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Conclusion: From the 26th Amendment to the 2024 Election and Beyond

Democracy is at a crossroads, and America once again finds itself in a time of upheaval.

The Supreme Court has long declared that the right to vote is fundamental because it is preservative of all other rights. Yet, for most of this country's history, the voting rights of many Americans have been denied or diluted. For youth voters specifically, it was not until 1971 when the 26th Amendment was ratified that they secured their right to vote. Through this process, they would gain recognition as a protected class of voters with respect to access to the ballot: "The right of citizens of the United States, who are eighteen years of age or older, to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of age." Although introduced over 150 times in Congress in a 30-year period, it was not until a nationwide youth-led coalition was formed—the Youth Franchise Coalition, consisting of prominent civil rights, education, labor, and youth organizations—that their access to suffrage was constitutionalized.

Like many of the steps on the road to American democracy, the ratification of the 26th Amendment did not resolve all issues related to youth voting rights. As foreshadowed in the congressional debate over the Amendment, the battle over the youth vote was particularly virulent on college campuses, and particularly so at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). These were attractive targets for voter suppression efforts because they represent the intersection of the political power of both youth and Black voters. And while it would be an exaggeration to equate the fight for the youth vote with the battle against white supremacy and the struggle for freedom and civil rights experienced by African Americans in the United States, the two share familiar and sometimes intersecting elements, even when race is not centrally involved, both in terms of the attitudes, behaviors, and practices of those seeking to limit the suffrage, and in terms of the tools used to defend democratic freedoms.

A little more than a half century since the ratification of the 26th Amendment, challenges to student voting remain. The bipartisan commitment to expand voting rights, which shaped the Second Reconstruction and was manifested in the overwhelming support in Congress for the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (passing the House 328–74 and the Senate 79–18), and even greater support for the 26th Amendment in 1971 (passing the Senate 94–0 and then the House 401–19), has now evaporated.

The 2013 *Shelby* decision by the United States Supreme Court dismantled key protections of the Voting Rights Act. Attempts to repair and modernize it in the form of the John Lewis Voting Rights Act passed the Democratic Party-led House twice with increasingly slim margins: in 2019 (228–187) and in 2021 (219–212), but the pro-voter measure has yet to achieve full support by both chambers of Congress.

Political polarization has taken over American society, evident in the increased politicization of the fundamental right to vote. Prior successful amendments to the Voting Rights Act once passed with wide support: in 1970 (passing in the Senate 64–12 and in the House 272–132), 1975 (Senate 77–12, House 346–56), 1982 (Senate 85–8, House unanimous), 1992 (House 237–125, Senate 75–20), and 2006 (House 390–33, Senate 98–0). Yet, by 2015, on the second anniversary of *Shelby*, then-House Judiciary Chairman Bob Goodlatte refused to so much as hold a committee hearing on the Voting Rights Act, allowing a previously introduced bill to amend it to languish in committee.

In the midst of the COVID pandemic, as students in 2020 were temporarily displaced from their campus residences during a consequential and unprecedented election season, the Youth Voting Rights Act was born. The proposal was originally conceived by Yael Bromberg, with strong support from D.C.-savvy Sonia Gill, then-senior legislative counsel with American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) National, and steadfast leadership from the congressional offices of Representative John Lewis and Senator Elizabeth Warren. It was introduced in 2022 and 2023 by Senator Warren and Representative Nikema Williams, gaining 68 co-sponsors in the House.

The Youth Voting Rights Act is the first comprehensive proposal to enforce the 26th Amendment by:

- designating public institutions of higher education as voter registration agencies, therefore imposing greater voter registration obligations on the institutions;
- allowing young people aged 16 and 17 in every state to pre-register to vote before turning 18, setting them up on the pipeline to civic engagement;
- requiring institutions of higher education to host an on-campus polling site, and a system of regulation and support, with an opportunity to waive-out;
- codifying the right to vote from a college domicile;
- guaranteeing that states accept student identification cards to meet voter ID requirements;
- creating a grant program dedicated to youth electoral involvement, including paid fellowships for young persons to work with state and local officials to support youth civic and political engagement among their peers;

- removing age-based restrictions on access to voting by mail in federal races; and
- empowering federal officials to gather data to study voter engagement by age and race to inform efforts to improve youth involvement in elections.

