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COLLEGE STUDENTS AND THEIR POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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HONORS PROJECT

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### **Abstract**

Historically, college students have had a low voter turnout despite having particularly high political engagement. This is a problem because it is instilling a bad habit of not politically engaging to the extent that a productive United States citizen should. By not voting, Americans are losing their rights to representation that reflects their views and beliefs. In this paper I discuss why this low voter turnout is negative and what the United States can do, via the government and educational institutions, to increase voter turnout. In this research, the reader will discover the reasons for low voting rates among college students, the reasons for high political engagement, and ways to solve the low voting rates. The solutions include modification of voting laws, increased communication of voting, the understanding of the importance of political participation in the United States, increased civic education and civic-based programs, and the engagement of students while learning about civics. This research concludes that by enacting these solutions, it will increase college students' voter turnout substantially.

*Keywords:* voter turnout, civics, college students, political engagement, representation

### **College Students and Their Political Participation**

As a current college student and social studies education major, I have a high interest in politics. I always am interested in how my local, state, and federal government impacts me and my day to day life. This is one of the prominent reasons I got into the field of social studies education, in the hopes to influence students to feel this way about politics. While in college, I have noticed that many people do not actually vote, sometimes despite being duly participatory in politics. This idea never made much sense to me, so when I got the opportunity to learn more about it, I did. I am also baffled as to why college students seem to not vote very much, despite voting and political participation having the biggest impact on our age group. We must live with the decisions being made today for the rest of our lives, so I believe it is important more than ever to participate in politics and government. In this paper I decided to address these issues in three parts. I want to find out if and why college students have a low voter turnout. I then want to verify how much they participate in politics and how so. Lastly, I want to find out the most effective way to increase voter and political participation in college students. Through my research, I hope to answer these questions effectively in order to try to make a difference in the United States. By not voting, Americans are not being appropriately represented. Not voting is resulting in citizens' voices to be lost and not have their views and beliefs reflected in the government they help support. Focusing on college students in this research, and when fixing the problem, allows for the youngest voting age group to increase their voter turnout, resulting in

them voting for the rest of their lives. By increasing voting at a young age, the United States is ensuring that most citizens will vote for years to come. These students also are continuing their education, which means they are more willing to learn new/more information pertaining to voting or civic participation.

I believe low voting and political participation is a large problem in the United States. According to the United States Census Bureau, for the 2016 election, only 56% of people eligible to vote did (U.S Census Bureau, 2017). This number seems very low to me and I think it needs to increase dramatically. According to Pew Research Center, the United States is 26<sup>th</sup> in the world when it comes to voter turnout in relation to eligible voters (DeSilver, 2018). The United States is trailing almost all over developed nations, such as the United Kingdom, Italy, and Belgium. I think the best way to increase this number is to influence younger voters, such as college students. If different organizations tried to help this group of people be more involved in politics and voting, then that small number of 56% can rise impressively. Higher voter turnout and political participation is beneficial to the citizens of the United States because it allows them to be more represented. Issues and representatives voted on by the public will better reflect the opinions and views of its constituents. For example, while there are over 30 million African Americans that are eligible to vote, in the 2016 election only about 17 million voted (U.S. Census Bureau). This means that representatives voted in in 2016 may not accurately represent the wants and needs of the Black populace. I think this is a big issue that needs to be fixed in order to allow the government of the United States to accurately fill the needs and wants of the American people. Citizens of our nation need to be concerned about voting and representation because it allows for a better democracy. This country was founded so that representation was at the forefront of importance. It is the obligation of all U.S. citizens to uphold these ideals in order

to make our government and society run at their best. It is also important that people understand that their opinions matter. Voting is the best way to make sure you have an input into what is directly impacting you.

By answering my research questions, I believe different entities can work more efficiently to try to increase voter and political participation in the United States. My analysis will help identify areas of improvement that could lead to college students voting and participating more, which will hopefully lead to all citizens participating in politics. My research could also lead to other college students and/or researchers to investigate the topic of political participation and see why it is so important to make sure that people go out and vote. I am trying to convey through my research that having your opinion heard allows for greater change in politics.

