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# Youth Electoral Significance Index

2018 Election

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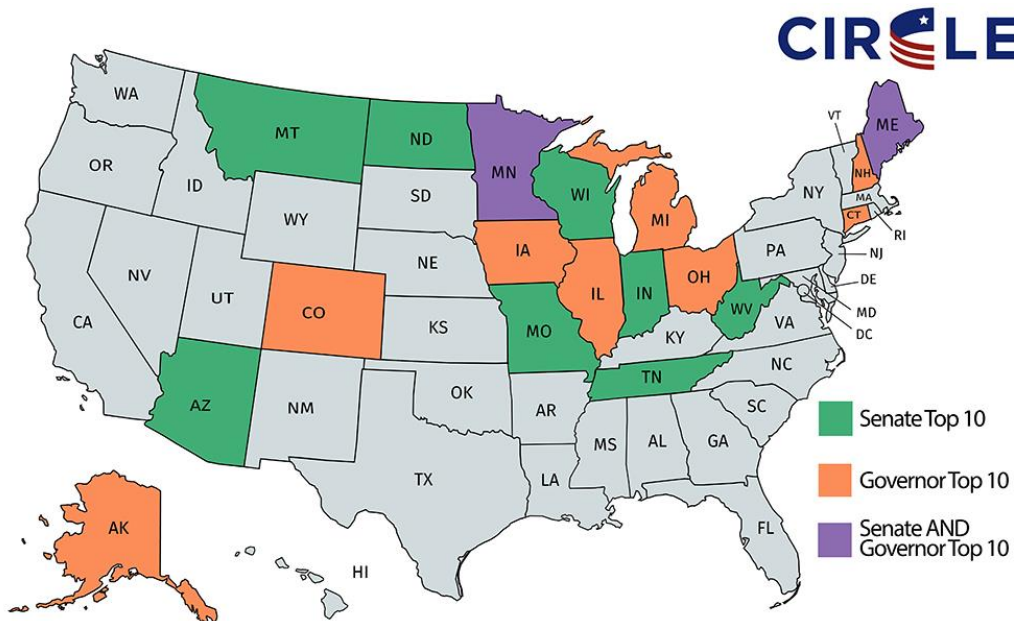
## Introduction

Many sectors of society must play a role in increasing youth voting and participation in democracy, and they can employ varied strategies to drive engagement. Different stakeholders will approach these efforts with diverse goals: some want to improve equity in civic participation, others to build a broad base of political power, and others still simply to win the next election.

CIRCLE's updated Youth Electoral Significance Index (YESI) is a valuable tool for any individual, campaign, organization, or institution that seeks to increase youth political engagement. Earlier this month, we highlighted the top 10 congressional districts where young people might have an especially high electoral influence. Today we are releasing the top 10 senate and gubernatorial races where young people have the potential to do the same. The YESI can help stakeholders identify places where additional efforts and resources to turn out the youth vote could be decisive. It can also be a tool for equity and broadening engagement, if efforts focus on reaching those not yet engaged in the top-ranked locations.

Because young people have the biggest potential to decide an election when it's projected to be close, competitiveness is a major factor in our Youth Electoral Significance Index (YESI). Thus our Senate and Governor's Top 10 features primarily two types of races: those with a vulnerable Democratic incumbent in a state Donald Trump carried in 2016, and elections for open seats following a sitting senator's retirement/resignation, or a sitting governor who is prevented by term limits from running again or has otherwise decided not to seek reelection. These races, like all competitive elections, are invaluable opportunities to drive especially high levels of interest and engagement from young voters.

Along with competitiveness, in each summary we highlight additional data that makes each state more likely to be ranked highly. This includes facilitative state election laws, large youth populations, and the presence of a considerable number of institutions of higher education, since campaigns often rely on colleges and universities to reach many potential young voters in one place.



