WHY MILLENNIALS DON’T VOTE, CONSEQUENCES, AND A COLLEGE CAMPUS SOLUTION

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The United States has a grave problem that impacts the future of its democracy. Millennials are not exercising their right to vote. Since the birth of the United States, voting rights has always been the front lines of improving our democracy. Thomas Jefferson’s proclamation that all men are created equal was revolutionary for its time. Throughout history citizens have made landmark challenges to American laws and the way we govern. These battles have been fought in courtrooms and in demonstrations in the streets. The battle for the right to choose who decides the order of life in our country did not end with the 1965 voting rights act. The ongoing fight for enfranchisement continues, but this time the obstacles do not manifest in the form of outright discrimination or blatant voter suppression. They present by another name. States have engaged in practices that limit access to voting. These include: passing strict voter identification laws, eliminating early voting, closing polling stations at earlier times, reducing the number of available polling stations, cutting back on the availability of multilingual materials and in many cases gerrymandering districts to lean towards a specific party. Expanding voter enfranchisement is not easy, but it is critical to a generation that is America’s future. I outline obstacles faced by younger voters and offer a solution to this pervasive problem that is widespread abstention from voting. What if we bring voter centers to college campuses? Would turnout increase? I lay out a case study at the University of Utah where I tested this theory by bringing a voter center to campus.

As of April 2016, millennials (age 18-35) have made up 31% of the electorate with 69.2 million people to rival the traditionally dominant baby boomer Generation (age 52-70) carrying 69.7 million Americans. American demographics are shifting significantly. Back in 2004 baby boomers made up 72.9 million eligible voters in contrast to 20 million millennials. The United States is experiencing a huge demographic shift, as the baby boomer population decreases more and more millennials are coming of voting age. Today just a decade later, millennials are equal counterparts in the population making up approximately 31% of the electorate. However, only 46% of eligible millennials participate in elections whereas 69% of baby boomers cast their ballots.

This trend is alarming, since millennials are expected to makeup an increasing percentage of the population and the workforce. As the Bernie Sanders campaign proved, millennials are increasingly frustrated by a limited job market and a troubling level of college debt for undergraduate and graduate degrees. Millennials clearly have grievances, but outside the landmark 2008 election where nearly 54% of young people voted, there is very little proportional representation in voter turnout which impacts representation in government at all levels.

If millennials are so much greater in number, then why aren’t they voting? I argue that the poor millennial turnout is rooted in two systemic issues. First, there is a decline in access. Polling locations are not in convenient or easily accessible areas for millennials. On one hand, voters must be reasonably informed about where those locations are, and on the other hand voters must
have the ability to travel there. In addition, what documents are needed in order to vote are not always clear leading up to Election Day. Specifically, students are impacted more by these issues. Often times students live on campus, may not have a car, or have moved from different states where laws are different. These obstacles do not amount to voter repression but they do contribute to a larger trend that makes voting harder for millennials than for other voters.

The second challenge is disenchantment that contributes to growing disengagement. Millennials don’t feel their voices are being heard nor do they think their votes matter. A new poll out from Tisch College’s Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, or CIRCLE, “shows only 32 percent of millennials believe they ‘have a legitimate voice in the political process.’” At first glance it is easy to say this problem is clearly a cyclical one. Millennials do not vote because politics do not serve their interests, and politics do not serve their interests because millennials do not vote. One explanation for lower turnout is that Utah is so homogeneously conservative, races seem uncompetitive so voters just do not feel their votes can make a difference.

Fighting for voter enfranchisement goes beyond my proposition to expand voter locations to college campuses. Ultimately, this system of voting in person is outdated. We are trying to force a generation that orders their meals on a mobile app to walk into a 19th century poll booth. The federal government must adapt to new technologies and to the generations that were born with those standards. The cyber security technology is there, but the political will to mobilize a generation that in its entirety is politically unpredictable is absent.

I concede that promoting my project in launching old fashioned polling locations across college campuses is counterproductive to the call for an overhaul in the way we vote, but in policy it is always prudent to take one step at a time.

2 http://www.npr.org/2016/05/16/478237882/millennials-now-rival-boomers-as-a-political-force-but-will-they-actually-vote
4 https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2016/11/01/the-power-millennial-voters/ytqZAS391W3xKqLLEibL/story.html