

# A SILENCED GENERATION: HOW THE POWER OF THE YOUTH VOTE COLLIDES WITH BARRIERS TO VOTING

JANUARY 2024



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**Movement Advancement Project**

MAP’s mission is to provide independent and rigorous research, insight, and communications that help speed equality and opportunity for LGBT and all people. MAP works to ensure that all people have a fair chance to pursue health and happiness, earn a living, take care of the ones they love, be safe in their communities, and participate in civic life.

**The Civics Center**

The Civics Center is on a mission to get every high school student in America registered to vote. Every year, 4 million Americans turn 18 and become eligible to vote. But less than half of them do so, because they are not registered. [thecivicscenter.org](http://thecivicscenter.org)

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# Foreword

Since ratification of the 26th Amendment in 1971, young people have had the right to vote, starting at age 18. More than five decades later, however, the 26th Amendment still has not lived up to its promise. Youth voter registration continues to lag far behind registration rates of older voters, suppressing overall youth turnout.

Congress could have enacted robust legislation decades ago to enforce the 26th Amendment and still has that power today.

- There could be a federal law requiring states to allow young people to preregister to vote beginning at age 16 and requiring online voter registration, Election Day registration, and automatic voter registration.
- There could be a federal law requiring states to accept college and high school IDs as valid IDs for purposes of their voter ID laws.
- Election Day could be a holiday nationwide.

Congress, however, has never enacted any of these policies or many others that could dramatically increase registration and turnout for younger voters. Today, with a divided Congress and many Members opposed to expanded protections for voting rights, national solutions remain some distance away.

With Congress deadlocked, state legislatures are key bodies to engage today in creating the policy foundation to strengthen democracy and to broaden youth electoral participation. They play a significant role in determining the time, place, and manner of elections.

A new report issued by the Movement Advancement Project (MAP) provides valuable insight and analysis regarding the most significant steps we can take to remove the artificial policy obstacles that suppress youth engagement. The report spotlights straightforward methods that are already widely in use and sets out a framework for evaluating which states have the best policy climate for youth voting. MAP shows with data and detail how policies map onto youth turnout and how our nation's youth, a young, diverse, rising generation can benefit.

Just as the 26th Amendment was enacted and ratified with great speed in the 1970s, rapid changes to encourage youth participation through state legislatures is also possible. In 2023, Michigan, Illinois, and Minnesota, for example, all enacted pre-registration laws, allowing young people to preregister to vote as soon as they turn 16. Today, 70% of U.S. teens live in states with laws that allow at least a year before a first election in which to preregister to vote. Five years ago, pre-registration was virtually unknown. These advances represent meaningful progress, but data tell us there is still much room for improvement.

Policies that can greatly benefit all voters, and especially our children as they come of age, are there to be enacted and there to be used. A healthy democracy means full participation. It means welcoming and celebrating new voters. In this election year, let's all work together and use our power to get it done.

By Laura Brill, Founder & CEO, The Civics Center



# Introduction

There are an estimated [53.5 million](#) young people between the ages of 18 and 29 in the United States, representing over 16% of the total population. These young people, in particular college students, are a demographic that has traditionally been overlooked and assumed to be uninterested in participating in the democratic process, due at least in part to relatively lower voter turnout. However, young voters face specific structural barriers to voting—and even despite these growing barriers, in recent years, young voter turnout has increased significantly. For example, in the 2020 election, an [estimated 50%](#) of all people ages 18 to 29 voted, up from 39% in 2016. And, in 2020, young voters [comprised over 16%](#) of all voters, roughly matching their share of the total population.

Heading into the 2024 election cycle, [8-10 million young voters](#) are projected to become newly eligible to cast a ballot since the 2022 midterm elections, representing a formidable voting bloc and an important opportunity to create a new generation of engaged, active lifetime voters who can strengthen our democracy. [Academic research](#) shows that voting is a habit: casting a ballot in one election significantly increases the chances of voting in the next election, and this is [particularly true](#) for young and first-time voters. Therefore, engaging young people is important not only for participation in current elections, but for the future of our democracy.

States have taken different approaches to engaging (or hindering) young voters. Some states are working to enable and grow young voter participation through policies like pre-registration or engaging youth as poll workers, while other states are attempting to limit access for young voters by banning student IDs as a valid form of voting ID and removing polling places from college campuses. This report examines the state of youth engagement in our elections, including ways to support young voter engagement and reduce the barriers they experience. This report also articulates a vision for voting to ensure that all eligible voters, including young voters, are able to fully participate in our democracy.



# An Estimated 50 Million Young Voters Will Be Eligible to Vote in 2024

Young or youth voters are typically defined as eligible voters between the ages of 18 and 29.<sup>a</sup> While the importance of young voters' participation in democracy is an oft-discussed topic, more than ever before, this younger electorate is poised to have an outsized impact on the 2024 elections.

According to estimates by The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), over 40 million members of Gen Z (who will be age 18-27) will be eligible to vote in 2024, including over eight million who will have become newly eligible since the 2022 election cycle. Adding young voters ages 28-29, this total demographic of 18-to-29-year-olds comprises over 50 million potential voters in 2024, representing over one in five of all eligible voters.

These new voters also represent a richly diverse generation: of the 40 million eligible Gen Z voters in 2024, 45% are young people of color, and among the 8 million newly eligible voters, that percentage is even higher. This diversity is concentrated in the South and West regions of the country; in the South young people of color represent over half of all newly eligible voters, and in the West, young Latino voters constitute almost 40% of all newly eligible voters.

In addition to racial diversity, these young voters are also different from previous generations in key aspects. Over one in five Gen Z adults identify as LGBTQ, as compared to 7.1 % of all adults. Young voters also seem to be inclined to reject partisan political loyalty, with 37% reporting unfavorable views of both major parties, compared to 28% of all voters. However, young voters do still show a clear inclination to support Democratic candidates and issues; 68% of young voters who cast a ballot in 2022 congressional midterm elections supported a Democratic candidate, compared to 48% of all voters.

The combination of increasing diversity along with changing attitudes makes young voters perhaps the most important demographic in the 2024 elections. And soon these voters will have the sheer numbers to exert their influence on the future of our democracy. Together with the older generation of Millennials, the largest in American history, voters under 45 are forecasted to become the majority of the electorate by 2028. Policymakers, advocates and other stakeholders in our democracy must engage with these young voters now to ensure a healthy democracy in the future.

## Gen Z voters are:

>40 million in number

45% people of color

21% LGBTQ people

Sources: CIRCLE 2023, Gallup 2022

## Why Engaging Youth Voters is Critical to a Healthy Democracy

Setting aside the raw numbers, what makes this younger generation of voters so important to the health of our democracy? It may seem obvious, but these voters represent the future of our country and will have the most important say as to whether our democracy will represent the growing diversity of all Americans. In recent years the country has seen a record amount of anti-LGBTQ legislation, attacks on reproductive freedom, increasing censorship, and growing rejection of the core tenets of democracy and the rule of law. These attacks are not one-offs, but part of a coordinated effort to strip people of their rights and impose rigid control over Americans across all walks of life. As these attacks on our freedoms continue, this growing and diverse group of young voters has the opportunity to create a more representative democracy, where people of color, LGBTQ people, and other historically underrepresented populations have their voices heard rather than silenced.

It is also critical to engage these young voters now to create a generation that is poised to participate in all aspects of civic life, including voting. Numerous academic studies show that voting is a habit that is established at a young age, particularly for first time voters. Research also shows that individuals who vote are more likely to engage in other forms of political participation such as contacting their elected officials or working on a campaign. Policymakers and other stakeholders in our democracy have the responsibility to take on the challenge of supporting these young voters. However, to make this vision a reality, states must engage young voters now, as well as create an environment that is conducive to forming a culture of strong civic engagement and thriving democracy.

<sup>a</sup>While some researchers and datasets may utilize an age range of 18-24, this report will use the 18-29 demographic when referring to young voters, unless otherwise explicitly noted.

