Young Americans may very well decide the results of what many have deemed the most consequential election of our lifetimes. Although they face systemic barriers to political participation and are often excluded from national political conversations, this large and increasingly diverse group of Americans has demonstrated a willingness not only to vote but also to take meaningful action on behalf of candidates and causes they care about.

Millenials and members of Generation Z hold a huge amount of electoral power—but much of that power remains untapped. Young people turn out to vote at lower levels than older generations and are less likely than Americans of other ages to identify or affiliate with a political party. In order to help persuade these potential voters to exercise their power, campaigns must keep the needs and priorities of young people in mind when developing their voter outreach strategies and policy plans and should neither take their support for granted nor count them out prematurely. Engaging and mobilizing this diverse and influential section of the electorate to turn out and vote on election day should be the priority of every campaign, candidate, and political organization from now until November.

More young voters are independent

Compared to other generations, a larger share of young adults are choosing not to identify as either a Democrat or a Republican. Instead, they are deciding to vote, or not vote, based on other factors, such as policy preferences or candidate values.

A survey from the Alliance for Youth Action and HIT Strategies found that among registered voters between the ages of 17 to 35, 39 percent identify as Democrat, 24 percent as Republican, and 37 percent as independent.1 Notably, however, only 20 percent self-describe as "strong Democrat" and only 11 percent as "strong Republican." These percentages shift even further away from party affiliation when you look at people in the same age group who have yet to register to vote. Of that subset of potential voters, just 17 percent identify as Democrat and 12 percent as Republican—the vast majority, 72 percent, identify as independent.
The reason for this trend is not apathy. More than half of young people say that they watch, read, or listen to political news every month, and nearly 60 percent talk to their families about politics at least once a month. Even on the subject of political parties, young people seem well-informed—according to a CIRCLE poll, 65 percent of Democrats and Republicans and 58 percent of independents feel that they know both what it means to be a member of a political party and what the parties individually stand for. However, people in this age group tend to hold negative views of the parties overall and are skeptical of what they would gain by being part of one.

When The Washington Post spoke with left-leaning young people about their views on politics, many of them expressed affinity toward particular candidates but a great deal of skepticism with the Democratic party and its leaders. Young people who describe their political beliefs as leaning conservative are likewise often wary of formally affiliating themselves with the Republican party. One reason for this is that, despite having conservative beliefs on a number of issues, young conservatives’ views on social issues and environmental policy tend to be at odds with the conventional Republican platform. Other experts hypothesize that the rise of hyperpolarization in Congress, the Supreme Court, and other political institutions has meant that young people who have grown up in this system have an innate distrust of the information political parties give to them.

Young people are also disillusioned by some of the challenges that their respective generations have either seen or personally experienced while entering adulthood. Many Millennials came of age around the time of the Great Recession and struggled to find stable, well-paying jobs and make ends meet. Although Millennials and members of Gen Z year are more educated than older Americans, they are also disproportionately laden with debt compared with previous generations—an estimated one-third of them currently hold student loan debt. Economic inequality has also continued to climb, but wages and wealth for most people has barely budged, which is impacting the ability of younger Americans to pay off loans, buy houses, and start families.
Candidates will need to speak to these concerns that young people have as well as devise and employ new strategies to reach young people and earn their votes. One of those strategies should be helping to ensure they turn out to vote in the first place.

**Increasing the turnout of young voters is possible**

It’s no secret that the makeup of the citizen voting-age population of our country is shifting. In the 2020 election, nonwhite people will make up one-third of the electorate for the first time ever.9 People from Generation Z, who are between the ages of 18 to 23, will comprise one-tenth of eligible voters. This is a significant change from past years: In 2016, Generation Z made up just 4 percent of eligible voters.10 Still, actual turnout in elections varies greatly by age. Americans older than the age of 65 are the most reliable voters, with turnout ranging from 58 percent in 2014 to 73 percent in 2016.11 In contrast, people between the ages of 18 to 24 vote much less consistently; just 11 percent of people in this age group voted in the 2014 midterms, while 44 percent voted in the 2008 presidential election. Voters between the ages of 25 to 29 are similarly volatile: Only 17 percent of people in that age range voted in 2014, but a much more robust 52 percent voted in 2008. Given that the highest voting rates of these groups in the last couple of decades—44 percent and 52 percent, respectively—are still much lower than the average turnout of older voters in presidential elections, turnout rates for young people still have a lot of room to grow. And with such high rates of variance between youth voting rates in any given election, it’s not hard to imagine the youth vote rate increasing to levels never seen before—especially at a time when voter enthusiasm is high.