### **Review of Literature**

To fully understand the basis of this research project, it is important to understand the vocabulary of the constructs laid out. Voter turnout, in the context of this project, is the amount of people that go out and vote in elections, whether they be local, state, or federal. Voter turnout is measured by counting how many people go to the polls or use an absentee ballot in an election. These numbers are traditionally higher in presidential election years. Political engagement or civic participation is any event or activity, including voting, that citizens are a part of that uses their political voice. This can range from protesting a mayoral candidate to volunteering at a soup kitchen on Thanksgiving. In the context of my second research question, I am mostly addressing any political activity that does not include voting. Civic engagement is measured mostly by polling. Seeing what citizens are active in their communities or voicing their political views. While there is a lot of polling that takes place, it is hard to decipher exactly what

the majority of the United States does in terms of political engagement because there are so many people and not enough people asking the questions asked in this research project.

### **Voting Habits of College Students**

The idea of college students having low voter turnout has been ingrained in the United States identity for a long time. Despite this, there is also a perception that college students are very politically active and driven. They care about politics and how they are being impacted, yet the voter turnout is low. This can be seen in a study on Stanford University. The university saw how many students voted in the 2012 general election, as well as the 2014 midterm election. The study concluded that of their 18,308 student population, only 59.7% and 45.0% were registered to vote, respectively. When it came to actually voting, only 38.6% and 14.5% did so, respectively (Tufts University, 2015). Another study conducted by Tufts University concluded that college student voting did increase from 2012 to 2016 from 45.1% to 48.3%, but that still shows less than half of the eligible voters voted, which is extremely low (2017). These statistics are not new to college student voters. Richard Niemi and Michael Hamner, professors of political science, reasoned that even in the 1960s and 1970s, when political activeness was considered very high, the actual voting rate was certainly low. This even included 1972, when the 26th Amendment, the federal legalization of 18-year-old to vote, was enacted (Niemi & Hamner, 2010). So why are college student voting habits so low? Michael O'Loughlin and Corey Unangst, researchers with the Institute for Public Affairs and Civic Engagement, cited that a major barrier to college student voting is the difficulty state to state of absentee voting. State law makes it difficult for many students to vote where and how they would like to (2006). Professors at Duke University believe that their students do not vote because they feel like they cannot make any effective change, that their vote does not count or make a difference, (Steve Hartsoe,

2018). Another opinion by communication professors from Ohio State University believe that voter turnout from college students directly correlates with their perceived social norms. This means that how their peers/families feel about the importance and frequency of voting will greatly impact the decision of the college student and whether they vote or not (Glynn, Huges, & Lunney, 2009). If you were not raised to be politically active and vote, then there is a decent chance you will not do it when you are older. While there are many more factors that could influence why college students do not have a respectable voter turnout, I believe these ideas do a good job of indicating how the majority of Americans think when it comes to why college students do not vote.

### **Political Participation of College Students**

In the opposite direction of the idea above, the typical perception of college students is that they are very politically active aside from voting. This can be anything from using their political voice on social media, to attending a political rally, or volunteering at a local political organization. Any or all of these undertakings are done all of the time by college students, as well as many other tasks. This can be seen in an article by Pamela Crosby and John Dalton. These editors found that in 2005, 30% of college students volunteered in some capacity while at their university. Crosby and Dalton believe this has a large correlation with higher political engagement (2008). This idea is also seen in the journal article “High School Community Service as a Predictor of Adult Voting and Volunteering.” As is gauged from the title, education professors also found that volunteering, in this case, in high school creates higher civic participation later in life (Hart, et al., 2007).

An extensive way college students today are civically engaged is through technology. Technology has allowed it to be easier than ever to be participatory in politics. Kenneth Moffett

and Laurie Rice, political science professors, discussed how Millennials and Generation Z engage in politics considerably different than other generations because of technology, the internet, and social media (2018). In a survey conducted by Hongwei Yang and Jean DeHart, professors of communication, asked college students about their social media use in terms of how they used it to politically participate. Yang and DeHart found that most social media use, specifically via Twitter and Facebook, was a positive predictor of civic engagement (2016). These sources give a good indication that college students are more engaged through technology than ever before. This is a continuing change that impacts the way college students participate in politics. Students can follow politicians and news sources more than ever before. They can interact with people from all over the world and get insights they may have never happened without technology.

