

High School Voting Can Activate the Left Out

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Meaningful voter engagement may require increasing sustained investment in four underutilized areas: low-propensity voters, civic education that fosters civic action, voter education that links ballots to local change, and trusted messengers. Advocates for election reform are correct to emphasize the need for more practical solutions to mobilize and scale these criteria, but what if a low-cost, scalable intervention already exists? This essay highlights the work being done by New Voters, a youth-led non-profit that promotes peer-to-peer civic engagement and education efforts in U.S. high schools through student-led voter registration drives.

As the President and Founder of New Voters – a youth-led nonprofit that has directed over one thousand voter registration drives nationwide since 2017 – I have found much of the academic literature on voter engagement difficult to translate into practice, either because its theoretical frameworks do not map cleanly to everyday life or because the interventions it evaluates are costly and difficult to replicate.¹ Yet, in the *Our Common Purpose* report and in Lisa García Bedolla’s contribution to this volume of *Dædalus*, we see practical, achievable recommendations that pair policy reforms with the evidenced-based, relationship-centered strategies needed to make those reforms effective.²

In her essay on U.S. voter engagement, García Bedolla argues that meaningful engagement requires sustained investment in:

1. low-propensity voters;
2. civic education that fosters civic action;
3. voter education that links ballots to local change; and
4. trusted messengers.

But what if there already exists a low-cost, scalable intervention that meets all four criteria? That intervention is peer-to-peer high school voter registration led by organizations like New Voters.

To explain why high school voter registration operationalizes García Bedolla’s recommendations, it is first necessary to examine why her framework is correct.

Policy is necessary but not sufficient. It is common to argue that policy reform is the primary or even sole way to increase voter turnout. The United States has one of the lowest turnout rates of any developed country, exacerbated by uniquely regressive laws that actively suppress voter turnout.³ From purging registered voter lists to voter identification requirements to polling place inaccessibility, structural reform is certainly necessary.⁴

However, García Bedolla's case study of electoral administration changes in California illustrates that even the most voter-expansive law cannot overcome a lack of knowledge among the voting population. The Voter's Choice Act (VCA) in California significantly expanded access by mailing ballots to all voters, extending voting periods, and adding polling places.⁵ However, implementation of this optional law has been uneven since its passage in 2016, and in places that adopted the law, nearly two-thirds of voters were unaware that the VCA had changed the voting process.⁶ This finding is not an indictment of the VCA; it did increase voter turnout by 4 percentage points in the state's 2022 midterm election.⁷ It instead shows that administrative reform without voter onboarding leaves participation inequities intact.

Target low-propensity voters. Effective voter engagement begins with whom we choose to target. Most research focuses on likely or already registered voters, rarely examining unregistered voters. However, elections today are regularly decided at the margin, with a handful of votes determining the difference between one candidate or the other in many local elections.

As García Bedolla observes, "one could argue that our elections are being decided, by and large, by who chooses to stay home on Election Day."⁸ In my hometown of Chester County, Pennsylvania, local elections are often close enough that tied races are routinely decided by a random drawing using a bingo ball machine; some counties are even left to select winning candidates by casting lots.⁹ It then stands to reason that voter engagement strategies that prioritize low-propensity voters are not only the most equitable but will likely have the highest impact on electoral outcomes.

Civic education to make people engaged in civic life. Among the goals of K–12 education is preparing young people for adult life by helping them build interpersonal networks, develop life skills, practice critical thinking, and participate meaningfully in communities. Civic engagement is an essential part of adulthood that is often linked to voter turnout and other broader positive social behaviors like volunteering or interpersonal trust. García Bedolla states, "Civic knowledge is only valuable insofar as it serves the purpose of giving students the confidence to become actively engaged in civic life."¹⁰

However, current civic education's focus on rote memorization of checks and balances and the number of congressional representatives does not meet García Bedolla's ideals. Her research points toward more effective civic education that

engages students in identifying shared problems and working together to address them.¹¹ High school voter registration is one of the few civic learning experiences that meets these criteria simultaneously.