Despite the massive cross-partisan history of the 26th Amendment, it is extremely unlikely that the Youth Voting Rights Act will advance in the current political climate. That is not to say that the federal initiative should not be pursued, of course, but that it should set an organizing and policy framework and goalpost. Indeed, grassroots advocates in various states across the nation are beginning to explore state-based versions of the proposal. In this manner, an eventual federal statutory proposal may perhaps follow the historical experience of the Amendment, where a handful of states lowered the voting age prior to ratification (Georgia, Kentucky, Alaska, Hawaii) and informed the congressional debates for ratification.

The present federal view is particularly bleak where the current proposals have shifted from advancement and modernization to outright suppression. The 2025 GOP-led House of Representatives in April passed the Safeguard American Voter Eligibility (SAVE) Act, under the false myth of noncitizen voting. The proposal mandates documentary proof of citizenship for any voter registration applicant, such as a U.S. passport or U.S. birth certificate, placing enormous burdens on married women who have changed their names (and therefore their birth certificates may not match their current legal name) and young people, who are particularly mobile and do not travel to school with their U.S. passport or their U.S. birth certificate; nor are they likely to appear in person with such proof at an election agency prior to voter registration deadlines, as would be required under the Act. This radical measure, which is supported by the President, passed the House with unanimous Republican support, and though it faces an uphill challenge in the Senate because of the filibuster, it is a fire alarm that the right to vote is under attack. Elements of it have already been taken up in state legislatures.

There is something downright nihilistic about these efforts. It is un-American to attack voters' access to the ballot based on a presumption of their partisan affiliations. *Why not play by the rules and appeal to the voters based on your candidacy and platform?* Nonetheless, the most recent attacks on the vote seem to attack voters *regardless* of their partisan affiliation. The University of Maryland's Center for Democracy and Civic Engagement conducted three surveys to analyze the impact of voter registration laws like the SAVE Act proposal requiring documentary proof of citizenship.¹ They found that men—and especially young men

1 Sam Novey, Jillian Andres Rothschild, and Michael Hammer, "Which U.S. Citizens Lack Easy

aged 18–29—are the least likely to be able to easily access such proofs, and that in certain Republican states such as Texas, access to these proofs was harder for Republicans than for Democrats. Older voters were less likely to own documentary proof of citizenship as well.

The same destructive trend has emerged as to limitations on access to vote-by-mail. Here, the GOP has advanced false narratives claiming that vote-by-mail is insecure and contributes to election fraud. It has pursued multiple legal challenges to restrict the voting mechanism across the nation, although the strong majority of votes cast in 2020 relied on this mechanism (69.4%), a considerable jump from 2016 (40%), with increased rates continuing even after the pandemic.² According to Pew, in 2024 a quarter (26%) of Republican voters said they voted by mail or absentee ballot.³

More recently, in 2025, an unprecedented effort sought to disenfranchise voters who already lawfully cast their duly counted votes in an election for a seat on the North Carolina Supreme Court. There, Judge Jefferson Griffin, a candidate for the high court bench who sits on the state appeals court, lost his bid for higher office. Rather than concede, Griffin waged a months-long effort to toss 65,000 lawfully cast ballots, including those cast by over 5,000 military personnel, overseas civil servants, and missionaries, which became the center of the legal challenge six months after the election. The challenge was unprecedented on multiple counts: the contest was not limited to votes that had been cast but not yet counted, such as outstanding absentee or provisional ballots, but went after votes that were both lawfully cast and lawfully counted—essentially operating as a post-election months-long audit. It also sought to change the requirements for voter identification after the election, requiring military voters to offer proper identification even though they followed the rules and cast a lawful ballot for election day. The Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals temporarily blocked the beginning of a massive, unprecedented review period, initially approved by the state's high court, until the federal constitutional claims could be further addressed.⁴ Finally, in May, nearly seven

Access to Documentary Proof of Citizenship?” University of Maryland Center for Democracy and Civic Engagement, April 10, 2025, <https://cdce.substack.com/p/which-us-citizens-lack-easy-access>.

² Ivan Pereira, “Early Voting Options Grow in Popularity, Reconfiguring Campaigns and Voting Preparation,” *ABC News*, September 4, 2024, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/early-voting-options-grow-popularity-reconfiguring-campaigns-voting/story?id=112682514>.

