



Street Art Photograph by Drew Perales

5 Reasons College Students Should Care About November's Midterm Elections: An Explainer

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The race to November has begun, and all 435 seats in the House of Representatives, 34 seats in the U.S. Senate, and 36 gubernatorial seats are on the 2022 midterm ballot November 8. And while countless articles examine what the outcome of the midterms could mean for the Democratic Party or for the Republican Party, what does that mean for an emergent block of young voters, specifically college students?

The complexity of elections and ubiquitous campaigning can make navigating the midterms difficult for young voters. Yet, understanding the implications of who gains control over both chambers of Congress and State government is doubly important. Who's elected in the fall will effect local communities, as well as the national legislative agenda.

Midterm elections are often accompanied by midterm dropoff: the regular drop of voter turnout relative to the most recent general election. However, the 79 percent increase in voter turnout among 18- to 29-year-olds from the 2014 to 2018 midterms was "the largest percentage point increase for any age group". If this upward trend continues, what might college voters need to know this November in order to shape the future of the American political landscape?

STATE GOVERNMENT HAS MORE POWER THAN YOU THINK

Frequently overshadowed by presidential and congressional races, but equally important, are elections for the State legislature and gubernatorial seats within State government. Anything not vested in the federal government — police departments, libraries, schools — is divided between State and Local government. State governments are structured much like the federal government: they have their own constitution, an executive branch, a legislative branch, and a judicial branch.

We can imagine then similar state and federal processes: an executive who approves legislation brought forth by the legislative branch, and a legislature with majority and minority coalitions. The key difference is that State government is meant to be uniquely responsive to their polity. Vice-versa, it is much easier for the polity to contact and interact with State, and Local, government.

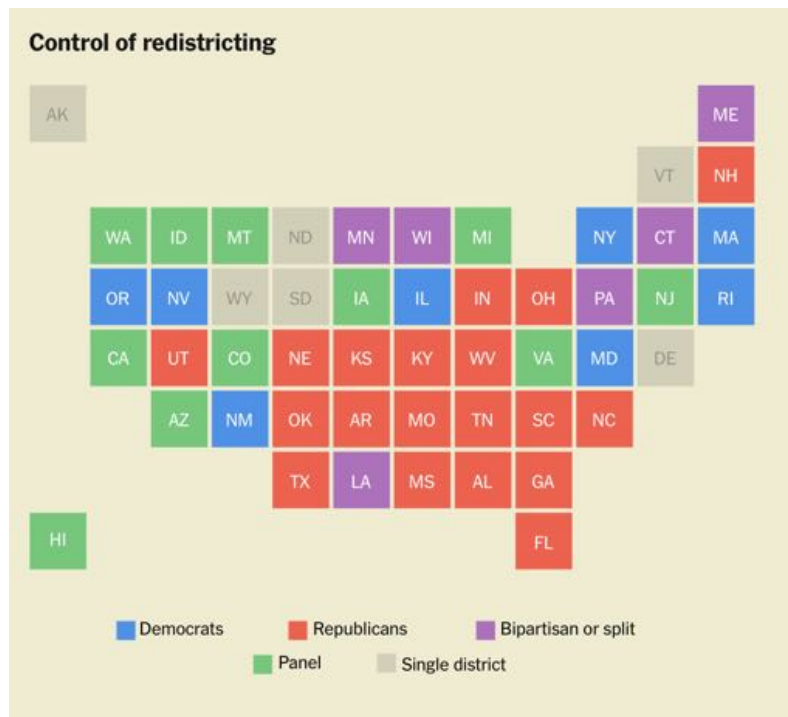
Most important however, State law is the foundation for free and fair elections. State legislatures not only institute voting rights and rules, but also have control over redistricting — which ultimately impacts voter's congressional representation. And this year "88 of the country's 99 state legislative chambers will hold regularly-scheduled elections".

