



# CIRCLE

The Center for Information & Research  
on Civic Learning & Engagement

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## Deep Divide in Primary Youth Vote

### 8 in 10 Young Voters Went to College

#### Research Reveals Higher Income School Districts Offer More Opportunities to Learn about Politics and Citizenship

Washington – A disturbing and serious disparity among young voters is being revealed in the 2008 presidential primaries, according to new research released by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Education (CIRCLE).

Although half of young Americans ages 18-29 have never enrolled in college, 79 percent of the young voters on Super Tuesday attended college, according to the new research. This trend was also evident in youth turnout rates: one in four eligible young voters with college experience voted on Super Tuesday, compared with *one in 14* eligible young voters with no college experience. These findings and additional data on young primary voters can be found at [www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org).

“The overall rise in young Americans voting this primary season has been remarkable, but it’s disproportionately well-educated young people,” said CIRCLE Director Peter Levine. “Campaigns and interest groups mobilize youth on college campuses, but it’s harder to reach non-college youth, whose membership in unions, religious congregations, and community groups has fallen since the 1970s. We need to find a way to counteract this inequality and motivate all young people to vote so that their priorities and perspectives get attention. Research shows that schools can boost young people's participation by providing civic education in the form of social studies classes, service opportunities, discussions of current events and other activities.”

Instead of making things more equal though, school systems exacerbate this political inequality by providing more opportunities to learn about politics to higher income students, white students, and academically successful students, according to a new study by Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh of the Civic Engagement Research Group (CERG) at Mills College, also released by CIRCLE. Students in higher-income school districts are up to twice as likely as those from average-income districts to learn how laws are made and how Congress works, for example. They are more than one-and-a-half 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 and current events discussions, and to participate in simulations of civic processes. Latino students reported fewer opportunities to volunteer, participate in simulations and have discussion in an open classroom climate.

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“Schools should not offer opportunities to develop a civic and political voice on the basis of race or income or academic standing. Unfortunately, both our California and national data indicate that this is occurring,” said Joseph Kahne, CERG’s Director of Research and Dean of the School of Education at Mills College.

The exit polls revealed that young Democratic voters were the most racially and ethnically diverse voting bloc in the Super Tuesday primaries. The majority (53 percent) of voters ages 17-24 were non-white with young Latinos making up the largest minority voting bloc (23 percent), reflecting a growing trend in the youth population. There were no Republican breakdowns of voters by race and ethnicity available in exit polls.

The CERG study’s more positive findings show that schools can make a difference. Young people who receive civic learning opportunities develop civic commitments including a commitment to vote, regardless of race or socioeconomic status. These opportunities include:

- discussing current events
- studying issues about which students care
- experiencing an open climate for classroom discussions of controversial topics
- studying government, history and related social sciences
- providing opportunities to interact with civic role models
- engaging in after-school activities
- learning about community problems and ways to respond
- working on service learning projects
- engaging in simulations

“Schools are exacerbating inequality in voting when they could be narrowing the gap. The good news is that because schools reach a broader cross-section of youth than colleges, if they provide quality civic learning opportunities to all students, they can promote more equal participation” said Kahne.

In response to this “Civic Opportunity Gap,” the study’s authors’ recommend:

- Making desired civic learning opportunities part of the curriculum that all students receive rather than voluntary opportunities for the most interested or academically capable students.
- Providing professional development – especially for schools and teachers serving the groups of students that currently get fewer opportunities.
- Assessing the degree to which all groups of students are receiving desired civic learning opportunities.

The CERG study draws on a nationally representative sample of ninth graders and on a diverse set of more than 2,500 high school seniors in California. It was conducted in partnership with the Constitutional Rights Foundation and the California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools.

*The Civic Engagement Research Group at Mills College conducts quantitative and qualitative research on youth civic engagement and the impact of civic learning opportunities on young people’s civic capacities and commitments. Through its research the group works to frame priorities and develop evidence supporting best civic education practices. [www.civicsurvey.org](http://www.civicsurvey.org)*

*CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) promotes research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25. Since 2001, CIRCLE has conducted, collected, and funded research on the civic and political participation of young Americans. CIRCLE is based in the University of Maryland’s School of Public Policy and is funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, Carnegie Corporation of New York and several other foundations.*