

Inadvertent Disenfranchisement of College Students

by Anna Ardelean (2-9-2020)

As long as we've had voting, we've also had voter suppression. Those in power have maintained their stronghold through the suppression of oppressed groups. Originally, only white male landowners could vote. Then white males. Then males. Then males and females. Then males and females above the age of eighteen. America has a long history of chipping away at disenfranchisement group by group. We have spent our entire history expanding the "us" and reducing the "other" in order to achieve a more representative democracy. However, one group is still being left behind: college students.

If you ask anyone who follows voting trends, they will likely tell you that college students don't vote. While there is data to support this accusation, it does not get to the root of the issue. Many will contribute low voter turnout for young people to the fact that young people are lazy and apathetic to political and social issues. This is not entirely false, however, few will look beyond it. More importantly, few will ask students themselves why they aren't voting.

As a college voting activist, I have spent a great deal of time speaking with college-age voters. One recurring concern for college voters is lack of clarity. Students don't understand absentee ballots. They get tripped up by registration and application deadlines. They do not have the time to wait in lines for hours to vote and early voting options do not match their schedules either. However, these complaints from college students are really indicative of a greater issue. Students don't understand absentee ballots because absentee ballots are confusing and there are too many steps involved. Students miss deadlines because deadlines vary from state to state, so they are unsure of the dates. Students do not have time to vote because their schedules may not match those who work a nine-to-five job. Students have extra-curricular activities, jobs before or after classes, and hours' worth of homework each night. Early

voting seems to be a great solution, but the hours are still just as problematic. These concerns effectively disenfranchise college students simply by making voting impractical.

If we are really concerned about low voter turnout among college students and young people in general, we need to look critically at all of the small issues with the voting process and acknowledge that they are all amplified for students. Registering can be tedious, but older adults only have to do it once unless they move. College students, should they decide to vote where their college is, will need to re-register every year as their housing situation changes. Absentee ballots are helpful for adults who may be out of town on Election Day. For college students, they are the primary voting method for many. Going through the application process can be annoying but manageable for adults, but they are frustrating and confusing when they need to be filed for every election. Out-of-state students have the additional burden of juggling election laws between states, including different deadlines for absentee and voter registration. Many of these steps may seem like petty grievances for adults with a normal job and a stable home, but they are difficult enough that they effectively disenfranchise many college students. And no one is talking about it because college students are “lazy.”

The suppression of college voters is a threat to our democracy. These voters are well-educated and have the most “skin in the game” for many issues, since laws made today will impact their future directly. If policies drastically increase the national debt, they will be the ones who will have to pay it off. Action (or lack thereof) on climate change will change their entire lives and impact the lives of their children. College students are all preparing to enter a career field, so policies enacted now will inevitably reflect on their future careers. For example, us not paying our teachers will affect education students.

The voices of students may not be the most solicited, but they are arguably the most necessary. For young people, there is no enticement to act against our own self-interest because we will live with the consequences. The entire lives that lie ahead of us are on that ballot so we should absolutely be consulted and be an active voice in these discussions. We

may be frequently considered to be too young to run for office or hold positions within prestigious organizations (and that is a debate for another time), but there is no justification for keeping young voters from the polls. Our voting laws may not explicitly disenfranchise college students, but their actions speak louder than their words. We need to re-evaluate how inclusive our laws really are in order to be a *representative* democracy moving forward.