



Protests, Politics, and Power: Exploring the Connections Between Youth Voting and Youth Movements

Executive Summary

August 2021



Youth-led social movements have been one of the big stories of the past few years. Across the country, teenagers and young adults have banded together to lead movements that have organized massive rallies aimed at ending gun violence, climate walkouts and marches, and protests to demand racial justice. CIRCLE's research reveals a surge in the number of young people who reported having participated in marches or protests: from 5% in 2016, [to 16% in 2018, and 27% in 2020](#).

During the same period, there has also been a marked increase in youth voting. Historically, young people have voted at a much lower rate than other age groups. But in 2018, youth turnout [increased by 15 percentage points](#) compared to the 2014 midterms: 28% vs. 13%. In 2020, youth turnout [rose by 11 points compared to 2016](#): 50% vs. 39%. These are major developments in youth electoral participation, which is an important pathway into civic life for young people.

Both of these trends—the rise in youth activism and the rise in youth voting—have been examined individually. But it is not yet well-understood if and how they converge. Specifically, questions remain about whether and in what ways recent protests and youth-led social movements may have contributed to an increase in youth voting.

A team of scholars has produced two studies exploring this question from different vantage points and with different methods. Both studies address the key question of whether and how protest and youth-led social movement organizations affect youth voting. We summarize both studies, along with major findings and recommendations below, but we strongly encourage reading both reports in full in order to grasp the nuanced data and the valuable insights from young leaders across the country.

Study I: The Role of Electoral Engagement in Youth Social Movements

Authors: Jerusha Conner, Johnnie Lotesta, Tova Wang, Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, with Alex Foley, Miranda Febus, Kristen Oshyn

Overview

To understand the relationships between youth-led social movement organizations (SMOs) and young people's voting-related attitudes and behaviors, this qualitative study draws primarily on interviews with leaders, staff, and rank-and-file members from five youth-led SMOs. Interviews were supplemented by a focus group with rank-and-file SMO members, as well as follow-up surveys assessing members' behaviors, attitudes, and experiences related to organizing and electoral engagement. To understand the broader environment in which our target SMOs are situated, we also conducted interviews with youth leaders from other SMOs, as well as high-ranking staff from organizations that support youth activism.

Recognizing that the social movements in which youth participate are fueled by a variety of organizational actors, we identified five youth-led SMOs that are racially and geographically diverse: Sunrise Movement, Youth Climate Action Team (YCAT), March for Our Lives (MfOL), GoodKids MadCity (GKMC), and Palmetto Youth Movement (PYM). These organizations work to address a range of issues but focus primarily on either climate justice or gun violence prevention (GVP) and community safety. We purposefully selected organizations with varying structures, sizes, and organizing models in order to illuminate the diversity of organizational actors within the broader climate and gun violence prevention movements. Detailed organizational profiles describing the origins, growth, and key characteristics of our five target SMOs appear in the full report.

Findings

The degree to which voting figures in the theories of change of the youth-led SMOs in this study can be positioned on a spectrum (See the figure below). The right end of the spectrum represents groups that fully embrace electoral politics and center voting, such as Sunrise Movement. The left end of the spectrum is populated by groups like the now-dissolved U.S. Youth Climate Strike, which dispute that voting can lead to sustainable change.



Irrespective of the differences in their SMOs' theories of change or level of engagement in electoral strategies, the youth respondents in this study tended to believe that voting is necessary but not sufficient to effect change. None of the survey respondents rated voting as "not at all important" as a vehicle for change, and 74% saw it as extremely or very important, reflecting our over-sampling of March and Sunrise members. Members from every SMO we studied reported engaging in at least one Get Out the Vote (GOTV) effort, whether nonpartisan voter registration, information sharing, text or phone banking, canvassing in support of, or endorsing specific candidates. Across the spectrum, interview respondents reported engaging in approximately 3.5 distinct GOTV effort types per person, on average, in the lead up to the 2020 election. Even still, respondents believed voting and voter engagement work could not stand on their own and must be paired with other forms of social engagement, including direct action, education efforts, and community healing.