³ Pew Research Center, “Voters Broadly Positive About How Elections Were Conducted, in Sharp Contrast to 2020,” December 4, 2024, 17, https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2024/12/PP_2024.12.3_election-2024_REPORT.pdf.

⁴ Kyle Ingram, “Federal Judges Block NC Supreme Court Election ‘Cure’ Process—For Now,” *The Raleigh News & Observer*, April 22, 2025, <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/politics-government/article304819896.html>.

months after the election, a federal judge, a Trump appointee, ruled that the process would violate the equal protection because it would subject voters to different rules. Two days later, Griffin finally conceded, and Riggs was duly sworn in.

Former GOP governor Pat McCrory, who admitted he voted for Griffin, criticized the approach:

I wanted the Republican judge to win because his philosophy more aligns with me. But in order to take the seat, you've got to earn the seat and win the seat. And in this case, he was defeated. ... You abide by the rules before the election. It's like changing a penalty call after the Super Bowl is over. You don't do that. And the military personnel, I think are special. And that's why an exception was made for ID, that we trusted the military to do what's right. And they voted based upon the rule set.⁵

In sum, we find ourselves in a new age of body politic, where hyper-political polarization has warped into an anti-democracy bent.

This lawless whirlwind directly impacts youth voters, and is a far cry from the times when Senator Barry Goldwater (R-Arizona), the leader of the modern national conservative movement, stood up against youth discrimination in ballot access, persuading his conservative peers in Congress to join him to support youth enfranchisement, first via the 1970 Amendment of the Voting Rights Act, and then via constitutional ratification. Senator Goldwater implored Congress to embrace the youth vote:

They are not allowed to vote. ... This attitude is outmoded and archaic. It is literally based on a tradition which dates back to medieval times. Perhaps, in the days around the turn of the century, it once had meaning. In 1900 only 6 % of Americans who had reached 18 were high school graduates. In fact, as late as 1940, only half of all 18-year-olds had completed high school.

But this is 1970. This is the age of instant communications, all-news radio stations, TV, news, and the most avid political concern on the part of young Americans that I have ever witnessed.

Today fully 81 % of Americans have graduated from high school before they reach 18. Almost 50 % of 18-, 19- and 20-year-olds are enrolled in college. And the education which they are receiving is more advanced and intense than in any time in our history.

In short, youth today is better informed and better equipped than any previous generation. They are without a doubt equally mature, both mentally and physically, as the average citizen who had reached 25 when I was growing up. In fact, they may be better able to com-

⁵ Tom George, "Military and Overseas Voters at Center of Challenges in Riggs-Griffin NC Supreme Court Race," *ABC News*, April 20, 2025, <https://abc7ny.com/post/military-overseas-voters-center-challenges-north-carolina-supreme-court-race-between-allison-riggs-jefferson-griffin/16209562/>.

prehend the dramatic technological advances and changing perspectives of modern life than many of their parents.

Therefore, I hold that there is no sensible reason for denying the vote to 18-year-olds. What's more, I think we have studied the issue long enough. The voting age should be lowered and lowered at once across the entire nation.⁶

In contrast, at every step of the election administration process today—from voter registration, to vote-by-mail applications, to in-person voting, to ensuring that vote-by-mail or provisional ballots are adequately counted—young people experience unique and disproportionate obstacles.

For example, ahead of the 2024 election, Idaho passed a law removing student identification cards from permissible forms of voter ID. The law came on the heels of Idaho boasting the largest rate of increase (66%) in youth voter registration in the nation between 2018 and 2022.⁷ The removal was upheld unanimously by the Idaho Supreme Court, which reasoned that young voters' fundamental rights to vote were not infringed, because students could sign an affidavit in lieu of voter ID.⁸ Just two weeks earlier, the Montana Supreme Court had issued a landmark ruling, invalidating four 2021 laws that uniquely impacted youth voters.⁹ The Montana legislature had ended same-day registration (which allows voters to register and vote on the same day, a key policy for highly mobile youth voters); stripped student identification from the list of eligible forms of voter ID, although it had allowed student voter IDs for almost two decades; prohibited paid third-party ballot collection (a measure that directly impacted Native American voters living on reservations); and barred county officials from distributing mail-in ballots to minors who would turn 18 and be eligible to vote by Election Day.¹⁰

In 2024, the Board of Elections serving Purdue University, an Indiana public university home to approximately 40,000 undergraduate students, announced that for the first time in nearly two decades an on-campus polling site would

6 Senator Barry Goldwater, Testimony, 116 Cong. Rec. S.3216 (March 9, 1970).

7 Ruby Belle Booth, "Youth Voter Registration Has Surpassed 2018 Levels in Many States, but It's Lagging for the Youngest Voters," Center for Information & Research Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), September 14, 2022, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/youth-voter-registration-has-surpassed-2018-levels-many-states-its-lagging-youngest>.