# How Barriers for Young Voters Hinder Turnout

While young voters turn out at lower rates than older voters, as shown below, this discrepancy cannot be attributed simply to apathy or generational differences. Young voters face additional structural and intentional barriers to participating in the democratic process. Understanding these barriers and working to alleviate them is critical to closing the participation gap for young voters. This section discusses trends in turnout among young voters and details common barriers they face, both because of the realities and structures of our society, as well as voter suppression efforts that particularly impact this demographic.

## Young Voter Turnout is Relatively Lower—But Increasing Over Time

It is not a new phenomenon that younger people tend to vote at lower rates than older voters. As shown in **Figure 1**, this trend has persisted for decades. This trend is also not limited to the United States, as [research](#) shows that younger voters across the world tend to vote at lower rates than the general population.

However, and as shown in Figure 1, young voter turnout in U.S. presidential elections has increased dramatically since its historic low in 2000 to a record high in 2020. And, in 2020, the gap in turnout between young voters and the general population was the smallest it has been (13.3%). Similarly, in midterm elections, young voter turnout in 2018 and 2022 was

notably higher than it had been over the past two decades. Taken together, these trends show the increasing participation of young voters over time.

These trends also illustrate the promise of further improving young voter participation by removing structural barriers—if young voter turnout is increasing even with current barriers in place, then removing those barriers will enable even more political participation and engagement.

## Key Barriers to Young Voter Turnout

As shown above, young voters on average have relatively lower voting rates than older voters, though this is improving over time. This turnout gap is due at least in part to the additional barriers, both structural and intentional, that young voters face in order to cast their ballot. These barriers include the following:



Lack of Voting Experience Creates Information Gap



Moving More Frequently Creates Challenges for Registration and Voting



Fewer Resources and Less Predictable Work Schedules Make it Harder to Vote

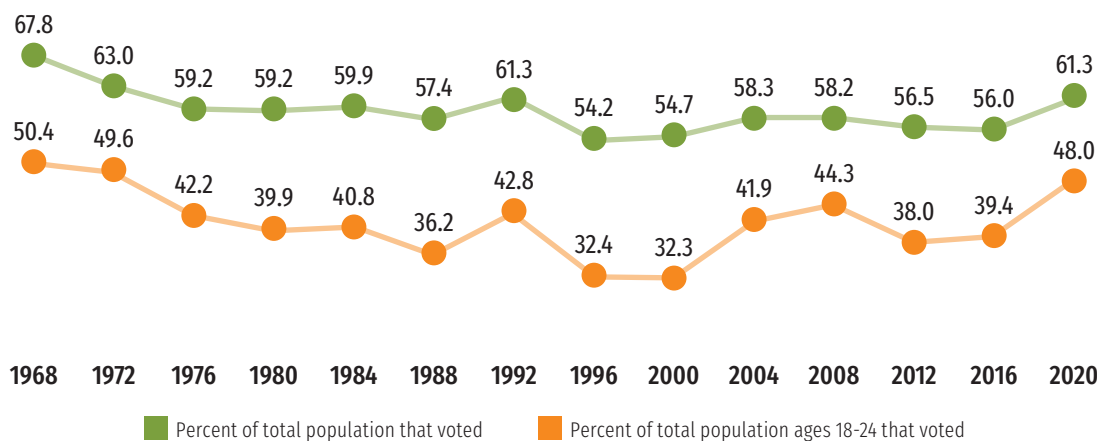


Targeted Efforts Disenfranchise Young Voters, Especially College Students

Young people, advocates, and lawmakers seeking to encourage young voters' participation should work to address these barriers.

**FIGURE 1: YOUTH VOTER TURNOUT IS HISTORICALLY LOWER THAN GENERAL TURNOUT, BUT THAT GAP IS CLOSING**

*% of total population that voted in presidential elections*



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. "Table A-1. Reported Voting and Registration by Race, Hispanic Origin, Sex and Age Groups: November 1964 to 2022."



## Barrier #1: Lack of Voting Experience Creates Information Gap

Anyone who is voting for the first time faces an information or experience gap: never having voted before, they are less familiar with the process, rules, and what to expect, which itself can be a deterrent or obstacle to voting for some people. Young people are inherently more likely to be first time voters, and therefore to face this information gap and potential obstacle. In fact, research conducted by CIRCLE shows that over a [third of young people](#) who didn't vote in 2022 reported not doing so due to a lack of information or problems with voting processes.

New voters must familiarize themselves with registration requirements, potentially travel to a registration agency, complete paperwork, and ensure they have the required ID or documents. Then they must engage in the voting process, learn the options for casting their ballot, find and travel to a polling place, while also complying with any ID or document requirements associated with in-person voting. With the [complex landscape](#) of voting laws across the country, it is no easy task to be familiar with the requirements to vote in a given state, particularly as a first-time voter.

This experience and information gap in turn exacerbates the obstacles presented by other barriers: if young voters already face challenges or deterrents due to an information gap, adding on additional obstacles such as navigating a different state's laws, an unpredictable work schedule, or intentional barriers to voting make it all the more difficult for young voters to participate in democracy.



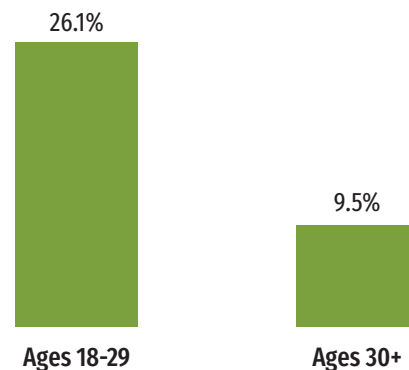
## Barrier #2: Moving More Frequently Creates Challenges for Registration and Voting

Young people move and change addresses much more frequently than their older peers. As shown in [Figure 2](#), 2022 Census Bureau data show that nearly [three times](#) as many people ages 18-29 moved in the past year, compared to those over the age of 30. Over one-quarter (26%) of young people moved at least once in the past year.

These frequent relocations introduce several barriers related to voting, and especially for those who move out of state. The primary barrier is related to registration; each time a person moves, they need to update their registration to match their new location, or otherwise risk being turned away at the polling place. While this may seem like a simple task, the stress and

FIGURE 2: OVER ONE-QUARTER OF YOUNG PEOPLE MOVED IN THE PAST YEAR, NEARLY THREE TIMES AS MANY AS THOSE AGES 30 AND ABOVE

*% of each age group that moved in the past year*



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. "Geographical Mobility in the Past Year by Age for Current Residence in the United States." American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B07001, 2022. Accessed on November 15, 2023.

logistics of moving can make it easy for people to forget this step until the next time they go to vote, at which point it may be too late. States with automatic voter registration lessen this burden by updating young people's registration when they move within state, but young voters still need to interact with certain government agencies to be registered initially. Those who move out of state likely face an entirely new set of registration rules, requirements, and processes.

While moving is stressful for everyone, as shown here, young people are far more likely to move and therefore to face this obstacle. Additionally, the barriers discussed above regarding young voters' information gap can further compound the challenges young people face when moving.

Importantly, many young people move to attend college, and this creates a host of unique challenges in accessing the ballot box—particularly for those who move out of state. As many as half of all people ages 18 to 21 who move each year [report](#) doing so due to relocating for education and schooling purposes, and roughly 20% of all those who attend college [move out of state](#) to do so. These unique challenges include, for example, the fact that college voters must choose whether to register at their home address or their campus address, which may be in another state. If a student chooses to register with their permanent home address, then they are confronted with potentially burdensome absentee voting requirements and difficulties returning their ballot through the mail on time. If a student chooses to register at their new college address, they may encounter strict voter ID requirements,

including the inability to use student IDs to vote, depending on the state. In addition, these students are forced to navigate potentially complex residency requirements to establish eligibility to vote, including targeted efforts to intentionally limit college students' votes, as discussed further in barrier four. All of these complications layer on additional burdens for young voters who are already navigating the major life changes of moving, attending college, and living on their own for the first time.