The SMOs in our study used a range of strategies to create engaged voters, both inside and outside their member networks. Many respondents made references to sharing information with those outside their SMOs on where to vote, how to register to vote, how to vote by mail versus in person, voting absentee, etc.—with an emphasis on reaching first time voters. Beyond external information sharing both in person and virtually, many groups reported an emphasis on state and local government, such as getting informed about school board or city council races, or showing up to a legislative hearing. Some participants saw this focus as a means of helping young people, especially young people of color whose communities have faced significant disenfranchisement, feel more empowered and hopeful. We also observed the use of endorsements as a tool for both recruitment

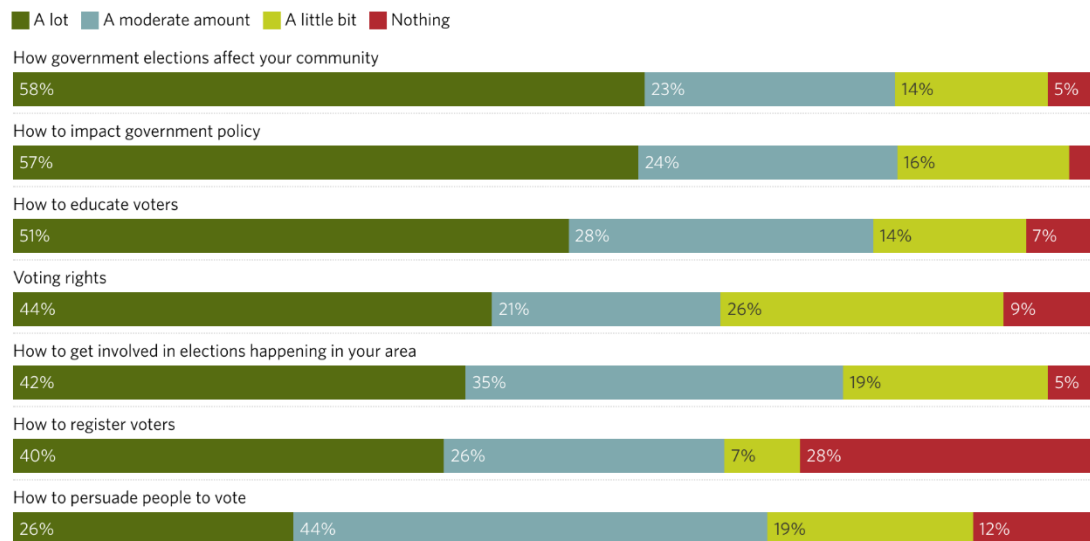
and for building youth power, particularly among our target climate justice SMOs. Two of the climate organizations we studied—Sunrise and YCAT—mentioned endorsing specific candidates.

Across all SMOs in our study, just over one quarter of interview respondents reported that participating in their youth-led SMO improved their perception of voting as a vehicle for change. This improvement was most pronounced among chapter leaders and committed participants. Survey data focused only on rank-and-file members suggest that improved perceptions of voting were more common among members of the national SMOs that center voting in their theories of change than among the state and community-based organizations that did not emphasize voting.

Youth-led SMO's impact on members' perceptions of voting were not unidirectional, however. Just as some interview respondents credited their SMO with giving them a more positive view of voting, others reported gaining a more negative or critical perspective. For some, this shift in perspective involved a realization that voting alone would not create the change they wished to see. Still others suggested that their participation in our focal SMOs reinforced, rather than changed, their voting-related attitudes.

Consonant with previous research, survey data show that participating in SMOs led to new knowledge and new ways of thinking among study respondents. All but two survey respondents reported learning about how to get involved in elections happening in their area, and a full 90% reported learning about voting rights. Seventy-two percent of respondents learned about registering voters, 88% learned about how to persuade others to vote, and 93% learned about how to educate voters. (See the figure below.) Respondents also reported learning about areas beyond voting and electoral politics. For example, all survey respondents reported learning more about how to effect social change, and the skills involved in organizing.

How Much Survey Respondents Learned about Voting, Elections, and Government



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Source: Youth Movements & Voting Study survey of youth-led SMO members and chapter leaders

We conducted our research in summer 2020, amidst the rapidly developing COVID-19 pandemic and a national reckoning with racial injustice in the wake of the police killing of George Floyd. Both these developments posed unexpected challenges to the young people in our study. Beyond transitions to distance learning, social distancing, and economic insecurity, youth-led SMO leaders and members had to determine how to continue their work in a remote environment. At the

same time, the move of abolition frameworks into the mainstream of American politics prompted SMO leaders to reflect on the goals and strategies of their movements and to consider the place of racial justice within their broader theories of change.

