

“Learning from our Youngers: the Case for Youth Voting Rights”

By Sadie Bograd

My first exposure to the importance of youth voting rights came from a rather unexpected source.

For the past three years, I’ve worked with my local League of Women Voters, an organization whose members average, by my best guess, sixty years or more. But counterintuitively, it is from this relatively senior group that I have learned much about the critical nature of voting rights, both for citizens in general and youth in particular.

My time with the League has shown me the power of intergenerational partnerships. Although the most obvious asset I contribute to the group is my social media prowess (limited as that may be), my youth has also allowed me to offer insights into the education system, helping older colleagues develop effective voter registration initiatives in local high schools. For example, I was the only one who knew that most of the high school seniors in my district don’t take social studies courses, so hosting voter registration presentations in those classrooms would leave out the target audience. In this work, all stereotypes are broken: these mostly retired women bring dynamism and enthusiasm, while I am able to contribute my years of expertise as a student. Our collaboration is a powerful representation of the potential of youth advocacy and input, a firm rebuttal to all those who claim that sixteen-year-olds are too young and inexperienced to express rational opinions, whether with their voices or their ballots.

Our work together is also a reminder of how far we have to go. In planning these outreach efforts, unfortunately cut short by pandemic-related school closures, it’s become clear that high school voter registration would be much easier if we could register sophomores and juniors, too. Encouraging high school seniors to vote in local elections when they often don’t know where they’ll be living next year is something of a challenge. I’ve heard much criticism of youth apathy and disengagement. Rarely do we recognize that we are asking students to fulfill a new civic responsibility at a time when much of their life is already up in the air, that the structural barriers we erect - difficulties in getting absentee ballots, voter ID laws that [disproportionately affect](#) young people - are often more potent than the disaffected character we ascribe to younger demographics. By allowing teenagers to start voting earlier, at a time when their addresses are more stable and their support systems better entrenched, we raise turnout rates, not only for [students](#) but also for the [parents](#) who wish to vote in order to model good civic behavior for their kids.

Over the past few years, we’ve seen inspiring youth activists take the world by storm. From climate change to gun control, there is seemingly no issue where students are not at the forefront of the national debate. But on a smaller scale, too, we can find powerful examples of teenagers’ civic engagement. Teenagers are wisely sacrificing their spring breaks to [shelter in place](#) and protect the health of their communities; students are pushing for changes to their schools’ grading and testing policies in the midst of a pandemic. Everywhere you look, the signs

are there. Adolescents can be trusted to make wise decisions, to add valuable input to civic discourse. Only one question remains: are adults ready to recognize that?