



CENTER FOR INFORMATION & RESEARCH ON CIVIC LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT

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Minneapolis Election Judge Project

# Insights for Communities and the Media from High School Poll Workers

What Youth Want You to Know

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## Introduction

Young people are critical to running elections all over the country, and we want your help bringing more young people into the process. In the United States, elections are regular occurrences. They do not only happen every two or four years; there are local elections every year that have a profound impact on the lives of communities. Running elections takes a great deal of time and effort, and many people are required to make elections run smoothly and fairly. In this brief, you'll find an overview of how paid young poll workers support elections, why this youth leadership opportunity is important, and how you can help make sure more young people know how they can step up, help their communities, and help democracy run smoothly and fairly.

The contents of this brief are based on a survey of young people who acted as poll workers in Minneapolis, MN, during the 2020 election. This research was a collaborative effort between young leaders in Minneapolis, the Minneapolis Elections and Voter Services Office, the YMCA of the Twin Cities, the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University, and Auburn University.

## What Do Youth Poll Workers Do?

While professional election administrators oversee elections, they hire poll workers from their community to assist them at the many precincts that they oversee. Young people all over the country are eligible to be community leaders in this way. In all states, individuals 18 and over can be poll workers, and in most states (44 states) young people ages 16 and 17 can do so as well, according to [CIRCLE's 2020](#)



[scan of state policies that support “growing voters.”](#) In Minneapolis, a youth election judge program has existed for many years. In 2020, 400 high schoolers from 59 different schools in the city participated.

Poll workers of all ages do a range of tasks, including greeting voters, helping voters register (when applicable), checking in registered voters, and explaining how to successfully mark a ballot. Additionally, when poll workers speak a language in addition to English (which many youth do), they may be able to provide language support to voters who need it.

Youth poll workers promote and facilitate democracy by ensuring that everyone who is eligible to vote is able to do so in a quick and easy manner.

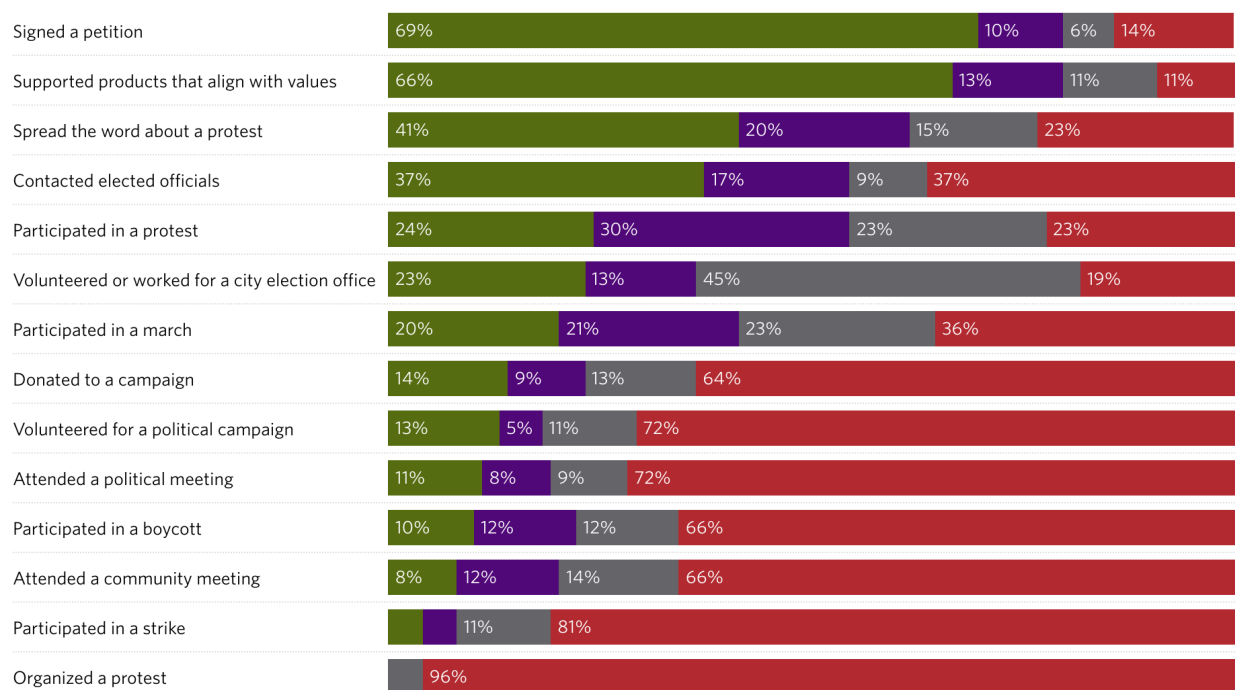
## Why This Is Important

There are many reasons why involving young people in helping to support elections is positive. In fact, we like to call it a triple win: good for youth, good for the integrity of elections, and good for our communities. Young people fill critical gaps in capacity to staff voting locations. Often, they also bring knowledge of other languages and ability to use newer technologies. Additionally, having a wider diversity of election judges can create a more understanding and welcoming environment at voting locations.