Amidst these reiterative crises of health, social isolation, economic downturn, and systemic racism, the young people in our study displayed outstanding resilience, mobilizing quickly to meet the needs of their communities and developing new solidarity practices. MfOL and Sunrise Movement launched summer-long, virtual campaigns to cultivate youth power and develop youth leadership capacities. GKMC organized a mutual aid network, and YCAT shifted its planned Earth Day strike to online platforms. At the same time, the youth-led SMOs in our study reflected deeply on what racial justice mobilizations, and systemic racism more broadly, meant for their movements and organizations. These reflections lead to multiple new collaborations. Sunrise Movement offered staff support for Black Lives Matter digital organizing campaigns; MfOL shared ways members could demonstrate solidarity with BLM, and a YCAT hub canceled a water quality webinar to demonstrate solidarity with protesters. At the time of writing, conversations were ongoing within several of our target SMOs about how racial justice and equity objectives can be incorporated into movement strategies and goals.

Despite demonstrable strengths and adaptability, the youth-led SMOs in this study all experienced challenges that could threaten their sustainability: high rates of activist burnout, limited funding, and complexities in organizational structure. The degrees to which the SMOs experienced these challenges varied; nevertheless, their experiences raise important considerations for funders as well as organizers.

Recommendations

In the final section of our report, we offer recommendations to organizers, funders, and those who collaborate with youth-led SMOs. These are summarized below:

- Adult-led Voter Engagement Organizations should:
 - Continue to collaborate with youth-led SMOs and invite them to partner on voter registration drives and GOTV efforts.
 - Explore partnerships with youth-led SMOs on civic engagement activities not directly tied to the ballot box.
 - Partner with youth-led SMOs in ways that build their internal capacities, such as working together to secure funding for one of their projects.
 - Use social media and personal networks to amplify the work of youth activists.
 - Express appreciation for the diverse approaches to social change that youth-led SMOs embrace.
- Funders should:
 - Make longer-term investments that can sustain capacity across election cycles and during off-election years.
 - Recognize the diversity of ways in which youth-led SMOs connect young people to the ballot box and to electoral work, including through art, direct action, issue education, and community service.

- Recognize that a diverse, vibrant ecosystem of youth-led activism must include an array of national groups as well as community-based SMOs that are focused on local issues and led by BIPOC youth.
- Make longer-term, capacity-building investments to fund leadership development and internal reflection on movement goals and strategy.
- Support groups to hold convenings or engage in coalition-building across geographic divides in order to promote cross-group knowledge-sharing and power-building.
- Organizers should:
 - Use down-ballot candidates, including their own members running for local office, to energize potential voters and drive them to the polls.
 - Confront head-on the narrative of low youth turnout as a form of voter suppression.
 - Collaborate with well-vetted groups, such as the League of Conservation Voters Education Fund, to engage in voter outreach and registration, merging the electoral or civic engagement infrastructure of these groups with any planned actions, community events, or ongoing campaigns.
 - Strive for integrated voter organizing, which couples voter engagement work with issue organizing and leadership development, as many youth activists are wary of focusing solely on voting to the exclusion of other means of effecting change.
 - Continue to innovate in organizational structure in response to emergent needs. Consider developing explicit guidelines about who has decision-making authority and what governs interactions across teams or levels.
 - For national and state-level groups, strike a balance between providing material support for local chapters or hubs and encouraging their autonomy, particularly as they work to address community-based needs.
 - Continue centering the leadership of communities of color and those most impacted by the issues the SMO works to address. .
 - Fuel one another's personal growth by creating opportunities for leadership development, such as peer mentoring or leadership workshops and trainings.

Study II: Quantifying the Effects of Protests on Voter Registration and Turnout

Authors: John Holbein, Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, Tova Wang

Overview

In this report we offer to a set of quantitative analyses used to explore the impact of individual social justice protest events mostly organized by a number of coalitions of adult led organizations, on youth voter registration and youth voter turnout. These analyses use data from public-use voter files, other public data sources (e.g., the American Community Survey, IRS Charitable Donations data, etc.), and crowd-sourced data on recent protests to better understand the effect of these protests on youth voter registration and turnout.

