

Highlights from the Workshop on Data-Driven Strategies to Promote Youth Turnout

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On Wednesday, August 29, faculty from universities as well as representatives from voter mobilization groups gathered on the campus of MIT to discuss data-driven strategies to promote youth voter turnout. Organized by Edie Goldenberg (Michigan), Adam Berinsky (MIT), and Charles Stewart III (MIT), and funded by the Mellon Foundation, this gathering took the form of a workshop, with authors presenting papers on the topic, discussants providing comments on those papers, and an open discussion among all participants about those papers. The event concluded with attendees splitting into groups to discuss core questions about what universities can do to promote youth voting.

The first paper, written and presented by Jared A. McDonald and Michael J. Hanmer, “Understanding and Confronting Barriers to Youth Voting in America,” discusses the state of the literature on the obstacles youth voters face when attempting to register and vote. They argue that a research agenda that focuses on youth voters and includes considering both institutional and behavioral paths to improving youth turnout is needed, and the existing evidence suggests that removing barriers to registering and voting alone is not a panacea to the problem of low voter turnout among young people.

The second paper, “What We Know about Mobilizing College Students to Vote,” by Elizabeth A. Bennion and David W. Nickerson examines previous studies of efforts to improve turnout among college students. The evidence suggests that young voters respond positively to personal contact aimed at encouraging turnout, whether that contact comes in the form of a canvasser, a personal email, or a social media post by a friend. Other strategies that may be effective include individuals making a plan to vote, pledging to vote, and being reminded to vote via text message. Direct mail and impersonal contact such

as “blast” emails or ads on social media are less effective strategies.

D. Sunshine Hillygus and John Holbein then presented their paper “Approaches to Making Young Voters: A Review Essay.” They argue that while young people seem to be generally interested in politics, they often do not translate that interest into action, and this distinction between attitudes and behavior is an area that needs further research.

The final paper presented was “Working in the Trenches: What Do We Need to Know” by Robert J. Donahue. In his paper, Donahue describes the strategies that have helped Northwestern University succeed in registering 95% of their students to vote, and improve their student turnout by 15% in 2016 as compared with 2012. Peer-to-peer contact and creating a culture of civic involvement on campus and among students have been key to Northwestern’s success.

The workshop concluded with participants forming small groups and discussing insights from the presentations, comments, and discussions earlier in the session. These small-group discussions focused on the ethical and resource constraints that academics might face when promoting youth turnout, future directions for research, and how to implement lessons from the workshop across different types of academic institutions. ■



Above: Participants in the Workshop on Data-Driven Strategies to Promote Youth Turnout present their papers and brainstorm follow up steps for the next academic year.