

Activating the Left Out: Enhancing U.S. Voter Engagement

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In the 2020 presidential election, the highest-turnout U.S. election in decades, only 67 percent of eligible voters participated; almost one-third stayed home. This essay explores how to activate nonvoters through electoral reforms such as those proposed in Our Common Purpose, many of which have been implemented in California. It also looks at the importance of voter education and mobilization efforts using effective messaging and trusted messengers to engage nonvoters. I argue that, if we want our democracy to be as healthy, robust, and inclusive as possible, then we need intentional action, as was laid out in Our Common Purpose. We need to change how we administer elections. And we also need to make the investments necessary to educate and mobilize disengaged eligible voters and scaffold them into the electoral process.

Democracy in the United States was never meant to be fully participatory.¹ For much of the nation's history, the franchise was limited to those who owned property, were white, or were male.² Even though many of those legal restrictions were lifted by the mid-twentieth century, other barriers to enfranchisement remain: Election Day is not a holiday as it is in many other democratic systems; eligible voters are, in most states, required to register to vote well before Election Day; and ballots tend to be long and confusing, making engaging in the political process challenging for those with limited political knowledge, or for whom English is not their first language.

In recent years, states have been engaged in practices that can be expected to lower voter turnout even further. For example, as of April 2026, thirty-six states require that voters provide some form of identification in order to vote.³ Although analysts may disagree as to whether requiring voter identification is a good electoral policy, studies exploring its impact strongly suggest that the implementation of voter identification requirements can be expected to depress voter turnout.⁴ In addition, the U.S. Election Assistance Commission found that “states reported removing 21,298,175 records from their voter lists,” which “was equal to 9.1% of the total number of voters who were registered in the United States as of the close of registration for the 2024 general election.”⁵ That rate of purging was 21 percent higher than was reported by jurisdictions from 2014 to 2016.⁶

It should not be surprising, then, that voter participation rates in the United States are among the lowest of any advanced industrialized country. In presidential elections, U.S. voter turnout over the last two decades has hovered around 50 to 60 percent of eligible voters.⁷ The 2020 presidential election, when states and localities loosened restrictions on absentee voting and sent mail-in ballots to all registered voters, was the high-water mark for presidential voter turnout in the United States, with almost 67 percent of eligible voters turning out to vote.⁸ Even so, that means almost one-third of eligible voters stayed home. That turnout rate decreased in 2024 to only 64 percent of eligible voters. Given how close U.S. election results have become, one could argue that our elections are being decided, by and large, by who chooses to stay home on Election Day.

It is important, then, to consider the motivations and behavior of the nonvoting segment of the U.S. eligible voter population: those who can vote but choose not to. We know that nonvoters are not randomly distributed; they skew younger, poorer, male, and nonwhite.⁹ These voters are not apathetic. In fact, they often are highly engaged in U.S. political discourse.¹⁰ But, they – for good, logical, and historic reasons – do not see electoral politics as a place that is going to address the very real problems they face on a daily basis. I would note that a focus on engaging nonvoters should not be seen as a partisan issue; ensuring that all Americans feel empowered and engaged in our democracy is a goal we should all share – for the good of our democracy and the legitimacy of our democratic institutions.

This is why *Our Common Purpose*, the 2020 report published by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, lays out a series of strategies and recommendations designed to empower voters and encourage higher levels of U.S. voter engagement, particularly among those currently disenfranchised.¹¹ The report focuses on procedural changes to make voting easier, such as establishing vote centers with early voting opportunities, making Election Day a federal holiday honoring our veterans, implementing same-day registration and automatic voter registration, and allowing sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds to preregister to vote, along with leveraging the role that schools can play in helping to integrate young people into the voting process. The report also focuses on how to encourage behavioral changes. For this essay, using electoral reforms in California as a case study, I explore what would need to change in our electoral system for U.S. democracy to reach its full, participatory potential.

Over the past decade, California has been home to some of the most dramatic changes to electoral administration of any state in the country. It is important to note how these changes came about politically and what their impacts have been. In terms of their genesis, The James Irvine Foundation, a private foundation that had long funded voting rights work, decided to try to address the historically adversarial nature of this domain, which often pitted voting rights advocates against county registrars and others who managed the state's

electoral administration infrastructure. They founded the Future of California Elections (FOCE) in 2011, a “nonpartisan network of election officials, reform advocates, civil rights organizations, and civic engagement groups collaborating to advance effective and inclusive election policies and practices.”¹² Over the course of many years, FOCE convened these groups in order to arrive at a set of agreed-upon priorities and policy changes designed to streamline and improve electoral administration in California.

