

An Intergenerational Call to Fulfill Our Nation's Democratic Promise

by Heather C. McGhee

Civic engagement is the lifeblood of a society. In addition to the positive substantive outcomes of engagement—elections of well-supported representatives, laws passed, human needs met through service—it also is essential to the cohesion of a body politic. And America gravely needs this cohesion, for we are a nation of ancestral strangers. We are not automatically united by any common language, lineage, history, creeds, or, importantly, race. The exciting acceleration of racial and ethnic diversity that has come about since we lifted race-based immigration quotas in 1965 makes a focus on social integration through civic participation even more urgent today.

The preceding article focuses on the promise of service as one fundamental form of civic engagement that could foster social cohesion. This response offers two concrete policy recommendations that speak to another dimension of civic engagement: not just what individuals can do for one another, but what individuals can't accomplish without a responsive government.

The United States has yet to live up to

the claim of being “the world's greatest democracy”. In many states and particularly in off-presidential years, the majority of eligible voters do not vote. When this is the case—as it was most recently in the 2010 mid-term Congressional elections—it undermines the basic premise of self-governance and popular representation. Unfortunately, the policy trend since 2010 has been even greater restrictions and threats to the franchise, whether measured by the 41 restrictive state election laws introduced,¹ or the five Supreme Court votes to defang the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

As the largest generation in history comes into adulthood, we should be moving in the opposite direction, aiming to bring the generations closer in the fundamental civic exercise of voting. Forty-six million young adults under 30 are eligible to vote, actually surpassing the 39 million eligible seniors who are²—and yet the turnout rate is 72 percent among seniors³ and just 45 percent among youth.⁴ Young Asian and Latino citizens are even less likely to vote, while the highest youth turnout rates have been among black youth since the 2008 election,

surging as high as 58 percent.⁵

The age gap in voting is pernicious, and dilutes the ability of young adult issues—child care, college affordability, job quality, criminal justice, rental housing—to be integrated into the political agenda. Part of the fiscal “generation war” narrative is driven by the relative political voice of seniors versus younger Americans in Washington. Equalizing this voice is essential to a more balanced political debate that protects our past promises while also being responsive to the needs of future generations.

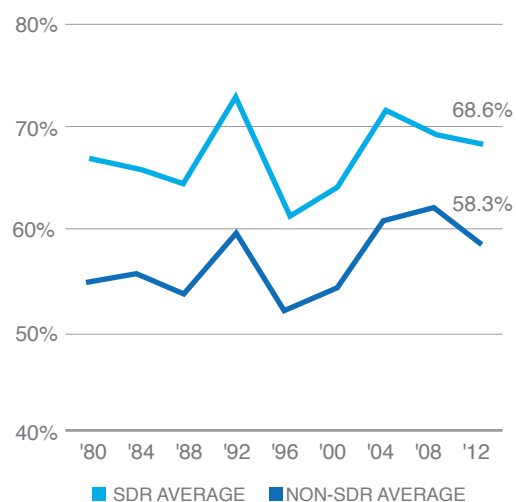
Fortunately, older Americans overwhelmingly want to *pass* down the value of voting to younger generations.⁶ What can we do to narrow the age gap in voting? Registration is the biggest hurdle to voting for young people, who succeed in voting at rates similar to older Americans once they are registered. For example, 84% of eligible citizens under 30 who were registered in 2008 actually voted.⁷ Yet over half of young people who did not vote in 2012 blamed not being registered ahead of time.⁸ Registration is particularly burdensome for young people who move often for school, work or family and therefore must re-register multiple times, are less likely to drive, and—as compared to retirees—are less likely to have the time available for the bureaucratic processes of registration in addition to the time off necessary for voting.

To clear this unnecessary roadblock, the federal government can adopt a uniform standard allowing eligible voters to register to vote and cast their ballots on the same day: Same-Day Registration (SDR). Pioneered by Maine, Minnesota, and Wisconsin in the early-to-mid-1970s, thirteen states (California, Connecticut, Colorado,

Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Wisconsin, and Wyoming) and the District of Columbia have now enacted the reform. Depending on the state, this one-stop process for registering and voting may be offered on Election Day, during the early voting period, or both. Eligible voters can also use Same Day Registration to correct an outdated voter registration record and cast a ballot that will be counted.

States that allow Same Day Registration consistently lead the nation in voter participation—and have a narrower age-based gap in voting. Four of the top five states for voter turnout in the 2012 presidential election all offered Same Day Registration.⁹ Average voter turnout was over 10 percentage points higher in SDR states than in other states.¹⁰ Research indicates that allowing young people to register to vote on Election Day increases turnout by as much as 14 percentage points.¹¹ Adopting this reform nationwide would bring seniors and youth together in higher levels of voting.