## 2018 Senate Top 10

- 1. North Dakota** - Democratic Senator Heidi Heitkamp seeks reelection, after winning in 2012 by just one percentage point, in a state that Donald Trump won by 36 points in 2016. One-fifth of North Dakota's population is aged 18 to 29—the highest proportion of any state with a 2018 Senate election—and because the state does not use a voter registration process, there are fewer obstacles to participation like missed deadlines and strong potential for young people to be mobilized at any time before Election Day. Thirty percent of young North Dakotans voted in the 2014 midterms, more than 10 percentage points higher than the national youth turnout rate.
- 2. Minnesota** - Young people are poised to have an extraordinary impact at every level in Minnesota, which also ranks 1st in our Gubernatorial YESI and has four districts in our Congressional YESI Top 10. The race to replace Sen. Al Franken after his resignation is currently rated as a toss-up in a state with 19 “pivot counties” that went for Donald Trump in 2016 after going for Obama in 2008 and 2012. The state's demographics correlate with high potential turnout: a small percentage of low-income families and high educational attainment, with more than a third of young Minnesotans enrolled in one of over 80 colleges and universities in the state. Twenty-eight percent of youth voted in the previous midterm—much higher than the national figure—and online and same-day registration) facilitate participation.
- 3. Wisconsin** - Incumbent Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin faces a tough race in Wisconsin, which went for Donald Trump in 2016 and elected a Republican to the state's other Senate seat in the process. Young people make up 16% of the population, more than a third of whom attend one of the 66 higher education institutions across the Badger State. Online and same-day registration make it easier for young people to participate, and 29 percent of Wisconsin youth cast ballots in the previous midterm in 2014, 10 points higher than the national youth turnout.
- 4. Montana** - Democratic Senator Jon Tester will be in a tough fight for reelection in this solidly “red” state. Tester previously won reelection by less than four percentage points in 2012; two years later Montanans elected a Republican to the state's other Senate seat by 18 points, and Donald Trump won the state in 2016 by 20 points. Youth turnout in the previous midterms was slightly above average (23%), and Montana allows for same-day registration.
- 5. Missouri** - Senator Claire McCaskill faces a toss-up reelection race in a state where she was the last Democrat, in 2012, to win statewide office. Missouri went for Donald Trump by nearly 20 points in 2016. Young people favored Trump by a smaller margin than the overall population: 51% to 40% vs. 57% to 38%, which could be decisive in a tightly contested race. Youth turnout in the state has been slightly below average in recent elections, but pre-registration for 17-year-olds and online registration create opportunities to facilitate youth participation—as does the fact that a robust 35% of young people across the state attend one of over 100 higher education institutions.

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- 6. Indiana** - The state follows a familiar pattern: a projected toss-up in which Democratic Senator Joe Donnelly will be trying to keep his seat even though Donald Trump carried Indiana by nearly 20 points in 2016—though young people were evenly split in their support of Trump and Hillary Clinton (46% for both). Seventeen percent of the state's population is aged 18-29, and more than a third of youth attend a college or university in the Hoosier State. Online voter registration is available to facilitate electoral participation.
  
  - 7. West Virginia** - In the state where Donald Trump enjoyed his largest margin of victory over Hillary Clinton (69% to 27%) Senator Joe Manchin is considered one of the most vulnerable Democratic incumbents. Nearly a third of youth attend one of the 50+ colleges and universities in the state, a high number given West Virginia's modest population. West Virginia also has some of the most facilitative election laws in the country, including automatic voter registration, online registration, and pre-registration for 17-year-olds.
  
  - 8. Tennessee** - Republican Senator Bob Corker's resignation has put a question mark on what would be an otherwise safe Republican seat: in 2016, Donald Trump carried the Volunteer State by a 61% to 35% margin. The state's youth will have to improve on their voter turnout in the previous midterms, which was one of the lowest in the nation. They will benefit from online voter registration and the presence of 100 higher education institutions.
  
  - 9. Arizona** - The Arizona senate race is currently rated a toss-up after Republican Senator Jeff Flake decided not to seek reelection. Donald Trump carried the state by just 3 percentage points in 2016, while under-30 voters backed Clinton by 18 points, which makes young people—who make up 17% of the state's population—a potentially decisive electoral force. Unlike the other highly ranked states, Arizona has a high proportion of people of color, including Native Americans, and foreign-born residents, specifically Latinos, who historically turn out to vote at lower rates but may be motivated to go to the polls when issues that affect their communities are on the ballot. The state has worked on providing access to voting for non-English speakers, which may facilitate greater participation.
  
  - 10. Maine** - Maine, which also ranks second in our Gubernatorial YESI, was the definition of a swing state in 2016: half of its 16 counties were "pivot counties" that went for Donald Trump after favoring Obama in the two previous elections. Independent Senator Angus King, who caucuses with Democrats, will seek a second term in a state where young people frequently make their voices heard. Maine youth have had well above-average voter turnout in recent elections, including 32% in the 2014 midterms, which was among the highest in the nation. The state allows 17-year-olds to preregister to vote and allows same-day voter registration.