Another way that college students engage in civics is by joining organizations on campus or in their communities. College campuses across the United States have thousands of different organizations that students can participate in. Hundreds of those can be linked to civic participation. The first type of organization is party based. Almost every college campus or town has a college Democrats or Republicans association. There are also independent party alliances that get together to discuss politics. These student-led organizations make an effort to recruit students to support the ideals of their party. In today's political climate, parties are more divided than ever, so these organizations are becoming more prominent. Psychology professors from San Diego State University conducted a study in 2015 and found that since 1970 college students have become more polarized as the years progressed (Twenge, et al., 2016). This polarization has also resulted in higher political participation in organizations that align with their party. Another organization that college students belong to is an ethnic organization. These organizations also

impact civic engagement. A person's ethnicity heavily influences the way they are civically engaged. A Latinx student organization and a black student organization will most likely have a different political view on a topic. This difference also contributes to the way they may volunteer or vote. Minority groups have different political platforms they care about, such as government aid, immigration, or healthcare. An example of this can be seen in the voter turnout by black and Hispanic Americans. According to the United States Census Bureau, African Americans vote almost 10% more than Hispanic Americans (2016). This difference in voter turnout can make a large difference in how ethnic organizations participate politically. These organizations can help each other vote more by helping clarify that by voting, African Americans or the Latinx community can be more represented in their government.

The last group I will discuss is non-party affiliated political organizations that college students engage in. Groups such student government, Greek life, and voter registration all have aspects of politics in them, but do not support a particular party. Organizations like student government and Greek life provide civic engagement on a small scale on campus. These provide students with the opportunity to impact their day to day lives through volunteering and enacting change on campus. Voter registration organizations work with their campus and sometimes outside groups, like Campus Vote Project or Young Invincibles, to get as many college students registered to vote as possible. This can also include helping students vote via absentee ballot or providing transport to polls. Groups like these not only increase the political participation of its members, but of the college campus as a whole. Voting rates increase, as well as participation in clubs/organizations that influence civic engagement and voting.

All of this research comes to the conclusion that college students are very politically active, despite their low voter turnout rates. A study conducted by the Cooperative Institutional

Research Program at UCLA in 2015 found that Freshmen students are more politically engaged than ever. More would participate in a protest on campus or having the goal of becoming a community leader than years before (CIRP, 2015). This civic engagement, and increase thereof, is a great omen that increasing college student voter participation is possible and close.

Organizations and social media are helping to promote voting at colleges, but that is just the start.

### **Influencing Civic Participation of College Students**

It is important to get college students to vote at higher rates. It is a start that students are politically engaged in other aspects, such as volunteering and being a part of campus organizations, as well as voter registration being higher than actual voting, but clearly just those elements are not doing enough to impact students to actually vote. While organizations on campus and voter registration groups are making a dent in getting students to vote, there are other entities that can positively influence them to vote more. The first group is the government. As mentioned in the first section of this Literature Review, many college students do not vote because of the barriers put in place by the government. Many students have a hard time registering to vote, finding out where they vote, and/or handling an absentee ballot. One of the problems with absentee voting is that the rules are different for each state in the United States. This can become difficult to understand, especially on campuses, because students from all over go to college. To find out each states' rules, students can visit [vote.org](http://vote.org), but the website is less than user friendly and may be confusing to those trying to use it. According to Rebecca Ayala, a voting rights and election expert who has worked for ACLU and the Kamala Harris for Senate campaign, voting access in the United States has become more and more restricted. Many states are starting to reject greater numbers of absentee ballots due to minute errors such as missing

addresses or mismatched signatures (2018). Voting absentee also requires multiple mailings, which is something college students do not use that much of in general. This hassle to vote, especially for midterm and local elections, entices college students to just not bother to attempt it. Even if they do, there is a chance that their ballot will be thrown out anyway due to harsh voter laws. The government needs to make absentee voting easier for college students to be more open to voting. Easing up on the voter laws and/or switching over to an internet ballots will help make absentee voting easier for not only college students, but all Americans that require its use.

Another way to increase college student voting is by colleges making a bigger effort in civic education. The book, *Educating for Democracy: Preparing Undergraduates for Responsible Political Engagement*, takes in depth look at how college students can increase the entirety of their political engagement if colleges and universities sponsored more efforts for political participation. By these institutions not doing this, the authors assert that they are doing a disservice to their students and are not making sure they get a rounded education (2007). The authors do a good job of articulating the problem many people have with how colleges address politics. While some institutions have occasional seminars, workshops, speakers, etc., there is still much more that can be done. Colleges, especially public universities, need to dramatically increase their number of political/civic events on campus. This can include allowing for more events that they already provide, greatly increasing voter registration on campus, and increasing political/civic education as a whole. Political professors Pritzker, Springer, and McBride present a comprehensive way that colleges and universities can provide adequate civic education. The authors state that if colleges had a class or program that combined “civic instruction, deliberative course-based discussion, community service, and service learning” then college students will properly be educated and will be extremely more likely to participate in elections (2015, pg. 2).