### How Many Times Have You Engaged in Each of these Actions in the Past 12 Months?

Respondents were most likely to sign a petition, support products that align with their values, attend a protest, or volunteer at least once.

■ Three or More Times ■ Twice ■ Once ■ Never



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Source: Minneapolis 2020 election youth poll worker post-election survey

Becoming a poll worker is also an opportunity for young people, across a range of ideologies, to translate their interest in civic engagement into action that supports fair and equitable elections. As the graph above shows, many young people are already interested in supporting their communities. When youth are in public leadership positions, such as by serving as poll workers, it can encourage other youth to get civically involved.

It's also clear that these opportunities have a positive impact on young people who participate. The graph below shows the positive benefits that young people report from being a part of the Minneapolis program. This includes learning to interact with older generations, learning practical skills, and an increased sense of belonging to their community.

### Working as an Election Judge...

A majority of young poll workers felt that the experience connected them to the community and improved their skills.

Made me feel I helped ensure every eligible voter felt welcome and able to vote

76%

Made me feel I was making things better for my community

67%

Gave me practical skills that will help me in the future

59%

Helped me improve how to communicate with older people

54%

Gave me a strong sense of belonging to my community

52%

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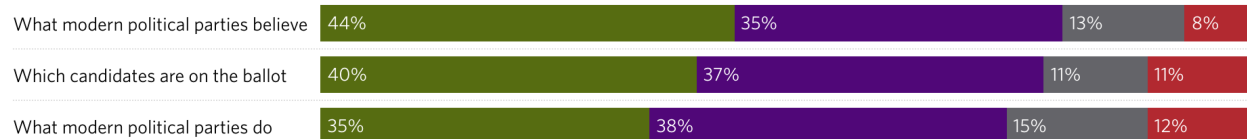
Chart: Minneapolis 2020 election youth poll worker post-election survey

In addition, being a poll worker can benefit young people who may not have had the opportunity to learn about civic and political life in school or at home. The graph below shows that how much young people learn from their families can differ a great deal.

### How Much Have You Learned From Your Family About...

Respondents learn a lot about politics and elections from their families

■ A great deal ■ A moderate amount ■ A little ■ Not at all



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Source: Minneapolis 2020 election youth poll worker post-election survey

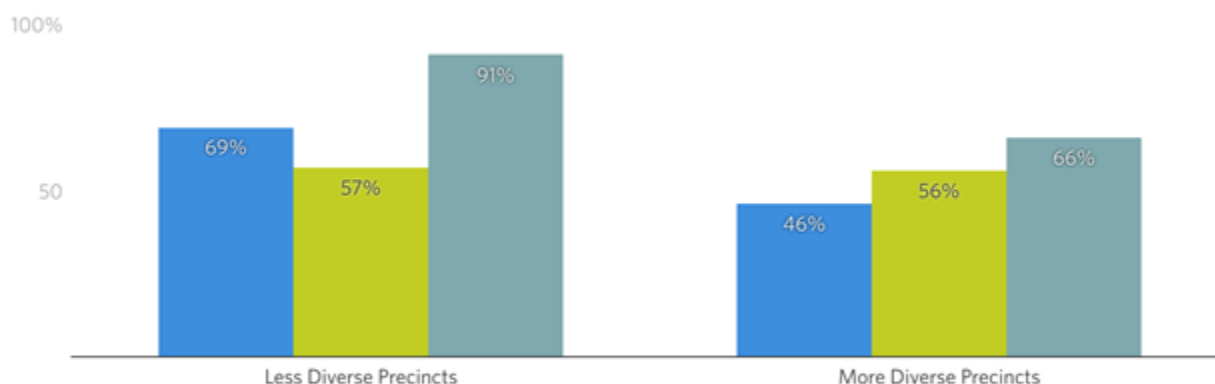
Finally, there is evidence that having more young poll workers may benefit democracy more broadly. A regression model of precinct-level voter turnout in 2020 suggested that, accounting for the 2016 general election turnout, the population size, and the racial/ethnic composition of the precinct population, the number of youth election judges at a given precinct was significantly correlated with estimated voter turnout among 18- to 24-year-olds.