## 2018 Governor Top 10

- 1. Minnesota** - Young people are poised to have an extraordinary impact at every level in Minnesota, which also ranks 2nd in our Senate YESI and has four districts in our Congressional YESI Top 10. The state's gubernatorial races are historically competitive, and Democratic Governor Mark Dayton's decision not to seek reelection makes it even more of a toss-up. Minnesota's demographics correlate with high potential turnout: a small percentage of low-income families and high educational attainment, with more than a third of young Minnesotans enrolled in one of over 80 colleges and universities in the state. Twenty-eight percent of youth—much higher than the national figure—voted in 2014 when the previous gubernatorial election was held, and online and same-day registration facilitate participation.
- 2. Maine** - Maine, which also ranks tenth in our Senate YESI, was the definition of a swing state in 2016: half of its 16 counties were "pivot counties" that went for Donald Trump after favoring Obama in the two previous elections. Its gubernatorial seat has changed parties in five of the last 10 elections, and it's an open seat this year as term limits prevent Republican Governor Paul LePage from running again. Maine youth have had well above-average voter turnout in recent elections, including 32% in 2014 when LePage last won, which was among the highest in the nation. The state allows 17-year-olds to preregister to vote and allows same-day voter registration.
- 3. Colorado** - Young people make up 17% of the population in Colorado, where sitting Democratic Governor John Hickenlooper cannot seek reelection due to term limits. One in 10 state residents are foreign-born and one in five are Latino, which does not always suggest high turnout, but other demographic factors such as high educational attainment and a small proportion of low-income families do correlate with more participation. In 2014, an above-average 31% of Colorado youth went to the polls, and the state has exceptionally facilitative voting laws: pre-registration for 16-year-olds, automatic voter registration, online registration, and same-day registration.
- 4. Connecticut** - The state's gubernatorial race is currently rated a toss-up after Democrat Dan Malloy decided not to seek a third term. Young people make up 16% of Connecticut's population, and their above-average educational attainment and socioeconomic status indicates a high potential for engagement—as do the availability of automatic, online, and same-day voter registration. More than a third of youth are enrolled in one of the 54 higher education institutions in Connecticut.
- 5. Ohio** - Young people have the sheer numbers to be a powerful political force in Ohio: an estimated 1.8 million residents are aged 18-29. A third of them attend one of the nearly 200 colleges and universities in the state. Young people can also have an impact because of how they vote: while Donald Trump carried Ohio 52% to 44% in 2016, under-30 voters went the other way, favoring Hillary Clinton 51% to 42%. Ohio's Republican governor John Kasich, a 2016 presidential aspirant, cannot seek reelection due to term limits, which should make the open seat more competitive than usual.

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- 6. Michigan** - Term limits prevent Republican Governor Rick Snyder from running again in Michigan, which famously went for Donald Trump by less than 11,000 votes in 2016 and helped decide the election. But under-30 voters voted quite differently, choosing Clinton by 23 points (57% to 34%). The 1.6 million youth in the state, more than a third of whom attend one of almost 100 higher education institutions, will have another chance to swing an election—especially if they improve on their voter turnout of 21% in the previous midterm.
  - 7. Alaska** - Young people, aged 18-29, make up 19% of Alaska's population—the highest proportion of any state with a gubernatorial race this year. Young Alaskans have had a relatively high turnout in recent elections, including 30% in 2014 (compared to 19% nationally) and the state makes participation easier through online voter registration, automatic registration, and registration for some 17-year-olds. Governor Bill Walker is up for reelection after winning as an independent in 2014 with Democratic support, but the race's outlook is much more uncertain this year.
  - 8. Illinois** - There are nearly two million residents aged 18-29 in Illinois, with more than a third of them enrolled at one of 160+ higher education institutions in the state. They'll have a chance to make their voices heard in a toss-up race: Governor Bruce Rauner is considered one of the most vulnerable incumbents on the ballot: a Republican seeking reelection in a state that Hillary Clinton carried by 17 points—and by 39 points among youth. Online and same-day registration should facilitate participation.
  - 9. Iowa** - Young Iowans make up 17% of the state's population, and they've helped it live up to its reputation as a politically active state with above-average youth turnout in recent elections, including 24% in 2014 when the last gubernatorial election was held. Almost 40% of young Iowans are enrolled in a college or university, pre-registration for 17.5-year-olds, online registration, and same-day registration also translate to greater potential for youth participation. Sitting governor Kim Reynolds (R), who took over when the previous Governor was appointed a U.S. Ambassador, is seeking a full term.
  - 10. New Hampshire** - Republican incumbent Chris Sununu, who seeks reelection, won a close race in 2016 by less than 3 points—and with under-30 voters backing his Democratic opponent by 5 points. Young people make up 16% of the state's population, and New Hampshire's demographics (largely White, high educational attainment, small proportion of low-income families) favor higher turnout, as does the availability of same-day registration. There are 27 higher education institutions in the state, a high proportion given its population.

