



# Engaging Youth Voters Beyond Marriage Equality

By Hannah Hussey and Sarah Audelo      September 8, 2014

After young people turned out for the 2008 elections at their highest rate since 1992<sup>1</sup> and played an important role again in the 2012 elections,<sup>2</sup> political observers focused renewed attention on their habits and demographics as a political group. It is noteworthy not only who voted in these elections and how but also how the ways in which young people engaged with contemporary social and political issues shifted. In addition to voting and traditional campaign involvement, young people are sparking new modes of online advocacy and communication and are changing the terms of political conversations—factors that future campaigns will need to understand in order to successfully mobilize young voters.

The 2012 marriage-equality campaigns are a strong example of successful youth engagement and illuminate valuable lessons for future campaigns, both within the marriage-equality movement and beyond. Young voters showed up at the ballot box in large numbers to support marriage equality in four states—the pro-marriage-equality ballot initiatives in Maine, Maryland, and Washington, and the successful defeat of an anti-marriage-equality amendment in Minnesota. Findings from a poll commissioned by the Center for American Progress provide insight into the reasons underlying youth political participation and how progressive movements can be responsive to youth priorities moving forward.

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## The poll

Research conducted by Grassroots Solutions for the Center for American Progress analyzed information on core lessons from the four successful state marriage-equality campaigns in 2012.<sup>3</sup> It included an online poll conducted in fall 2013 of 800 youth voters ages 18 to 30, who were screened to ensure they had voted in favor of marriage for same-sex couples, as well as 200 youth voters who had expressed a proclivity for political advocacy through volunteering for a campaign or political issue or donating money to a campaign within the past two years. These participants are referred to here as activist voters. The poll included questions on respondents' levels of involvement, reasons for becoming involved, ways of taking action, and priority issue areas.<sup>4</sup>

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## What constitutes political engagement

Traditional definitions of campaign engagement usually include the activities typical of an activist voter. In the poll, young voters themselves were most likely to define involvement with a campaign as entailing volunteering, donating, making phone calls, or knocking on doors. However, the young respondents reported relatively low levels of participation in these activities. For instance, 12 percent of respondents put up signs supporting the campaign, 10 percent donated money, 5 percent made phone calls, and 2 percent knocked on doors. Self-identified involvement levels were higher for respondents of color, who reported being “very involved” at a rate two times that of white respondents. Hispanic voters in particular reported being very involved at three times the rate of white respondents.

A broader view of engagement, however, suggests that most respondents did take some sort of action to support the campaigns. In particular, many voters engaged in online or in-person discussions with others in their network; in some respects, this was an extension of a core part of the Maine and Washington campaign strategies, which relied heavily on interpersonal conversations between volunteers and potential voters.<sup>5</sup> Earlier polling data from an unsuccessful 2009 effort in Maine hints at the effect of these types of conversations: A report from Third Way noted that “people who had talked to a gay person about marriage voted [in favor of marriage equality] by 63% to 37%,” and parents who had spoken with their children, regardless of sexual orientation, voted in favor of marriage equality 55 percent to 45 percent.<sup>6</sup>

For respondents, these interactions took several forms, and many participated in more than one. Social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter were popular platforms for engaging with the issue: 24 percent of the sample reported sharing videos, articles, or campaign information, and 35 percent reported posting their own views on the issue. Additionally, 32 percent said they persuaded friends and family to vote in support of marriage equality; a majority of these youth also shared their own views on social media.

Notably, this level of engagement displayed through the campaigns was new for many voters. Approximately half of those who had knocked on doors and those who had made phone calls said it was their first time participating in those ways. Voters who expressed their support through less formal activities were often doing so for the first time as well: More than 40 percent of those who had persuaded friends and family and those who had posted on social media reported that they had not done so for a campaign before. However, while many voters expected to remain politically engaged in the future, involvement in the marriage-equality campaigns does not on its own guarantee sustained interest. Approximately one-third of respondents indicated some level of uncertainty about whether they would vote in the 2014 elections, and nearly one-quarter indicated they were paying little to no attention to current political issues in their state. The enthusiasm directed specifically at marriage equality presents both an opportunity and a challenge to organizers of other progressive campaigns who are seeking to sustain and build on the new interest in civic engagement that many young voters expressed.

