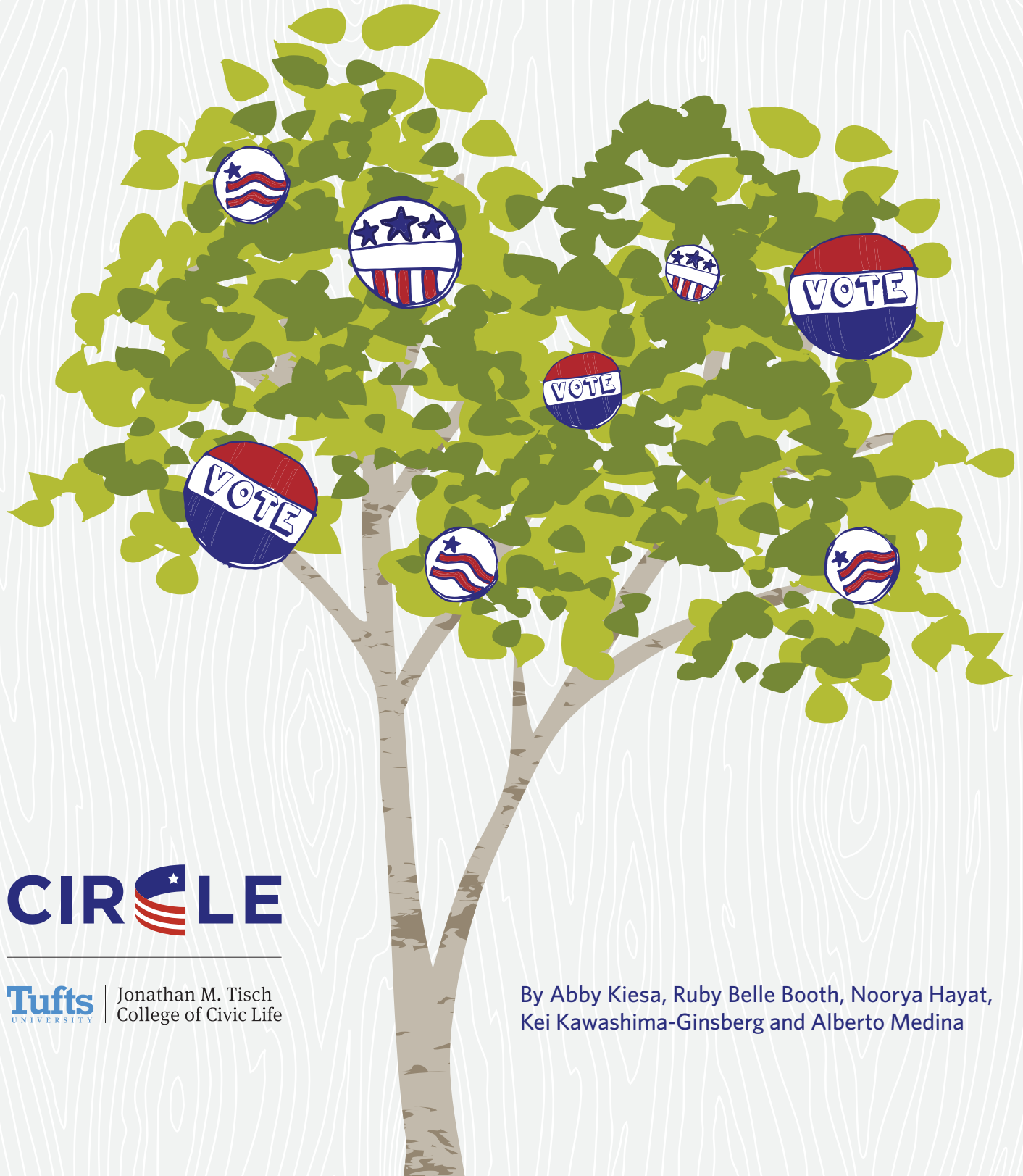


CIRCLE Growing Voters

Executive Summary



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The CIRCLE Growing Voters framework is informed by exclusive new data on the civic access and experiences of teens; by what we have learned in 20 years studying youth civic education and engagement; by the findings of fellow researchers; and by what we have heard and continue to hear from educators, practitioners, organizers, and others who work directly with youth. It envisions and challenges these and other stakeholders to create varied, interconnected pathways to electoral participation that will be accessible and relevant to youth of diverse identities, backgrounds, and experiences.