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## 2018 House Top 10

- 1. Iowa 1st (Cedar Rapids)** – Iowa's 1st district has 20 colleges and universities and a high proportion of 18 to 29-year-olds enrolled in college (over 40%). The district population is predominantly white and young people had one of the 20 best turnout rates in the nation in the 2014 midterms: 22%. There are several so-called pivot counties in this district, meaning that voters supported President Obama in 2012 and President Trump in 2016; so competitiveness will be a factor.
- 2. Minnesota 1st (Rochester-Mankato-Winona)** – More than 16 percent of the population in this Minnesota district is young, and recent youth turnout has been moderate. There are 15 institutions of higher education in the district, well above the national average. The area is largely rural, covering the southern border of the state. The district's overall population has characteristics that are associated with high turnout. There are several so-called pivot counties in this district (where voters supported President Obama in 2012 and President Trump in 2016), and the race is ranked as competitive.
- 3. Minnesota 3rd (Western Suburbs of Minneapolis)** – Competitiveness is the story here, combined with historically high turnout. This district is represented by a Republican member, but voters supported President Obama and then Secretary Clinton (by more than a 10-point margin). It was recently ranked as a toss-up. Voters in this district tend to turnout at higher rates, including young people; 27% of under-30s voted in the 2014 midterms, which was the 7th highest youth turnout in the country. Combined, these two factors may drive attention and young voters to the polls.
- 4. Michigan 11th (Wayne-Oakland)** – This district, which sits between Detroit and Ann Arbor (but does not include either city), is expected to be very competitive in 2018. The incumbent, David Trott (R), has announced he will not seek reelection, and more than 10 candidates have entered the race. While the number of young people living in the district is not notably high, the ratio of those youth who are enrolled in college is very high, a factor associated with higher turnout.
- 5. Colorado 6th (Adams-Arapahoe-Douglas)** – This is another Congressional race that is expected to be highly competitive in 2018. The incumbent, Republican Mike Coffman, was first elected in 2008, but the district went for President Obama in 2012 and for Secretary Clinton in 2019 (by 9 points), and continues to be considered a battleground district. College enrollment in the district is high, and youth turnout was 26% in 2014, among the 10 highest participation rates in the nation.
- 6. Minnesota 8th (Duluth-Grand Rapids)** – An ultracompetitive district where incumbent Democrat Rick Nolan won reelection by less than 2% in 2014 and less than 1% in 2016—despite the fact that it encompasses several pivot counties that helped President Trump win the district by a substantial 15% margin. Young people make up nearly 14% of the Minnesota 8th's population and more than 23% turned out to vote in 2014 (the 18th best youth turnout across the nation), casting over 20,000 ballots in a race decided by 3,700 votes. There are 13 higher-ed institutions in the district. The population is more than 90% White and just 2% foreign-born, which correlates with higher turnout.



- 7. Illinois 6th (West Chicago-Naperville)** – An affluent district whose residents have median household earnings of nearly \$100,000 and fewer than 10% are considered low-income. More than half the overall population has a college degree, and 57% are married. Young people make up 14% of the district's citizens. There is an open primary this March, and Politico calls the district one of 10 House races to watch in 2018 after incumbent Republican Peter Roskam won handily in 2016 even as Trump lost the district by 7 points.
- 8. Nebraska 2nd (Omaha)** – A perennial swing district that has been decided by less than 4% in all three congressional elections since 2012, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee has set its sights on unseating Republican Don Bacon. A hundred thousand young people live in the Nebraska 2nd, making up over 16% of the district's population. Nearly 40% of the district population is enrolled in one of its 10 higher education institutions.
- 9. Minnesota 2nd (Southern part of Twin Cities)** – This district was #5 in our 2016 YESI rankings, and Republican Jason Lewis edged out his opponent by less than 3% in that congressional election. It includes parts of Rice County, one of the pivot counties in the 2016 race. The district has seen relatively high youth turnout in recent midterms: 23% of youth voted in 2014, 17th best in the country. Its residents are fairly well-off, with a median income of over \$80,000, and more than 80% of district citizens are White.
- 10. California 39th (East L.A.-Orange County-San Bernardino)** – More than 110,000 young people live in this southern California district. They make up close to 18% of the population—the highest proportion for any district in our top-10. While much more racially diverse than other high-ranking districts, it has other attributes related to strong electoral significance, like a median household income of \$85,000. Longtime Republican congressman Edward Royce's retirement after holding the seat for 26 years has set the stage for a highly competitive race in 2018.

