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Minneapolis Election Judge Project

Insights for Teachers from High School Poll Workers

What Youth Want You to Know

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UNIVERSITY

the 
YMCA

Introduction

Over the past few election cycles, America has faced a shortage of poll workers, putting our right to free and fair elections in jeopardy. In addition, poll workers are becoming more and more unrepresentative of the population as a whole—they tend to be older and whiter than the general population. [A Pew Research analysis](#) found that 58% of poll workers were over the age of 60, while just 8% were under the age of 25. In addition, young people turn out to vote at far lower rates than seniors and retirees. Allowing young Americans to receive a proper exposure to the voting process is crucial in order to stimulate higher levels of political interest and knowledge, and boost turnout in the future.

To counter this trend, counties and municipalities across the country are creating programs aimed at recruiting high school students to work as election judges. These programs allow 16- and 17-year-old students to gain real-world experience at a polling location, while also being paid for their work. For students who aren't quite old enough to vote, it's a great way to learn about elections and the voting process while earning money at the same time.

This brief analyzes survey data from a group of student election judges in Minneapolis. The survey data provides an overview of the benefits of student election judging, both in terms of increasing civic engagement among young people and its effects on teachers and the classroom environment.

What are the benefits of election judging?

- **Young people are strongly committed to civic action.** Nearly 70% of surveyed students rated protesting as a “very important” form of political participation. In addition, 44% of surveyed students rated participating in boycotts as “very important” and 55% said so about participating in strikes. Despite this interest, though, voter turnout among young people is still lower than among older adults.
- **Schools are failing to educate young people about the voting process.** When asked about whether they learned about how to register to vote in school, 44% of surveyed students reported they did not cover it at all. With regards to requesting an absentee ballot, that number rose to 68%. At the same time, 68% of students reported that they did learn about which candidates are on the ballot and the role of political parties. The data suggests that social studies education is too focused on teaching about politics in

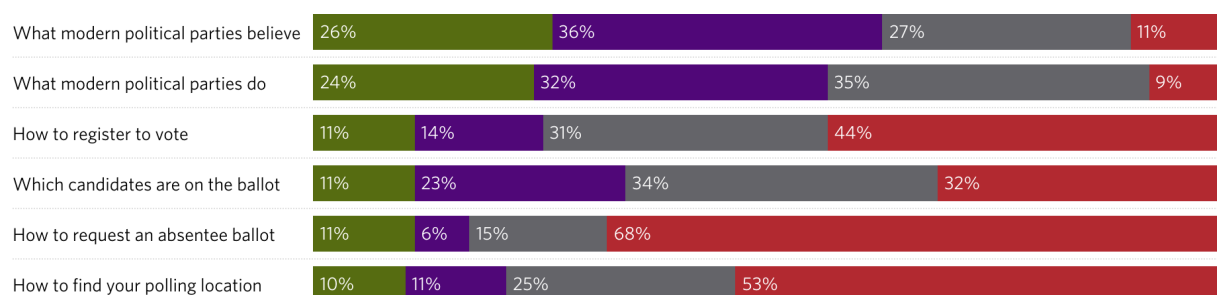
general—as a result, students are not being taught about the mechanics of voting, an important part of the political process.

- **Student election judging plays an important role in filling this gap.** 99% of surveyed student election judges reported that working as an election judge helped them better understand the voting system, and almost 70% said it helped "a great deal." Nearly 100% of youth who were 18 or older said that they were planning to vote in the 2020 election. In essence, getting students "in the door" through programs like student election judging is essential in increasing voter turnout among young people.

How Much Did You Learn in School About...

Respondents learned more about the actions and positions of political parties, less about the practicalities of registration and voting.

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

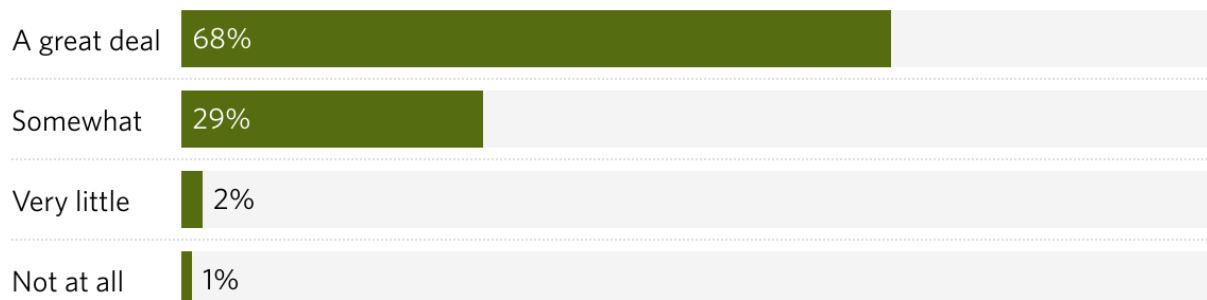


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Source: Minneapolis 2020 election youth poll worker post-election survey

To What Extent Did Serving as an Election Judge Help You Understand the Voting System?