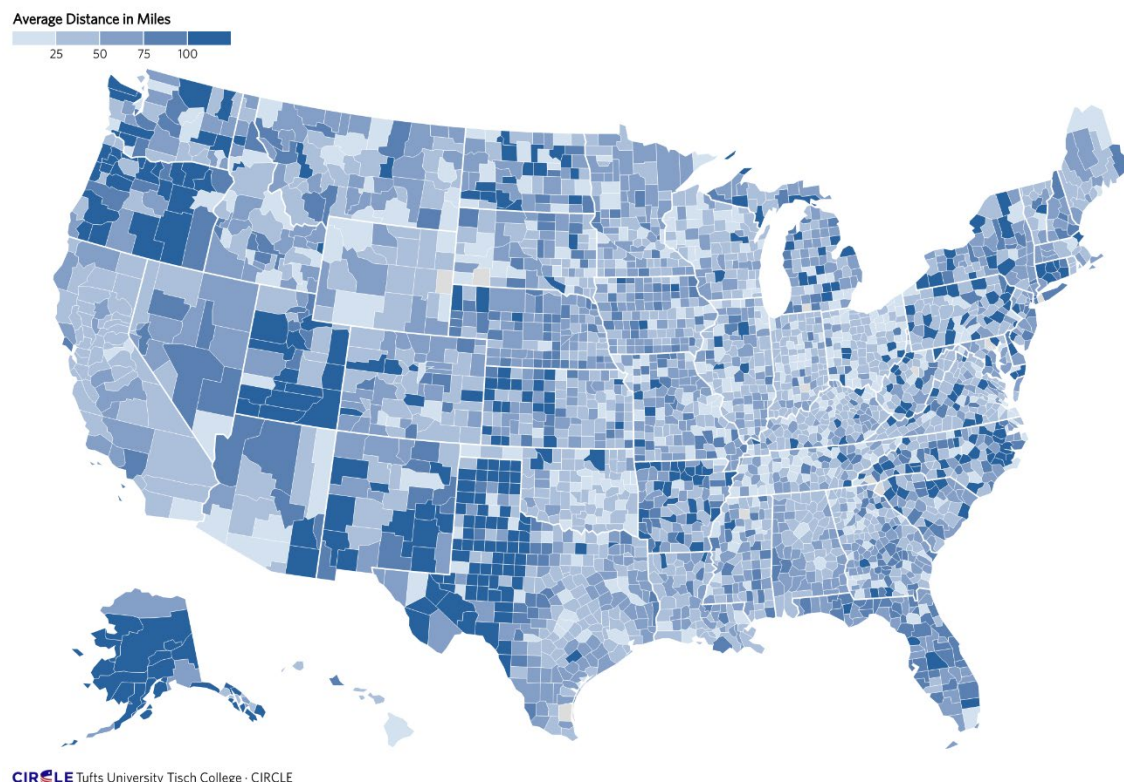
First, we explored the prevalence of recent protests and their geographic distribution. This involved mapping protests' location using precise geo-coding and exploring how young people participate in protests. We include evidence of an increase in self-reported rates of protesting among youth and the general population.

Second, we estimated the impact of protests on voter registration and turnout during the Trump presidency. These analyses focused on young people of various age groups (including 18-30, 18-19, 20-23, and 24-30) as well as on young people of various races, ethnicities, genders, political parties, and estimated income levels. We took two different analytic approaches to explore possible and immediate impact of localized, issue-diverse protests which vary in scale and the impact of a surge in protests immediately following George Floyd's murder in May 2020.

Findings

There has been a sizable increase in protest accessibility and participation among young people in the Trump era, with a sharp increase observed in 2018. These protests were not equally distributed across the country: across much of the Bible Belt and the Great Plains, residents would have had to drive well over an hour (75 miles or more) to get to the nearest protest if they wanted to participate in person. (See map below.) Communities with higher levels of civic infrastructure—as captured by the presence of youth nonprofits and high rates of charitable donation in the years prior to the Trump era—were more likely to have had protests.

Average Travel Distance to Protest by County of Residence, 2017-2020



Simply having a protest in a county typically did not have a measurable effect on **voter registration** among youth overall, or among any subgroup of youth, in that county or surrounding areas. Counties where more climate change protests occurred did have modestly higher rates of youth

voter registration. However, the counties that had protests pushing for more gun control had slightly lower youth voter registration rates than those that had no or fewer such protests in that same month. It remains unclear whether this is because gun control protests took place in counties that were somehow different from counties that did not have protests, such as having pre-existing lower patterns of voter registration.

Pro-Trump, anti-Trump, Black Lives Matter (separate from those that took place following the murder of George Floyd), and All Lives Matter protests had no effect on rates of youth voter registration in the counties in which they occurred. However, there was a modest but significant uptick (which varied in size across states) in the number of voter registrations that occurred in the days after George Floyd's murder and the large-scale protests that followed in 2020. The effect is strongest among 18- and 19-year-olds, among whom the effect is largely consistent and positive. For the general electorate, the overall effect is null, but it is statistically significant among people of color, those of high-income, and those who are Democrats. (See figure below.)

In instances where protests increased youth voter registration, there is oftentimes evidence of both mobilization and counter-mobilization. Protests that better align their mission and agenda with left-leaning causes sometimes increase registration rates among Democrats and Republicans; the same is true for protests that align their mission with right-leaning causes.