## Top 10 Congressional Districts

Where Young People Might Decide the 2018 Elections





## Methodology

The Youth Electoral Significance Index (YESI) was first created in 2016 to illustrate the *potential of young voters, ages 18-29, to affect the outcomes* of that year's Presidential, Senate, and House races.

CIRCLE has now redeveloped YESI for the 2018 elections with updated data and information that reflects the latest ratings of races' competitiveness and, notably, an up-to-date analysis of state's electoral laws. We calculated a separate index for Senate, Governor, and House races, and we profile the top 10 states and districts from each index in this report.

We believe these rankings and profiles can serve as useful tool for understanding youth demographics more deeply and developing outreach and mobilization strategies for the 2018 election and beyond.

### **YESI's methodology consists of four steps, as described below:**

1. Build a conceptual model of youth electoral significance based on research about youth voting patterns and trends, and our retrospective analysis of the youth vote's influence on statewide races occurring between 2006 and 2014. This model suggested that three types of indicators likely influence youth electoral significance: 1) the size and characteristics of youth and overall eligible population demographics, along with the context of voting in the state (such as electoral laws); 2) youth voter turnout in midterm elections; 3) potential leverage of young voters, such as historical differences in the vote choice of youth and the overall electorate; and the expected competitiveness of the race in 2016.
2. Gather available data about the demographic composition of each community (state or congressional district), along with data such as past voter turnout, youth vote choice, share of votes cast by youth, and predicted competitiveness of the upcoming race. For state YESIs, we collected information about statewide electoral laws. Components of YESI data, data sources, and calculation methods are described in detail below.
3. Create composite indices (i.e., a score made up of multiple, related indicators) for the demographic makeup of each district or state, and determine how the conceptual pieces of YESI fit together. We made changes to the Facilitative Election Law Index, which is a way to account for ways in which states have passed and implemented election laws that facilitate registration and voting. For 2018, we rated states on automatic voter registration, same-day registration, online registration, pre-registration for 16- or 17-year olds, and ease of access to information about voting absentee, as a college student, and as an ex-felon.
4. Compute YESI by averaging standardized scores from each component of the data. This gives us an "unweighted" YESI score, which does not yet incorporate information on the competitiveness of the upcoming race. Because the possibility of youth influence on the outcome is highly dependent on how close the race is expected to be, we weigh that factor heavily and compute the final rankings by adding a "competitiveness" score to the unweighted YESI.

## Data Elements of YESI

### 1. Demographic data and context

We focus on the relative share of youth population in the eligible electorate and on the number of colleges and universities in the state or district. As part of the context of youth voting, we also include the extent to which each state has implemented laws that are designed to increase registration and voting, especially among youth.

Indicator	Operational Definition	Source	Units of data availability
<b>Size of youth population relative to the overall population</b>	% of adult citizen population who are aged 18 to 29	American Community Survey (ACS)	State CD
<b>Presence of sizable college student population</b>	Number of students (of all ages) enrolled in colleges and universities in the state or Congressional district, relative to the 18-29 citizen population in the same geographic location (expressed as % ratio). Students who are enrolled 100% online are excluded from the student count.	IPEDS (The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System), ACS	State CD
<b>Newcomer Index</b>	The extent to which the population is made up of naturalized citizens and predominantly Spanish-speaking individuals. (Inverse score is used in the index, as a low % of newcomers predicts higher turnout)	American Community Survey	State CD
<b>Economic Challenge Index</b>	The degree to which the community faces economic challenges such as high unemployment rate and low income. (Inverse score is used in the index, as a low % of population with these characteristics predicts higher turnout.)	American Community Survey	State CD
<b>High Turnout Demographic Index</b>	The degree to which the community has a high proportion of individuals who share the backgrounds of high-turnout propensity individuals (higher level of educational attainment, % white in the community, % married)	American Community Survey	State CD
<b>State election laws that can facilitate youth vote</b>	We count online registration, automatic registration, pre-registration, same-day-registration, and ease of access to information about voting as students, absentees, or ex-felons on the state election website. With each law, we give up to two points if there is evidence of strong implementation and for website, one point if all three types of information is easily accessible.	National Conference of State Legislatures	State
<b>% of youth who have a mid-range vote propensity score</b>	% of 18-29s who fall into the "middle propensity score" category (propensity scores are calculated using demographic factors and voting history, and are highly correlated to voter turnout).	Catalist	State