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## Why young voters get involved

Given that so many young voters reported that the actions they took to support the marriage-equality campaigns were new to them, what motivated them to become involved? And how might these motivating factors apply to other issue areas?

While many young people in the sample reported they always knew how they would vote on the marriage-equality initiative in their state, many others decided in the months, weeks, and even days leading up to the election. This suggests that campaigns and advocates do have a significant window of opportunity to reach out to undecided voters with appropriate messaging. This was particularly true for Hispanic respondents, nearly half of whom said they had not always known which way they would vote, with 17 percent making their decision within the last couple days before the election. Additionally, male voters were less likely than female voters to have always known how they would vote—69 percent compared with 81 percent.

Reaching these undecided voters, and encouraging involvement among those who had already made up their minds, was a key component of the successful campaigns. Personal connections to the issue served as a strong factor in fostering support for marriage equality. For instance, 79 percent of those who had a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, or LGBT, friend or family member reported that they always knew how they would vote on the ballot measures, compared with 66 percent of those who did not. Personal networks and beliefs also proved to be an important aspect of how voters chose to express their involvement. In general, respondents were more likely to post their own views about the issue on social media than to share videos, articles, or campaign information on those same websites. In particular, African American respondents, who were the least likely to share information from external sources, were actually more likely than other voters to post their own views. As with the 32 percent of respondents who persuaded friends and family to vote in favor of pro-marriage-equality initiatives, these findings suggest that using personal networks to share personal beliefs was a primary mechanism of participation, highlighting the central role played by informal outreach that discussed personal investments in marriage equality.

Similarly, the most successful framings of the marriage-equality initiatives drew heavily on appeals to personal relationships. Of the three most popular reasons respondents cited for getting involved in the campaigns, the concept of love was central to two: “Love is love and it belongs to everybody,” and “Nobody should be told it is illegal to marry the person they love.” These statements align with a conscious shift by marriage-equality advocates from messaging focused on rights and equality to an emphasis on love and commitment.<sup>7</sup> Advocates hoped this reframing would draw support from voters who were uninspired by the connection between legal rights and marriage equality made during earlier, unsuccessful campaigns in these states and others.<sup>8</sup> While the polling data reaffirm the rationale for this shift in messaging, other framings also resonated among youth voters. For instance, equality and a sense of moral right and wrong were powerful as well:

The highest-ranking reason for involvement was that it was important for “gay and lesbian couples to have the same rights as straight couples,” and many people also cited a sense that anti-marriage-equality initiatives were “wrong” and that new laws were “overdue.”

The data suggest that motivations for involvement differ by race, emphasizing the need for campaigns to use a variety of tactics to attract a diverse set of supporters. While most respondents agreed that the three most popular reasons for involvement explained their own participation at least somewhat well, messages centered on love resonated less strongly for minority voters. For instance, when asked what factors explained their reasons for getting involved in the campaign “very well,” 75 percent of respondents of color said that, “Love is love and it belongs to everybody” and 69 percent said that, “Nobody should be told it is illegal to marry the person they love,” compared with 85 percent of white voters. Instead, respondents of color indicated that their involvement was often better explained by Golden Rule-type messaging and a desire to create change. In Minnesota, 93 percent of Hispanic and 100 percent of African American respondents cited the idea that the proposed anti-marriage-equality amendment “was wrong” as a reason that matched their motivation “very well,” compared with 72 percent of white respondents. Hispanic voters across all four states were heavily motivated by the idea that the marriage-equality campaign felt like an “important accomplishment,” compared with 49 percent of white respondents, 48 percent of Asian American respondents, and 56 percent of African American respondents.

