**COMBATING VOTER APATHY WITHIN THE RISING ELECTORATE IN THE UNITED STATES**

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ABSTRACT:

Although the vote is often considered to be the most rudimentary form of political participation and a defining characteristic and right of a democratic society, voter turnout in the United States continues to trail most other developed countries (Desilver 2018). The reason for such a decrease in political participation via voting has been researched heavily in the field of political science, especially among groups who statistically tend to exhibit lower turnout rates, such as the less-educated, minority groups, and young voters. Voter apathy, which affects the youngest generations of voters the most significantly, is often described as the reason for the voter turnout trends that has been reflected by data for decades (Fry 2018). My research aims to pinpoint the causes and specificities of this voter apathy in the young electorate groups, such as Millennials and Generation Z, via surveying of undergraduate students to determine whether general state turnout trends are reflected similarly in the younger cohort. The goal is to understand sources of voter apathy on a state and national scale and to propose initiatives to combat the issue.

INTRODUCTION:

Voting is a fundamental right that is an integral part of a democratic society and often defined, therefore, as a civic duty of a country’s citizens. Voter turnout, then, is often a statistic that can be used to express the health of a democracy and the magnitude of national identity that is felt by its citizens. Political scientists often use trends to discuss voter turnout through the lens of various demographics such as age, socioeconomic status, and education level. Unfortunately, the United States’ largest electorate group of nearly 70 million voters, those born from years 1981 onward, historically exhibit the lowest voter turnout rates of all other voting age groups (Fry 2018). In contrast, older generations, such as Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation, have historically had the highest rates of voter turnout (Fry 2018). Even so, a steady decline in voter turnout has been observed since the 1960’s within the United States (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). This remains a national issue.

One reason used to explain these statistical trends is the concept of voter apathy. Voter apathy can be defined as a lack of caring or interest in the importance and process of voting and, even more generally, other conventional forms of political participation. This phenomenon has a multitude of probable causes: lack of national identity, a large effort expectancy to vote, a lack of understanding regarding the voting and registration process, lack of governmental trust, inadequate information about candidates, or even social influences such as friends and family.

The goal of my research is to analyze the most prevalent sources of this voter apathy in the young generation of voters and, ultimately, to find initiatives that can be implemented in these communities to combat it.

BACKGROUND:

Youth political participation is a topic of interest in the political science community. Much of the recent research looking at the topic of political participation among the Millennial (born 1981-1996) and Generation Z (born 1997-after) electorates focus on the emergence of the Internet as a platform for which political discussions can be held informally and the possible translation of such discourse into actual political and civic participation (Fry 2018). Vaccari and Valeriani, in their study titled “Digital Political Talk and Political Participation: Comparing Established and Third Wave Democracies”, find that interactions via social networking sites (SNS) were more likely to lead to political participation among the subjects than instant messaging platforms (MIMS) (Vaccari and Valeriani 2018). Texting messaging still falls under the category of unconventional methods to participate politically and is one of the methods that is currently being tested for effectiveness in mobilizing primarily younger voters (Kann 2007). If transformed into initiatives, social media blasts and chain messaging could aid in increasing voter turnout among Generation Z and Millennial voters. My research will lend insight into which initiatives would accomplish this and what states would benefit most from their implementation.

The concept of initiatives as a tool to get people out to cast their votes is not entirely a new one, however they are not always aimed towards young voters. One example of this motivation to bring the vote to the people is shown in an area close to Washington D.C. where an event was held in a retirement community with people to assist in explaining how to fill out the ballot (Vasilogambros 2018). Turnout in this area, in the past, has reached up to 94% voter turnout, showing that initiatives such as these help elderly people overcome some of their barrier to the polls. If initiatives like this can be so effective in these communities, a relevant translation could be well-received and effective for young voters as well.

