

Voter turnout spotlights educational need

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For many years, we had a problem with youth voting, or, more precisely, not voting. Older Americans' voting rates held relatively steady at about 70 percent in presidential elections, while voting rates for those under 30 steadily declined - from about 55 percent in 1972 to 40 percent in 2000.

Of course, it's great that older Americans vote in such high numbers - democracy works when individuals vote their interests. When groups don't participate, however, their interests get lost. Social Security is untouchable because senior citizens vote; but no one talks about the youth unemployment rate, which is 18 percent; it is 3.7 percent for adults 35 and older.

But so far in the 2008 primary season, youth turnout has risen in almost every state (California saw a 4 percent increase), even tripling in Iowa, Georgia, Missouri and Oklahoma and quadrupling in Tennessee. Although these rates could be higher - youth turnout is still well below 50 percent in the primaries - at least we're moving in the right direction.

Or are we?

Only about half of Americans attend college during their young adult years, and as many as one-third do not even complete high school. Analysis of exit polls from the primaries by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Education reveals that 79 percent of young voters on Super Tuesday attended college. This trend was also evident in youth turnout rates: Of eligible young people with college experience, 1 in 4 voted on Super Tuesday, compared with just 1 in 14 of the non-college youth.

The low participation rates of young people who didn't attend college means that little attention will be paid to their priorities and perspectives on everything from the war in Iraq to who should get rebates as part of the economic stimulus package. Indeed, the young people most likely to be affected by the war in Iraq or a downturn in the economy are often politically silent. But has anyone taught them to speak?

In this country, it has been the job of the public schools to prepare young people for citizenship because a commitment to voting can be developed well before a person has the right to vote. Schools - as research demonstrates - can do a great deal to develop this and other commitments to civic participation.

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Studies show that when students have the opportunity to learn civic responsibility, their commitment to voting increases regardless of race, ethnicity or family background. Discussions of current events, interacting with civic leaders, engaging in simulations of civic processes, and learning about and taking action to resolve community problems all foster students' commitment and capacity for participation.

The problem is that schools are not providing these opportunities equally. As part of the California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, we analyzed surveys of more than 2,500 California high school seniors and a nationally representative sample of ninth-graders. We found that access to opportunities for learning about politics and citizenship depend on a student's wealth, academic skills and race.

Students whose families are wealthy are up to twice as likely as those whose families have average incomes to learn how laws are made and how Congress works, for example. They are more than 1 1/2 times as likely to report having political debates and panel discussions. In addition, African American students are less likely than white students to have civic-focused government classes, discussions on current events and participatory civic lessons. Latino students, too, report fewer of these opportunities.

This shows that schools are perpetuating inequality when they could be rectifying it. If we are to truly educate kids, we cannot rely solely on the reading and math skills emphasized in the climate of No Child Left Behind. We must teach the skills young people need to become engaged, active and effective citizens.

So what can be done? Make civic learning opportunities part of the curriculum that all students receive, especially at schools serving low-income students. The resources it would take to implement such changes are small compared to the payoff: a dynamic, vital democracy, and engaged citizens reflecting the wealth of American diversity. The cost of inaction is great - democracy for some is not democracy at all.

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