Additionally, African American and Hispanic voters were more likely than white and Asian American voters to find reasons related to the act of campaigning itself as important to their involvement. When asked what explained their participation “very well,” 24 percent of African American and 28 percent of Hispanic respondents cited the fact that they regularly get involved in political campaigns, compared with 12 percent of whites and 8 percent of Asian Americans; 22 percent of African American and 26 percent of Hispanic voters traced their involvement with the campaign to it seeming like “fun,” compared with 14 percent of whites and 16 percent of Asian Americans; and 31 percent of African American and 38 percent of Hispanic voters indicated that the friendly and welcoming attitudes of campaign staff were important, compared with 25 percent of whites and 24 percent of Asian Americans. Future campaigns that seek to attract diverse participants should be mindful that while these data confirm other studies highlighting the effectiveness of messaging around love and commitment, additional factors, such as a sense of what is right and opportunities for enjoyable engagement, matter as well.

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## Issue priorities for young voters

In addition to questions specific to the marriage-equality initiatives, the poll asked young voters what issues they considered important. The respondents indicated that they care about much more than marriage: While 37 percent of respondents listed marriage equality as one of the top three issues they paid attention to, high percentages of respondents also listed improving education—34 percent—and making health care more affordable—also 34 percent.

These results differed by race to some extent. African American respondents paid less attention to marriage equality than did other respondents, with more of them directing their attention to reducing poverty and the cost of college. Hispanic respondents were more likely than other respondents to pay attention to immigration reform and the protection of air and water, though they were less interested than whites, African Americans, and Asian Americans in affordable health care and poverty reduction. In addition to marriage equality, education, and health care, Asian American respondents prioritized racial equality relative to other issues. White respondents were less likely than others to pay attention to racial equality. Gender was also a significant factor—most notably with respect to protecting women’s reproductive health options and access to birth control, which 38 percent of women listed as one of the top three issues they paid attention to, compared with only 8 percent of men.

Many young people not only care about a variety of issues but also are willing to work on them. In addition to marriage equality at 42 percent, respondents listed improving education—47 percent—and reducing the cost of college—44 percent—as the top issues in which they would consider becoming involved. The emphasis on education is not surprising, given that 55 percent of respondents were college graduates and another 18 percent listed their employment status as “student.” Interestingly, even when young voters responded that they were paying more attention to health care affordability than to the cost of college, they still indicated slightly higher interest in getting personally involved in reducing the cost of college—44 percent—than in making health care more affordable—38 percent. This highlights the tangible nature of this topic to them. Demographic differences in which issues respondents wanted to become involved largely tracked with the issues to which they paid attention, with a few differences. African American and Hispanic voters indicated higher interest than white and Asian American voters in gun violence prevention and reducing the cost of college. Additionally, African American voters were more interested in health care affordability when compared with others, and women were more interested in the issue when compared with men. Respondents of color expressed more enthusiasm across the board for racial equality than white respondents did.

Also interesting, however, were the issues for which young voters expressed less enthusiasm relative to the priorities listed above. When presented with several progressive goals and asked which ones they paid attention to or would consider getting involved with, relatively few respondents indicated employment-related issues. Only 3 percent of respondents listed “workplace protections for gay and transgender individuals” as one of the top three issues to which they paid attention, and only 21 percent of respondents indicated they might become involved in it. Similarly, only 1 percent of respondents prioritized attention to “beating back on attempts to take away workplace safety protections,” with only 10 percent listing it as an issue in which they might become active. These responses do not necessarily indicate that young voters believe these issues are unimportant, but could instead suggest that advocates have not provided sufficient opportunities for youth engagement and leadership or portrayed the human impact of these issues in a way that appeals to young people. Additionally, these findings likely reflect the political climates of the four states in which the survey took place and may not be indicative of issue priorities in other locations.