Effect of George Floyd's Murder on Voter Registration, 18-19-year-olds

All data is for youth ages 18-19

Political Party

Other
Democrat
Republican

Income

Higher
Lower

Race

Other
Asian
Hispanic
Black
White

Sex

Male
Female

All

Notes: Figure is a coefficient plot of the effects of the George Floyd murder on the voter registration patterns of different youth (ages 18-19) subgroups. Coefficients (i.e., effect sizes) are shown with circles; bars denote the 95% confidence intervals for the effect estimates. **Takeaway:** On average, the George Floyd murder modestly increased the voter registration patterns of most 18- and 19-year-olds

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With regards to youth **voter turnout**, we find that simply having a protest in a county does not have a detectable effect on voter turnout among youth of any subgroup in that county. However, youth voter turnout was about 1 percentage point higher in counties adjacent to where a protest was held.

In addition, when a county had more pro-Trump protests, that county had about 1 percentage point higher voter turnout among youth (and about 1-2 percentage points among other subsets of the public) than those that had no pro-Trump protests. When a county had Black Lives Matter or All Lives Matter protests, that county had a turnout rate among young people that was about 1-2 percentage

points higher. The effect on other subsets of the electorate ranged from a 1-4 percentage point increase.

The counties that had more pro-gun control rallies had slightly (1 percentage point) lower youth voter turnout. Again, it remains unclear whether this is because gun control protests took place in counties that were somehow different from counties that did not have protests (apart from the factors that our difference-in-differences model can account for), such as having pre-existing lower patterns of turnout. Anti-Trump and climate change protests in a county did not appear to affect youth voter turnout in that county.

These findings indicate that the relationship between individual protest events and youth voter registration and participation is not straightforward.

Recommendations

Our results lead us to several recommendations for vested parties interested in better tapping into mass social protests as a means of bringing more and more diverse citizens to the polls.

- Protest organizers might be able to better increase their impact by doing more to follow up with the voters they registered to ensure they also cast/mail their ballots. Protest organizers need to provide support to registered voters to ensure that they actually show up at the polls. This might be accomplished by better collecting, storing, and distributing data on protest attendees and following up with them through various effective get-out-the-vote interventions. Youth groups acting more often as lead organizers of protests might also result in more youth-specific outreach at these events.
- Protest organizers might better nurture strategic relationships with existing local organizations that can help facilitate registration and mobilization. Many potential partners in this space have invaluable experience, tools, and evidence on which to build voter registration and voter mobilization supports.
- Protest organizers need to engage with the fact that many of the people who turn out to protest may already be likely to vote to begin with. Alternate pathways for targeting young people who are less engaged in politics include partnering with school-based efforts to increase voter registration.

Conclusions

Both studies we report on here offer distinct and valuable insights on the critical topic of the connection between youth social movements, protest events and electoral participation. Taken together, they paint a nuanced picture of recent developments in this civic and political landscape.

The preponderance of interview, survey, and archival evidence reviewed here suggests that youth-led climate justice and gun violence prevention SMOs can create opportunities for young people to participate in voting-related activities and electoral politics. The young people in our qualitative study reported engaging in voting and electoral politics despite recognizing significant deficits in our democracy, including voter suppression, the influence of money in politics, and systemic racism. For a subset of our respondents, engagement in their SMO contributed to a more positive view of voting as a

vehicle for change. For others, it led to a more nuanced assessment of the strategic value of voting relative to other vehicles for change.

Voting is often presented as a high-bar outcome of previous civic engagement. Yet members of the youth-led SMOs that participated in this study expressed the idea that voting was actually a low-bar entry point into civic engagement and activism among young people. Further systematic study of youth pathways to organizing, civic engagement, and voter participation will help clarify these relationships.

The fact that our quantitative study reveals the average protest in the Trump era had little to no effect on youth voter registration in the days and weeks that followed a protest in the counties in which they occurred further complicates the relationship between youth movements and electoral engagement. That the exception to this rule is climate change protests, which modestly increased the voter registration of several subgroups in the counties in which these protests occurred, may reflect the way that different types of organizations explicitly emphasize voter engagement as part of their movement work. Scale also appears to matter: major protests—such as those that came after the killing of George Floyd—did bring new people into the political process afterward at a rate not observed after other forms/scales of protests.

We encourage stakeholders across the civic, organizational, and political spectrums to heed the insights and recommendations in both reports, and for other researchers to focus on these crucial topics and continue to further our understanding of how young people in America engage in civic and political life.

CIRCLE, the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University's Tisch College of Civic Life, served as coordinator for the research.

