

# Connect young voters to political process

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**By Elizabeth C. Matto**

With Election Day approaching, the question is being asked again: Will young people show up at the polls this November?

Younger voters played a prominent role in 2008, infusing the electoral season with excitement. As students head back to the classroom and the campaign enters its last frenzied months, it is worth acknowledging the important role educators, parents and the public play in preparing and enabling the nation's youngest voters to show up at the polls.

The millennial generation, those young Americans born after 1980,



U.S. Republican presidential candidate, former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney (center-L) and Republican vice presidential candidate, U.S. Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wisconsin) address a crowd during a campaign event at Saint Anselm College in Manchester, NH.

is brimming with demographic promise. Still, their commitment to the voting process is questionable. As the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement reports, although 2008 marked one of the highest showings among youth, turnout rates lagged 16 percent behind voters 30 and older. Moreover, as a group, young people don't possess the sense of civic duty that inspires older Americans and motivates their political action.

Rather than castigate them, it's the responsibility of the rest of us to connect young people to the political process. The recent finding from Harvard's Institute of Politics that only 49 percent of young people surveyed said they "definitely" will be voting only heightens this responsibility.

When looking to exercise their right to vote, college-age voters face a labyrinth of registration and Election Day regulations that vary state by state, even election by election. Questions young voters must confront include: Do I register at my home or campus address? Can I register to vote online? Do I need to update my voter registration status if I've moved — even if it's just to a different residence hall? New voter ID laws enacted recently around the country bring even more confusion. For first-time or younger voters with little experience exercising the franchise, these questions can be crippling.

Institutions of higher education, those with the closest relationships to large numbers of young voters, can play an important role here. Campuses can bring elections within reach of students by mounting get-out-the-vote drives, hosting debate watches and candidate visits, and maintaining campus-specific voter information websites.

In addition to these outreach efforts, institutions can integrate nonpartisan civic learning opportunities into curricula as a means of teaching active citizenship. As we've learned here on the Rutgers campus, structured participation in registration and mobilization efforts in conjunction with coursework offers an opportunity to link the theoretical understanding of politics with its everyday realities.

Not only can colleges and universities do this; it is their responsibility. As the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement observed in the report "A Crucible Moment," one mission of institutions of higher education is to prepare students for engaged and active citizenship.

Moreover, this learning ought not wait until college. Elections offer an excellent opportunity for teachers at all grade levels to bring their history lessons to life. What better way to improve understanding of the Electoral College than to simulate the electoral process in the classroom? Other evidenced-based methods of instruction, such as discussions and debates, allow students to practice being active citizens in the confines of the schoolhouse, preparing them for active citizenship.

Of course, parents are also powerful agents of political socialization. One's interest in politics, rates of news consumption and sense of preparedness for political participation are shaped in no small part by parents. These findings were recently confirmed in our research; we found that the effects of classroom discussion of the news on levels of political knowledge and efficacy were amplified when the news also was discussed in the home. To be sure, any parent who has taken a child into the voting booth has powerful anecdotal evidence of the parental role in educating future active citizens.

Active citizenship isn't genetic, it must be taught by educators and modeled by parents. Moreover, it has to be supported by

the public at large. As research supported by CIRCLE has shown, states that adopt measures to ease the voting process — such as same-day registration and early voting — benefit from increased youth turnout.

Will young people show up on Election Day? They will if we encourage them to do so and show them the way.

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