### Barrier #3: Fewer Resources and Less Predictable Work Schedules Make it Harder to Vote

Young voters face additional obstacles to voting due to socioeconomic barriers. For example, whether attending school or not, younger people are more likely to have lower-paying jobs. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, workers under 25 make up almost half of all workers earning minimum wage or less. Those working for hourly wages also face the difficult choice to either forego earning additional income at work or forego voting. Older voters, on the other hand, more often work on a salary basis and likely also have more access to paid time off, enabling their ability to vote without potential loss of income.

Hourly and minimum-wage jobs also have more volatile schedules, meaning that younger people are disproportionately likely to have less predictable schedules, making it difficult to be able to engage in the voting process. This is especially true for those who work multiple part-time jobs to make ends meet. The Economic Policy Institute, for example, reports that “nearly half of low-wage and/or hourly workers have no input into their work hours, including the ability to make even minor adjustments.”

Challenges related to lack of resources may also impact young voters' ability to cast their ballot directly. For example, according to previous MAP research, the average cost of obtaining a driver's license is \$38—the equivalent of over four hours of work at minimum wage—and can range as high as \$89 depending on the state. Therefore, young voters may not be able to expend the resources to obtain the necessary ID documents to meet the requirements for voting in their state.

Finally, younger voters are less likely to have access to transportation to travel to a polling place or ballot return location. In addition to being less likely to possess a driver's license, young people also are less likely to have a personal vehicle, and rates of vehicle ownership have consistently declined among this demographic in recent years. This lack of transportation may add additional cost barriers to voting, if

## Arizona Graduate Student Faces Barriers Resulting from Voter ID Requirements

Showcasing the barriers often faced by young voters, 24-year-old Arizona State student Rebecca Tindle encountered challenges to voting, even though she had the required ID.

Arizona law permits a voter to use an out-of-state ID as long as they also have another ID with an address that reasonably matches their voter registration. Yet, Rebecca was still challenged by poll workers on multiple occasions when she tried to vote.

Rebecca initially had an out-of-state ID from her home state of Indiana, but still needed to establish residency before being eligible to obtain an Arizona state ID. She found the process to apply for an Arizona ID incredibly confusing.

“Every time I would try to schedule an appointment online, the DMV would tell me that since I don't already have an Arizona license, I needed to call them,” Rebecca explained. “Also, my car is in my mom's name, and I didn't know how to switch my plate. So, I just put it off because I was so confused.”

Rebecca was eventually put in touch with VoteRiders, who helped her navigate the process to obtain a new ID. With a new Arizona state ID, Rebecca is now eligible to obtain her master's license, petition for in-state tuition, and vote confidently in person.

Rebecca's story showcases the challenges often encountered by young voters. The complex landscape of state laws regarding student IDs adds a formidable barrier to the voting process for young people, given that they often lack alternative forms of identification beyond their student IDs. Recent research conducted by VoteRiders in collaboration with the University of Maryland's Center for Democracy and Civic Engagement (CDCE) found that 39% of 18- to 19-year-olds lacked a driver's license, and overall, the 24% of young people aged 18-29 who lacked a license were more than twice the rate of those aged 30 and up.

As recommended in this report, states should act to alleviate these barriers by revising their general ID requirements to allow a range of identity documents to be used, and explicitly allow student IDs to be used to satisfy ID requirements that are in place.

Adapted from, VoteRiders, “Arizona Grad Student Can Now Vote Confidently with New ID.”



young voters are required to utilize a ride share or other paid services. Furthermore, being less inclined to interact with DMVs and similar agencies also makes it less likely that young voters will be registered to vote, either through automatic registration or traditional processes. Together, these literal costs of voting, combined with other barriers discussed here, create significant barriers for young voters.

The average cost of a driver's license is

**4.1 hours of work**

at the minimum wage

Source: MAP, November 2022. "The ID Divide: How Barriers to ID Impact Different Communities and Affect Us All."



#### **Barrier #4: Targeted Efforts Disenfranchise Young Voters, Especially College Students**

Perhaps most importantly, there are many intentionally created barriers to young voters' participation and right to vote. A growing number of states have taken direct action to restrict voting for young people, and especially college students. These restrictive efforts come in many forms but are often focused on voter registration and residency laws, the availability of early voting and polling locations, and voter identification requirements.

Many efforts to restrict young voters focus on voter registration and residency laws, with a particular goal of restricting the votes of college students. Any individual registering to vote must establish legal residency under state law. College students attending out-of-state schools must choose whether to register in their home state or in the state where they attend school. While some states have added provisions to explicitly allow college students to register where they attend school, other states have done the opposite. In [New Hampshire](#)—which has a [higher percentage](#) of college students than any other state—there has been a years-long legal battle over efforts by the state to use residency requirements to restrict the ability of college students to register there, including by requiring students to undertake actions such as buying a home or obtaining a driver's license in the state in order to register. Thankfully, the New Hampshire Supreme Court ruled that these requirements are unconstitutional in 2021. There have been similar efforts in states like [Texas](#) and [Arizona](#).

Further undemocratic efforts to restrict the rights of young voters are targeting the availability of polling places. While some states explicitly require that institutions of higher education be designated as polling places, in many states these decisions are left to the discretion of local officials. This discretion has opened the door for efforts by anti-democratic state legislatures to impose restrictions. In 2021, Texas [banned](#) temporary polling places that were often used by college campuses in lieu of setting up permanent polling locations. There have also been [numerous efforts](#) by the legislature in Florida to restrict campus polling places over the past decade, beginning with legislation in 2011 that limited the discretion of local officials to designate polling places on campuses. Fortunately, following years of litigation, in the 2020 election multiple college campuses were used as polling places in the state.

Strict voter ID requirements are also commonly used to restrict the right to vote of many people, including young voters. As detailed later in this report, strict voter ID requirements depress turnout generally, and may particularly do so among young voters, who, for example, are [less likely](#) to have a driver's license. In addition, a growing number of states with strict ID requirements explicitly ban the use of student identification cards as an acceptable form of ID for voting (see Figure 3 for further discussion). For example, Tennessee explicitly prohibits the use of student identification cards, despite allowing other forms of identification issued to faculty and staff at colleges to be used. More recently, in 2023, Idaho [passed legislation](#) explicitly eliminating the use of student IDs in the state for voting. Litigation challenging the new Idaho law is ongoing.

These efforts to intentionally restrict the fundamental right to vote for young people fly in the face of our democratic system and the freedoms guaranteed by our constitution. To fully realize the vision for a healthy democracy where all people are able to have their voices heard, these efforts to stop young people from voting must be recognized for the blatant attacks on freedom that they are and be put in check both by the courts as well as rejected through the exercise of those same voting rights.

# How States Can Remove Barriers and Engage Young Voters

To respond to and address the structural and intentional barriers that are faced by young voters, lawmakers and advocates must consider a range of policies related to voter registration, in-person voting, mail voting, and civic engagement. While many of the policies discussed here would benefit all voters, research shows that many of the policies highlighted in this section have significant impacts on registration rates and turnout among young voters. By adopting these policies, states can take concrete steps towards creating an environment where young voters are supported and encouraged to participate in democracy.



## Policies to Improve Young Voters' Registration

Policies related to voter registration requirements are arguably the most important area that can be addressed in terms of lowering the barriers for youth participation, as all newly eligible voters must be registered before they can participate. In particular, pre-registration, automatic registration, online registration and same-day registration policies have all been shown to have significant impacts on registration and turnout rates among young voters.

### Pre-Registration

Due to the information gap and associated barriers discussed above, registration requirements and processes can be confusing or an obstacle for young or first-time voters in particular. Pre-registration is a policy that can alleviate these barriers by allowing eligible people as young as 16 to sign up to be automatically registered to vote once they turn 18. While this may seem like simply registering to vote earlier, this difference is important because registering earlier offers young voters a chance to become engaged in the election system and learn about voting processes before they become eligible. Pre-registration can also help to alleviate barriers for young voters related to frequent moves and attending college, as in the context of these significant life changes young people may be less likely to find time and opportunity to register.

Research also shows that pre-registration is effective not only for improving voter registration, but also actual voter turnout

among youth. In 2020, for example, counties with pre-registration saw a nine percent increase in youth turnout compared to counties without the policy.

