



## The Youth Voting Gap

New America Media, Commentary, Joseph Kahne and Chris Evans, Posted: Apr 17, 2008

*Editor's Note: More young people are voting this year, but these young voters are not representative – they tend to be white and college-educated. This is in part because schools are not giving low-income students and students of color the same access to the political knowledge and skills they need to be empowered citizens, say Joseph Kahne, Dean of the School of Education at Mills College and director of research at the Civic Engagement Research Group (CERG) and Chris Evans, senior writer at CERG.*

This election year, we have seen a huge increase in the number of young people who are voting. If we look at who these young voters are, we find that the majority are college-educated. According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Education (CIRCLE) one in four young people who voted on Super Tuesday had been to college. Only one in 14 of these young voters had no college experience.

Our own research suggests that those youth who did vote are more likely to have had high school experiences that promote voting. Civic learning opportunities in high school can also lead to political interest and involvement.

One high school student told us that he hadn't been interested in government until he started learning about it in school. "I'm living my life," he said. "They make the laws. I'll follow the laws. Fine."

"But now," he says, "I know why the laws are here and how they make the law."

This student's social studies teacher used a civics curriculum called CityWorks in which students learn by doing. They discuss current events and develop their own opinions. They learn about the courts by participating in mock trials. They learn how laws are made by participating in simulations of government processes where they try to get bills passed through congressional committees. They also volunteer in their communities, visit government offices and meet government and local leaders.

Another high school student says the program makes her feel empowered "because now I know how it [government] works...I kind of know how I can actively participate."

The problem is that schools are not making it possible for all young people to become empowered. In our study of high school students in California, we found a big difference between those who benefited from these kinds of civic learning opportunities and those who did not. White, higher income, and academically successful students got the best civic learning opportunities, while low-income students, students of color, and those not on the path to college received significantly fewer.

African-American students, for example, were significantly less likely than white students to have government courses where they learned that it was important to stay informed about and to act on political and community issues that affected them. They were also less likely than white students to be in classrooms where they could freely express their opinions.

Latino students had fewer chances to participate in structured community service activities linked to their work in class. They also had fewer opportunities to participate in simulations of civic processes, for example, a mock senate debate on government wiretapping.

Students from higher income families were two times more likely than students with average income levels to study how laws are made.

These findings are particularly disturbing because they have long-term consequences for low-income young people, young people of color, and those who don't go to college. There are also consequences for the larger society. We lose the contributions and perspectives of whole segments of the population.

Civic learning that makes government relevant to students leads young people to vote, and to become leaders, community organizers, and volunteers. When students are encouraged in class to talk about issues relevant to them and their communities – immigration policy, youth unemployment, teen pregnancy – civics and government become their concern. When they learn how local government works by organizing and conducting a mock public hearing on school funding cuts, for example, government becomes something they understand and do.

We, as a democracy, make better decisions when the political process includes a full range of voices, especially youth voices. We need to teach all young people to be engaged, active citizens. We need to make civic education part of the core curriculum and we need professional development initiatives that target those teaching in schools where there are

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high numbers of low-income students, students of color and students not planning to attend college. The United States won't truly be a democracy until we bring the voices of all young people – especially lower income young people and youth of color – into the political dialogue.

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