Increasing Voter Registration Among 18-Year-Olds in New Hampshire

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February 6, 2024
Introduction

More than 16,000 people turn 18 in New Hampshire every year.¹ As of the close of the 2022/2023 school year, however, only 15.6% of the Granite State’s 18-year-olds are registered to vote. This compares to 80% of voters age 35 and above who are registered to vote in NH and an estimate of 30.6% of 18-year-olds nationwide in 2022.²

Across the country, The Civics Center consistently finds that when young people are registered to vote, they turn out at high rates. In fact, a 2022 report by TCC showed that 83% of New Hampshire 18-year-olds who were registered turned out to vote in the 2022 midterms.

The challenge is getting them to register.

The Civics Center, in partnership with Open Democracy, an on-the-ground non-partisan organization dedicated to political equality for all, developed a program aimed at boosting NH high school voter registration. The pilot ran during the 2022/2023 school year and generated further student and faculty engagement in the Fall of 2023.

While there are many programs that are designed to reach college students, The Civics Center and Open Democracy program was designed specifically to focus on New Hampshire’s own local high school students.

¹ US Census Reporter, American Community Survey
² US Census voting and registration data (2022, Table 1)
The program was multi-faceted:

1. **We developed outreach materials to recruit students and educators** from every public high school in the state. These materials focused on our national High School Voter Registration Week in September.

2. **We provided training in one-hour workshops** offering a step-by-step roadmap in how to fill out a voter registration form and how to organize a drive within a high school.

3. **Students recruited volunteers and led the drives** and were supported by their faculty. Between them, they recruited election officials to attend.

4. **We provided materials and support**, like Democracy in a Box.

5. **We provided post-drive follow up** to learn what went well and what can be improved and to help us track rates and let the students know how they did.

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**Training**

**Drive Materials**

**District-Level Data**

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Lessons We Learned

1.

Without dedicated programming, students and teachers lacked easy access to resources to run successful drives. There were too many steps, and it was too complicated to figure out how to make a drive happen. They needed it to be simple and easy. We found success by bringing our easy-to-use tools directly to the students.

For example, in Spring 2023, teacher Logan Laroche got connected to the project through The Civics Center’s Cap, Gown & Ballot initiative. He tapped two students, Sam and Sydney to help lead the drive. Sam said that the resources that The Civics Center provided made it really easy for them to run the drive.

They used it all: templates, toolkits, sample messaging, posters, handouts. They said that using those resources made the drive not only effective, but fun for them and for their peers. Once their peers had the information that they needed in order to register to vote, Sam and Sydney said that the school setting made the process friendlier.

“I think they thought it was really scary to go in somewhere and register, rather than have people you know asking you to register.”

- SAM AND SYDNEY

Mr. Laroche agreed. He says that some people don’t vote because the idea of registering is daunting. Making it accessible and easy to high school students, he says, “lays a blueprint.”

2.

The complexities of New Hampshire’s registration requirements presented unique challenges for student leaders. Because voter registration requires in-person registration and a local official to be present, most students could not overcome these obstacles on their own. They needed adult support.

The most successful voter registration efforts in NH had an intergenerational team, such an educator and student or parent and student. These teams could more directly address the two largest hurdles to high school voter registration: young people could use their relationships with their peers to nurture a culture of voter registration and civic engagement, and adults could leverage their authority to address logistical challenges of organizing field trips to town clerks’ offices or bringing elected officials to campus.

This learning led us to reconfigure our training model to primarily target educator and student teams, rather than solely student leaders. This was an adaptation of our youth-led programming approach, but felt more appropriate based on state laws and successful models.
Lessons We Learned (cont.)

3.

The most successful drives tied into existing infrastructure to institutionalize the effort.

Students found that rather than starting from scratch, it was helpful to connect to already-existing school structure, curriculum, and traditions.

Ella from Laconia High School planned her drive through her school district’s Diploma of Distinction Program, an existing program for students to pursue a rigorous and academic passion project for a special distinction. Others found success in holding the drive during events tied to graduation, when eligible students are required to be on campus. Some identified a longstanding club or student government entity that could run the drive, not just this year, but every year. Making the drive a recurring part of the school year helps to institutionalize the program and even creates the expectation each year that voter registration is a rite of passage.

Students Sam and Sydney hold The Civics Center’s Democracy in a Box, a voter registration drive toolkit.

The Cap, Gown, & Ballot Campaign is TCC’s nationwide effort to make graduation season synonymous with voter registration.
Our Efforts Were Successful

The Civics Center and Open Democracy found that school-based programs for registering young voters had a significant impact on youth voter registration rates.

Expert Findings

David Nickerson, one of the most widely respected experts in evaluating the effectiveness of voter registration and turnout programs, evaluated our program. He found that among 40 municipalities in NH with the largest high school aged populations, those that held student-led high school voter registration drives as part of this joint program saw an increase in registration rates of 18-year-olds of 7.4 percentage points above comparable municipalities without such drives.

The Civics Center and Open Democracy’s joint effort contributed to a near doubling of voter registration rates for 18-year-olds in the state as a whole from June 2022 to July 2023. During that period, the rate increased from 8.5% to 15.6%.

Peer-to-peer efforts, such as those undertaken by TCC and OD, are arguably the most important aspect of engaging young people in the voting process.

“... near doubling of voter registration rates for 18-year-olds in the state as a whole...”
The project has created momentum throughout the state. Building on our success with the voter registration drives, TCC and Open Democracy NH sought to broaden our reach when we undertook a first-ever Youth Voter Registration Conference and enlisted event co-sponsors NH Civics, 350 New Hampshire and New Hampshire Youth Movement to support the event.