The dichotomy that exists between generations of voters and their respective voter turnout has been of interest in the political science community and inspired conversations and studies in hopes of determining what causes these stark differences. As voter apathy and low rates of voter turnout still plague the United States and its youth, past research has evidently not found the most effective initiatives to dissolve this issue. There is a lack of information of voter state turnout statistics that also specify age groups. I aspire to fill this gap with my research to see if the general turnout rates exhibited by states as a whole are reflected by their young voter cohort. Data will be collected via distributed surveys at universities in the state with the highest voter turnout on average, Minnesota, and the state with the lowest rates, Hawaii, to be used in a statistical comparative analysis (Massachusetts Institute of Technology 2018). The survey questions will aim to also analyze specific factors that influence these young voters’ decisions to vote and test the effectiveness of possible voting initiative ideas.

METHODS:

I propose to use survey analysis to find the prevalent causes of voter apathy on a state basis. This research will involve both field work and/or data collection and statistical analysis. A survey will be created, and participants will be required to respond to the posed questions on a scale of 1 to 5 increasing in likelihood to participate in a certain political event or initiative and will also be asked whether or not they voted in the last election with subsequent questions to explain why or why not. These questions will refer to the commonly posed reasons for voter apathy such as questions about social influences, knowledge on candidates and registration, and trust in the governmental institution itself. A total of 50 students from both the University of Minnesota and the University of Hawaii will be chosen at random on campus by student body executive board members to participate in a survey and receive compensation of $15. The empirical data will then be collected online and analyzed using statistical models to assess the differences between the political participation levels and likelihood to vote of students from the University of Minnesota and those of the University of Hawaii. Survey answers will also pinpoint which aspects of voter apathy are most influential in the decisions of these young people to vote or not.

Because my study uses human subjects, I will submit detailed paperwork of the methods of my experiment to the Institutional Review Board for approval. I will contact student body presidents’ and executive boards at the respective two universities seeking permission for distribution of the survey on a digital platform.

EXPECTED RESULTS:

According to data from previous studies, university educated students are almost twice as likely to vote than those who are not highly educated (Smith 2018). This is a potential area for bias, which will be minimized by the randomization of the selection of survey participants. The monetary incentive – compensation for participating – will also ensure that interest alone does not drive people to agree to take the survey. Because those surveyed are university students, for the reason mentioned above, I think they will recognize the importance of voting. However, I do not hypothesize that actual political participation, especially in the recent midterm election, and desire to engage in politics will be as frequent because of effort expectancy. Because of the large difference in voter turnout rates previously observed and recorded between Hawaii and Minnesota, I would expect similar differences in those that are surveyed due to the power of social influences of participatory behavior and culture that were previously mentioned. The collected and analyzed data from my research could be delivered in article form to be published in the respective universities’ media outlets such as student-run newspapers to serve as an initiative to reduce voter apathy and political complacency in its own effect. In addition, I will submit the article to the academic journal Attic Salt to be peer-reviewed for publication.

CONCLUSION:

Despite the large impact it has on a nation’s political reputation and governmental future, data shows that many young people still chose not to vote. This is opposed by older generations. Voters of all ages encounter different voting barriers, but this should not cause such largely differing voter turnout rates. A similar statement can be generalized for state turnout rates as well. The goal is to minimize barriers and bring awareness to the causes of voter apathy so that all voters can understand and participate in national politics. As the size of the young electorate continues to grow, initiatives to increase political participation and reduce sources of voter apathy is integral to the United States’ democratic health. By surveying members of the younger electorate, specifically university-educated students, I can ask questions that will highlight the most prevalent aspects of voter apathy and the most effective methods and initiatives that can increase voter turnout in this age group. I can further specify my results into state data from both Minnesota and Hawaii to compare with general state turnout rates gathered across all age groups to see if these trends agree locally. My research can be translated into an article which presents the collected data as a form of awareness for voter apathy in young voting groups.

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APPENDIX

BUDGET:

In order to conduct my research, I will require $100 to purchase and access additional materials such as academic journals to further my research on effecting voting initiatives and methods of analysis. I would expect to spend 10 hours in total generating the survey, transforming it into an online deliverable, reaching out to the universities I hope to survey, and analyzing the data which would translate to $132 at the California minimum wage of $11 per hour. I will also need funding to compensate the subjects who agree to participate in my study. I plan to give monetary compensation of $15 to each of the 100 participants and would need this funding of $150 for the purpose of data collection.