Figure 1. Turnout Rates in SDR vs. Non-SDR States, 1980–2012, Presidential Election Years



Source: U.S. Elections Project, <http://elections.gmu.edu/Turnout%201980>

Voting is, of course, the most basic civic act. Yet all too often, voting is the highest level of engagement that most citizens have the opportunity to attain. The actual decisions that affect all of our quality of life—how much to support education, social services, capital improvements, how to regulate business and work, and how to distribute the costs for our public needs—usually happen without any public involvement beyond the ballot booth. As Congress has become increasingly polarized, the important act of finding common ground, which is paramount given our nation’s diversity of backgrounds and viewpoints, seems to be eluding us. That is why the policy innovation of participatory budgeting is so promising.

Since 1989, the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil has engaged up to 50,000 people a year in direct deliberations choosing how to allocate as much as 20 percent of the city’s budget.¹² In 2011-12, New York City became the second and largest American city to use participatory budgeting, allowing 6,000 local residents from four city council districts to propose, debate, evaluate and then vote on projects spending over \$6 million from the councilmembers’ discretionary capital budgets.¹³

How did this come about? A grassroots group founded by women on welfare, Community Voices Heard, assembled a 42-group coalition and partnered with the Participatory Budgeting Project to bring the idea to the city council. The results from the six-month process were revealing. People of color, immigrants and low-income people participated in participatory budgeting at higher rates than in electoral politics. Almost half of the neighborhood assembly participants had not contacted an elected

official in the prior year—and yet here they were, engaging deeply in decision-making about their community’s priorities.¹⁴

Expanding participatory budgeting across the country holds the promise of increasing intergenerational civic participation and priority-sharing. With the right outreach, the New York project was able to bring both youth and seniors into the deliberative, community-building process. In the council district that made extra effort to recruit youth, their presence helped educate the otherwise older-skewing group about the need for safe places for teens to play. The winning project: new lights for the Tilden High School athletic field. Likewise, the young participants had an opportunity to consider the community beyond their day-to-day experience and interact on even footing with their elders. “I really liked the way that the youth got involved in this project... because they thought about the community as a whole. They are the leaders of our future and they were able to do something and see it through to the end which is very important for their self-esteem,” remarked Monique Chandler-Waterman.¹⁵

Another participant recalled being proud “...that a group of totally unrelated people of all ages and backgrounds can commit to come together to discuss important issues in our communities. That was wonderful.”¹⁶ A council district with a 10 percent over-65 population was able to attract a disproportionate number of seniors into the project through targeted outreach. At a time when the city’s Department of Aging budget had been cut in half, this district’s citizen assembly successfully voted for new vans for senior centers.¹⁷

Can we imagine creating participatory

budgeting experiments with the federal budget? Given the polarizing ideological debate about fiscal priorities among elected officials, any process that gives Americans of all ages and races the ability to directly engage with one another—to test their assumptions, discover mutual aspirations for our families and our nation—is worth attempting.

In addition to the concrete recommendations of Same-Day Registration and Participatory Budgeting, I'll close with an aspirational proposal: a national goal of 100 percent adult citizen voting. Just by adopting this goal, our national leaders could challenge naysayers to justify why we should aim for less in “the world's greatest democracy”. The federal government could set up a competition among the states, awarding jurisdictions for dismantling barriers to voting and achieving truly representational elections. It could start a cultural shift: from complacency about low-turnout elections to a norm in which politicians elected with less than 50 percent turnout would rightly feel less like than legitimate representatives of their communities.

Together, these three ideas offer an intergenerational call to fulfilling our nation's democratic promise. America has become a much more diverse nation since we last heard moral leaders urging us to overcome our narrow instincts and interests. It's time for us to deeply engage with what it means to be one people in a multi-racial democracy: serving each other, allowing equal access to the levers of power, and being willing to invest in one another and in our common future. ●

Generations Initiative is a network of leaders, organizations, and communities that work together to raise awareness and promote solutions to harness America's current demographic revolution to our country's advantage. It aims to build on the strengths of each generation to ensure our democratic and economic vitality. The goal is to catalyze action that transforms these demographic shifts into an asset for our collective future.

This paper was part of the Generations United publication “Out of Many, One: Uniting the Changing Faces of America.”

Endnotes

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Contact

www.demos.org
@demos_org
Elektra Gray
egray@demos.org
P: 212.633.1405