Youth Power at the Ballot Box: How youth-led voter engagement efforts increased turnout among young voters in California’s 2018 midterm election

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Between the 2014 and 2018 midterm elections, voter turnout among 18 to 24-year-olds in California more than tripled. Concerns about the country’s political dynamics may have motivated some to vote, but youth-led efforts also contributed to the increase in turnout.

Coordinated by the Power California network, grassroots youth organizing and civic engagement groups across the state involved high school-aged adolescents and young adults in conducting non-partisan outreach among their peers. They targeted youth in low-income, immigrant, and communities of color. Based on two years of mixed-methods research, we found four key elements of Power California’s 2018 campaign efforts that made a difference in educating and mobilizing young voters.

**Building the capacity of non-partisan organizations to reach young voters.** Power California provided partner organizations with training, technical assistance, and coordination of civic engagement efforts. Our pre- and post-election surveys of staff representatives suggest that Power California’s efforts helped increase organizations’ capacities to train youth members, partner with high schools, leverage social media, and manage campaign data.

**Preparing racially diverse youth leaders to conduct voter outreach.** Partner organizations trained high school-aged adolescents and young adults so that they could better communicate with their peers about the importance of participating in government elections. Surveys collected from youth leaders indicate that their organizations helped them learn a lot about voting issues and gave them concrete skills to educate others.

Conducting youth-led voter registration and education. Partner organizations have conducted extensive voter registration of young adults and pre-registration of 16 and 17-year-olds across the state. Youth-led classroom presentations, conferences, tabling, and other activities reached tens of thousands of future and new voters in the year leading up to the election. Partners developed and implemented voter education workshops that explained the fundamentals of voting rights, and why voting can have an effect on issues that young people care about, such as environmental justice, quality schools, the costs of college, criminal justice reforms, affordable housing, and immigrant rights. Findings from our participant observations, workshop evaluations, and in-depth interviews suggest that these youth-led outreach efforts helped young people understand the relevance of voting to their everyday lives.

Contacting young voters through phone calls, texting, and social media during election season. We conducted experiments to assess the impacts of youth-led efforts to get out the vote among young voters aged 18 to 24. These experiments compared voter turnout between randomly selected “control groups” of voters who were not targeted for outreach and those who received phone calls, social media outreach, and/or texts. Our statistically significant research findings demonstrated that peer-to-peer phone calls increased turnout among young voters. While turnout averaged around 39.9% in the control group, those who were targeted for outreach (regardless of whether they picked up the phone) averaged a turnout of 42.3%. Those who were successfully contacted by phone averaged a turnout of 46.9%, indicating that phone banking resulted in an estimated 7% point increase in turnout.* Our experiments also revealed that reaching out to young voters via Facebook and Instagram also resulted in modest increases in turnout.

In summary, our research indicates that coordinated and youth-led efforts can have a notable positive impact on the democratic representation of young people from low-income, racially diverse, and immigrant communities.

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*Peer-to-Peer Phone Banking Increased 2018 Voter Turnout Among 18-24-Year-Olds

N= 226,438

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Control Group</th>
<th>Target Group</th>
<th>Contacted Group</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Turnout</td>
<td>39.9%</td>
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