8 *Babe Vote and League of Women Voters of Idaho v. McGrane*, 546 P.3d 694 (Idaho 2024).

9 *Montana Democratic Party v. Jacobsen*, 545 P.3d 1074 (Montana 2024). In prior phases of the litigation securing a preliminary injunction of these laws, Bromberg served as an expert witness on their youth impact and the state's constitutional convention history vis-à-vis the 26th Amendment.

10 Alicia Bannon, "Montana Strikes Down Voting Restrictions," State Court Report, April 10, 2024, <https://statecourtreport.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/montana-strikes-down-voting-restrictions>

not be provided.¹¹ The board claimed that low student voter registration rates informed the decision. However, after backlash, a limited site—only for the early voting period—was situated on campus. The board declined the university administration's efforts to bring the polling site back on campus on Election Day.¹² In April 2025, the state passed a new law prohibiting the use of student identification as voter identification, rolling back 20 years of state policy.¹³

At Franklin and Marshall College in Pennsylvania, student registrations were delayed ahead of the 2024 general elections. Some students were told they should vote where their parents lived and that they could not register in Pennsylvania without providing proof that they had cancelled previous registrations; the use of Franklin and Marshall's main address was also challenged.¹⁴ The Lancaster Board of Elections tried to silence the college through a highly unusual cease-and-desist order, though the Secretary of State's office intervened to ensure that students could register.¹⁵

In Texas, a bill was proposed in 2023 to outright ban polling locations on college campuses across the state. A similar endeavor had been pursued in Florida by the secretary of state in 2018, but a federal court judge found that it plainly vio-

11 Johanna Alonso, "Removal of On-Campus Voting on Election Day Sparks Uproar at Purdue," *Inside Higher Ed*, October 3, 2024, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/politics-elections/2024/10/03/purdue-loses-long-standing-campus-polling-place>.

12 Purdue University, "Purdue University Statement on Campus Voting Locations," September 17, 2024, <https://www.purdue.edu/newsroom/2024/Q3/purdue-university-statement-on-campus-voting-locations-sept172024/>.

13 Kayla Dwyer, "Gov. Mike Braun Signs Bill Banning Student IDs at Voting Booth," *Indy Star*, April 16, 2025, <https://www.indystar.com/story/news/politics/2025/04/16/gov-mike-braun-senate-bill-10-student-voter-id-laws/83030092007/>.

14 Matt Klinedinst, "Lancaster County Election Officials Accused of Misleading Voters about Their Registration Status," *Fox43*, October 22, 2024, <https://www.fox43.com/article/news/local/lancaster-county-election-officials-accused-misleading-voters-registration-status-lancaster-county/521-3bc14754-6e79-4150-8fb9-b0416a29f4c8>; Russ Walker and Tom Lisi, "F&M Voter Organization Alleges Lancaster County Elections Staff Misled on Registration Rules," *Lancaster Online*, October 19, 2024, https://lancasteronline.com/news/local/f-m-voter-organization-alleges-lancaster-county-elections-staff-misled-on-registration-rules/article_8e2a9904-8e66-11ef-bf47-df1e4cfd3e8.html.

15 Steve Ulrich, "Department of State Intervenes in F&M Votes/Lancaster County Voter Registration Dispute," *PoliticsPA*, October 21, 2024, <https://www.politicspa.com/department-of-state-intervenes-in-fm-votes-lancaster-county-voter-registration-dispute/139616>; Brett Sholtis, "Lancaster County Commissioners Send 'Cease and Desist' Letter to F&M College over Voter Registration Claims," *Lancaster Online*, October 29, 2024, https://lancasteronline.com/news/politics/lancaster-county-commissioners-send-cease-and-desist-letter-to-f-m-college-over-voter-registration/article_e51a4dae-9578-11ef-8394-4f60feb393b8.html.

