



Mobilizing the youth vote

Campaigns target young people to participate in elections

When Savannah Mendoza was a child, her father would take her along to the polling place when he went to vote. Years later, Mendoza is a political science major at Sacramento State. She wants to run for office someday.

But for now, she's focused on a more immediate challenge: getting her classmates to turn out for the 2020 elections.

"As a young Latina, that's something that in our communities we don't see that often," said Mendoza. "We don't recognize how powerful our voice and our vote is."

Mendoza and other campus organizers across

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California are gearing up for the state's early primary in March, hoping for a repeat of the 2018 elections, when student voter turnout nationwide more than doubled. They're trying creative tactics to get their peers registered

and to the polls, helped along by two new California laws aimed at encouraging campus civic engagement. Younger adults have long voted at lower rates than older ones, but a combination of shock over the 2016 elections and strong feelings about issues such as the environment and immigration drove a surge in student voting in 2018 that outpaced the uptick seen among the general population, experts say. Those same factors could come into play again this year, said Nancy Thomas, director of Tufts University's Institute for Democracy and Higher Education, which reports on college student voting rates in

each federal election.

"I don't think there's any question that 2020 is going to be another bumper crop year for college and university student voting," she said.

From "Vote Goat" petting zoos to toting popcorn machines to dorms for "pop-up" voter registration drives, many of the campaigns seek to inject some fun into voting. To be successful, they will have to overcome the barriers that can inhibit students from participating in elections.

Many have moved to attend school and will need to re-register if they want to vote at their new address.

At Fresno State, fourth-year student D'Aungillique Jackson said that at first, talking to students about registering to vote was "almost like pulling teeth." Then Jackson, the vice president of her school's NAACP chapter, attended a civic engagement training sponsored by the organization.

She learned to start conversations about criminal justice issues that disproportionately affect young people of color, she said, such as gang conspiracy and stand your ground laws.

"Talking to people about things that affect them that way, I was able to increase interest about the election process among black people on campus and in my greater community," she said.

After hosting dozens of civic engagement events last year, including a voting-themed variety show, Jackson decided the job was too big for students to handle alone. She and other Fresno State students lobbied legislators to pass a new law that requires public college and university campuses to designate a "civic and voter empowerment coordinator" who will run voter education events and social media campaigns.

Sacramento State students vote on campus, Nov. 6, 2018. Student-run voter engagement efforts are aiming for an even bigger turnout in 2020.

PHOTO BY EUCARIO CALDERON/THE STATE HORNET

Authored by Assemblywoman Cottie Petrie-Norris, it took effect Jan. 1.

The law is just one of several ways California is pushing to make student voting easier at a time when reports of campus voter suppression are surfacing nationwide.

"You have to make [voting] convenient, especially for the working student," said Noel Mora, an outreach worker with the California Secretary of State's Office.

One way to do that is with vote centers—one-stop shops that open between four and 10 days before an election for voters to register and drop off mail-in ballots. Fifteen counties are experimenting with the centers this year, including on college campuses.

As a student, Mora helped bring the first on-campus vote center to Sacramento State in 2018. That fall, students held a Black & Brown Voter Summit with speeches on issues like health care and criminal justice reform, and a performance by local rapper Consci8us. Organizers gave students rides to the polls in golf carts. Thousands turned out, some waiting in line until late in the night.

Now Mora is helping students around the state bring vote centers to their campuses. A second state law passed last year encourages county registrars to locate them at colleges.

California law already requires public colleges to provide a voter registration link in their online campus portal. Last spring, the state commission overseeing financial aid started asking each of the 100,000 students who contact its call center each year whether they want to register to vote and if they need help with the process.

Some might see efforts to legislate higher student turnout as partisan politics—Democrats control California's government, after all, and younger voters tend to vote Democratic.

A significant increase in younger voters could help progressive Democrats in the primary, said Mark Baldassare, president of the Public Policy Institute of California. It could also make a difference in close contests over congressional seats or ballot measures, he said. And because of California's changing demographics, a younger electorate would also mean a more ethnically diverse electorate.

While most students in the state may lean left, some of the most successful campus voter drives have been bipartisan—like one at UCLA in 2018, where a coalition including the campus Democratic and Republican clubs more than tripled the voting rate.

"I don't feel like keeping young people from the polls is going to benefit the Republican Party," said Michelle Ohanian, policy director for the Bruin Republicans. "We need to increase voter turnout from this group because we need politicians to also hear our voice."

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