A follow-up analysis indicated that having youth poll workers may be especially important in precincts where at least 40% of the residents are members of minority groups. While, overall, youth voter turnout tends to be lower in these more diverse precincts, those with four or more student election judges (out of 10-12 total poll workers) had a similar youth voter turnout rate than less diverse precincts with just one or no student election judges. Therefore, our study suggests that young election workers may be most important in precincts where voters are more diverse and can help ensure that there's greater equality in voter participation across different communities.

### Youth Voter Turnout Was Highest in Minneapolis Precincts with More Student Election Judges

CIRCLE estimates of the average youth voter turnout (ages 18-24) in precincts, based on population demographics and the number of student poll workers in each precinct.

■ 0-1 Student Election Judges ■ 2-3 Student Election Judges ■ 4+ Student Election Judges



**Notes:** "More diverse" precincts are defined as those where 40% or more of the population is nonwhite.


We removed several precincts that are immediately adjacent to universities within the city and had a very large share of 18- to 24-year-olds. Due to students possibly moving out of the neighborhood due to the COVID-19 pandemic and universities offering virtual instruction, we did not believe we could accurately estimate the residential population in those precincts at the time of the 2020 election.

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Source: CIRCLE analysis of 132 Minneapolis precincts' aggregated turnout data from the 2020 Catalyst voter files, along with American Community Survey population estimates

## Recommendations and Next Steps

There are steps that you can take to support young people who are helping communities by acting as poll workers:

- **Help spread the word to young people in youth life:** The benefits mentioned above are an opportunity for a wide range and diversity of young people to participate. Parents and guardians looking out for the young people in their lives can consider this a leadership, skill development, and educational opportunity. In particular, parents and others who regularly interact with high school-aged youth can do a lot to get the word out about this paid leadership opportunity, which many people are not aware of. Communities need your help making sure that the group of young people who are involved represent your community.
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"As a student, I would like to gain more experience with the election process and in government. I want to help other students understand how important their role is in local and national elections. Many students in Minneapolis don't understand the impact that their vote makes with issues that affect them directly."
- **Media can build awareness while sharing good local news stories:** Stories about youth civic and political leadership, like youth working as poll workers, can help to build local pride. Diverse young leaders, from across regions and backgrounds, getting active to make their communities and democracies stronger can make for a great story! It also helps to show the lengths that election administrators go through to make elections run smoothly and fairly. This could take the form of interviews, profiles, or photos and videos showing youth being civically involved. These are also great stories to tell in collaboration with young leaders, bringing youth voices into the media.
  - **Media can also help reach a broader diversity of youth:** Media can increase the number of PSAs, ads, and information about being a youth election judge coming from your outlet. These resources help amplify the importance of young people's electoral participation. Media can also collaborate with schools and election administrators to inform schools and youth about student election judging opportunities.

As immediate next steps, individuals and organizations can check whether their community has a local youth election judge program, learn more about the program in your area, and work with local election administrators to create accurate recruitment/advertising materials you can share.

## About the Research

The data contained in this report was collected through the Minneapolis Election Judge Project, a collaborative effort between Minneapolis Elections & Voter Services, the YMCA of the North, the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University's Tisch College of Civic Life, Auburn University, and the Civic Scholars. The Civic Scholars are a group of student interns currently enrolled in high school and college who were selected to participate a series of projects related to the Minneapolis Elections & Voter Services Student Election Judge Program. One of the projects was a survey to evaluate the experiences of student poll workers during the 2020 General Election. Both a pre-election survey and post-election survey of youth election judges were conducted in October and November of 2020. The survey questions were created by the Civic Scholars with guidance from the Minneapolis Elections & Voter Services, the YMCA of the North, CIRCLE, and Auburn University. The survey was administered by the Minneapolis Elections & Voter Services Student Election Judge Program. A total of 133 youth election judges responded to the pre-election survey, and 147 to the post-election survey. The data presented is from the post-election survey.

From January 2021 to April 2021, the Civic Scholars worked with the partner organizations to produce three reports from the 2020 surveys. This report is one of three that was created from that work. The other two reports, one of which summarizes lessons and findings from the project, and another aimed at teachers and educators, can be found on the CIRCLE website.

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CIRCLE (The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) is a nonpartisan, independent, academic research center that studies young people in politics and presents detailed data on young voters in all 50 states. CIRCLE is part of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University.

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