Executive Summary

This report introduces and details a new framework for how institutions and communities can prepare young people—starting long before they turn 18—to become active and informed voters. We present this CIRCLE Growing Voters approach now because we recognize that, despite two recent election cycles with historic voter turnout, young people’s participation in our democracy remains inadequate and inequitable. We believe that building on these recent efforts and, especially, on the energy and enthusiasm of a rising generation of young people, now is the time to pursue a transformative shift in how we support their development into voters.

The approach outlined in this report aims to address two foundational problems identified by our own research and by decades of scholarship on youth electoral participation:

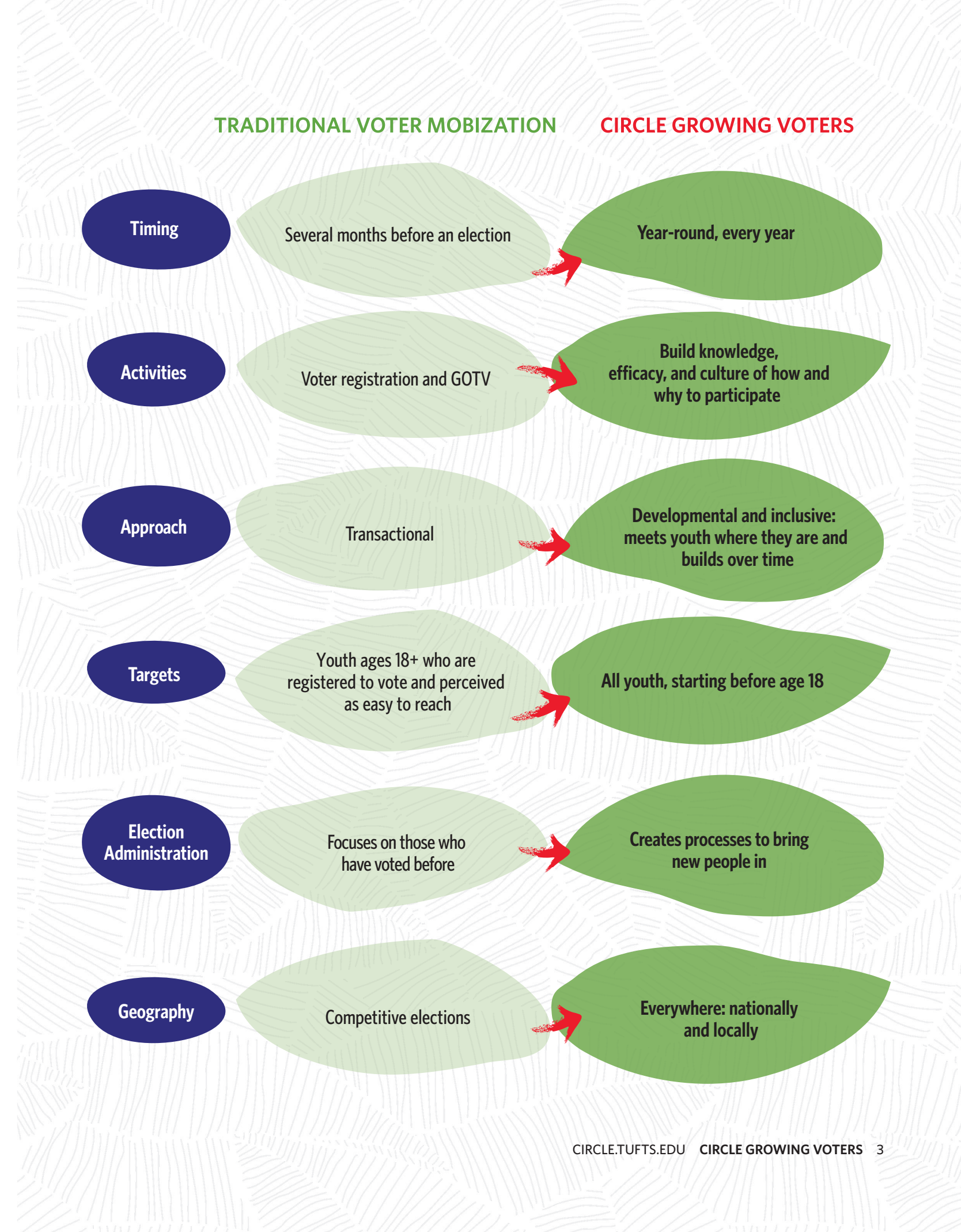
1) There are profound inequities in access to civic learning and engagement opportunities for young people. These inequities lead to differences in voting rates by race/ethnicity, education, and other factors that prevent us from building a fully representative multi-racial democracy.