The result has been extraordinary. The most transformative piece of legislation to come out of the FOCE coalition is the Voter’s Choice Act (VCA). Passed in 2016, the VCA “modernizes elections in California by allowing counties to conduct elections under a model which provides greater flexibility and convenience for voters. This election model allows voters to choose how, when, and where to cast their ballot by: mailing every voter a ballot; expanding in-person early voting; allowing voters to cast a ballot at any vote center within their county; [and] providing secure ballot drop off locations throughout the county.”¹³ Because the VCA entails fairly dramatic changes to voting methods and systems, the act also requires that local jurisdictions conduct significant outreach and provide information to voters about these changes. However, the VCA is an optional law: counties are not required to participate, and the state provides few resources to help them with implementation. As is true in all states, registrars across California’s fifty-eight counties have differing capacities, in terms of staff and resources, to implement the changes required under the VCA. It is therefore not surprising that, as of 2026, only thirty of California’s fifty-eight counties have agreed to adopt the law’s requirements.¹⁴

In addition to the VCA, California allows sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds to preregister to vote, provides for conditional voter registration on Election Day, and has instituted automatic voter registration when eligible individuals visit the Department of Motor Vehicles and other state agencies.¹⁵ Thus, California has implemented many of the changes recommended in *Our Common Purpose*, with many democratic successes as well as a few lessons learned.

In terms of automatic voter registration, according to the California Secretary of State’s fifteen-day registration reports, by the November 2024 general election, the first after automatic voter registration went into effect under Assembly Bill 1461, nearly 84 percent of California’s eligible voters were registered to vote, compared to 78 percent in November 2016.¹⁶ So registration rates have increased in nontrivial ways since the law was passed. However, California has yet to implement an automatic preregistration system for sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds. To preregister, this demographic must opt in when offered the opportunity, such as when applying for a driver’s license or in a school setting; it does not happen automatically. In terms of the impact of preregistration, a 2024 report from California’s Secretary of State found that about 1.2 million sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds in California had preregistered to vote since they became eligible in 2016.¹⁷ This comprises about 13

percent of eligible young voters in California during that eight-year period. Critics contend that neither automatic voter registration nor sixteen- and seventeen-year-old preregistration was implemented as effectively as it could have been. Instead, they argue, California should institute a fully automatic voter registration system and, for preregistration to be as effective as possible, it needs to be coupled with a civic education effort in schools that would teach young people why preregistration and, subsequently, voting are important things for them to do, as *Our Common Purpose* recommends.¹⁸

The importance of education is a key lesson learned around the Voter's Choice Act as well. It is worth noting that the VCA has not been fully implemented in the state, so its long-term impact is as yet unknown. But the preliminary studies so far suggest how difficult it is to change voting systems and educate voters about those changes. The VCA requires that registrars conduct outreach and engage their community as part of the VCA transition. A study looking at implementation efforts in the March 2020 primary election found that, despite the registrars' significant outreach efforts, two-thirds of voters were unaware of the VCA changes.¹⁹ Even with these difficulties, the act does seem to be having a positive impact on voter turnout. In the 2022 midterm election, the most recent election for which the California Secretary of State provides data, there was a 4 percentage point difference in turnout when comparing VCA counties to non-VCA counties when Los Angeles (LA) County was excluded.²⁰ It is important to look at the non-LA-county VCA outcomes because LA County has historically had voting rates that were significantly lower than the state as a whole. For example, in November 2022, statewide turnout was 50.8 percent but only 44 percent in LA County.²¹

The lesson from California, then, is that changes to electoral administration that make voting easier are necessary, but not sufficient, ingredients to engaging disengaged voters. Voter education is a difficult and long-term process that takes intentional investments, strategies, and resources. California is on the cutting edge of these efforts, but much work remains to be done before these structural changes to election administration make a difference at the ballot box, particularly in places like LA County.

