

Commentary: 50 years after ratifying 26th Amendment, where are all the young voters?

- By Charles Beresford
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July 1 will be the 50th anniversary of the ratification of the 26th Amendment, which lowered the eligible voting age from 21 to 18.

There were continuous pushes for legal adults to be able to vote in elections dating back to the end of World War II. The idea of “old enough to fight, old enough to vote” was integral to the first youth activists. Eventually, this became the rallying cry of students during the backlash against the Vietnam War.

With the struggle that many endured to secure the right for all young adult citizens to participate in elections, one might expect younger generations to continue this enthusiasm about voting and turn out in high numbers each election cycle. This, however, is not the case.

Millennials and Generation Z were set to account for 37% of the 2020 electorate, according to Pew Research. In actuality, the two generations accounted for just 32% of voters in the 2020 general election, according to exit polls. This is lower than the voter turnout among 18- to 39-year-olds in both the 2008 and the 2016 elections, which was 36%.

While this past election cycle was unprecedented in American history due to COVID-19 forcing states, localities and political parties to adjust election plans, overall turnout nationwide (66.2%) was the highest in more than 100 years. The low proportion of young voters is even more exasperating because, due to the nature of the coronavirus and its increased danger for the

older population, the chance of young people dying of COVID is not the reason their turnout numbers were so low.

Of course, this past election cycle could have been an anomaly due to a number of factors, namely the involvement of then-President Donald Trump, who also had one of the highest turnout midterm elections in American history in 2018. Despite this perceived aberration, there is no sign that people will slow down their voting efforts now that Trump is out of office.

Given how voting was a right that millions had to organize for, it is incredibly salient that my young colleagues do not take the anniversary of the extension of these rights for granted. It may seem cliché to point out that the future is young people, but that is, and will continue to be, the truth.

Many young people who I interacted with before, during and after the 2020 presidential election are concerned about the future of this country. While some are consumed with more frivolous issues such as the new controversial Cardi B song or the next TikTok dance trend, others have deep concerns about racial justice, climate change and their future place in the economy.

Moreover, due to these anxieties surrounding the future of American politics, younger generations are seeking out politicians who propose addressing their concerns. Unfortunately, many I have talked with do not believe that the people in power, including President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, do a good enough job representing their interests.

Seeing this, my fellow young Americans need to make sure our beliefs are reflected in our politics. We should take the 50th anniversary of our gained suffrage as a reminder that the onus is on us to guide this country and shape it toward what we want it to be. We must show up and vote as though our future depends on it — because it does.

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