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## Motivating young voters for progressive movements

Knowing that young voters care passionately about a variety of issues yet do not necessarily see themselves as likely voters or participants in the future, progressive campaigns cannot count on support from youth without intentionally engaging them. In some cases, young voters are already eager to take action, particularly around issues that are touching their lives in immediately visible ways, such as the obstacles created by high tuition costs. In many cases, however, campaign organizers seeking to attract young people to multigenerational movements will need to more clearly articulate why youth also have a stake in their issues. For instance, organizers could place lower-priority items such as workplace protections in the context of a larger economic justice movement that also addresses the high loan burdens facing students and recent graduates.

Although not directly transferable, the findings from this poll of pro-marriage-equality youth can shine light on effective framing and outreach strategies that campaigns seeking to address problems such as workplace discrimination can use to galvanize young voters. The marriage-equality campaigns showed that messaging that emphasized shared values and the human impact of inequality were powerful methods of engaging young people, many of whom showed a strong desire to stand up for what they believe is right. These are concepts that are likely replicable for other movements. Additionally, survey responses indicated that—while important—values-based messaging is not enough. In order to most effectively reach young African American and Hispanic voters in particular, campaigns should also build on the previous political involvement of potential participants, create fun avenues for action, and emphasize friendly and welcoming campaign staff. A diverse set of strategies is especially important given that African American and Hispanic respondents indicated higher levels of involvement in the marriage-equality campaigns than other voters in our poll and are therefore key groups to engage moving forward.

Additionally, it is critical that campaigns seeking a higher degree of youth involvement deliver their information in a manner conducive to sharing via social media or interpersonal conversations. Social media websites are among the most popular sources of information about politics for young people, with nearly half of respondents using Facebook for that purpose at least once per day. However, social media also serves as a critical platform for youth to transmit their own information—including information produced by another individual or organization and, for many young people and particularly African American young people, information about their own personal views.

Campaigns that facilitate these informal mechanisms of involvement among youth, such as the sharing of personal views on social media or interpersonal conversations about personal beliefs aimed at persuading friends and family members, will be better aligned with the types of advocacy in which young people are already engaged. Similarly, campaigns that are able to demonstrate immediate relevance to young voters or people they know will be more attractive to potential participants. As an increasing number of states adopt marriage equality, progressive movements will need to carefully consider how to harness the energy that young voters displayed—many for the first time—during marriage-equality campaigns and mobilize it for a broader range of issues. By aligning their messaging, outreach strategies, and issue framing with the priorities that young people are setting for themselves, campaigns can seek not only to turn out youth voters but also to engage them as proactive leaders within progressive movements.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Emily Hoban Kirby and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, "The Youth Vote in 2008" (Medford, MA: Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2009), available at [http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS\\_youth\\_Voting\\_2008\\_updated\\_6.22.pdf](http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_youth_Voting_2008_updated_6.22.pdf).
- 2 Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Young Voters Supported Obama Less, But May Have Mattered More," November 26, 2012, available at <http://www.people-press.org/2012/11/26/young-voters-supported-obama-less-but-may-have-mattered-more/>.
- 3 Grassroots Solutions, "Analysis of the 2012 Marriage Campaigns for the Center for American Progress" (2014). The poll is available upon request to CAP.
- 4 Additional details on the methodology are available upon request.
- 5 Geordy Boveroux and Jake Williams, "Have Gay Marriage Advocates Found a Winning Formula?", *Campaigns and Elections*, August 29, 2014, available at <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P3-3056380961.html>.
- 6 Rachel Laser, Lanae Erickson, and Jim Kessler, "Moving the Middle on Marriage: Lessons from Maine and Washington" (Washington: Third Way, 2010), available at [http://content.thirdway.org/publications/248/Third\\_Way\\_Report\\_-\\_Moving\\_the\\_Middle\\_on\\_Marriage.pdf](http://content.thirdway.org/publications/248/Third_Way_Report_-_Moving_the_Middle_on_Marriage.pdf).
- 7 Lanae Erickson Hatalsky, "Why Marriage Matters: The Research Behind the Message" (Washington: Third Way and others), available at <http://www.thirdway.org/subjects/11/publications/377> (last accessed August 2014).
- 8 Ibid.