*Knowledge will forever govern ignorance ; and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.*²²

—James Madison

The other ingredient essential to voter engagement is direct voter education and mobilization. My analysis in this section draws on more than two decades of work with community-based organizations in California and

nationally. Those efforts have included direct evaluation of canvassing efforts, examination of political discussion networks and their impacts on feelings of political agency and civic engagement, and dozens of focus groups and surveys I conducted in order to explore political attitudes and engagement in the pre- and post-COVID eras.²³ A common thread that runs through all of this work is that the way we teach civic engagement in schools – namely, without helping future voters connect what they are learning in school about the federal government to their daily lives – and how we run political campaigns – with a focus on engaging likely voters and little attention to those who are less engaged – combine to help explain why voter participation is so low in the United States.

Civic education is about more than just fostering civic knowledge, such as the ability to know one's congressperson or name all three branches of government.²⁴ Civic knowledge is only valuable insofar as it serves the purpose of giving students the confidence to become actively engaged in civic life. Yet that is rarely what students get in school. Instead, civics is often taught as rote memorization of facts rather than the development of culturally competent democratic understanding and engagement. We need a broader understanding of civic learning as

a process through which young people develop the knowledge, skills, and commitments to interact effectively with fellow community members to address shared problems. It includes preparation for both civic engagement (or practices seeking to promote the public good through non-governmental organizations and informal community work) and political engagement (or activities aiming to influence state action through formal avenues such as voting, lobbying, petitioning, or protesting).²⁵

This definition from education scholar John Rogers and colleagues assumes that civic education is about more than just fostering civic knowledge. In like manner, it recognizes that civic knowledge is only valuable insofar as it serves the purpose of helping students become actively engaged in civic life. Research shows that problem-based approaches to civic education are most effective. By problem-based, I mean that students are asked to identify a problem in their community and then, working in groups with a mentor to guide them, study who is in charge of that problem in order to arrive at an approach for addressing it. Having students learn about federalism, jurisdictional overlap, and the role of governmental and nongovernmental actors in this way gives them a much more grounded understanding of government, its forms, its powers, and, most important, the avenues into government that are available to them to foster change regarding the things they care most about.²⁶

Yet few civics classrooms are structured in this way, for important political reasons. In a recent study of civics teachers in a racially diverse school district, learning scientist Daniela Kruei DiGiacomo and colleagues found that teachers lacked a shared understanding of the purpose of civic education and the appropriate methods for teaching civics, as well as adequate professional development in this area.²⁷

These challenges made many of the teachers in their study shy away from addressing political issues within their classrooms.²⁸ In their analysis of a 2023 nationally representative study, education scholars Joseph Kahne and John Rogers found that “25% of teachers reported that their school or district told them to limit discussions about political and social issues. In addition, because of concern regarding conflict, 65% decided of their own accord to limit such discussions!”²⁹ Yet, as they note, “Research has consistently shown that student engagement with informed examination and discussion of controversial issues promotes skills and commitments tied to democratic participation and, in particular, the capacity to dialogue productively across difference.”³⁰ The pressure teachers face not to do so negatively affects schools’ ability to effectively prepare their students for democratic citizenship.

There is a vast literature looking at voter mobilization in the United States.³¹ However, because the overwhelming majority of U.S. voter engagement efforts focuses on likely voters, we know little about the attitudinal orientations of eligible voters who do not go to the polls on Election Day. Scholars who have studied low-propensity voters have found that political education is key, as are conversations that meet prospective voters where they are, centering their day-to-day struggles, and messages that foster agency, hope, and possibility. I will discuss each in turn.

Political Education: Voters Need Onboarding. As was mentioned in the previous section, the information taught in civics classrooms in U.S. K–12 schools is often superficial. It also tends to focus on the federal government, with little information about state government, and rarely any mention of what local government does. This is ironic given that local government arguably has the most direct influence on citizens’ daily lives through zoning and housing laws, trash pickup schedules, and public schooling, among other policy areas. Because of this, most Americans do not know what their congressperson is responsible for, what state legislators do, or why it is important to vote in their city council election. Many voter engagement efforts start by asking the target individual to vote. That is, in some ways, the equivalent of asking someone to marry you before dating them. In the first place, the target voter needs to better understand why their vote matters within the context of a particular election.

