

Political Participation of College Students: The Case of Berea College

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Introduction

The right to vote, a fundamental and defining element of democracy, represents one of the key freedoms of American citizenship. It is a right that crosses all gender and racial barriers, and it unites us as citizens of the United States. The difficulty facing American politics is the relatively low participation rates of the voting age public. As many political analysts have documented, over the past 30 years voting among the electorate has either declined or leveled at roughly 50 percent in presidential elections. Some have labeled this the problem of the "disappearing electorate" (Halsup 1).

One segment of the voting age population that contributes to this overall problem is the group of potential voters in the 18-24-age cohort and, more narrowly, those who are attending colleges or universities at this age. It was hoped when this group won voting rights in 1971 that they would participate greatly in American democracy. Sadly, these expectations have only been met with declining youth political participation. This group of potential voters has maintained a consistently low rate of voter registration and voter turnout in national elections, which has declined steadily since the 1972 presidential race between George McGovern and Richard Nixon (National Association of Secretaries of State). That year, when the Vietnam War was still raging, 50 percent of 18-24 year-olds showed up at the polls, versus 63 percent of voters overall. Though not huge by any measure, that turnout was the "historical high-water mark" (Fetto 46).

Many researchers have suggested multiple factors that are likely to contribute to the low rates of participation of this voting group. Among these factors are inexperience, momentary status in their communities, and political culture. It has been shown that

people with deeper roots in society who feel connected to their communities vote at much higher rates than others.¹ Do college students feel disconnected?

According to a study on how service and non-service students differ, performed by Janet Eyler, Dwight Giles, and John Braxton, students from service learning backgrounds believe that they are connected to their communities (Sullivan 27). Since Berea College is dedicated to service learning, and students who attend service-learning institutions are supposed to feel more connected to their communities, will Berea's students vote at higher rates than nationwide averages?

I tested the above question and many others in partial fulfillment of the requirements for senior research seminar at Berea College during the fall of 2003. My research shows that Berea's students differ from average college students in many aspects, including discussing politics and current events with their families growing up, boycotting and signing petitions. My research also shows that students nationwide who feel like they do not have enough time to be involved in activities other than schoolwork and a job are planning on voting at lower rates than students who feel that they do have enough time. However, students at Berea who feel more "busy" are planning to participate in the electoral process at the same rates as those who feel that they have enough time.²

This paper, however, will only highlight many of my findings on college student political participation and give suggestions on how to increase the number of college students at the polls.

¹ For further information, please see the "Social Connectedness" section of my senior thesis: "Political Participation: Are Berea College Students Different?"

² For more information regarding my research findings, please see my senior thesis: "Political Participation: Are Berea College Students Different?"

Voting Decline- Statistics from Previous Voting Years

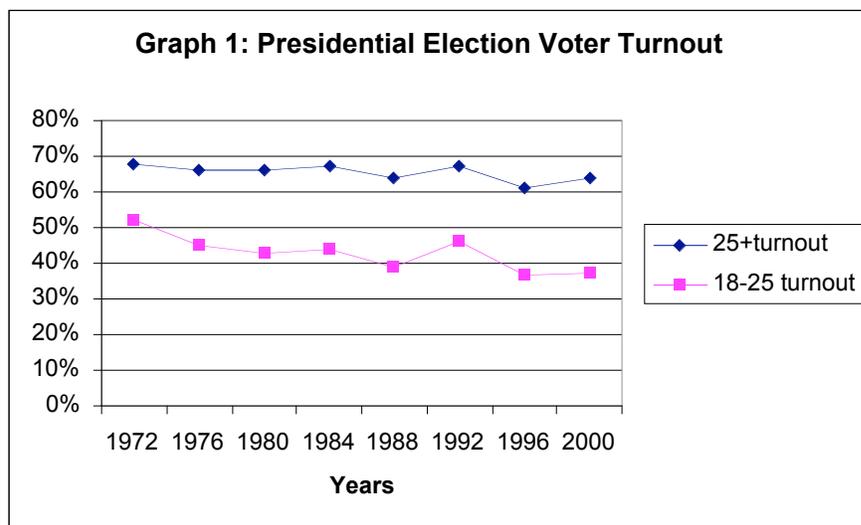
In America, we are accustomed to hearing that our overall voter turnout is low in comparison to other nations. When examining college student voter turnout, many problems arise because there is not a clearly correct turnout figure for college students in any given year. The first problem with examining college student voter turnout is that citizens between the ages of 18 to 21 were not allowed to vote before 1972. This means that we cannot compare today' college students with those born before 1951. The Federal Election Commission also does not have any way of knowing how old voters are, or whether they are enrolled in college. Polls and surveys are our only means of calculating youth and college student voter turnout, and this is a problem since "all surveys of voting behavior produce inflated turnout estimates, since some people mistakenly, or falsely, report that they have voted" (Levine 2). Therefore we can never say with certainty how many students vote in any given year.