2) The current model of bringing young people into the electorate, which relies on short-term mobilization tied to election cycles and overly focuses on “likely voters,” is grossly insufficient and further reifies existing inequities.

The CIRCLE Growing Voters framework is informed by exclusive new data on the civic access and experiences of teens; by what we have learned in 20 years studying youth civic education and engagement; by the findings of fellow researchers; and by what we have heard and continue to hear from educators, practitioners, organizers, and others who work directly with youth. It identifies three major elements: **Access and Exposure** to opportunities for youth to grow as voters, **Support** in the form of systems and structures that enable all youth to take advantage of those opportunities, and a **Culture** that promotes and values voting.

In each of these areas, we highlight the ways that institutions like K-12 schools, policy-makers, community organizations, media outlets, social media platforms, political campaigns, and parents/families can support the equitable development of young voters. The CIRCLE Growing Voters framework envisions and challenges these and other stakeholders to create varied, interconnected pathways to electoral participation that will be accessible and relevant to youth of diverse identities, backgrounds, and experiences.

We encourage you to read the full report, to share its recommendations, and to implement them in your own institutions and communities. Here we summarize major findings from the research in our report and the takeaways that can inform your future work.



Access and Exposure

FINDINGS

As an institution that reaches the overwhelming majority of youth, K-12 schools have a crucial role to play in the CIRCLE Growing Voters framework. We find that some teens—especially youth of color—who do not have other opportunities to learn about voting rely on in-school civic education. At the same time, frequent and high-quality opportunities to learn about elections in school have been inequitably distributed; youth in rural areas and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds report less experience learning about voting in school.

Civic Education

HOW TO GROW VOTERS

Schools must include nonpartisan teaching about elections across curricula, and they should start long before students approach voting age so that young people start to build an identity as a voter. Instruction must include not just why voting is important, but the practicalities of when, where, and how to cast a ballot. Media literacy education that helps students navigate and participate in an ever-changing information landscape is also key. Opportunities like voter pre-registration in schools, mock elections, and partnerships with local election officials can enhance learning and create accessible pathways to participation. Crucially, in order to address inequities, district leaders and policymakers must ensure that schools in underserved communities have the resources to implement these educational practices and activities.

Election Administration

FINDINGS

State and local election officials do a remarkable job running elections, but they are not fully and equitably providing all young people with the information they need to participate in democracy. CIRCLE polling in 2020 found that half of youth did not know whether their state allowed online voter registration, and more than two-thirds did not know the felony disenfranchisement laws in their state. Other research has found that a substantial minority of newly eligible voters did not register because they did not know how, and Black and Latino youth were more likely to report not knowing about, or struggling with, mail-in voting.

