

## **Isabella Miller - LWV Luncheon Speech**

Good morning everyone,

First, thank you to the League of Women Voters for inviting me to speak today. It's especially meaningful for me to be here because this organization has been part of my life since I was a teenager trying to understand what it meant to care about a community and to have a voice within it.

I joined the League of Women Voters as a high school student in Bluffton and I became one of the first student members in our local chapter. I care deeply about my community, especially growing up in the Lowcountry, where you can so clearly see the ways history, culture, development, and inequality all intersect.

What the League gave me was not just information about voting or government. It gave me confidence. It gave me mentors. It gave me the feeling that my perspective mattered, even before I had a title, a degree, or years of experience.

That matters deeply for young people.

Because the biggest barrier to youth engagement is not laziness. It is not apathy. It is not that young people do not care.

The biggest barrier is that many young people genuinely do not believe the political system cares about them.

And when young people feel invisible, disconnected, or unheard, we disengage.

But I believe something very different about my generation.

I believe young people are one of the most civically aware, socially conscious, and community-oriented generations we have seen in a long time. We care deeply about fairness, safety, opportunity, and dignity. We care about whether people can afford to live. We care about education. We care about healthcare. We care about racial justice. We care about the future of democracy itself.

The challenge is not convincing young people to care.

The challenge is creating systems and spaces where young people feel welcomed into participation.

Today, I want to talk about two things:

First, how we can better engage young voters.

And second, what issues are actually motivating young voters today.

## **First, How Do We Get Young Voters Engaged?**

I think we have to start by changing the way we talk about civic engagement.

Too often, politics is presented to young people as something distant, complicated, exhausting, or hostile. Many young people only encounter politics through arguments online, divisive headlines, or institutions that feel inaccessible.

But civic engagement is not just about political parties.

It is about everyday life.

Voting determines whether schools are funded.

Voting determines whether reproductive healthcare is accessible.

Voting determines housing policy, transportation, wages, environmental protections, and criminal justice systems.

Politics is not abstract to young people. It shapes whether we can afford rent, whether we feel safe, whether we can stay in the communities we grew up in, and whether we believe we have a future worth investing in.

So if we want young people to vote, we have to stop treating voting as a chore and start treating it as what it really is: a tool for self-determination.

And I think there are several concrete ways we can do that.

### **1. Meet Young People Where They Are**

Young voters are not all sitting in town hall meetings.

They are on college campuses.

They are working jobs.

They are on social media.

They are in community organizations.

They are balancing school, work, caregiving responsibilities, and economic uncertainty.

If civic organizations want young people involved, we cannot expect them to automatically come to us. We have to go to them.

That means partnering with schools, colleges, churches, athletic programs, libraries, local businesses, and community organizations.

It means making voter registration visible at community events.

It means using social media not just to post announcements, but to educate, explain, and invite conversation.

And importantly, it means speaking in language that is accessible.

Young people should not need a political science degree to understand how local government affects their lives.

I saw firsthand how effective this kind of outreach can be when I worked with the League of Women Voters DC chapter during my time as a Howard University College of Arts and Sciences Flagship Ambassador Team Captain. Each team was tasked with putting on an event of some sort, and my team came up with the idea to put on a voter registration event. What unified students during the event and attracted them to engage was our shared love for community: we played music, games, and also gave out food. Since fashion is a big part of the school's culture, we even set up a mock runway for students to walk down, which was a huge hit.

What stood out to me was that students were eager to engage once the process felt approachable and relevant to their daily lives - food is always an added plus. Many students simply needed information, encouragement, and the sense that their participation actually mattered.

That experience reinforced something I continue to believe strongly: young people are not disconnected from civic life. They are often just waiting for someone to genuinely invite them into it.

## **2. Stop Framing Young Voters Negatively**

Every election cycle, we hear conversations about how young people are unreliable voters.

But the truth is that voting habits are built through experience.

People who vote early in adulthood are more likely to become lifelong voters.

Instead of criticizing young people for lower turnout, we should ask:

Are we giving them the resources, information, transportation, time, and encouragement they need to participate?

For many young people, especially working-class students or first-generation students, voting is not logistically easy.

Some are navigating registration for the first time.

Some move frequently.

Some work multiple jobs.

Some lack transportation.

Some have never had anyone explain the process to them.

I've been fortunate to grow up in a household where political engagement and civic awareness were always encouraged, shaping the way I understand social issues and public life. At the same time, I recognize that many of my peers did not have the same exposure or opportunities to engage with politics from an early age.

And yet, despite those barriers, many still show up.

That deserves recognition.

### **3. Connect Voting to Community**

Young people are highly motivated by community impact.

My generation values authenticity and direct action.

We want to see how civic participation improves real people's lives.

That means we should frame voting not simply as an individual responsibility, but as collective care.

Voting is how we protect vulnerable people.

Voting is how communities advocate for themselves.

Voting is how we preserve history, culture, and public resources.