Despite this clear impact, only 20 states and D.C. allow pre-registration beginning at 16 years old, while another four states allow it to begin at 17 years old.<sup>b</sup> These states are shown in the spotlight on page 11.

Research has also shown that the number of young people registered through this process has increased substantially in recent years; in 2014 just over 400,000 young people were added to the rolls through pre-registration, but in 2020 this increased to almost 1 million. This growing adoption of pre-registration, coupled with its clear impact on youth voter engagement, illustrates why all states should implement policies that specifically allow young people to pre-register as soon as they turn 16.

### Automatic Registration

Like pre-registration, automatic voter registration is another crucial tool for policymakers to address barriers for young voters. Automatic voter registration (AVR) is a policy that modernizes registration by automatically enrolling eligible voters through their interactions with designated state agencies, most commonly motor vehicle departments. This eliminates unnecessary, additional steps for eligible voters of all backgrounds, including young voters. In particular, AVR lowers barriers for young voters in terms of initially being registered through interactions with government agencies, as well as automatically updating their registration when they move within state.

Currently, and as shown in the spotlight on page 11, 24 states and D.C. have enacted some form of AVR. Of those states, 16 and D.C. have “front-end” AVR, where the voter is given an opportunity to opt-out at the point of a transaction (such as when applying for a driver’s license), and eight states have “back-end” AVR, where eligible voters are automatically registered and then given an opportunity to opt-out at a later time. Back-end AVR has been shown to have a more significant impact on registration and turnout rates compared to front-end; this may be particularly relevant for young voters who have less information about voting requirements and therefore may opt-out of registering at the time of a relevant agency transaction.

<sup>b</sup> Note: For detailed information on state specific time frames for pre-registration in the 2024 election cycle, reference can be made to the Civics Center [resources](#).

# Pre-Registration & AVR: A One-Two Punch for Youth Voter Engagement

In addition to the respective benefits of automatic voter registration (AVR) and pre-registration for young voters, [new research](#) from Next-Gen suggests that the combination of the two policies has an especially powerful impact on the rates of registration for young voters.

In 2017, Colorado first adopted AVR, in addition to its existing pre-registration policy for 16- and 17-year-olds. In a study examining the impact of Colorado's AVR policy from 2017 to 2022, researchers found that out of over 900,000 new registrants in that five-year period, almost 150,000 were 16- and 17-year-old pre-registrants. The positive impact on voter registration was especially notable when the state moved in mid-2020 from front-end AVR to the even more impactful back-end AVR: pre-registration rates for 16- and 17-year-olds soared from 25% under the front-end AVR system to 68% under the back-end AVR.

Another way to measure the impact for young voters is through opting-out of voter registration. As noted in this report, younger voters face an information and experience gap about voting, which may make them more likely to opt-out of automatic registration when offered the chance under front-end AVR. In the Colorado study, under the front-end system, 72% of unregistered 16- and 17-year-olds who were offered pre-registration opted out; but under the back-end system, only 0.47% opted-out.

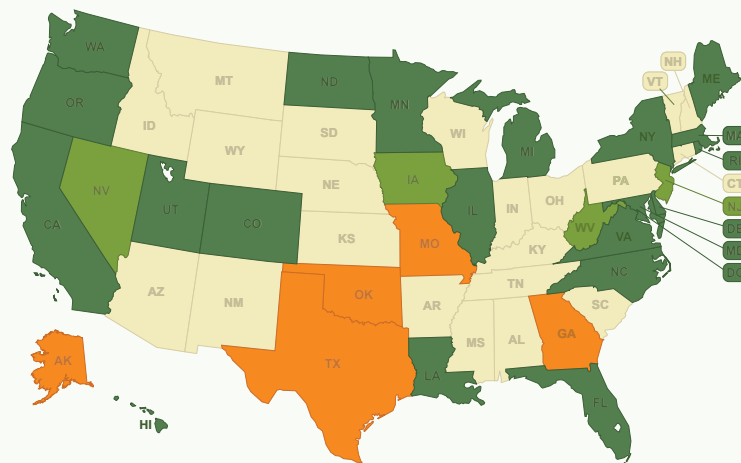
This synergy of pre-registration and AVR offers great promise in significantly reducing the barriers for young voters to register, and states should follow Colorado's example when crafting their registration policies.

## PRE-REGISTRATION

- State allows pre-registration beginning at 16 years old (20 states + D.C.)
- State allows pre-registration beginning at 17 years old (4 states)
- State does not set specific age but allows pre-registration if individual will turn 18 by the next election (21 states)
- State allows pre-registration only within six months or less of 18th birthday (5 states)

### Pre-Registration Laws

Source: [https://www.mapresearch.org/democracy-maps/voter\\_preregistration](https://www.mapresearch.org/democracy-maps/voter_preregistration). Data as of 1/1/24.

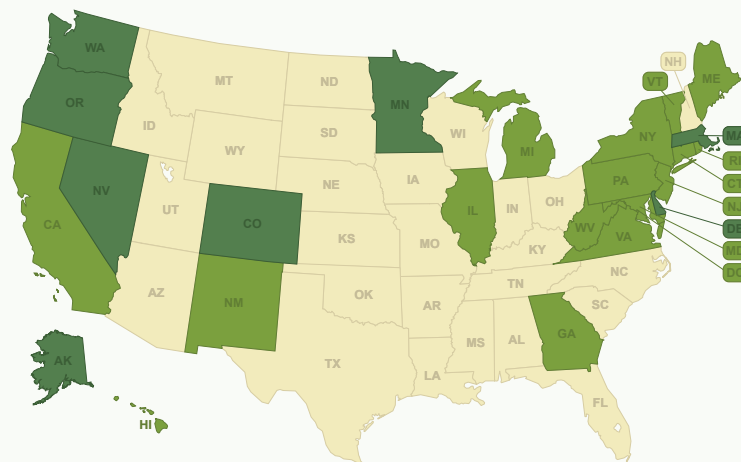


## AUTOMATIC REGISTRATION

- State has back-end automatic voter registration (8 states)
- State has front-end automatic voter registration (16 states + D.C.)
- State does not have automatic voter registration (26 states)

### Automatic Voter Registration Laws

Source: [https://www.mapresearch.org/democracy-maps/automatic\\_voter\\_registration](https://www.mapresearch.org/democracy-maps/automatic_voter_registration). Data as of 1/1/24.



In addition to implementing AVR, expanding designated AVR agencies beyond motor vehicle departments to other government offices may also help more young voters get registered, as young people drive less than older generations and are therefore less likely to interact with the DMV.

Due to the fact that AVR is a relatively new policy in terms of adoption across the states, there have been fewer studies on its impact on young voters specifically, but research conducted in Oregon (the first state to adopt AVR) suggests that AVR contributed to a seven percent increase in turnout among young voters in the state. States should act now to adopt automatic voter registration, in particular back-end systems, to reduce barriers to registration for young voters.

### Online Registration

To reduce barriers for a generation accustomed to interacting with all aspects of life online, it is important to bring voter registration into the digital world as well. Online voter registration (OVR) is a policy that improves the registration process by allowing voters to fill out and submit registration forms electronically through online portals run by the state. In most states these systems work in tandem with motor vehicle departments and use information from driver's licenses and other state-issued IDs. Currently, 42 states and D.C. allow voters to register online.

Broadly, OVR has been shown to increase rates of both registration and turnout for the general population. Research suggests that these increases are particularly impactful for young voters. According to CIRCLE, states with online voter registration had registration rates 10 percent higher among young people compared to states without OVR. In addition, the Center for American Progress reports that in Georgia, voters who registered online turned out at rates more than 20 percentage points higher than voters who registered through traditional methods. Similar results have been observed in California, particularly among young voters, who were more than 20 percent more likely to vote than those in their age group who registered through traditional methods. The remaining eight states that do not allow online registration should act now to modernize their systems and lower barriers for young voters who particularly rely on the internet.