HOW TO GROW VOTERS

Election officials must adopt a CIRCLE Growing Voters mindset. That means directing their efforts and resources toward reaching newly eligible voters and even teens who are not yet eligible to vote with practical information about election laws and processes. Partnerships with schools and local organizations are key to meeting young people where they are. Election administrators should not assume apathy or disinterest, but they should also not assume knowledge about even the most basic aspects of the voting process, and see it as their role and responsibility to give all youth the tools they need to participate in democracy.

Friends, Family, and Communities

FINDINGS

Young people get information about elections from a variety of sources, and just as some youth rely on school to learn about voting, others who do not enjoy these opportunities in the classroom rely on their personal networks. CIRCLE polling has consistently found that friends and family are one of young people's primary sources of information about elections and voting, and peer-to-peer voter outreach was a major factor in recent elections.

HOW TO GROW VOTERS

Parents, peers, and other influential figures in a young person's life must embrace their role and responsibility in helping them develop as voters. That can take many forms: modeling civic engagement and electoral participation, encouraging youth to develop and express their views, and having conversations about elections and issues. Those conversations are especially effective if they include practical information about the voting process. And they may be especially important for youth in rural areas, many of whom live in "civic deserts" with fewer electoral learning and engagement opportunities beyond those provided by trusted friends and relatives.

Support

FINDINGS

Local, state, and federal elections are invaluable opportunities for youth outreach and engagement; in each national cycle, billions of dollars are spent to try to reach and mobilize voters. But the structures and practices of campaign outreach, which are often focused on people who have cast a ballot before or others considered “likely voters” leave a lot of young people behind: in 2020 we found that almost half of youth were not contacted by either major political party or campaign. Our research has also found that young people who are in college are more likely to hear from campaigns, which reflects and perpetuates inequities in participation.

Campaign Outreach to Youth

HOW TO GROW VOTERS

Political campaigns and organizations must shift away from merely mobilizing voters who have cast a ballot before to focusing on growing and broadening a more representative electorate. These institutions must invest in supporting potential young voters regularly and holistically—for example, by working in concert with organizations and movements dedicated to issues young people care about—not merely asking for their votes in a cyclical fashion that can feel transactional to many youth. Outreach that goes beyond trying to convince people to vote, and actively gives new voters the tools and information they need to do so, is also important. Campaigns must look beyond the college campus in order to reach a wider diversity of young people, and they should not rely too heavily on digital outreach and social media, which is a valuable tool but not a panacea for reaching youth.

FINDINGS

Our research has long promoted “CIRCLE Growing Voters” policies that make it easier to register and cast a ballot, such as online registration, same-day registration, automatic registration, and pre-registration for 16- and 17-year-olds. The impact of these policies on youth participation—some of which are very new, and most of which are implemented differently in different states—is the subject of ongoing research. But a new analysis conducted for this report finds a substantial positive effect for one of those policies: on average, counties with a pre-registration law in place in 2020 had a 9-percentage-point higher youth voter turnout than those that did not. Our research also found that another election-related policy, allowing teens to serve as poll workers, has myriad benefits for youth and may boost voter turnout, especially in diverse communities.

Election Laws & Policies

HOW TO GROW VOTERS

Policymakers should continue to enact facilitative election policies—especially pre-registration, which creates pathways to participation for youth before they’re eligible to vote. Where these and other policies already exist, elected officials and election administrators should examine their implementation to ensure that there is adequate information about them and structures in place for that information to broadly and equitably reach youth in different communities. Creating or expanding youth poll worker programs, paying youth for their time, and widely promoting these opportunities through schools and local organizations may also have a substantial positive impact.