However, it does appear that the youth vote has declined steadily since 1972, when the voting age was lowered to eighteen: "The size of the decline in presidential-election years is between 13 and fifteen percentage points" (1). This seems to be a significant drop in comparison to older Americans.

Voter registration and turnout statistics are calculated based on the Voting Age Population (VAP), which is determined by the United States Bureau of the Census, as reported in its Current Population Reports. The VAP is the total number of persons in the United States who are 18 years of age or older, regardless of citizenship, military status, felony conviction or mental state. It is important to note that the number of actual eligible voters is usually much less than the VAP due to the fact that resident aliens (legal

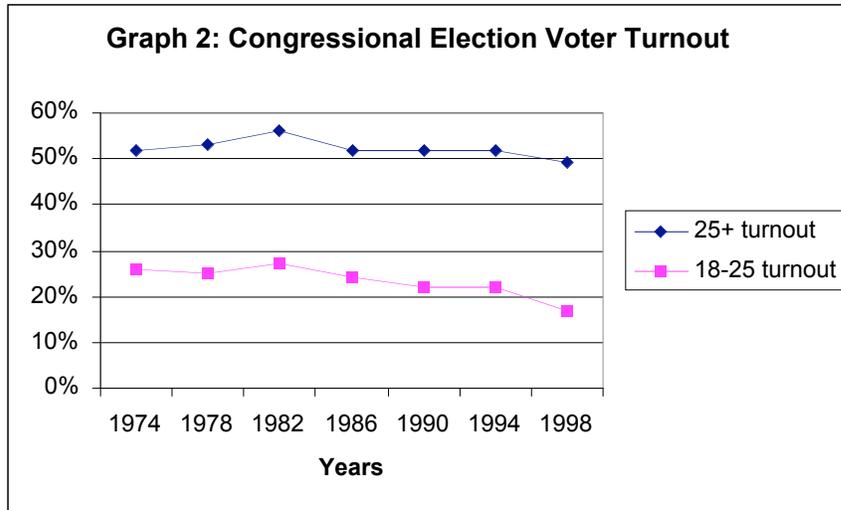
and illegal), institutionalized felons and persons declared mentally ill must be accounted for.

The easiest and most common way to measure voter turnout is to take the number of voters and divide by the number of eligible adult residents. When one measures voter turnout this way, overall voter turnout seems to have only declined by about 4 percentage points since 1972 (according to the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement’s method for analyzing U.S. Census Bureau data). However, when one takes a deeper look at the youth vote, the decline is much steeper (for presidential and congressional elections):



As one can see in the graph above, presidential election voter turnout has declined for all ages, but the decline for the 18-25-age cohort is much steeper. This trend holds during congressional elections as well (see below):³

³ Statistics for both Graph 1 and 2 were taken from the U.S. Bureau of the Census. For the raw data please see “Appendix 1” of “Political Participation: Are Berea College Students Different?”



The 18-24-age segment is the largest age cohort of the Voting Age Population, yet they have the lowest turnout. This age group in fact counts for almost 35 percent of all the unregistered voters in the country (Young 213).⁴

Why Aren't They Voting?

Political scientists have devoted a great deal of attention to the question of what determines voter turnout. There are multiple answers. From a theoretical perspective, one answer has been given in terms of costs and benefits. Anthony Downs (1957) began this tradition when he suggested that perhaps the costs of voting (things such as transportation) might outweigh the benefits acquired from it. Tullock (1967) observed that the probability of any one person's vote altering the outcome of the person in office was almost nothing in a large electorate. Therefore, the "benefit" was near zero. In Riker and Ordeshook's "calculus of voting," they modified the computations made by

⁴ It is also interesting to note that the percentage of younger, college-age voters has gradually decreased, however, over the past few decades. This group has always constituted the smallest percentage of the total vote, but the proportion of the electorate between the ages of 18-25 fell from 14.2% in 1972 to 7.8% in 2000 (U.S. Bureau of the Census).

Tullock to try to account for the fact that millions of people vote despite what seems to be irrationality. Riker and Ordeshook suggested that there were benefits from voting that went beyond altering the outcome, and they described these benefits as “citizen duty” (Niemi 23).

According to Anthony Down’s *Economic Theory of Democracy*, people vote if it gives them more benefits than not voting. Nonvoting then could be due either to the high costs of voting or low benefits from voting. There is much controversy over this issue. Is nonvoting due to institutional changes that increase the cost of voting? Is it due to weak party organizations and party competition that depress the benefits of voting? (23).