In my research, I have found that the best place to start this educational conversation is by asking the individual what they care most about or what they see as the most important issue in their community. From there, a canvasser can then talk to them about who is responsible for addressing that issue and how what is on the upcoming election ballot may help them move the needle on what they care about. Given the level of voter disengagement that exists in the United States, this scaffolding is critical to helping nonvoters understand what is at stake in our political system and, most importantly, see themselves as having the power to change it.

That scaffolding extends to information about the voting process itself. For potential voters who come from families with a large number of nonvoters, heading to the voting booth can be intimidating. Many of the high school-aged respondents I interviewed for my 2005 book *Fluid Borders* talked about being afraid to vote because they did not know how to vote.³² They had seen video on the news of voting booths with curtains, but no one had ever shown them what, literally, was to be found behind the curtain. To this end, one simple thing that schools can do is show their students what the voting machines look like in their county and how to use them. They can also walk their students through voting by mail and how to ensure that their ballots get counted. These things may seem obvious, but for young new voters from families in which no one votes, providing this type of information can be critical to getting them to turn out and vote. That is also true for, as we saw with the Voter's Choice Act, changes in traditional approaches to voting. Vote centers are a great innovation, but they can only be effective if prospective voters know about them and feel comfortable using them.

Messaging the Disengaged: Stories of Success and Trusted Messengers. Disengaged eligible voters also need to feel that their vote matters and will have an impact on the things they care about. It is important to consider what types of messages and messengers help these voters connect with the political process. Research suggests that motivating infrequent and nonvoters requires messages that are rooted in their lived experience, speak to their shared values, name the harm being addressed in terms of values, make people feel like agents in their own lives, and describe a solution, not just a critique of current actions.³³

This “stories of success” piece is very important, particularly at a time when people can feel they have little impact on political outcomes. In research polling and focus groups, telling stories of “people like me” winning an election, changing a policy, or making a difference in their communities has been found to have a meaningful impact on people’s feelings of political efficacy.³⁴ In other words, seeing someone “like you” make a difference makes it more likely you will feel you can too. I would argue that part of the reason why voter participation rates are so low in the United States is because it is so rare that disengaged voters hear stories of democracy *working* for everyday people. Perhaps that is why such stories can have such a big impact on listeners.

Who tells those stories also matters. According to the Pew Research Center, trust in the federal government has shifted from 73 percent of Americans in 1958 saying “they trust the government to do what is right just about always/most of the time” to 22 percent saying they felt that way in 2024.³⁵ Similarly, interpersonal trust, measured as the percentage of people agreeing with the statement “most people can be trusted,” has gone from 46.3 percent of Americans who agreed in 1972 to 31.9 percent in 2018.³⁶ A 2025 data essay studying interpersonal trust published by the Pew Research Center also found that people who were less educated,

lower income, had lost a job, or experienced racial discrimination had the lowest levels of trust in others.³⁷ We know that disengaged American voters tend to hold those demographic and life characteristics, making it reasonable to assume many have lower levels of trust in others. That is why the messenger matters. Research has shown that engagement efforts that use “trusted messengers” – community members with similar life experiences, from the same neighborhood – are much more effective than those that bring in canvassers from the outside.³⁸

The principle underlying all these points – the need for more practical, applicable political education and hearing stories of success from trusted messengers – is that political engagement is a form of collective action, even when we are talking about an individual-level activity like voting. People act politically because they care about something bigger than themselves, be it their families, their local communities, the larger polity, or all of the above. Politics, therefore, is fundamentally relational. It is about connecting people to a greater purpose. That is the core of our democracy. But as our cities have grown and people have become more residually mobile, we have lost the connective tissue that binds us together as a polity. If we want our democracy to be as healthy and robust as possible, and to be inclusive of all eligible voters, then we need intentional action, as was laid out in *Our Common Purpose*. We need to change the structure of how we administer elections. And we also need to invest in efforts to educate and mobilize disengaged eligible voters in order to scaffold them into the electoral process. All are necessary ingredients for us to strengthen and support U.S. democracy.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ This essay is grounded in the normative claim that, for democracy to be strong, electoral engagement should not vary significantly by socioeconomic status, racial group identification, gender identity, or other positionalities that have historically been marginalized in the United States. It is important to note that not all members of the American

Academy's Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship would necessarily agree with this claim.

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