### Election Day Registration

In addition to measures like pre-registration and AVR, which facilitate the registration of young voters, it is also important for states to provide a fail-safe if young voters are unable to register in advance of voting day. Allowing voters to register on

Election Day provides this fail-safe, and it increases access to voting, boosts voter turnout in the general population, and especially boosts young voter turnout, even more so than among the general population.

Despite this, currently, only 22 states and D.C. allow voters to register and cast their ballot on Election Day. Another six states have deadlines 1-15 days prior to Election Day, and the remaining 22 states set registration deadlines an even earlier 16-30 days prior to Election Day. The federal National Voter Registration Act prohibits states from setting a registration deadline more than 30 days before an election.

All states should adjust their registration deadlines to allow voters to register and cast their ballot on Election Day, to significantly lower the barriers to both registration and voting for young people.



### Policies To Improve Young Voters' Access to the Ballot

In addition to policies that increase young voters' registration, states must also adopt policies to reduce the barriers for these voters in casting their ballots once they are registered. Many of the same barriers to young people's registration also impact their ability to cast their vote, including having fewer resources and facing intentionally restrictive measures such as not allowing student IDs for voting. To close the turnout gap among these young voters, states need to reform their ID policies, increase accessibility of early voting and polling locations, allow young people to vote in primaries, offer options for absentee and mail voting, and require employers to provide paid time off to vote.

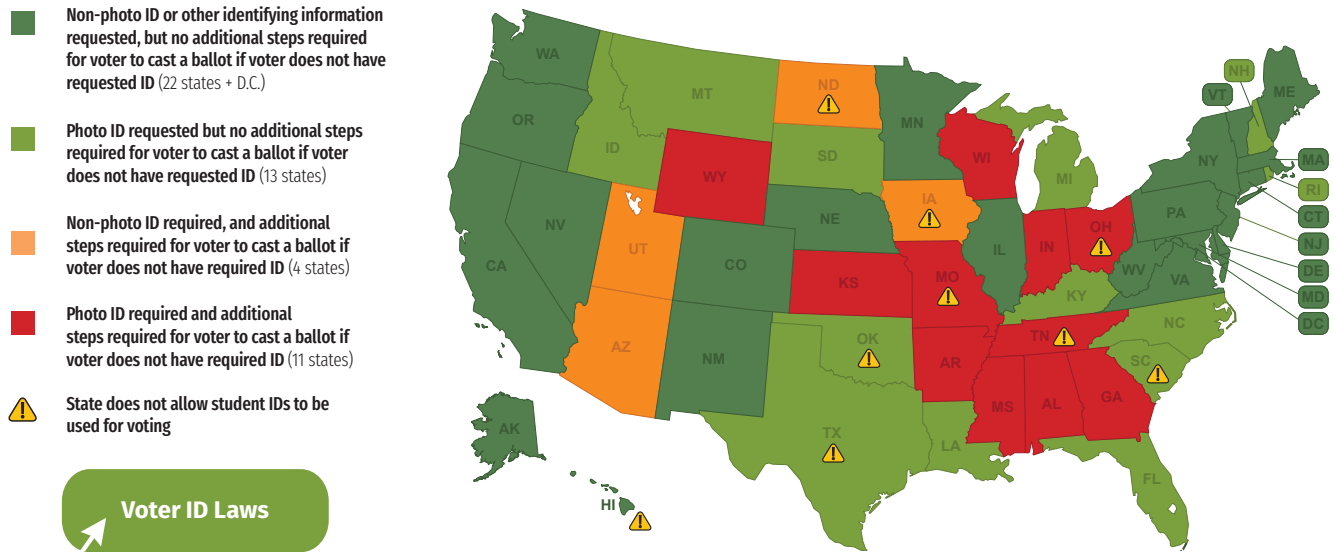
### Voter ID & Allowing Student IDs

As noted above, young people face additional difficulty attaining ID documents due to having fewer resources and being less likely to drive and therefore to have driver's licenses. This creates multiple challenges for young voters in terms of satisfying state ID requirements for casting their ballot.

In the majority of states, voters must show some form of identification at the polls in order to cast their ballot. As shown in **Figure 3** on the following page, 11 states have unnecessarily strict requirements where photo identification is required and if the voter does not have the required ID, they must undertake additional burdensome steps to have their vote counted.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Note: In May 2024, a strict photo ID law will go into effect in Nebraska, making it the 12th state with such a requirement.

FIGURE 3: STATE VOTER ID LAWS & EXCLUSION OF STUDENT IDS



Source: [https://www.mapresearch.org/democracy-maps/in\\_person\\_voting](https://www.mapresearch.org/democracy-maps/in_person_voting). Data as of 1/1/24.

Studies [show](#) that these restrictive laws reduce turnout across the general population by as much as three percentage points, which would represent a difference of almost 1.5 million voters in the 11 states with strict voter ID laws. While there is less literature that specifically examines the impact of strict voter ID laws on youth turnout overall, [research](#) suggests these laws disproportionately and negatively impact young voters of color.

Furthermore, when state laws forbid the use of student IDs as an acceptable form of identification to cast a ballot, this makes it more difficult for young people to vote. Requirements vary widely in this area, but according to [VoteRiders](#), of the states that require ID to vote, at least nine do not allow student IDs to be used (see Figure 3). This includes three of the states that have strict photo ID requirements, and in these states a young voter may not possess a driver's license or one of the few other forms of acceptable identification under these very restrictive state laws. The remaining strict photo ID states accept some forms of student identification, but the [requirements](#) for what those documents must contain can be complex and young voters may not be aware of the necessary information before they attempt to vote.

The varying landscape of acceptance of student IDs adds yet another layer of barriers to the ballot box for young voters. States that wish to improve young voter participation in democracy should revise their general ID requirements to allow a range of identity documents to be used, as well as alternative verification methods such as affidavits. States should also explicitly allow student IDs to be used to satisfy ID requirements that are in place.

### Early Voting Availability

Once a young voter is properly registered and has the necessary ID documents to satisfy the requirements in their state, they still must find the opportunity to cast their ballot. As these young voters often work less predictable schedules and may be more likely to forego voting to earn much needed income, it is important for states to provide opportunities for voting before Election Day.

Almost [all states](#) offer some form of early in-person voting, but the length of the early voting period varies widely. Currently, [43 states](#) and D.C. offer early voting periods that are more than seven days, and four states have early voting periods less than seven days. Only three states do not currently offer any form of early in-person voting.

Recent elections clearly demonstrate that young voters take advantage of early voting when it is available: in the 2022 election, [more than half](#) of all young voters cast their ballots before Election Day. All states should offer robust periods of early voting to reduce barriers for young voters and provide more opportunities to access the ballot box.

### Absentee Voting Availability & All-Mail Voting

In addition to providing opportunities for young voters to cast their ballots in-person before Election Day, it is also important for states to provide options to vote by mail. Currently, [36 states](#) and D.C. allow all voters to request an absentee ballot be mailed to them without providing an excuse. In an additional [eight states](#), all registered voters are automatically sent a mail

ballot in advance of the election. Like early voting, these opportunities to vote prior to Election Day are critical to facilitate the participation of young voters who face difficulties getting to the polls on Election Day.

In the 2020 election, which saw higher availability of mail voting due to the COVID-19 pandemic, [27% of all young voters](#) cast their ballots by mail. According to [CIRCLE research](#), youth voter turnout was highest in the states that automatically mailed ballots to voters in 2020, and, conversely, in states with the most restrictive mail voting policies, youth turnout was as much as 15 percentage points lower. States need to adopt policies that allow all voters to request an absentee ballot without an excuse, and ideally go a step further and embrace vote by mail elections where all voters are mailed a ballot, to have a positive impact on young voters.

### Polling Place Locations

To take advantage of policies such as Election Day registration and early voting, young voters must also have access to convenient polling places where they can cast their ballot. As detailed in this report, young voters lack access to transportation, resources, and often work challenging schedules that makes it difficult to find time to vote. While state law sometimes provides guidelines for the location of polling places, the decision is often left to the discretion of local election officials. Only [five states](#) require that polling locations be provided on college campuses. In addition, there have been a number of efforts to restrict access for young voters by excluding campuses from being used as polling

locations. Beginning in 2011, the Florida legislature [made multiple attempts](#) to prohibit polling places from being located on college campuses, resulting in decade-long litigation that is only partially settled today.