These ideas can be funded by the government or ingrained into college curriculum by law. Any or all of these ideas will allow colleges to be fully effective when it comes to educating college students on all aspects of political participation. Authors Green and Gerber explain in their book how providing college students with visuals that remind them to vote, such as posters, pamphlets, and direct mail, that this can increase the chance that students who receive those materials will be more likely to vote (2019). To compliment that book, two studies conducted at Ohio State University in 1987 concluded that simply asking college students if they were going to vote in the next election increased the chance they would be civically engaged by 33% (Greenwald, et al., 1987). This could easily be done in person or via email, being a simple solution by college campuses.

Another way to influence the civic participation of college students is by educating them earlier than college. If we taught America's youth about being politically active before they are able to vote, then they will be better prepared to participate when they are more able to. Although many people would think that this is already done in schools, it is not being done to the best of its ability. The Center for American Progress (CAP) calculated in 2018 that only nine states require a full year of government/civics education in high school. Ten states have no government/civics requirement at all. CAP goes on to address that while most states require high schoolers to take at least one government course, which only results in four to nine months of the class, there is little in the standards forcing teachers to educate their students on voting practices and other civic engagement. State curriculum focuses massively on knowledge acquisition, but little on building skills that aid civic participation (Shapiro and Brown, 2018). Teachers often do not have time to focus on these skills because they are too fixated on adhering to the state standards and worrying about their students doing well on the state test. These problems within

lower education can be solved in a multitude of ways. The first actually goes back to the government. If state governments put a greater emphasis on civic education in their standards and laws, then students, when they get to voting age, will be more likely to vote and participate in politics because they have the knowledge to do so properly. Another solution is schools providing electives that are civics based. This could include classes such as state government, model United Nations, etc. High schools could also do events similarly to colleges and provide different workshops, speakers, and/or seminars that educate students on how to vote and civically participate in their communities. A journal article by college professors who specialize in young adult development concluded that an increase in civic education in high school greatly increased the chance that students in college would vote and be civically engaged (Malin, et al., 2017). This helps confirm the idea that by teaching students in all age groups the importance of voting and civics, then it will influence them later in life. The younger the United States educates its youth on civics, the better educated they will be on voting and being represented in their government. It also teaches them how to use their political voice and that their opinions matter.

While these solutions may seem overwhelming, it is important to remember that if slowly implemented, this could be the new normal in terms of voting and civic participation. By utilizing the research provided in this Literature Review, I believe that the United States can dramatically increase voting in college students. While it seems like a lot of work, it will ultimately better the United States because a greater number of people will be represented within our government at all levels. A simpler solution that can also be enacted is greater civic education at home. If parents and families educated students throughout their life on how to vote, engage civically, etc. then there would be a higher voter turnout from that as well. Family is one of the greatest influencers of voting. If your family does not vote, it is highly unlikely that you

will. This means that if the United States, through civic education, discusses the importance of voting, that families may also understand the importance, resulting in more voting from citizens. Families modeling how democracy is correctly implemented will result in more civic participation in all realms.

### **Conclusions**

In this paper so far, I have researched in depth why college student voter turnout is lower than in any other age group in the United States, as well as having higher political participation than other age groups and education levels. I discovered that college students do not vote for a variety of reasons. They may not vote because they are ill informed on how to do so, or they may feel like it is a futile gesture because they think their vote does not make a difference. They also may not vote because voting absentee is such an arduous process that could result in their vote not being counted anyway. Lastly, they may not vote because their friends and family do not, so there is no influence to vote. College students have a high political participation because of factors such as campus organizations like student government or Latinx student organization and how they positively impact civic engagement. They may also have a high participation because of the ease of technology and having a political voice through social media. Civic participation in college students is higher than voting turnout in comparison to other age and education groups which does not logically correlate.

Some people may read this paper and question why the United States should attempt to increase the voting rates of college students. It may seem like an obsolete thought to Baby Boomers or Generation X because it does not impact them greatly. Although that may be true, that is not a reason to ignore the problem of low voter turnout in our youth. By having college students vote at greater rates, the better and more accurately represented citizens will be.