97% of young election judges improved their understanding of the voting process.



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

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

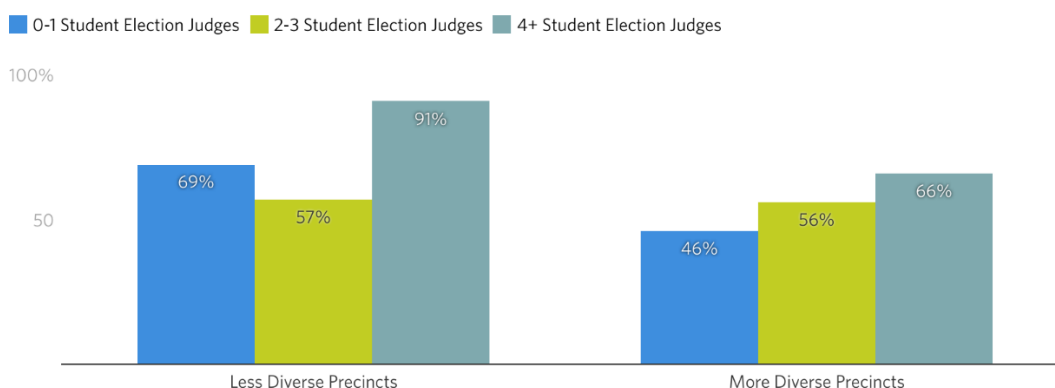
Having Student Poll Workers Led to Higher Youth Voting

The survey created and fielded by young leaders in Minneapolis shows that young poll workers believe they benefit in myriad ways from the experience. 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.



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

Why Should Teachers and Administrators Care?

It's a win-win situation for both students and teachers. Student election judges become more motivated in and out of the classroom, and they are more likely to be involved in civic activities. And teachers enjoy classes filled with engaged students.

"During the pandemic, I found myself consuming the news 24/7 on Twitter. I would keep up with the 2020 presidential election and would witness voter suppression on social media. My closest friends were turning voting age but seemed disinterested or believed their vote could not change the outcome of the policies that would affect us in the future. So I turned to voter engagement, posting voter hotlines and voting information, to keep my friends updated and informed. People like Stacey Abrams inspire me to engage people in a fundamental process of our country, to help shape the government to reflect our communities. I hope to take this with me into college where I plan on majoring in political science!"

"As an election judge last November, I realized how much I did not know much about one of our country's tenet processes. I now understand voting requirements and have a more comprehensive understanding of how to vote. I have noticed a lack of education in schools about registering to vote and how to become an election judge, because the training was the first time I had been taught anything about voting. This made me want to help other students my age have the opportunity to get involved as student election judges and learn how to vote before they turn 18, just like I did."

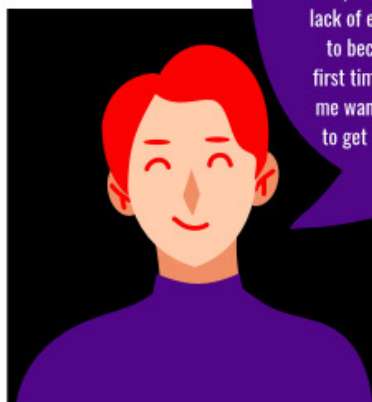
What Student Poll Workers Thought about their Experience in the Program



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"I talk to a lot of teens and I know that they don't want to get involved in elections and implement change because they don't know how. With my help more teens would be able to learn about this process and expand their interests! I think it is critical to get teens more involved so we can learn and when it's time to vote we can make change."



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Recommendations and Next Steps

Teachers have access to many resources for teaching civics, but it is important not to think of civic education as something that happens only in the civics classroom. Here are some ideas:

- As most schools have a Constitution Day or History Day set aside for reviewing and learning more about the Constitution, we strongly suggest that a **Voting Day** be introduced to the curriculum. Students should learn the history of voting and the historical fights of citizens so that many of us today can vote.
- Schools should dedicate **more time and material to the election process** and help students understand how to vote.
- **Invite the local elections office** or nonpartisan nonprofits to teach your students how to run a voter registration drive in your school.
- **Mock elections** can be a hands-on activity that many students can participate in to bridge learned material and experience.
- Connect with local elections offices and other government offices to find out about ways young people can be involved now in their communities. Talk with your students about opportunities for them to serve as poll workers, serve on local boards and commissions, or advocate for a local issue that is important to them. Help students become aware of internship opportunities with elections or other local government offices, and invite those students to speak to their peers about their experiences.

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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<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/06/older-people-account-for-large-shares-of-poll-workers-and-voters-in-u-s-general-elections/>

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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