In order to facilitate access for young voters, states should enact policies to require polling locations be available on college campuses and limit the discretion of local officials to prohibit or relocate these polling places.

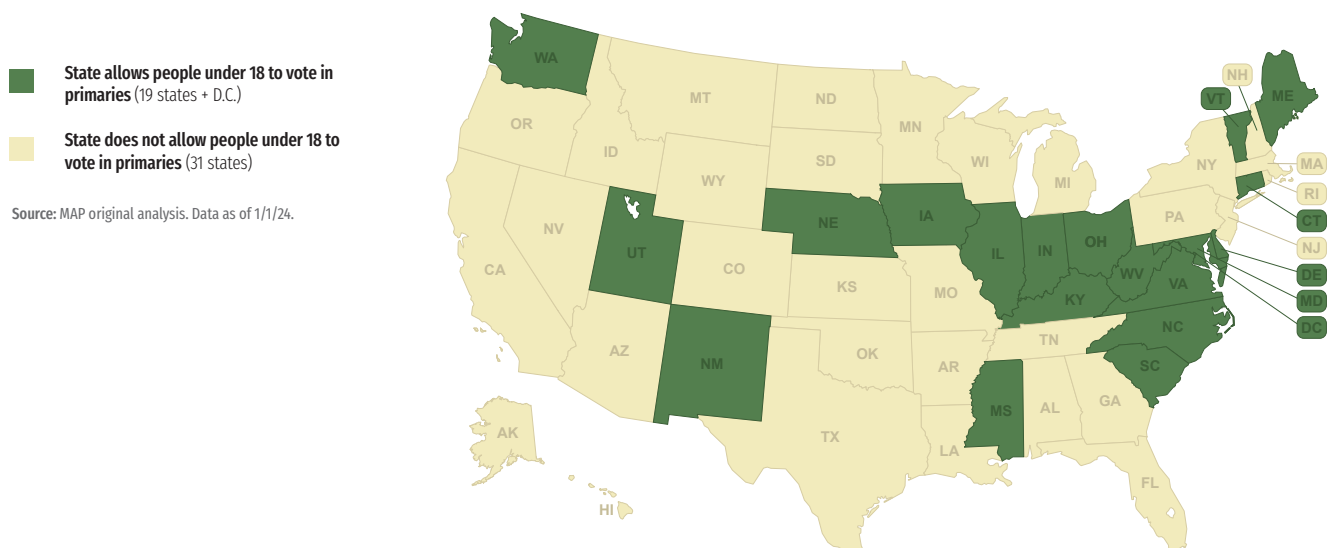
### Youth Voting in Primaries

To help bridge the information gap among young voters and begin building the habit of voting that leads to lifetime civic engagement, 19 states & D.C. have adopted policies allowing young people who are 17 to vote in primaries and caucuses, as long as they will turn 18 by the time of the next general election. These states are shown in [Figure 4](#).

This is a commonsense policy that gives a voice to voters who will become eligible by the time of the general election and have a say on who they will ultimately cast their vote for. It also increases the chances of these young people being engaged in the political process and becoming habitual lifelong voters and civic-minded citizens. All states should adopt policies to allow 17-year-olds to vote in primary elections if they will turn 18 by the time of the general election.<sup>d</sup>

<sup>d</sup>Note: In some states it may be the responsibility of the major political parties to allow youth voting in primaries, depending on state law and the type of election.

FIGURE 4: STATES THAT ALLOW PEOPLE UNDER 18 TO VOTE IN PRIMARIES



## Paid Time Off to Vote

As detailed throughout this report, young voters often work less predictable schedules and disproportionately make up a large percentage of minimum wage workers. These young voters may be less likely to forego income to make time to vote, as compared to older voters who are more likely to work salaried jobs. In 2016, [14% of all nonvoters](#) reported work schedules as a reason for not voting.

One solution that can help reduce these barriers for young voters is state laws that require employees to provide paid time off to vote. There is no federal law that requires employers to provide time off for voting, and currently [only 22 states](#) have laws that require this of employers. States should take responsibility for requiring private employers to provide time off for all voters to cast their ballot, and to assist young and lower-income voters in overcoming the barriers they face.



## Civic Engagement and Institutional Support for Young Voters

In addition to removing structural and intentional barriers for young voters related to registration and voting, policymakers must also consider other measures to increase civic engagement and participation among this demographic. There are many methods to achieve this goal, some outside the scope of this report, but two policies to highlight are allowing and encouraging young people to serve as poll workers and requiring higher education institutions to engage in promoting democratic participation among their students.

### Young Voters as Poll Workers

To encourage civic engagement and bridge information gaps among young voters, states should consider encouraging young people to serve as poll workers. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, [45 states and D.C.](#) have some form of youth poll worker programs that allow people under the age of 18 to serve on Election Day. Most states that do so focus on 16- and 17-year-old high school students, though some states allow people as young as 15 to work the polls (with training and alongside adults).

These programs can benefit both future young voters as well as the health of democracy as a whole. Serving as a poll worker gives young people a chance to engage with the democratic process hands on and bridges the information gap among these future voters in terms of registration and voting requirements. A study conducted by CIRCLE through a pilot project in Minneapolis, Minnesota, found a [myriad of benefits](#)

for young people serving as poll workers: 70% of participants reported the experience significantly improved their understanding of election processes, and almost all respondents who would be old enough to vote in the next election said they planned to do so. The study also suggests a relationship between the number of youth poll workers at a given precinct in Minneapolis and the estimated youth voter turnout in those precincts. Such programs can also help improve the health of our democracy by filling the need for additional poll workers. States should adopt and promote these youth poll worker programs to facilitate the upcoming generation in engaging in their community and eventually becoming lifelong voters.

### Institutional Support from Colleges and Universities

In addition to policies that lower barriers for young voters engaging in the electoral process, it is also critical for educational institutions to support their students by allowing and encouraging registration and other activities on campus. There are several approaches to accomplishing these goals, some of which can be supported and required by state law.

At least [15 states](#) have laws that require colleges and universities make voter registration forms available for students, although these schools can go a step further and encourage students to take advantage of these opportunities to register. Along those lines, at least 25 states have additional policies that promote voter registration activities in schools; the other half of states without such a policy do not prohibit these activities, so schools in those states are still free to promote voter registration voluntarily. Finally, at least 24 states have another kind of policy that explicitly designates schools as voter registration sites, and some states require school officials to provide opportunities for students to register on campus. The combination of these policies, along with other civic educational initiatives such as official school visits to election offices, can help significantly lower the barriers to registration for young voters while also bridging the information gap and helping to build lifelong voters.

# Youth Democracy Score

As of this writing, our Democracy Maps track over 50 election and voting policies across all 50 states and the District of Columbia (D.C.), including many of the policies discussed above that protect and promote young voters' engagement. Using our existing data as well as additional 50-state analysis of the policies discussed in this report, MAP has created the "Youth Democracy Score," which represents one measure of the policy environment shaping young voters' voting experience across the states.<sup>e</sup>

The policies that make up the Youth Democracy Score (YDS) include:

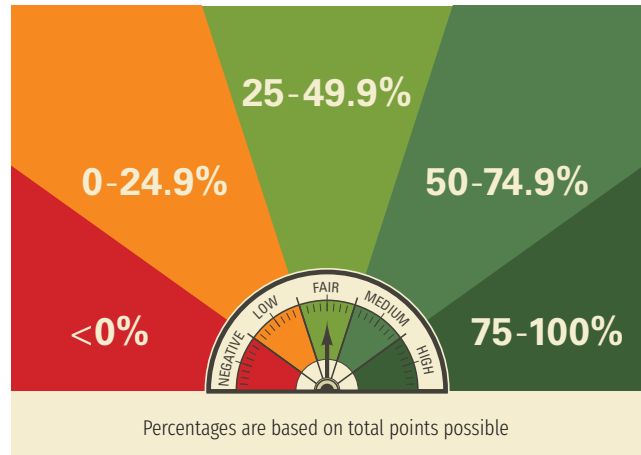
- Pre-registration
- Automatic Voter Registration
- Online Registration
- Registration Deadlines
- Voter ID Policies
- Prohibitions on the use of Student IDs
- Availability of Early Voting
- Allowing Young People to Vote in Primaries
- Availability of Absentee and Mail Voting
- Allowing Young People to Serve as Poll Workers
- Requiring Employers to Provide Paid Time Off to Vote

In analyzing and scoring these 11 policies, laws that encourage and facilitate the participation of young voters earn positive points, and harmful or discriminatory policies earn negative points. States can also earn partial points for nuances and variations with a particular policy area. Given this mix of both negative and positive laws, the possible scores for the Youth Democracy Score ranges from -1 to 10. The Youth Democracy Score is also divided into categories (negative, low, fair, medium and high) based on the total score relative to the total points possible within the tally, to facilitate comparison between the states in terms of the electoral environment for young voters.