Connecting elections to local issues. To make voting feel meaningful, it must be connected to issues people care about. García Bedolla's emphasis on this point is straightforward but essential. Effective engagement begins by understanding what people care about, then making the link to elections explicit. This looks like informing voters about what is on the ballot this cycle, identifying how they relate to problems addressed on the ballot, and showing how their voting will connect to concrete outcomes.

Trusted messengers. When it comes to voter engagement strategies, face-to-face canvassing is one of the most effective.¹² In García Bedolla's essay, she illustrates that conversations with people from the same community with similar experiences are more effective than outside canvassers. These "trusted messengers" come to conversations with shared experiences and language that make political information more credible and relatable. Ideally, the trusted messenger is someone voters already know and trust.

In this response, high school student-led voter registration refers to the act of a high school student registering their peers to vote. For the twenty-three states (plus the District of Columbia) with preregistration for sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds, this often includes junior, senior, and some of the sophomore classes of students.¹³ In the other twenty-seven states, this applies only to seniors, with additional students becoming eligible to register to vote at the end of the school year, after the spring elections in their area have concluded.

With these core determinants of youth voter engagement established, the question becomes how does high school voter registration operationalize them?

Target low-propensity voters. Eighteen-year-olds are the least likely to vote of any eligible age group in the United States.¹⁴ This pattern is especially pronounced among young people who do not go on to college, with 52.5 percent turnout for high school graduates compared to 77.2 percent among those with a bachelor's degree.¹⁵ High school is the last universal touchpoint for young people, with 38 percent of graduates not continuing on to higher education.¹⁶ As a result, high school seniors constitute a low-propensity but electorally important group.

Civic education to make people engaged in civic life. Peer-to-peer high school voter registration embodies the problem-based approach to civic education that García Bedolla describes in this volume.¹⁷ Students begin by identifying a concrete problem in their own community; in this case, low voter participation among their peers. They then work collaboratively to address it, mobilizing classmates across different social groups, such as athletic teams, music ensembles, or extracurricular organizations, to encourage registration within their "cliques."

I would add that another critical part of civic education is that civic action produces tangible results. Students can observe voter registration numbers increasing, hear conversations around civic engagement in the school, and sometimes even see local election results and turnout rates change.

Positioning voter registration as an action-based project in civic education accomplishes two goals at the same time. Students can register their peers to vote and help increase turnout rates and, in doing so, instill a lifelong belief that they can act on a problem they see and mobilize others to join them in fixing it.

Trusted messengers. American community life is in rapid decline, with a lack of third spaces and fewer opportunities for in-person social interactions – that is, for adults.¹⁸ For high school students, trusted messengers are in abundance, from their teachers, coaches, and, most important of all, classmates. Students mobilize each other constantly, leading laps around the field as captain of the soccer team, ensuring people hit their marks as drum major in the marching band, hounding people for service hours as president of their National Honor Society chapter, or just getting their friends to show up to help with household projects or chores like packing up their basement.

These same social dynamics perfectly position students to register their peers to vote. Because classmates have often known each other for years, sometimes since elementary school, student-led outreach has a level of trust that is difficult to replicate through any other kind of canvassing.

Connecting elections to local issues. There is no election more local than a school board race and no community more directly affected by its outcomes than the students at the school. Other local offices, like the district attorney setting policy for youth crimes or the city controller budgeting for various public programs like the arts or sports, also impact the daily life of a student. The opportunity to connect important issues to local elections is clear for students. That is why equipping student registration drive leaders with information on these local races and their potential for impacting peers is critical.

Beyond the previously stated reasons, there are two additional factors that make high school voter registration uniquely well suited for voter engagement.

Captive audience. Having structured access to a population makes any type of face-to-face interaction and trusted communication possible. Schools have repeated, predictable opportunities for classmates to engage, such as classes, lunch, prom, graduation, and more. This allows the trusted student messenger to reach their peers often and at scale, without the high costs of canvassing.

