



THIS SCHOOL RAISED YOUTH VOTING RATES. CAN OTHERS LEARN FROM ITS EXAMPLE?



Politics are exciting these days. The Democratic primary has been a nail biter. The 2016 presidential elections were a shock to many observers. And the 2020 elections are a stone's throw away.

Even during such interesting times, however, younger people have continued a trend of participating at much lower rates than their elders when it comes to one of the most important aspects of civic engagement: voting. **Despite the fact** that the voting rate of 18- to 29-year-olds **skyrocketed in 2018** from 20 to 36 percent, citizens aged 65-plus were still nearly twice as likely to vote. **Voting rates** are also lower for African Americans and Hispanics than for whites, and for those with relatively lower rates of formal education.

These results raise questions about what schools can do not only to encourage everyone to vote more but to help close voting gaps by age, socioeconomic status, and race. A **study** co-authored by **NEPC Fellow Sean Corcoran of Vanderbilt University** offers fodder for thought. The study found that students offered admittance to Democracy Prep's middle or high school between 2007-08 and 2015-16 were 24 percentage points more likely to vote in the 2016 election than applicants who were not admitted, based on a lottery the charter school network uses when it has more applicants than spots.

The students studied fit the profile of those most at risk of growing up to become non-voting adults. More than three quarters qualified for free or reduced-price meals. Sixty-nine percent were black. Thirty percent were Hispanic. And the voting behavior of all was observed while they were under age 30.

The study authors note that theirs is the first of its kind to measure a charter school's causal

impact on registration and voting. However, Democracy Prep is not just a charter school. As implied by its name, it is a network whose mission includes an explicit focus on civic engagement. As described on the system's [website](#):

Each Election Day, elementary and middle school scholars run our “Get Out The Vote” campaign, standing on busy street corners wearing t-shirts and handing out flyers that read “*I Can’t Vote, but You Can!*” Since its inception, the campaign has encouraged thousands of Harlem, Camden, and Baton Rouge resident to get out and vote. Our scholars are the youngest in history to testify in front of the New York State Senate and Assembly, and the New York City Council.

As such, civics education is not a single course or unit at the school but a key focal point. Each school has a civic education coordinator whose job it is to create curricula and experiences that go beyond teaching skills. The students are [encouraged to](#) “feel an obligation to be true and authentic citizens of a community.” For example, high school seniors take a course in which they spend nine months on a “Change the World” project that investigates real-world civic problems such as homelessness or drug abuse.

An important caveat is that Democracy Prep and its students differ in important ways from other students and schools. For example, regardless of whether or not they were admitted to the school, all applicants took the impetus to apply and were potentially attracted in some way to the school's civic mission. The network has also received [millions in federal grants](#) for charter schools—meaning it may have more resources than other schools to carry out its civics-focused mission (although the school has [since faced financial challenges](#) related to its expansion).

In addition, a [2012 analysis](#) found the network's first middle school had one of New York City's highest charter school annual attrition rates (24 percent), a fact the founder attributed at the time to students leaving to avoid being retained in grade under the school's strict promotion policy. A [later study](#) continued to show high attrition at a Democracy Prep school. If students with poorer educational outcomes leave a school at higher rates than those with better outcomes, it can create an environment that is not typical of the majority of public schools that serve higher- and lower-achieving students alike. That said, Democracy Prep deserves praise as an [early supporter](#) of charter schools “[backfilling](#)” seats when students exit—admitting new students at older grades when seats became available.

“It's very hard to say whether and how Democracy Prep's impact on civic participation is replicable at other schools,” Corcoran said in an email interview.

We absolutely could use more evidence on that question. But I have to think this is something that could be replicated elsewhere. What sets Democracy Prep apart in this regard is that it makes democratic participation and civic engagement a central part of its mission—it's weaved into the culture and curriculum of the school. That is something any school could do, arguably, with the right leadership and support from the district and parents. I'm aware of multiple (non-charter) schools in NYC, for example, that put civic engagement front and center in their mission. I'm not aware of any analyses of impact for these schools, however.

Even if civics education is not a core focus of a school, [there are other things](#) that educators can do to encourage children and teens to grow up to be voters. For example, educators can provide students with more authentic leadership opportunities within schools. Districts can create guides on participating in the electoral process not only by voting but also by mobilizing voters and advocating in the community. And some cities have aimed to foster good voting habits by allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in local elections.

As Corcoran and his co-authors write, “An education focused on preparing students for citizenship can in fact increase students’ civic participation when they reach adulthood. Renewed attention to the foundational purpose of public schools might broadly increase civic participation across the country.”

NEPC Resources on Democracy and Education

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