On Veterans Day 2023, over 50 students, educators, volunteers and election officials from across New Hampshire gathered in Concord to learn about how they could work to strengthen democracy through high school drives.

All three organizations reached out to invite attendees, knowing that their networks would contain students or educators who might already be inclined to support voter registration and benefit from training, materials and support. NH Civics participated in panel discussions and breakout sessions with educators, answering questions and offering support to educators seeking to embed voter registration more deeply into their curriculum and school culture.

- Sam, Sydney and their teacher, Logan LaRoche, the same team mentioned above, attended the event as expert speakers. Sam and Sydney joined a morning panel to share their firsthand experiences, challenges and successes in running their first voter registration drive. Logan joined an afternoon breakout session with other teachers, taking questions and sharing advice about how to support student drive leaders and support civic education more broadly.

- Twelve student and educator teams left the conference with action plans for drives while additional volunteers and election officials leveraged their learnings from the day to collaborate on outreach plans to inspire drives within their own communities.

- Open Democracy NH and The Civics Center are planning to continue support for these drives and have opened up a local position to provide even more local, on-the-ground support as we continue to inspire drives across the state.

“It was eye opening for me to see towns in my district weren’t on the list of the top 20 towns registering students to vote. It’s not great to hear. I am now passionate about helping get people educated in my district, and the connections I learned about today can make that a reality.”

- AMELIA, student attendee
We strongly recommend continuing these efforts leading up to the 2024 election. A look at the percentage of 18-year-olds registered in all New Hampshire counties shows that none of the counties is near or above the NH state average for voter registration among residents 35 and older. All counties could benefit greatly with continued efforts to reach high school students.

There’s Room to Grow

None of the counties is near or above the New Hampshire state average for voter registration among residents 35 and older.
It is worth noting that New Hampshire presents students (and many adults) with higher barriers to register to vote than virtually any other state in the country. Among those hurdles are:

**Unique Challenges in New Hampshire**

**No online voter registration.** NH is one of only seven states in the country that does not offer online voter registration. In addition, unlike every other state in the nation, New Hampshire requires residents to register to vote in person, usually during business hours, which alone creates a significant barrier for high school students to register to vote.

**NH has strict ID requirements to register to vote.** NH voter registration requires evidence showing proof of age, identity, domicile, and citizenship. For young people with easy access to either a passport or driver's license, the process can be relatively smooth. However, for young people without such access, the hurdles can be a significant deterrent. For example, the New Hampshire Secretary of State publishes guidance for types of documents that are sufficient to prove domicile, such as a utility bill or a lease, which most 18-year-old high school students do not have. The Secretary of State's guidance document says nothing about students providing documents from their high schools to demonstrate their domicile. A photo ID from a public high school may provide proof of domicile, but only if it includes the student's address, and often high school IDs do not.

**No preregistration at age 16.** NH's laws about when students can pre-register can be confusing and inconsistent. The state requires residents to be 18 on the “next election” day in order to register, but different localities hold local elections on different days, making it difficult for teens to anticipate when a 17 year old will be able to register. Fifty percent of teens across the country live in states that allow preregistration starting at age 16. Preregistration is a growing phenomenon. In 2023, Minnesota, Illinois, and Michigan all enacted laws allowing preregistration at age 16, bringing the total number of such states to 19.

**Same-Day Registration.** One silver lining amid these challenges is NH’s same-day registration law, which creates an opportunity for a last-minute surge in registration, an important boost in voter turnout and engagement. But waiting until the last day can stymie new voters who do not have the proper documentation to register and vote that day.

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3 For example, Lebanon held a local election on March 14th, 2023, while Concord's local election was on November 7th. This variability creates challenges in providing consistent messaging to educate young people about when they can register before the age of 18, as there is no single election date or age attainment that applies statewide.
Peer-to-Peer Registration Drives Are Critical.

While New Hampshire creates unique and often burdensome barriers to voter registration, we have found that peer-to-peer registration drives make a significant difference in overcoming the obstacles and increasing youth registration and participation rates. Because of New Hampshire’s in-person registration requirement, these efforts work best when they involve the whole community, engaging students, educators, volunteers, and elected officials. Once schools incorporate voter registration into their campus life and election officials make a practice of coordinating with schools, and once student leaders and educators are trained on the materials needed to register, these efforts can continue at a relatively low cost from one year to the next and can make a significant impact on the voter registration rates among 18 year olds in New Hampshire.

Methodology

We measured changes in voter registration rates in the following manner.

- **IN JUNE 2022**, we obtained from the NH Secretary of State aggregate voter registration counts of 18-year-olds for each municipality. We then compared the counts to population data from the American Community Survey to estimate a baseline registration rate for 18-year-olds in each municipality.

- **IN THE SUMMER OF 2023**, following our program, we obtained updated voter registration numbers from the NH Secretary of State, recalculated the registration rate for each municipality and compared the pre-program rate to post-program rates.
Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions of The Civics Center’s dedicated staff, volunteers, and partners, without whom this report would not have been possible. Special thanks to Lisa Cohen, Laurel Denrbach, Molly Ford, Livia Polise, Avery Shaw, and Vicki Shapiro.

The Civics Center is grateful to Open Democracy New Hampshire, whose director and staff, including Olivia Zink, Sara Lobdell, and Doreen Desmarais have supported and enriched our work.

This report was made possible through the generous support of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation.

For more of our research, please visit: https://www.thecivicscenter.org/research

For more information, please contact: info@thecivicscenter.org

The Civics Center is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to bringing voter registration to every high school in America. The Civics Center is a project of Community Partners, a 501(c)(3) organization.

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