Habit formation. Research suggests that voting is habit forming, with individuals who vote early in life more likely to continue voting in subsequent elections.¹⁹ Intervening at the first moment of eligibility therefore yields outsized long-term returns. High school voter registration reaches young people at precisely this point of entry into the electorate, creating the potential for a single registration intervention to influence participation across decades of future elections.

This is not to suggest that high school voter registration is without challenges. The majority of students in a high school aren't eligible to register to vote, especially at the beginning of the school year. By the end of the school year, when most high school seniors across the country are eligible to register to vote, they are often academically disengaged or difficult to reach. Additionally, around 20 to 30 percent of students leave their home state for college, complicating turnout in local elections after initial voter registration.²⁰ There are also concerns of partisanship and class disruption that make some risk-averse school administrators resist such interventions.

These constraints underscore the importance of thoughtful program design. Student leaders need training, mentors, and clear compliance guidance. These can look like sample scripts, nonpartisanship rules, and step-by-step instructions for submitting forms correctly.

Administrative resistance, while common, is not insurmountable. Nonpartisan voter registration activity in public high schools is protected under the First Amendment, subject to reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions. A majority of states have statutes that explicitly permit, encourage, or mandate voter registration access in public high schools.²¹ Unfortunately, most of these laws are unfunded mandates and are not enforced, often putting additional work onto county election officials or state governmental entities, so they do not result in higher youth voter registration. However, they do provide a legal basis and justification for students to lead their own drives and combat administrative concerns. Civic organizations can help students further by providing free materials, prizes, training, and guides for students to lead their own nonpartisan voter registration drives.

Roughly four million students graduate from high school every year, and they are significantly less likely to vote than older age groups. They are not being targeted by traditional campaigns or voter outreach, and that's a mistake. Students can serve as trusted messengers when registering their peers to vote and in doing so can connect local elections to the issues that matter to young people most, all while practicing the habit of civic action.

If we are serious about building a participatory democracy, high schools cannot remain peripheral to voter engagement strategy. They must be treated as foundational democratic institutions and resourced accordingly. The question is no longer whether high school voter registration works, but why it remains so underutilized.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jahnvi Rao is President and Founder of New Voters, a youth-led 501(c)3 that empowers high school students through nonpartisan near-peer mentorship, voter registration drives, community-driven advocacy initiatives, and youth-led research on political behavior. Since she started New Voters in 2017 as a junior in high school, it has run over one thousand high school voter registration drives and civically engaged tens of thousands of high school students across forty-two states. She is a Senior Fellow at the University of Maryland Center for Democracy and Civic Engagement and graduated from Harvard College with a concentration in Government in 2023.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ New Voters, “Mobilizing Youth for Democracy,” <https://www.new-voters.org> (accessed June 23, 2026).
- ² American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020), <https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/report/section/3>; Lisa García Bedolla, “Activating the Left Out: Enhancing U.S. Voter Engagement,” *Dædalus* 155 (3) (Summer 2026), <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/activating-left-out-enhancing-us-voter-engagement>; and Brennan Center for Justice, “Automatic Voter Registration,” <https://www.brennancenter.org/topics/voting-elections/voting-reform/automatic-voter-registration> (accessed June 23, 2026).
- ³ International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), “Voter Turnout Database,” <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout-database> (accessed June 23, 2026).
- ⁴ Lyon Nishizawa, “How Does U.S. Voter Turnout Compare to the Rest of the World’s?” Council on Foreign Relations, August 24, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/how-does-us-voter-turnout-compare-rest-worlds>.
- ⁵ California Secretary of State, “California Voter’s Choice Act,” <https://www.sos.ca.gov/voters-choice-act> (accessed June 16, 2026).
- ⁶ Center for Inclusive Democracy, 2020 *Primary Election: Voter Outreach and Education in Counties Adopting the California Voter’s Choice Act* (USC Sol Price School of Public Policy, 2020), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57b8c7ce15d5dbf599fb46ab/t/623d63ee28438102beccc3d/1648190450246/2020+Primary+Election+-+Voter+Outreach+and+Education.pdf>.
- ⁷ California Secretary of State, 2022 *General Election VCA Report* (California Secretary of State, 2022), <https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/vca/2022-vca-report/vca-2022-general-election.pdf>.
- ⁸ For a review and summary of that literature, see García Bedolla, “Activating the Left Out,” 46.
- ⁹ Carter Walker, “Why Marbles, Playing Cards, and Ping Pong Balls Decide So Many Local Pennsylvania Races,” *Votebeat Pennsylvania*, November 24, 2025, <https://www.votebeat.org/pennsylvania/2025/11/24/why-marbles-playing-cards-and-ping-pong-balls-decide-so-many-local-pennsylvania-races>.
- ¹⁰ García Bedolla, “Activating the Left Out,” 49.