We must remember that it is difficult to truly assess why people do not vote. Non-voting could be due to many personal attitudes, such as a lack of interest, a distrust of government, a low sense of civic duty, or a feeling that the elections are not important or that an individual’s vote will not matter.

My senior research focused on many factors influencing college student voting, including parents’ voting history, social connectedness, and simple discounting by candidates. I then took the basic ideas from each of these factors and tested them against national and “Berea-specific” survey data.

Beginning My Research

In October 2003, I contacted Harvard University’s Institute of Politics (IOP) and spoke with Dr. David King, explaining that I hoped to study Berea College's students to see if we are different than national averages regarding voting and political participation. Many studies regarding student political participation had been performed by the IOP,

and I asked Dr. King if it would be possible to see one of the survey instruments that the Institute had used nationwide. I then would use their instrument, narrow its scope to Berea, and compare our results.

Dr. King explained that the Institute of Politics was testing another survey during October, and he sent me their instrument. I then tailored the October IOP survey to suit my study. In the course of two weeks, I surveyed 67 Berea College students ($\pm 3.4\%$), and the IOP surveyed 1,202 students nationwide ($\pm 2.8\%$).⁵

What were my major findings and where should we go from here?

My senior research study was intended to provide the framework for a plan of action to increase the number of young people who are involved in the American political process. How can we increase the number of college students at the polls on Election Day?

The following are some highlights and suggestions from comparing the data that I collected on Berea's students and the data that the Institute of Politics collected nationwide.⁴

Please remember, however, that surveys always measure opinions. These findings are not *facts*. Each of these findings must be taken with a "grain of salt" since I am basing my conclusions on student opinions.

- **Today's college students are not "politically disengaged"**- they believe that politics and elections matter. In the IOP study, more than 90 percent of those

⁵ For further information on how I administered, tested, and completed my survey, please see the "Protocol" section of "Political Participation: Are Berea College Students Different?" Also, if you would like a copy of my dataset, please contact me. If you would like a copy of the IOP dataset or survey, please contact Dr. David King at Harvard University's Institute of Politics.

surveyed disagreed with the statement: “It doesn’t matter to me who the President is.” Eighty-six percent of Berea’s students also disagreed with the statement. More than 85 percent of those surveyed in both studies thought political engagement was an effective way of solving important community issues. Seventy-one percent of Berea’s students believe that political involvement can have tangible results, while two-thirds of students nationwide feel that way. More than 6 out of 10 in both studies expect to be more politically involved than their parents. More than two-thirds in both studies believe that politics is relevant to their lives right now.

- **They are planning to participate in the 2004 election.** More than two-thirds of the students surveyed by the IOP are registered to vote, compared to 62 percent at Berea – and more than three-fourths in both studies say they will definitely or probably vote in 2004. More than 7 out of 10 in both studies agree that their vote will make a difference in the Presidential election, and more than 8 out of 10 “care” who the President is.
- **Today’s college students are very active in community service.** Community volunteerism is high among college students, but involvement in political organizations is low. Of the Berea and national students who were surveyed, 65% had volunteered for community service in the last twelve months. But only 21% of the students in both studies said that they had participated in a government, political, or issue-related organization in the last year. The students surveyed in both studies prefer political engagement over community volunteerism as a way of solving important issues facing the country, and prefer community

volunteerism over political engagement as a way of solving important issues facing their local communities.

- **Perhaps “politics” should take some pointers from “community service.”**

Community service is encouraged from a very early age, yet many students do not learn about political involvement until they are old enough to vote. Community service is expected in many high schools, and it is a requirement for attending many colleges. Political involvement, on the other hand, is not. Many students get involved in community service because they “have to” due to school requirements, but they end up staying involved, perhaps because they want to; they enjoy it. During their initial involvement, volunteers have mentors, workshops and often training sessions to help them understand how to become involved and how to be an effective volunteer. It is more difficult to find such support for college students interested in pursuing politics.

Students normally stay involved in community service because they can see positive change; the activity is very gratifying. A student can see the results firsthand when he or she teaches someone to read or helps build a home for the homeless. It is more difficult to see the influence that legislation has on the same people.

One must remember, however, that since students need to show that they have volunteered for community service when applying to college, the volunteerism level found in this research may be inflated.

- **If you ask, they will come.** Candidates and political parties should tap into college students, who say that they are willing to get more politically involved, if

asked. While a minority have volunteered on a political campaign (12 percent in the IOP study and 10 percent in my study), or attended a political rally (26 percent and 30 percent), many say they would if asked. Nearly two-thirds would be likely to attend a political rally if asked by a friend or peer; about half similarly say they would volunteer on a political campaign if asked.