DECENNIAL REDISTRICTING AFFECTS YOUR BALLOT

The redrawn congressional and State legislative maps that have emerged thus far from the 2020 census will influence representation for ten years. Changes to maps can alter the balance of power in Congress and in states through an informal process called gerrymandering: when districts are drawn to give one party an unfair advantage "... to protect incumbent elected officials, or to help — or harm — a specific demographic group".

This happens as mapmakers work to allot an equal number of residents per district. But equal representation does not mean equitable representation. Manipulation of an electoral district to favor one party can consequentially dilute a group of voters impact. While some states use a panel or bipartisan mechanism for mapmaking, others have (partisan) State legislators drawing the districts.

So, while districts have roughly the same population, the subjective drawing of their borders matters a lot. This fall, to gain control over the slim Democratic majority in the House, a simple redraw of maps in a few key states could make all the difference for the Republican Party. And so far, Republicans have "converted light-red districts into safer seats in states like Indiana, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Utah".



Map Depicting 2022 Control of Redistricting via The New York Times

Yet, it's still too soon to know what party will 'come out on top' of redistricting. Not all the maps for the 435 House districts have been confirmed — including those for key states like New York and Florida — as there was a five-month delay of the 2020 census data. This prolonged process of redistricting will make it hard to predict in advance the composition of the House of Representatives. However, If voter's understand the importance of State legislatures in redistricting and representation, they can better select who's in charge today, and the next census in 2030.

HEIGHTENED PARTISANSHIP PLAYS A ROLE IN ELECTION OUTCOMES

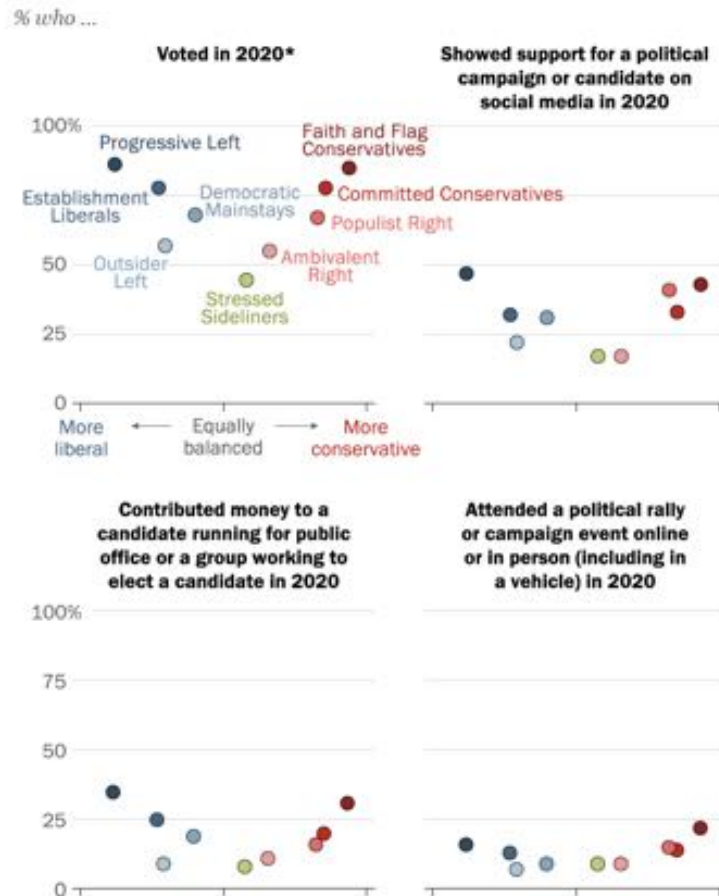
Redistricting is not the only exogeneous influence on election outcomes. Levels of partisanship influence what voters are most active, and what type of engagement audiences receive from elected officials.

Americans consistently on "either end of the ideological spectrum are more active than other Americans... from voting to posting about politics on social media to donating to campaigns". Coupled with normal midterm dropoff, those with more moderate (less consistently liberal or conservative) views will be less engaged in the months preceding the midterms as "typology groups at the ends of the spectrum register much higher levels of general interest in politics".