Local Groups & Organizations

FINDINGS

Local groups and organizations play a critical role in a CIRCLE Growing Voters ecosystem; in 2020, more than a third of youth reported hearing or learning about the election from a community group. They can also fill gaps and reach youth that other institutions and pathways do not: newly eligible voters (ages 18-21), as well as Black and Latino youth, were even more likely to be contacted about the election by a local organization. But other gaps remain unfilled: these groups are contacting young people with college experience at a higher rate than youth who are not in college.

HOW TO GROW VOTERS

Community groups and organizations (both those that are explicitly youth-focused and those that are not) must see bringing young people into democracy as a core part of their work. Beyond activities like voter registration drives, groups that are focused on issues young people care about have extraordinary potential to help youth connect their work to voting and elections. On the other hand, groups that are not explicitly political or issue-focused can build diverse and engaging pathways to civic engagement using art, sports, or whatever their focus. All organizations must redouble their efforts to reach youth, like those who are not on college campuses, that other institutions may be missing.

Culture

FINDINGS

Civic education content and curricula are not the only ways schools can help prepare young people to become informed and active voters. In our survey of teens, we found that young people were more supported and prepared to engage in democracy when they enjoyed a supportive school culture that fostered their participation, gave them opportunities to develop and use their voice, was responsive to their needs and experiences—and did so for all students of different backgrounds and identities. Unfortunately, our research also revealed inequality: white youth in urban areas are more likely to enjoy this kind of supportive school climate.

Supportive School Culture

HOW TO GROW VOTERS

Educational leaders must commit to transforming their schools into institutions where young people don't just learn about democracy: they practice it, live it, and see its potential to improve communities. That can take many forms, including involving students in decision-making in and out of the classroom, supporting student journalism, and actively working to create a sense of belonging for all students, but especially for those from historically marginalized communities. Adopting the principles and practices of deeper learning and socio-emotional learning can ensure that students develop key skills and strong civic agency as they grow into voters.

FINDINGS

Both traditional and social media have an essential role to play in the work of CIRCLE Growing Voters. Our research finds that, contrary to some stereotypes, young people rely on the news media—especially local news—to learn about issues and elections. However, they do not often see their generation or the issues they care about reflected in media coverage. Meanwhile, social networks and digital platforms play an increasingly pivotal role in the ecosystem of where young people get information about voting, and young people don't just see information or content, they also contribute to it by creating and sharing media. Research has documented that youth feel they're more informed, empowered, and effective civic actors when they create media about politics.

The Role of Media

HOW TO GROW VOTERS

Media institutions must embrace their roles in the ecosystem of electoral information and engagement. Both traditional and social media can provide young people with locally relevant information about elections, and in the case of social platforms—as some are already doing—put voter registration and education tools at young users' fingertips. News media should adopt norms and practices that treat young people as both a key audience and as potential co-creators, and provide opportunities for diverse youth to tell stories of the issues their communities want addressed. Digital platforms can further foster youth multimedia creation, partner with educators on media literacy, and promote online cultures that foster respectful, diverse, and equitable participation.

Empowering Young People

FINDINGS

One of the most powerful pieces of a culture that contributes to developing voters is young people's own sense of self-efficacy, culture of engagement, and belonging to a generation that is committed to participating in democracy and pursuing social change. In our 2020 polling, we found that an overwhelming majority of youth said they believe young people have the power to change things, and those who thought so were considerably more likely to talk to friends about voting, register others to vote, and talk to peers about salient issues like racial justice. That is a powerful civic culture that contributes to voter development at work.

HOW TO GROW VOTERS

While we highlight specific efforts and institutions under the Culture section of the CIRCLE Growing Voters report, every single stakeholder and influence in a young person's life can contribute to it. Young people themselves already do much of the work, and institutions should seek ways to support their formal and informal ways of lifting each other up. Parents and teachers can develop cultures, at school and at home, in which young people's views and participation are sought out, encouraged, and valued. Organizations of all kinds can strive to become "political homes" for youth in which they can learn, reflect, and take action together.

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