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Youth Using Social Networking Tools to Participate in Politics

by Lillian Mongeau | July 13, 2012 — 11:50 AM



Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty Images

Krista O'Connell, communications coordinator for the University Democrats, tries to register voters for the upcoming midterm elections outside Newcomb Hall at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia, October 7, 2010.

Nearly [17 million young people will be newly eligible to vote](#) this November. A new study of how these voters engage in politics online shows that they may be listening more carefully than politicians think.

Young people are notoriously bad at voting. Even in 2008, a banner year for youth turnout, [older voters went to the polls at much higher rates](#). But a new study called “Youth Participatory Politics,” finds that the youngest voters are far more likely to be talking about politics using tools like Facebook, Twitter and texting.

The study surveyed 3,000 young people between the ages of 15 and 25, and found that 78 percent of them report texting, sharing status updates or chatting online every week.

“If they think that sending an email to their friends is the same as showing up and voting, that could be a problem,” said Joseph Kahne, a professor at Mills College in Oakland and the co-author of the study. “But in fact, what we found in our study is that young people who were engaged in participatory politics were twice as likely to report voting as people who weren’t engaged.”

That is, the people who were engaged in politics in the virtual world, also got engaged in real life. And the people who are the most engaged—both online and in the voting booths—aren’t necessarily the ones you would expect.

“Actually in our study,” Kahne said, “if you look at all forms of political activity, we found that African-American youth were the most highly engaged.”

The study found that over 94 percent of black, white, Latino and Asian-American youth reported having access to a computer with Internet access. And everyone is using that access.

Damari Lawrence is an intern at KDOL, Oakland’s education access television station and he’ll turn 18

this summer. He says his family wants him to vote for Barack Obama in November. He's a little wary of participating in a system he calls corrupt, but said voting is better than not voting.

"I absolutely think I should be involved in government because if one falls, we all fall," Lawrence said.

Last year, Lawrence joined other youth leaders in Oakland on [a televised panel to ask Mayor Jean Quan a few questions](#). He said the experience made him and his peers want to know more about the issues affecting their community.

"Most teenagers are leaning towards not caring about it, but there's a good, significant portion of teenagers out there who have an interest that could be built upon," Lawrence said.

The message to politicians hoping to pull in the youth vote this fall? Get online.

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