According to the 2010 Census, 18 to 24-year-olds. Made up 13% of eligible voters in the United States population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). This may seem like a small number nationally, but is important to also consider state and local elections. College students make up only a portion of that 13% statistic, but by focusing one group at a time, the United States can increase voter turnout among all groups.

I think college students are the most logical group to start with because they are the most easily educated. They are already going to college to become more educated, not only in their perspective fields, but from a life viewpoint as well. They are already highly likely to be civically engaged in some way, so just adding an education element may prompt them to actually vote in high numbers. Once college students begin voting, then focuses can be made on other groups, such as the rest of the 18 to 24-year-old population or the Latinx population.

This effort to get college students to start voting more should begin with federal and state governments. The government should heavily revise voter laws in order to make it easier to vote. This needs to be done in terms of absentee voting, as well as technology. The U.S. government needs to reconsider how technology and the internet can play a part in the voting process. Utilizing technology, especially the internet, the government could make voting dramatically more user friendly. This would increase voter turnout not only in college students, but the population as a whole. Another way the government can improve college student voting numbers is to require more civic education being had at the high school and college level. If students had more time to learn about civics and voting, the more likely they are to participate in those events as an adult (Qiao, 2017). By making classes like this a larger requirement, the United States is giving students a greater chance to take part in civics and being an active citizen of their community and country.

Colleges and universities can also positively influence college student voter participation. These institutions need to make a greater effort in providing educational opportunities for their students. This can and should include providing courses that expand knowledge of the voting process, providing out of class opportunities, such as seminars, workshops, and more. It is also important that campuses promote voting via interactions with students. This can be as simple as an email to remind students to vote or a handing out pamphlets to show how to vote via absentee ballot. By enacting small and large ideas on college campuses, then college students can raise their voting rates.

Lastly, high schools can increase college student voter habits by adding civic-based electives to their class lists. By providing civic education before they can vote, allows them to fully understand what they need to do in order to be civically engaged citizens and help better their community and the United States prior to needing the knowledge. High schools, and lower education in general, can also have events like that of colleges and universities. Another way lower education can help increase college student voting, is by making civics classes as engaging and interesting as possible. It is important for students to be engaged, otherwise they will not want to pay attention or learn about a topic. Making civics engaging and relevant through projects, group work, and debates allows students to build skills in civics and political efficacy that will stay with them for a lifetime.

While a lot of research has been done in terms of voter turnout, civic participation, and how to increase voter turnout, I believe this paper has succeeded in addressing all of these elements in one, cohesive space. I also focused on college students in order to be able to narrow my research. I have concluded that while voter turnout is low across all demographics in the United States, concentrating on college students first allows for easier progress because college

students are already in a state of learning and wanting to obtain more knowledge. I also believe I had an insightful opinion on the topic of college students and their political participation because of my background. I am a college student, so I am often around my peers, discovering how political engagement is carried out. I am also in the Social Studies Education program at Bowling Green State University. This aspect of myself allows me to understand and appreciate how important it is for citizens to participate in their communities, especially through voting. All these components allow for this paper and research to add to my field of education. In time, I hope that more research can be conducted to further understand what college students need in order to be effective U.S. citizens. I think that more research would better articulate what different universities, ages, ethnicities, etc. need in order to participate effectively in their communities and country. It is important that researchers are not only asking these types of questions, but college students are asking it of themselves and their peers. Understanding the importance of political participation with peers allows for further conversations on how voting can improve representation and life. This can hopefully give a comprehensive understanding of how and why college student voting is an important aspect of the United States.

There are many opportunities for further research pertaining to this topic. One of the best ways I believe this research could be furthered is by gathering statistics and polling at specific colleges and universities in order to get opinions from a large number of college students. My opinion is just one of millions, so it would be beneficial to get more opinions and statistics to see if there are more or different ways to solve the low voter turnout problem. This problem could also be geographic specific, so getting data sets from smaller areas may allow for a better understanding of how to execute the solutions made in my research. I also think it would be very helpful to expand my research and find out how to fix low voter turnout in other demographics.

African and Latinx Americans have a lower turnout than white Americans. Solutions can be made for those specific groups and many others. The eventual goal is to have all eligible citizens in the United States vote whenever possible. This is a large goal, but by achieving it, the citizens of the United States will be accurately represented and more satisfied with how their government is running.

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