

Trust in a Context of Mistrust: Getting Young Voters to Vote

Paul Rogat Loeb — *Huffington Post*, Aug 2, 2016

Young voters could well determine the 2016 election, [as they did in many close 2012 states](#). But it's going to be a significant challenge to get them to show up in November. In [a recent poll](#) of battleground states, 63% of voters under 30 had a negative opinion of Clinton, 75% a negative opinion of Trump, and barely half were definitely planning to vote for either of them. In another [poll](#) where they were asked to select three people from a list of 22 political, business, and entertainment figures who they'd like to go to dinner with, Trump was number 12, and Clinton [tied with two others for 14](#). To make matters worse, young voters are coming off a doleful 2014, with the [lowest youth participation rate](#) since 18-year-olds got the vote. Even though this generation is highly engaged in their communities, cares passionately about critical societal and global issues, and [turned out](#) in the primaries at a higher rate than in 2008, [two thirds](#) voted for candidates other than Clinton and Trump. So there's a serious risk that they'll sit out the election in frustration, disgust, or disillusionment.

In spite of this risk, if young people are engaged sufficiently by their peers, and by institutions they're a part of and trust, many will vote despite their misgivings. What will get them to the polls? Probably not the candidates themselves. Given the levels of mistrust, these voters may simply tune out speeches and campaign ads, particularly as an already ugly election promises to become even uglier. But they have an inherent trust in peers who share their sense of the issues and stakes, even if they don't always agree. They trust honest human responses that they don't view as paid for. The more young voters talk with each other, the more likely they are to participate, even if they dislike their choices.

So how do we foster these responses? The campaigns themselves could help by encouraging volunteers to support their preferred candidates while also being encouraged to express their own mixed feelings. It's unlikely they'll do that even though it would be more effective than an outreach that brushes aside doubts and differences. But other individuals and organizations can foster these kinds of discussions, and when they do, it makes a difference.

The national nonpartisan [Campus Election Engagement Project](#) (CEEP) that I founded makes these approaches a core part of our strategy. We help America's colleges and universities use their resources and networks to engage America's 20 million students in elections. Coaching schools through approaches drawn from campuses nationwide and from [the best available research](#), we help administrators and faculty collaborate with each other and with student leaders to make electoral engagement a visible and important campus priority that's part of the school's ongoing culture.

In my recent lectures in a half dozen states, students have consistently affirmed the value of the peer-focused approaches that we use. When I asked students why they voted while most of their contemporaries stayed home, they consistently referred to key discussions that got them to participate. Some talked with random friends. Others participated in the more structured conversations galvanized by CEEP's Election Engagement Fellows—stipended students who lead nonpartisan engagement teams to help engage their peers. Social media can also highlight issues important to young voters and give them a sense of who their friends and support, and why. But the pivotal conversations are inevitably personal. The more students connected with peers and talked about the choices at hand, the more likely they were to vote.

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Structural and informational barriers definitely deter many from participating, like not knowing that they can register on campus, living too far away, missing registration deadlines or lacking necessary ID. But they also say they stay home because they believe that “my vote doesn’t matter,” “there’s no difference between them,” “the whole system’s corrupt.” These sentiments are clearly more prevalent this year for those who supported candidates like Sanders or Cruz in the primaries. For these voters, they’ve gone from candidates they prized for their authenticity to shape-shifters who they feel stand for little beyond their own advancement.

Given their mistrust of both candidates, and often of major media sources, young voters need trusted sources more than ever this year to help them sort out competing claims. Our CEEP project addresses this by creating [concise nonpartisan guides to candidate stands](#). We do this for the Presidential race and key Senate and Governors' gubernatorial races. We've also created a Supreme Court guide, since either Clinton or Trump will likely pick as many as two or three Justices. Schools then distribute these guides through campus newspapers, campus mail, email, and display them in high-traffic areas like the student union or residence halls. In a context where “everybody’s lying and spinning and they all have handlers, so you don’t know who to believe,” students have said the guides let them see “what the candidates actually stand for.” Not only do they help students decide who to support (including whether to vote for the candidates likely to be elected or to cast symbolic protest votes), but in many cases, they're the deciding factor in students choosing whether to vote at all.

From what we can tell, these approaches make a tangible difference. In 2014, we worked with 280 campuses in 21 states, with a total enrollment of 3.2 million students. Where we could measure, [we increased student turnout by 16%](#), based on precinct comparisons with 2010, when our project wasn't running. This was despite an election where the 18-24-year-old vote [dropped 17%](#) during the same period.

Approaches like these are likely to matter more than ever this year given the massive distrust of both Clinton and Trump among young voters. They want to be idealistic, but often judge elections as such a swamp of corruption that they avoid even getting near them. That’s why it’s so crucial to highlight the actual differences between candidates. Whoever students choose to support, we encourage them to explore and compare, with their peers, the consequences of electing each of the candidates they have to choose from. And how these candidates—whether for President or local City Council--will shape the world they inhabit. If students want significant change, and many do, we can remind them that getting out to vote will not by itself immediately bring about all the changes they seek. But it will create the landscape that will set the possibilities, constraints and risks for post-electoral efforts to create a better world.

Both Clinton and Trump have significant limits on their abilities to bring young voters to the polls. But if students and other young voters talk with each other about the implications of electing each of these candidates and of the concrete ways each will determine the direction of our country, there’s a good chance they can inspire each other to vote.

Paul Loeb is the founder of the national nonpartisan [Campus Election Engagement Project](#). His civic engagement books, like [Soul of a Citizen](#) and [The Impossible Will Take a Little While](#), have over three hundred thousand copies in print.



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