Voting is one way we tell future generations what kind of society we want to leave behind.

And in South Carolina especially, we should remind young people that civic engagement is part of a long historical tradition.

One thing that motivates me to vote is the fact that so many powerful Black women before me fought extraordinarily hard for voting rights.

Many risked their livelihoods, their safety, and even their lives.

Honoring that legacy means participating.

## **Next: What Issues Matter Most to Young Voters?**

Now, when we talk about youth engagement, we also have to talk honestly about what issues young voters actually care about.

And I think sometimes older generations misunderstand young voters.

Young people are not voting based on abstract ideology alone.

Most young voters are asking a very simple question:

Will this system allow me to build a stable and meaningful life?

That question shapes almost every issue young people care about.

### **Economic Security and Cost of Living**

One of the biggest concerns for young people right now is economic insecurity.

Many young adults feel like the traditional milestones of adulthood are becoming increasingly difficult to reach.

Housing costs are rising exponentially.

Student debt is overwhelming.

Wages often do not match the cost of living.

Many young people are working incredibly hard and still feel financially unstable.

And in places like South Carolina, young people are also watching rapid development reshape communities that we have known for so long.

Many are worried about whether they will even be able to afford to stay in the places they grew up.

Young voters are paying attention to policies related to affordable housing, wages, labor protections, education funding, and economic opportunity because these issues directly determine whether they can build futures here.

## **Reproductive Healthcare**

Reproductive healthcare is another major issue motivating young voters, especially young women.

Young people want bodily autonomy.

They want access to healthcare.

They want the ability to make decisions about their own futures.

And regardless of political affiliation, many young voters are deeply concerned about government overreach into personal medical decisions.

Healthcare more broadly is also important.

Young people are concerned about mental health access, healthcare affordability, maternal health disparities, and whether people can receive quality care without financial devastation.

## **Immigration**

Immigration is also an important issue for many young voters.

Young people are growing up in increasingly diverse communities, schools, and workplaces, and many view immigration not just as a political issue, but as a human issue.

For young voters, immigration conversations are often connected to questions about dignity, opportunity, safety, and belonging.

Many young people are concerned about the treatment of immigrant families, access to legal protections, pathways to citizenship, and the rhetoric regarding immigrants in political discourse.

Young voters are also paying attention to how immigration intersects with labor, education, healthcare, and economic policy.

And for many in my generation, there is a strong belief that America's strength has always come from the contributions of people from different backgrounds, cultures, and experiences.

Whether someone's family arrived generations ago or recently, many young voters believe people deserve to be treated with humanity and fairness.

## **Climate and Environmental Protection**

Young people are also deeply concerned about environmental issues and climate resilience.

In coastal South Carolina, these concerns are not theoretical.

Young people are watching flooding intensify.

They are watching environmental degradation affect communities.

They are watching development reshape natural and cultural landscapes.

At Howard University, I took a class called Environmental Inequality that deeply shaped the way I think about these issues. One of the major lessons from that course was that environmental harm is rarely experienced equally.

Typically, low-income communities and communities of color are the ones most heavily impacted by pollution, flooding, poor infrastructure, environmental neglect, and climate-related displacement.

Those realities made environmental justice feel much more personal and urgent to me.

Environmental protection is not only about nature. It is also about public health, housing, safety, economic stability, and whether vulnerable communities are treated with dignity. Something I learned in my course that allowed me to reframe my prior idea of "the environment" is the fact that our environment is defined as where we work, live, and play. Our environment is everything.

## **Social Justice and Equity**

Finally, young voters care deeply about fairness.

That includes racial justice, gender equity, LGBTQ+ rights, disability rights, and criminal justice reform.

As I progressed through school, some people from older generations spoke down on social media tremendously. They would make fun of my generation for using it so much, but they neglected the fact that social media has become a powerful vehicle for social change and education on political issues. Young people are growing up in an era where information about inequality is more visible than ever before.

And many feel a strong moral responsibility to advocate for systems that are more equitable and humane.

Whether people agree on every policy solution or not, I think there is broad agreement among young people that dignity and opportunity should not depend on someone's race, income, gender, or zip code.

As I close today, I want to return to the League of Women Voters and to the young version of myself who first walked into this organization years ago.

The people in this organization made room for me.

They listened to me.

They encouraged me.

And they helped me believe that civic engagement was not reserved for certain ages, backgrounds, or titles.

That belief shaped the person I became.

Organizations like this matter profoundly.

Not only because they encourage voting, but because they create spaces where civic participation feels possible.

And I think that kind of encouragement can change the trajectory of a young person's life, because it certainly changed mine.

If we want young people engaged, we have to move beyond simply asking them to vote every few years.

We have to invest in them.

We have to listen to them.

We have to mentor them.

We have to trust them.

And we have to create a political culture where young people feel not only invited, but necessary.

Because the truth is, young people are not just the future of democracy.

We are part of its present.

And when young people believe their voices matter, they do participate.

I am standing here today as proof of that.

Thank you.