lated the 26th Amendment.¹⁶ The case arose when trained student ambassadors with The Andrew Goodman Foundation began raising awareness of the measure in Florida, leading to the creation of new federal precedent on the 26th Amendment. Judge Walker therein recognized “voting is the beating heart of democracy” and that the state action targeted “a discrete class of individuals—nearly 830,000 individuals who live and work on public colleges and university communities, i.e., overwhelmingly young voters ... the *only* class in Florida facing such a prohibition.” He found the state action to be “unexplainable on grounds other than age” and barred the action pursuant to the 26th Amendment.¹⁷

While there are glimmers of hope, such as the 2024 ruling by the Montana Supreme Court and the 2018 ruling by the Florida federal court, there is reason to think that things will get worse. A large proportion of the American electorate falsely believes the 2020 election was stolen, and with a second Trump administration advocates for ‘election integrity’ will no doubt seek to impose new limits on voting. The Voting Rights Act continues to be the target of constant attacks to further dilute its efficacy. Potential new Executive Orders are rumored to be en route, to attack basic election administration tools such as the use of vote-by-mail or auditable voting machines. Key figures close to the administration have spoken of targeting election officials who actively promote voter registration or who make it easier for citizens to vote. They even resist legislation protecting election workers, citizens who are the linchpin of the sprawling American electoral system.¹⁸ It does not bode well that many close to the current administration seek to model their behavior on figures like authoritarian Hungarian prime minister Victor Orban, who has not only manipulated electoral rules and stacked the judiciary, but also targeted universities, including closing a thriving and distinguished private American institution.¹⁹ Meanwhile, efforts are underway to endeavor to normalize the idea of a third-term presidency.

16 *League of Women Voters of Florida Inc. v. Detzner*, 314 F.Supp.3d 1205 (N.D. Fla. 2018). Bromberg served as co-counsel for plaintiff The Andrew Goodman Foundation in subsequent phases of the litigation.

17 *League of Women Voters of Florida Inc. v. Detzner*, 314 F.Supp.3d 1205 (N.D. Fla. 2018).

18 Miles Parks, “What ‘Election Integrity Advocates’ Have Planned for 2025,” *NPR*, December 20, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/12/20/nx-s15217816/what-election-integrity-advocates-have-planned-for-2025>.

19 Ferenc Laczó, “Westernization by Preemptive Rejection: How Viktor Orbán Sells to U.S. Conservatives their own Obsessions,” *The Review of Democracy*, July 12, 2022, <https://revdem.ceu.edu/2022/12/07/westernization-by-preemptive-rejection-how-viktor-orban-sells-to-us-conservatives-their-own-obsessions/>; Jeremy Shapiro and Zsuzsanna Végh, “The Orbanisation of America: Hungary’s Lessons for Donald Trump,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, October 9, 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-orbanisation-of-america-hungarys-lessons-for-donald-trump/>.

The highly unusual aforementioned post-election challenge in the 2024 State Supreme Court race in North Carolina further demonstrates the continued vulnerability of young voters, particularly college students. A study by the Student Voting Rights Lab at Duke and North Carolina Central Universities found that voters 18–25 years old were disproportionately represented in Griffin’s challenge to the election results. Among the 60,000-plus voters with allegedly “incomplete voter registrations,” young voters were 3.4 times more likely than those over 65 to have their vote challenged. Additionally, young Black voters were 5.28 times more likely to be challenged than white men over 65. Notably, Griffin’s challenges to overseas ballots included just four counties—Durham, Guilford, Forsyth, and Buncombe—each home to large numbers of college students. Large proportions of students from Duke University, North Carolina Central, and NC A&T were targeted, with HBCU-enrolled students disqualified at particularly high rates.²⁰

Despite efforts of committed and sometimes heroic students and faculty, the occasional intervention of institutions, and the emergence and growth of important organizations like Students Learn Students Vote, the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge, and The Andrew Goodman Foundation, youth and student voting remain precarious, with only 50 % of young people age 18–29 voting in the 2020 election, and 47 % in 2024. While this is an improvement compared with 2016 (39 %), the fact of the matter is that approximately half of young voters nationally are just not participating at the ballot box.²¹ (Figure 1). Moreover, gaps persist based on race and gender. For example, Tuft’s Center for Information & Research Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) found that 58 % of young white women voted in the 2024 presidential election, compared with 25 % of young Black men. CIRCLE found a discrepancy in youth voter participation ranging from 33 % (in Oklahoma and Arkansas) to 62 % (Minnesota). Importantly, CIRCLE concluded that state-by-state trends in youth turnout vary based on the role of election policies