- **Education may be the key.** College students may shy away from the political process because they don't know much about it. First of all, more than three-fourths in both studies feel like they need more practical information about politics before they get involved. Of those who plan on voting through absentee ballot in the 2004 presidential election, only 50% of Berea's students know how to request one (66% in the IOP study). We need to educate today's youth about these very basic political participation practices.
- **Some research findings do not apply to both sets of new data.** I have found that talking about politics and current events with parents growing up is not correlated with volunteering in either dataset. This contradicts the finding made by Molly W. Andolina, Krista Jenkins, Cliff Zukin, and Scott Keeter in April 2003.⁶ This is very interesting, especially since their survey was performed a little less than 6 months before both the Berea College and the Institute of Politics survey was administered. Perhaps their finding is wrong. Further research should be preformed on this subject to see if parental discussion of politics really has any influence on whether youth volunteer at higher rates.

⁶ For more information on their findings, please see the "Parents' Voting History" section of "Political Participation: Are Berea College Students Different?"

I have also found that students under 21 are not planning on voting at lower rates than those over 21, and females are not less likely to vote than males. This contradicts the finding made by the Institute of Politics in 2001.⁷ Many things have happened in America since 2001, and perhaps the students that are now under 21 years of age have different viewpoints about political participation. Further research should also be performed on this topic.

- **Berea Students are different!** I have found that Berea's students are different than national averages in many ways. First of all, Berea's students are different than national averages when it comes to discussing politics and current events with their families growing up. They discussed politics and current events at lower rates than national averages, which could be due to family demographics.⁸ Discussing politics with their parents is also not a predictor of Berea's students heading to the polls, following the presidential race, or boycotting and signing petitions. Berea's students are not following the presidential race as closely as national college students, but they are boycotting and signing petitions at much higher rates. This could be due to multiple factors, including the lack of cable television and Berea's distinctive curriculum.⁹

Berea's students are also different when it comes to the correlation between voting and how "busy" they feel. While students nationwide who feel like they

⁷ For more information on the finding, please see the "Testing the Results from the 2001 Institute of Politics Survey" section of "Political Participation: Are Berea College Students Different?"

⁸ For more information including reports from Berea College's Institutional Research on student demographics, please see the "Testing Hypothesis #2(a)- Does Discussing Politics and Current Events with Parents have an Influence on Voting?" section of "Political Participation: Are Berea College Students Different?"

⁹ For further explanation, please see the "Testing Hypothesis #2(b)- Do Students Who Discussed Politics and Current Events with Their Parents Follow Politics at Higher Rates than Those Who Do Not?" section of "Political Participation: Are Berea College Students Different?"

do not have enough time to be involved in activities other than schoolwork and a job are planning on voting at lower rates than students who feel that they do have enough time, students at Berea who feel more “busy” are planning to participate in the electoral process at the same rates as those who feel that they have enough time. Again, Berea’s work-study program may directly influence this finding.¹⁰ Further research should be performed on Berea’s students to determine why I found our students to be different than national college students.

In conclusion, today’s college students are not an apathetic generation. Most are engaged in their communities through volunteering, and most believe that volunteerism is an effective means for addressing problems in their communities and around the nation. As shown by their high degree of involvement in community service activities, college students are interested in making positive change. The political process, however, lacks two important components that community service provides to students who are seeking to participate: structural support and immediate and tangible results.

Overall, the data collected from these two studies suggest that college students have a political culture where civic engagement is service to the community. Volunteerism has become a significant part of the college experience. The gap between high levels of community service and low levels of political engagement among students is a cause for concern, and a call for solutions. These findings suggest that the remedy to this problem is not to make students politically aware: they already are. Like the Institute of Politics puts it: “Young people are, in our own way, paying attention to political

¹⁰ For more information on this finding, please see the “Testing the Results from the 2001 Institute of Politics Survey- Not Enough Time” section of “Political Participation: Are Berea College Students Different?”

matters, and now we are waiting to see if politics is prepared to pay attention to us” (Institute of Politics). I am instead calling for opportunities to get acquainted with the practical side of the political system at early ages. The more students are asked to participate in the electoral process, the higher their voting rates will be.

Higher student voting rates are very important because once students vote for the first time, they will feel more connected to their communities and will continue to vote due to feelings of “owing” the community. It is also much easier to persuade a college student to vote than to convince someone who has never voted for 30 years to do the same. Each generation is giving way to another generation that votes less, and if this cycle continues, 5% of the voting population could be choosing the leaders of our country someday.¹¹

Better civics education in our school systems, more voter registration drives, more information about when the elections are, where the students can vote, and how to obtain an absentee ballot should increase the number of college students at the polls.

¹¹ Please see the “Do Older Americans Vote More?” section of “Political Participation: Are Berea College Students Different?”

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