## 1. Past Youth Voter Engagement

Indicator	Operational Definition	Source	Units of data availability
Baseline for youth voter engagement	State and congressional youth turnout in past few midterm election years	State: CPS 2006, 2010, 2014 (averaged) CD: Catalist (2014)	State CD

## 2. Potential Leverage of Youth Vote

Indicator	Operational Definition	Source	Units of data availability
Predicted competitiveness of the race in 2018	Average competitiveness rating from various expert sources and reports	Cook Political Report, Rothenberg & Gonzales, and Sabato Crystal Ball ratings as of 2/13/2018	State CD
Decisiveness of youth support for a party in most recent races	% voted for Democratic candidate vs. % voted for Republican candidate (among youth)	Exit polls (for youth by state), based on availability Aggregate data (for all 18+)	State (2014 and 2016) CD (2014)
Contrast between youth party support and older adults	% voting Democrat among 18-29s) - % voting Democrat among those 30+	Exit polls	State (2014 and 2016)

## Calculation of YESI

YESI is calculated so that a higher score means higher potential for youth electoral influence. We standardized the unit of measurement for this index by converting all continuous indicators (i.e., not categories or Yes/No) into Z-score. This allowed us to compare states and congressional districts to one another on a relative scale, ranging from 1st percentile (lowest) to 100th percentile (highest), making it easier to understand where each state/CD ranked compared to the average. On the [YESI site](#), we display the percentile rank for ease of interpretation: "50" is 50th percentile or median.

We chose to calculate YESI by averaging standardized scores of all indicators and demographic indices, and then adding 3 points if a state or district is considered a battleground by at least one expert.

### Senate and Gubernatorial YESI

YESI\_P\_W=mean (Z\_difference in democratic support by age, Z\_difference in democratic support by age, Average youth Turnout, Z\_YouthPopShare\_16, Z\_% of 18-29 year olds in college, Z\_Number of institute of higher ed per 10,000 youth, Election Law index, Z\_Newcomerindex\_inversed, Z\_Unemployment\_pov\_inversed, Z\_HighTurnOutDemographic, Z\_% youth rated with mid-range vote propensity score) + Presidential Battleground (+3 if yes)

**YESI – Congressional Districts**

The methodology for calculating the Congressional District YESI (YESI-CD) is similar to that for the Senate and Gubernatorial YESI, except that there are fewer data points available for congressional districts than for states. As we did for the state index, we calculated Congressional YESI scores that account for the predicted competitiveness in 2018, past turnout data, and the number of higher education institutions in the district. For predicted competitiveness, we incorporated the latest information on the House races that are predicted to be competitive based on three sources (Cook, Rothenberg and Sabato), and we added points that correspond to the most competitive rating among those three. For instance, if Cook rated a district as toss-up and the other two rated it as leaning, we gave the district a rating score of “toss-up.”

For House races, we do not have data on the specific direction and magnitude of youth support for a Democratic candidate, or how youth vote choice compared to that of older voters. Thus, we omitted these elements from the index calculation. We did include youth turnout in 2014 (data were available for districts in 44 out of 50 states), youth share of population, as well as the number of colleges and the number of students enrolled in colleges with addresses in each district. For the number of enrolled students, we excluded students enrolled as “100% distant education” from all universities in our sample, based on an assumption that these students are likely located outside of the district.

**A Note on Florida and Pennsylvania:** Due to recent court rulings against the district boundaries used in 2014 (and 2016) in Florida and Pennsylvania, we were unable to include any districts in these states † in our ranking. YESI relies on past turnout and population statistics, and in those two states we were unable to obtain data that would allow us to estimate a past youth turnout base within the new geographic boundaries. However, their absence from our ranking does not mean that youth are not likely to have a significant impact in those two states, which are in fact very likely to feature competitive races where young people can make a difference, especially where there are large youth populations in college towns and elsewhere.