While the "murky middle" is ideologically diverse (from moderates, undecideds, to independents), 42% of U.S. adults identify as independent. Such voters tend to not care as much about policy as they don't identify based on ideology or follow politics that closely. Even still, every vote matters,

and the bleak statistics beg the question: will more moderate voices be heard in November as more ideological voters continue to dominate the conversation?

Faith and Flag Conservatives, Progressive Left turned out to vote at higher rates than other typology groups



* Based on U.S. citizens.
Note: Validated voters are those citizens who said they voted in a post-election survey and were found to have voted in commercial voter files.
Source: Surveys of U.S. adults conducted Nov. 12-17, 2020, and July 8-18, 2021.

Typology and Participation via Pew Research Center

Markedly, social media has given citizens a greater platform for civic engagement. Likewise, it has enabled greater partisan rhetoric from politicians. During the 2020 election, “each party used distinctive language to engage with their constituencies on social media”. Certain terms, like those referencing polarizing opposition figures and political conflicts, tended to increase audience engagement. Additionally, “link polarization” became popular, broadcasting domains exclusively favored by the party to minimize outside opinion and content.

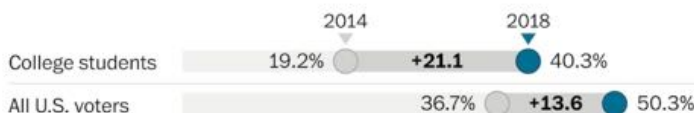
The nature of our present political communication environment is one of highly partisan engagement by voters and highly polarized rhetoric by public officials. If these trends continue in tandem, we can expect the feedback loop to further insulate both parties from one another. And an inactive ‘middle’ doesn’t help grow the diversity of viewpoints either. Both trends offer us a warning as November closes in: voters need to think critically about policy, not party, and how substantive claims are from elites and their filter bubble.

COLLEGE VOTERS COULD CLOSE THE TURNOUT GAP

In the 2018 midterms, when taken together, Gen Z and Millennials cast 30.6 million votes – a quarter of total votes. Taken with Gen X, the three generations out voted Baby Boomers. As Gen Z continues to come of voting-age, we can expect to see an enlarged bloc of young voters.

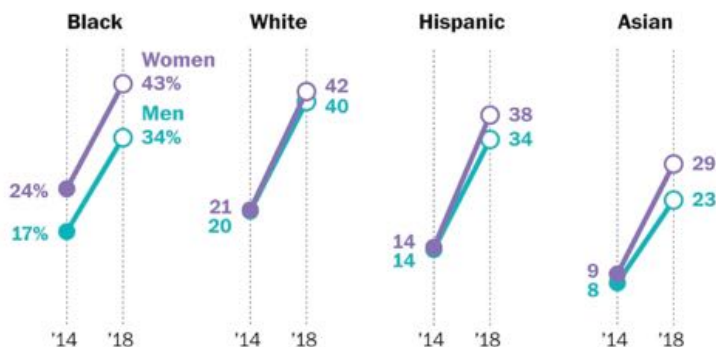
Yet, historically, not all groups within a bloc vote in equal proportion, leading to greater unrepresentative outcomes. Inequalities in voter turnout dilutes gender, racial, and ethnically diverse voices. But, as two-thirds of high school graduates go on to attend college, higher education can be "a potentially significant site for remedying inequality of participation in U.S. elections". Not only do college students represent a growing, more participatory electorate, but also a more diverse electorate. In 2018, not only did the demographic group as a whole jump in participation, but turnout increased among women, Hispanic, and Asian American college students.

Voting rates among college students and the general U.S. population, 2014 midterms vs. 2018 midterms



Voter Turnout Comparison via The Washington Post

Turnout among college students, by race and gender, 2014 midterms vs. 2018 midterms



Turnout Among College Students via The Washington Post

So, while the midterms might not draw as much of a spectacle as presidential elections, they do decide voter's State and Federal representation. Lawmaking at every level impacts our rules and norms as a society, but, most importantly, our voting laws. The steady increase in political engagement among college voters has the potential to galvanize leaders, and continue to close turnout gaps along several dimensions this November.

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