20 Gunther Peck, “Documenting the Damage of Judge Jefferson Griffin’s Supreme Court Election Challenge,” *NC Newsline*, February 6, 2025, <https://ncnewsline.com/2025/02/06/documenting-the-damage-of-judge-jefferson-griffins-supreme-court-election-challenge/>; Katherine Gallagher, “How the Grinch Is Stealing Our Voting Rights,” *Duke Chronicle*, December 23, 2024, <https://www.dukechronicle.com/article/2024/12/grinch-is-stealing-our-voting-rights>. The Duke research and more extensive research submitted on behalf of Justice Riggs demonstrated that missing information was overwhelmingly due to recording and other clerical errors or due to coding errors. See Rusty Jacobs, “Board Analysis Shows Griffin’s Ballot Challenges are Based on Inaccurate Assumptions,” *WUNC North Carolina Public Radio*, February 16, 2025, <https://www.wunc.org/politics/2025-02-16/board-analysis-jeffersongriffin-ballot-challenges-inaccurate-assumptions>.

21 Alberto Medina and Katie Hilton, “New Data: Nearly Half of Youth Voted in 2024,” Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), April 14, 2025, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/new-data-nearly-half-youth-voted-2024>.

in facilitating or hindering youth participation, policies like automatic, online, and same-day registration.²²

Another CIRCLE survey of 18–34-year-olds indicates that many who did not vote were not registered. Nearly 1 in 8 youth said that they “did not know how to register” or “had trouble” with their voter registration forms. Nearly one-third of those surveyed (32%) said they were “too busy,” “ran out of time,” or “missed the registration deadline.” Just over 10% simply “forgot,” while an astounding 36% of unregistered youth said simply that voting is “not important to me.”²³

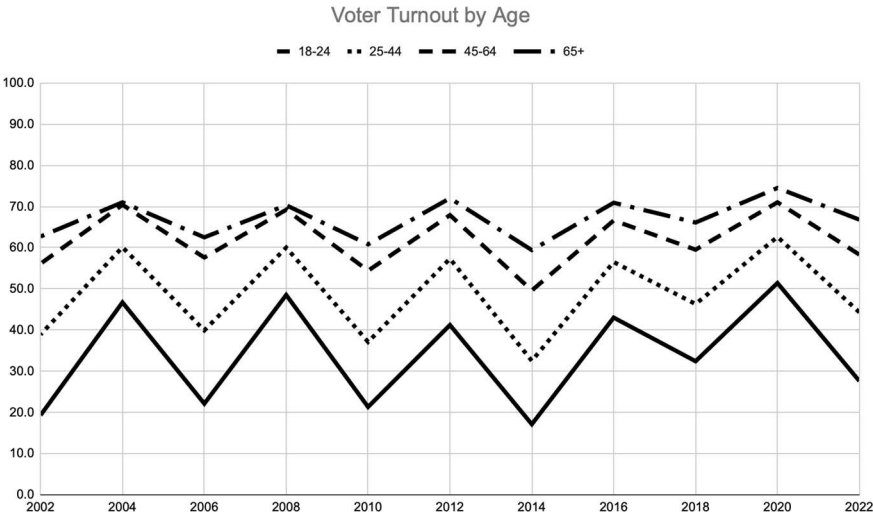


Figure 1: Percentage voted by age.
Source: US Census Bureau: <https://www.census.gov/topics/public-sector/voting/data/tables.html>.

All told, less than half of young voters in 2024 voted in the general election, compared with a national turnout of all ages of nearly 64%, which itself is lower than the majority of advanced industrial democracies.²⁴ While voter suppression laws

²² Medina and Hilton, “New Data.”
²³ Alberto Medina, Kelly Siegel-Stechler, Sara Suzuki, Ruby Belle Booth, and Katie Hilton, “Young People and the 2024 Election: Struggling, Disconnected, and Dissatisfied,” Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), January 15, 2025, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/2024-poll-barriers-issues-economy>.
²⁴ Ballotpedia, “Election Results, 2024: Analysis of Voter Turnout in the 2024 General Election,” https://ballotpedia.org/Election_results_2024:_Analysis_of_voter_turnout_in_the_2024_general_election; Drew Desilver, “Turnout in U.S. Has Soared in Recent Elections but by Some Measures Still

and regulations should be resisted at every turn, and we should embrace the full spirit of the 26th Amendment for increased political participation of youth, it is daunting to outrun non-participation altogether.