- ¹¹ Lisa García Bedolla, “Race, Equity, and Civic Education,” in *Civic Education in Polarized Times*, ed. Elizabeth Beaumont and Eric Beerbohm, Volume LXVI of NOMOS (New York University Press, 2024), 143–153.
- ¹² Alan S. Gerber and Donald P. Green, “Does Canvassing Increase Voter Turnout? A Field Experiment,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 96 (19) (1999): 10939–10942, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.96.19.10939>.
- ¹³ Rock the Vote, “Nationwide Voter Pre-Registration for Under 18,” <https://www.rockthevote.org/how-to-vote/nationwide-voting-info/voter-pre-registration> (accessed June 23, 2026).
- ¹⁴ Laura W. Brill, “Smoothing the On-Ramp to Democracy: Voter Registration as a Staple of American High Schools,” The Civics Center, August 28, 2023, <https://thecivicscenter.substack.com/p/smoothing-the-on-ramp-to-democracy>.
- ¹⁵ United States Census Bureau, “2024 Presidential Election Voting and Registration Tables Now Available,” April 30, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2025/2024-presidential-election-voting-registration-tables.html>.
- ¹⁶ Melanie Hanson, “College Enrollment & Student Demographic Statistics,” Education Data Initiative, last updated March 17, 2025, <https://educationdata.org/college-enrollment-statistics>; and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “College Enrollment and Work Activity of Recent High School and College Graduates Summary,” April 22, 2025, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/hsgec.nro.htm>.
- ¹⁷ See Joseph E. Kahne and Susan E. Sporte, “Developing Citizens: The Impact of Civic Learning Opportunities on Students’ Commitment to Civic Participation,” *American Educational Research Journal* 45 (3) (2008): 738–766, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27667149>. García Bedolla describes “working in groups with a mentor to guide them.” New Voters provides high school students with personal, near-peer mentors to map the landscape in their school, create a school-specific solution to register their peers to vote, and troubleshoot throughout the process!
- ¹⁸ Bruno V. Manno, “The Shrinking Space Between Home and Work,” *Washington Monthly*, January 30, 2026, <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2026/01/30/the-shrinking-space-between-home-and-work>; and Melissa L. Cannon, “COVID-19 Pandemic Impacts on Community Connections and Third Place Engagement: A Qualitative Analysis of Older Americans,” *Journal of Aging and Environment* 38 (4) (2024): 381–397, <https://doi.org/10.1080/26892618.2023.2225179>.
- ¹⁹ Donald P. Green and Ron Shachar, “Habit Formation and Political Behaviour: Evidence of Consuetude in Voter Turnout,” *British Journal of Political Science* 30 (4) (2000): 561–573, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123400000247>.
- ²⁰ National Center for Education Statistics, “Table 4. Number of First-Time Degree/Certificate-Seeking Undergraduate Students Enrolled, Residence, and Migration at Title IV Institutions, by State or Jurisdiction: Fall 2024,” U.S. Department of Education, Spring 2025 (fall enrollment component provisional data), <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/search/viewtable?tableId=36545&returnUrl=%2Fsearch%2F>.
- ²¹ Pre-published research circulated among partner organizations by the New Voters Research Network and the Center for Democracy and Civic Engagement at the University of Maryland, *Typology of High School Voting*, https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Fb_Sas32G3wk_1e86wP5TrgGlZ1GYz8We-7-S9xg9vg/edit?gid=0#gid=0 (accessed June 23, 2026).