Note that this tally is only based on a subset of laws identified by MAP as particularly impactful for young voters and does not examine societal factors or consider the actual implementation of a particular law.

<sup>e</sup>The policy tally is based on data current as of January 1, 2024

FIGURE 5: SCORING CUTOFFS FOR EACH TALLY



## Which States Best Support Young Voters?

The landscape of electoral environments for young voters varies widely from state to state. States identified as having a "high" youth democracy score have the most policies in place that support young voters, while states identified as "low" have the fewest policies in place. This varying national landscape (see **Figure 5**) illustrates how a young person's access to or opportunities to participate in the electoral process can depend simply on their zip code.

### Policy Environments for Young Voters Vary Widely

As shown in **Figure 6** on the following page, states vary widely in their Youth Democracy scores. For example, 18 states score in the highest category in terms of providing a strong and facilitative environment for young voters, while 22 states fall into "fair" (17 states) or "low" (5) categories given their absence of supportive laws or active efforts to discourage young voter participation.

### Nearly 2/5 of Young Voters (39%) Live in States with High Youth Democracy Scores

Eighteen states currently have high Youth Democracy Scores, representing over 20 million young voters. These states share key characteristics in terms of policies that support young voters. States with strong and modernized voter registration laws tend to have overall strong environments for young voters, driven by policies like pre-registration and automatic voter registration. High-scoring states also have laws that facilitate access to the ballot box for young voters, specifically in terms of



the availability of opportunities to vote prior to Election Day, either through early in-person voting or absentee and mail options. In addition, these states tend to lack policies that have a discriminatory or suppressive impact on young voters, in particular strict voter ID laws and policies that exclude student IDs from being used to satisfy these requirements.

### Nearly 1/4 of Young Voters (23%) Live in States with Medium Youth Democracy Scores

Eleven states score in the medium category, representing almost 1/4 of all young voters in the country. States falling into the medium category have many strong laws in place but may lack key policies that support young voters. For example, a state may allow pre-registration but does not specifically set the age at which young people can pre-register to 16. Or a state may have adopted automatic voter registration but has not updated their system to a back-end process which is recognized as best practice. Overall, these states still tend to have environments that are positive in terms of supporting young voters.

### Nearly 1/3 of Young Voters (31%) Live in States with Fair Youth Democracy Scores

Seventeen states have policy tallies scoring in the Fair category, with 25-50% of total points possible. These states include more than 16 million young voters nationwide. States falling into the fair category represent those that have a few key policies in place but tend to not have overly discriminatory or suppressive laws. States in this policy category can make progress towards supporting youth voters by updating their laws to allow, for

example, people to register and cast their vote on Election Day, or by embracing absentee and mail voting options that lower barriers to the ballot box for all voters, including young voters.

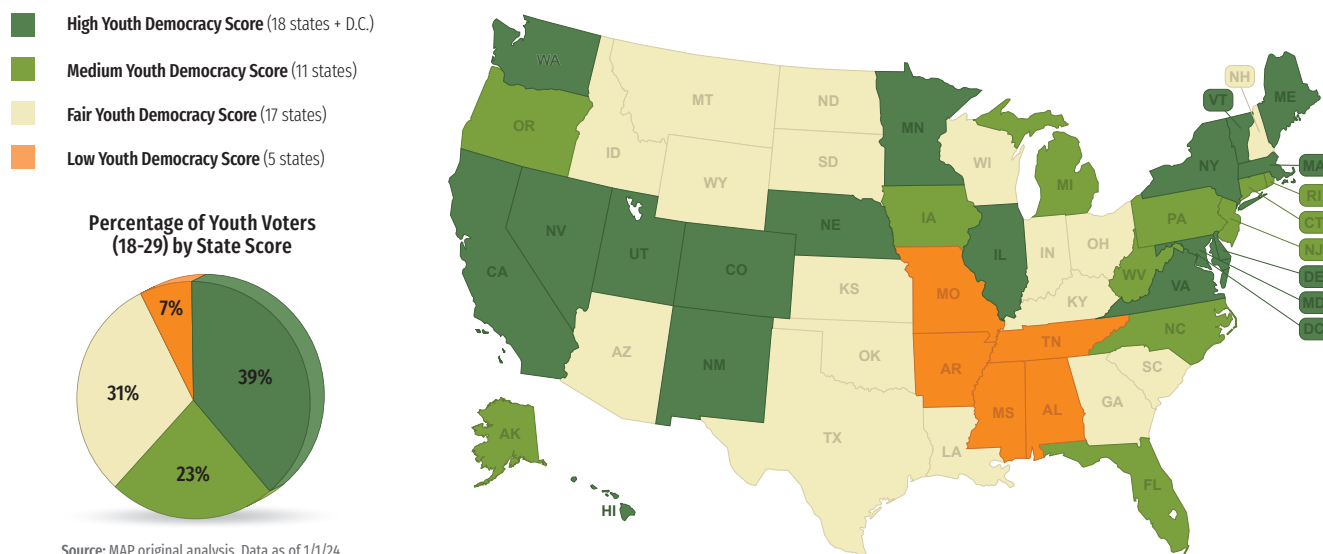
### Almost 1/10 Young Voters (7%) Live in States with Low Youth Democracy Scores

The five states in the lowest category of our Youth Democracy Score, with less than 25% of the total points possible, tend to lack many pro-voter policies identified in this report, as well as having discriminatory and suppressive laws that we have categorized as negative. For example, the two lowest scoring states, Arkansas and Mississippi, represent two of only eight remaining states that do not offer online voter registration. Both states also have strict voter ID laws, where a photo ID is required to cast a ballot. While these states may in some cases be making attempts to improve their electoral environments, they may also unfortunately be states where efforts have been made to actively suppress the youth vote.

### State Policy Environments Affect Youth Voter Turnout

As noted in this report, turnout rates among young voters tend to be lower than the general population, though this can partly be explained by the barriers young voters face. Using our Youth Democracy Score data and state-by-state turnout data from the 2020 and 2022 elections, however, we can begin to see the positive impact of more supportive state policy environments on youth voter turnout.