Challenges associated with voting and voter apathy are indicative of more pressing concerns about American democracy, of which voting and free and fair elections are necessary but insufficient conditions. Survey after survey have shown declining trust in institutions and belief in democracy. In one recent survey of 30 countries that asked whether “it is important to live in a country that is democratically governed,” only 80 % of Americans responded in the affirmative, leaving it fourth from the bottom, ahead of only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Russia.²⁵ The growing disenchantment of young Americans, and youth around the globe, with democracy is particularly alarming: several studies demonstrate not only that young Americans are dissatisfied with state democracy, but also that their belief in democracy compared with authoritarian alternatives is declining, both in absolute terms and in relative terms compared with what older generations believed at comparable stages of life.²⁶

There is also reason to be concerned about the civic commitment of American institutions of higher education. The most wealthy and powerful institutions in the country, which remain predominantly white, continue to celebrate the fundamental link between education and democracy, but remain hesitant to engage institutionally with the fight for the most fundamental of democratic rights. As the students from Ivy League Votes succinctly put it, “student voting is not where it should be,” and institutions share part of the blame.²⁷ The gap between word and deed only promises to grow as calls for institutional ‘neutrality’ and growing threats from the federal government translate into timidity and restraint in the face of injustice. While the civic mission of HBCUs remains intact, they are chron-

Trails That of Many Other Countries,” Pew Research Center, November 1, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/11/01/turnout-in-u-s-has-soared-in-recent-elections-but-by-some-measures-still-trails-that-of-many-other-countries/>.

25 Open Society Foundations, “Open Society Barometer: Can Democracy Deliver?,” launched September 2023, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/focus/open-society-barometer>.

26 R.S. Foa, A. Klassen, D. Wenger, A. Rand, and M. Slade, *Youth and Satisfaction with Democracy: Reversing the Democratic Disconnect?* (Centre for the Future of Democracy, 2020), https://www.cam.ac.uk/system/files/youth_and_satisfaction_with_democracy.pdf; Open Society Foundation, “Open Society Barometer”; Zach Hrynowski and Stephanie Marken, “Gen Z Voices Lackluster Trust in Major U.S. Institutions,” *Gallup*, September 14, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/510395/gen-voices-lackluster-trust-major-institutions.aspx>.

27 Members of Ivy League Votes, “Student Voting is Not Where it Should Be,” *Inside Higher Ed*, January 2, 2022, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2022/01/03/college-students-face-many-un-necessary-obstacles-voting-opinion>.

ically underfunded and remain vulnerable both to the malevolent acts of state lawmakers and a growing neoliberal ethos in academe which deemphasizes the social sciences and humanities, and which may ultimately diminish the ‘second curriculum’ that fostered race consciousness, cultural nationalism, idealism, and resistance to white supremacy.

Looking Forward

Students at the four institutions that are the focus of this book participated jointly in a course entitled “Student Voting: Power, Politics, and Race in the Fight for American Democracy,” that was offered simultaneously across the four campuses. The discussions with students at the end of the course in Fall 2023 were largely positive, but stood starkly compared with the mixed reaction for students at the end of the Fall 2024 course. Many of the students were disappointed with the 2024 election. Their disappointment was rooted in many things, including the defeat of their preferred candidates, the decline in youth voting overall, and the fact that there was an increase in college-age voters supporting a candidate who made election denialism a core element of his identity. Some were frustrated that the United States did not elect its first female president. Many of the students, particularly from HBCUs, were stung not just by the defeat of the first major-party presidential candidate who was a graduate of an HBCU, but by the victory of a presidential candidate whose racism, manifested in a history of discriminatory business practices, the promotion of birther conspiracy theories against America’s first Black president, and association with white supremacist groups, appeared so obvious to them. They expressed a palpable disappointment in fellow youth, including those with a college education, who voted for Trump in greater numbers than in 2016 or 2020, and with predominantly white higher education institutions which apparently produced many students who were evidently unconcerned with Trump’s racism.