![Youth turnout has room to grow](source: Yair Ghitza, “Revisiting What Happened in the 2018 Election: An Analysis of the Catalist Voter Registration Database” (Washington: Catalist, 2019), available at https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SPtEkDDdP-~yjHp6mRIDYKekamHqcpN/view.)
One indication that enthusiasm among young potential voters is high is the turnout record of the 2018 election. Although just 11 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds and 17 percent of 25- to 29-year-olds voted in the 2014 midterms, 22 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds and 30 percent of 25- to 29-year-olds voted in the 2018 midterms. We can expect that number to be considerably higher in 2020, since all voters, but young people especially, tend to turn out for presidential elections at higher levels than they do for midterms.12

Another indication is the number of registered voters of all ages who have indicated that they’re excited to vote in the 2020 election. According to a CNN poll conducted by SSRS in September 2019, nearly half of voters describe themselves as “extremely enthusiastic” about voting in November 2020. In September 2015, only 31 percent described their enthusiasm level that way. In October 2011, just 28 percent said they were extremely enthusiastic.13

Youth voting is also on the rise more generally—voters between the ages of 18 to 29 were the only age group that expanded its turnout rate from 2012 to 2016.14 If the 2018 and 2016 elections are any indication, we can expect that young people will likely turn out for the 2020 election at even higher rates than they did for the last presidential election, which could dramatically impact the results of the election.

What young voters are up against
All indications point to young voters maintaining the same fervent enthusiasm for politics and political engagement that they had in 2018, which bodes well for high turnout in 2020. What does not bode as well are the spate of voter suppression measures passed at the state and local level over the past decade that may make it even harder for young people to cast a ballot.
Since 2010, at least 25 states have passed new restrictions on voting, including laws that require voters to present a certain form of identification or mandate voter registration purging after a person has not voted for a specified period of time. Many of these measures disproportionately affect young people and people of color. For instance, since young people vote less frequently than older Americans, these young potential voters are more likely to be systematically removed—or purged—from the voter rolls after missing an election or two. Given that young people also move more often—for school, jobs, or growing families—the new and expanding restrictions on voting can also make it more confusing for young people to register and reregister to vote in different places.

### Next steps for campaigns

Campaigns put a lot of research and labor into reaching different voting demographics. However, one of those groups tends to be left virtually untouched—young voters.

If campaigns want young people to vote for them, they have to put effort into making sure young people know who they are and what they stand for—and also make sure they are well-informed about voting restrictions that can’t be resolved between now and November. For instance, if a young person is excited to vote for a candidate but they don’t know that they need to bring their driver’s license to the polling location or register by a certain date, they won’t be able to cast a ballot. Making registration requirements and deadlines clear; providing transportation to the polls; and making sure that young voters know their rights can all go a long way toward ensuring young people feel empowered to turn out and vote.

Well before election day, reaching young people also means employing different communication and organizing strategies. Young people may not be watching cable TV, but they are on their phones and laptops—so investing in a digital strategy that reaches them and their devices is critical. A survey from CIRCLE found that 28 percent of people between the ages of 18 to 24 heard or read about the election on social media but had not been reached by political parties and campaigns. The survey also found that 54 percent of people in this demographic who heard about the election both on social media and offline described themselves as “extremely likely” to vote, while only 41 percent of people who heard about the election from campaigns but did not hear about it on social media described themselves that way.

In terms of organizing, it’s important to recognize that traditional forms of canvassing won’t always be adequate when it comes to reaching young voters. Most campaigns rely on data from the public voter files to know which people they need to be connecting with in advance of an election. This can be an issue when it comes to young people. Many young people live in apartment buildings that are difficult or impossible to canvass, and because they move more often, their homes are less likely to be on the voter files in the first place. Additionally, new voters—which CIRCLE
estimates around 70 percent of voters between the ages of 18 to 29 will be—are not included in the public voter files, which means their touch points with campaigns will be greatly limited or even nonexistent. For this reason, it’s important to find ways to meet and engage with young people in other places, such as well-publicized town halls or meetups in areas that are frequented by young people.

Once you have young people talking, campaigns should make sure to listen to their concerns and take them seriously. Just like older Americans who are concerned about Social Security or Medicare, young people also have social and economic concerns that they want to see addressed. Listening to them without judgment and figuring out how to talk to them about topics such as student loan debt, the gig economy, or a lack of perceived opportunity for advancement is an important step toward earning their trust—and their votes. Ask them what they are most concerned about and what they want to see their elected officials take action on, and then build solutions for those problems into robust policy plans.

**Conclusion**

Young people have incredible power in this election. They will make up more than one-third of eligible voters; are passionate about improving their country and world for themselves and their children; and are ready to take a stand for what they believe in. Neglecting to prioritize listening to, appealing to, and inspiring this group would be a major miscalculation. In the eight months leading up to the November 2020 election, campaigns should be connecting with young voters on a personal level, asking about their concerns, and creating policy proposals that will resonate with young people specifically. People between the ages of 18 to 35 are a relatively untapped portion of the electorate, but they’ve demonstrated that they are capable of big things. Don’t leave them on the sidelines.

*Emily Leach is the senior press associate for Generation Progress. Brent J. Cohen is the executive director of Generation Progress.*
Endnotes


2 Ibid.


7 Generation Progress, “Addressing the $1.5 Trillion in Federal Student Loan Debt,” June 12, 2019, available at https://genprogress.org/fixstudentdebt/.


10 Ibid.


12 Ibid.


19 Ibid.