FIGURE 6: NATIONAL YOUTH DEMOCRACY SCORES



For this comparison, we created a version of the Youth Democracy Score using laws that were in place as of November 2020 and August 2022. We then compared those state policy scores to state turnout data for voters ages 18-29 in the November 2020 and 2022 general elections, respectively.<sup>f</sup>

As shown in **Figure 7**, states with lower scores have lower young voter turnout, while states with higher scores have varied but generally higher turnout. This relationship is slightly stronger—meaning that better policy scores are more closely tied to higher youth turnout—in 2020, suggesting that these policies may matter even more for presidential election year turnout among youth voters.<sup>g</sup>

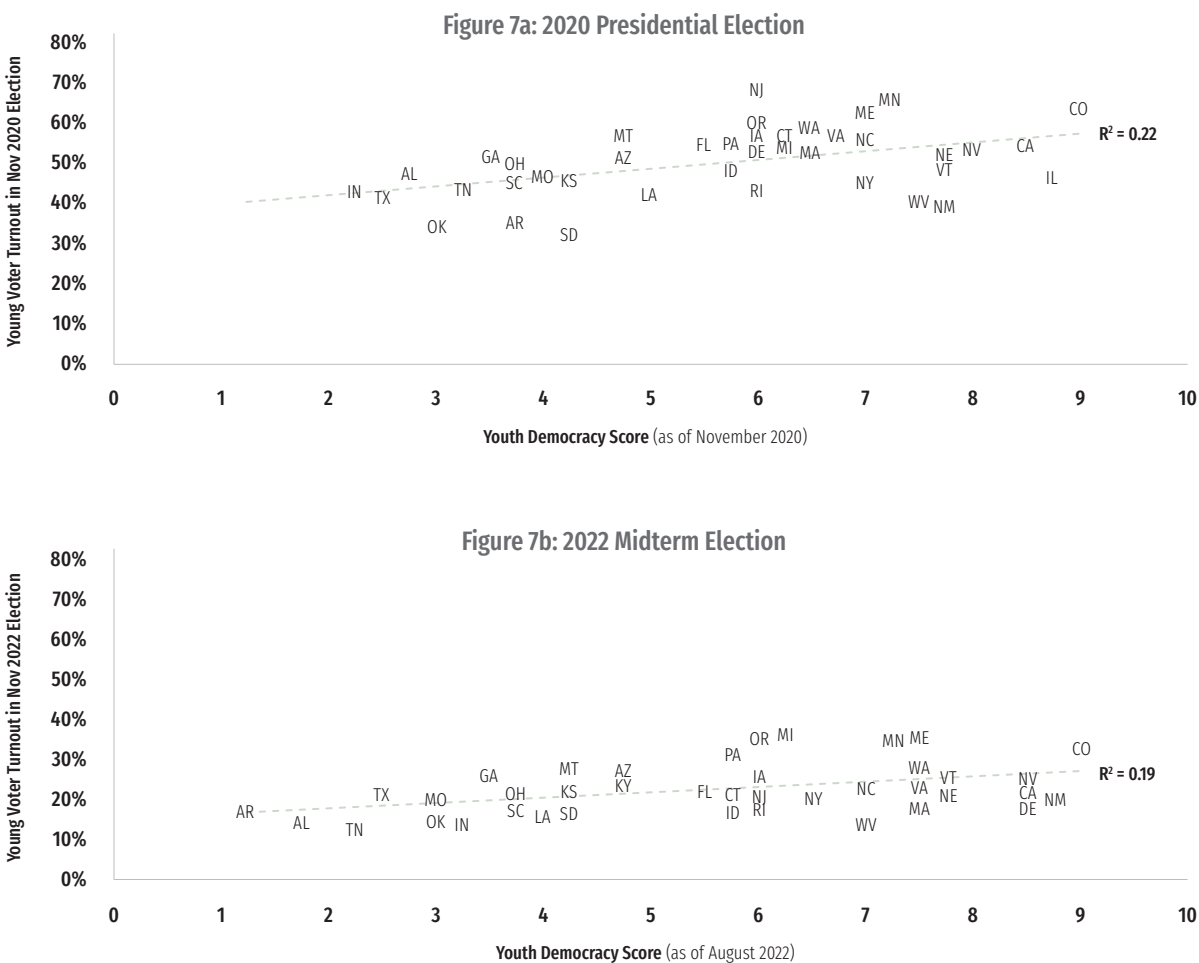
Importantly, the fact that states with higher scores still have a varied range of youth voter turnout illustrates that policy alone is not the only element impacting young voter turnout, and that policy actions must be taken as part of a more holistic approach to engaging young voters in voting and the democratic process more broadly.

<sup>f</sup> Note: Turnout rates are based on data from CIRCLÉ at Tufts University, using a combination of publicly available data and analysis of voter files by Catalyst. Age specific turnout data is only available for 40 states.

<sup>g</sup> The states for which data were not available were: Alaska, D.C., Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Mississippi, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Utah, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. These states had a wide range of YDS scores, from Mississippi’s low of 1.25 to D.C. and Maryland’s high of 9 out of 10. In other words, these states did not appear to be clustered around particularly low or high scores in ways that might affect the results shown here.

**FIGURE 7: IN BOTH 2020 AND 2022 ELECTIONS, STATES WITH WORSE YOUTH VOTER POLICIES SAW LOWER YOUTH TURNOUT, WHILE STATES WITH HIGHER SCORES SAW VARIED, THOUGH GENERALLY HIGHER YOUTH TURNOUT**

*% of youth population (18-29) that voted in 2020 and 2022 elections*



**Note:** An  $R^2$  value reflects the strength of a relationship between things, with a higher value (maximum=1) indicating a stronger relationship. The relationship between youth voter policy scores and youth voter turnout was even stronger in 2020 ( $R^2=0.22$ ) than in 2022 ( $R^2=0.19$ ), indicating that these policies may be even more impactful to youth turnout in presidential years.

**Sources:** Policy data from MAP original analysis. Youth voter turnout data from CIRCLÉ at Tufts University.

## States With Lower Youth Democracy Scores Have Low Turnout Among Young Voters

States that score in the low or fair category in our scoring also tend to fall among the states with the lowest rates of turnout among young voters.

In 2020, of the bottom ten states in terms of youth turnout rates, all but three had scores in the low or fair category. Mississippi, which had the lowest score of any state in 2020, does not have youth specific turnout data available but had the sixth lowest overall turnout in 2020, from which we can infer youth turnout was likely low as well.

In 2022, out of the five states in the low category, four rank below the national average for youth turnout, and three states (Alabama, Arkansas and Tennessee) are in the bottom six of youth voter turnout rates. Tennessee ranked as the lowest in terms of youth voter turnout, with only 12.7 % of eligible young voters casting a ballot in 2022, more than ten percentage points below the national average. Also, Mississippi, which again had the lowest score in 2022 but does not have youth voter turnout data available, had the lowest overall turnout rate of any state, 14 points below the national average.

In both election years, the states performing the most poorly in terms of youth voter turnout tend to lack many of the policies identified in this report as being critical to facilitating participation by young voters, particularly policies like automatic and online voter registration.

## States With Higher Youth Democracy Scores Have More Varied, Though Generally Higher Turnout Among Young Voters

States that score in the high or medium category of our scoring also tend to be among the states with the highest rates of turnout among young voters.

In 2020, out of the top ten states in youth voter turnout, all but one had a score in the High or Medium category. Colorado, the state with the highest score, ranked third in terms of youth turnout at 63%, 13 points above the national average for young voters in 2020.

In 2022, of the top ten states in youth turnout rates, all but two had a score in the High or Medium Category. One of the outliers, Georgia, with a fair score, was in the midst of a very high-profile U.S. Senate race in which the partisan control of the Senate was at stake, which may explain in part the high turnout rate in the state.

When looking at the states that had high youth voter turnout rates in both 2020 and 2022, there are a number of pro-voter policies these states have in common. Among the seven states that were in the top ten in youth turnout rates in both election years, the majority have strong registration policies that allow AVR and pre-registration, as well as online registration.

## Conclusion

While turnout trends among young voters over the past decade, along with advances in state policies promoting voter registration and access to the ballot, suggest an upward trend in terms of state support of young voters, there is still significant work to be done. Youth turnout still lags behind the rates of older generations, and we are still witnessing undemocratic efforts across the states to disenfranchise young voters. In order to maintain the progress that has been made in recent years, state policymakers and other stakeholders in our democracy must prioritize creating an electoral environment which not only lowers the barriers faced by young voters, but also actively encourages their participation in order to create a generation of lifelong voters and a healthier democracy. This can be achieved through the adoption of pro-voter policies like pre-registration and automatic voter registration. States should also take action to repeal restrictive policies such as not allowing the use of student IDs for voting. Finally, all stakeholders interested in promoting opportunities for young voters should consider amplifying opportunities for registration on campuses, and other efforts to lower barriers for these voters. Only through a collective effort can young voters be supported and encouraged and in turn build a healthier democracy in the future.

[Access detailed data here](#)