But that was not the entire story. Many of the students in the course were inspired and in awe of work done by generations of students who, together with faculty, administrators, and outside groups, had fought and continued to fight for the most essential of democratic rights. Students were moved and motivated when they engaged with past youth leaders like Judy Richardson, who played a central role in the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee, and David Goodman, whose brother Andy was assassinated by the Klan in Mississippi during Freedom Summer, which guided the creation of The Andrew Goodman Foundation, a national organization dedicated to youth voices and voters.

Students were also inspired by recent graduates who continued the fight after leaving college, like David Hogg of Leaders We Deserve which is working to elect young political leaders, and of March for Our Lives, a youth-led organization focused on gun control, created in the wake of the Parkland, Florida high school massacre. Evan Marlborough of Atlanta, Georgia offered insights of his college leadership experience in securing the first all-student-operated on-campus polling site with The Andrew Goodman Foundation. Upon graduation and in the midst of the pandemic, Marlborough then expanded this model and established the Georgia Youth Poll Worker Project to recruit and train 1,000 young poll workers for polling sites across the state, a program later acquired by the ACLU of Georgia. Jahnavi Rao, our youngest guest speaker, shared her work establishing the 501c3 New Voters, which civically engages over 800,000 high school students across the country. Brianna Cea described her efforts co-founding and leading non-profit GenVote, which engages college youth in organizing and advocacy.

Students also benefitted from hearing from their peers who were active with contemporary student voting rights efforts on campus. For example, Bard student Sierra Ford, an Andrew Goodman Foundation Vote Everywhere ambassador, and other Goodman ambassadors and student leaders from the course's participating colleges, offered short presentations at the beginning of the course on how the respective student bodies were engaging students in securing voter access.

The course's students were often moved to find ways to participate in the process of democratic participation itself, sometimes in an individual manner by ensuring that they registered by the deadline and voted; sometimes in a participatory manner outside of the course room by voluntarily canvassing their peers to register to vote; and sometimes moving towards a justice-oriented approach by voluntarily joining civics organizations beyond the classroom.

The pendulum may yet swing again. While much is made of this generation's dissatisfaction with traditional politics, as the voting numbers above illustrate, too little attention is paid to other forms of civic engagement which have been steadily growing among America's youth according to a 2022 survey by the Center for Information & Research Civic Learning and Engagement, and which may ultimately help grow youth voters, such as volunteering for political campaigns, donating money, attending protests, signing petitions, and joining boycotts.²⁸ Americans

²⁸ Ruby Belle Booth, "Youth Are Interested in Political Action, but Lack Support and Opportunities," Center for Information & Research Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), January 30, 2023, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/youth-are-interested-political-action-lack-support-and-opportunities>. See also A. Kiesa, R.B. Booth, N. Hayat, A. Medina, and K. Kawashima-Ginsberg, "Growing Voters: Building Institutions and Community Ecosystems for Equitable Election Par-

aged 18–24 still overwhelmingly believe in the potential for democracy to create change and three-quarters agree that “voting is an important way to have a say in the future of the country.”²⁹ One cannot but imagine that motivated young people, looking on as America reflects more and more the political stagnation of gerontocracy and kleptocracy, will channel their energies into further political engagement.

The 26th Amendment was adopted not only in reaction to the paradox that young Americans were old enough to die fighting for their country yet too young to determine who should govern. It was also adopted out of a hope that youthful energy and idealism could propel the nation to a better future. It passed not simply because politicians in Washington, D.C. decided that it was time for change, but because of the tremendous organizing and planning of students and advocacy groups who worked tirelessly for its passage, and who engaged in states across the nation, especially in Appalachia and middle America. That tradition, as our case studies show, has been kept alive as students, faculty, administrators, and allies have fought to realize the 26th Amendment’s promise on college campuses. As Jayla Allen of Prairie View A&M University put it, “One thing I always said is that we’re watching, we’re listening, we want to be involved, we know that we are the future, we know that we can have the impact to make the changes that we need ... [to make the] world that we want to see.”³⁰ The lesson of our case studies is not that voting and democracy are synonymous, but that citizens, including students, have agency and that they can deploy the tools of democracy to promote equity and advance democratic freedoms in the hope of a better future.

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²⁹ Booth, “Youth Are Interested.”

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