

# Information They Can Trust: Increasing Youth Voter Turnout at the University

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In the 2004 presidential election, perhaps 54% of the nation's youngest cohort—dubbed “Generation Next” by some pollsters—cast a vote. This was a substantial increase over the 42% of eligible 18–25-year-olds who voted in the 2000 election (U.S. Census Bureau 2005; Pew Center 2007). Still, youth voting rates lagged behind the voting rates of those citizens older than 25—66% made their way to the polls on Election Day in 2004 (Lopez, Kirby, and Sagoff 2005). It is likely that voting rates will increase in the current youth cohort as they age, as has happened in both the Baby Boomer and Generation X cohorts. But transforming more of the large Generation Next cohort into voters earlier in adulthood could substantially increase democratic participation in upcoming elections and for decades to come, as habits of civic participation developed in youth often last a lifetime (Miller and Shanks 1996). Two-thirds of young people now enroll in some form of higher education. Colleges and universities of all types would therefore seem to be natural sites to mount efforts to improve youth voter turnout. And because interest in voting among the youngest adult cohort seems to be on the rise, this would seem to be the time to encourage more of such behavior. But how can institutions of higher learning

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best promote democratic participation, especially voting?

We report here the results of one successful effort to promote youth voting undertaken at Hofstra University, an ethnically and economically diverse, medium-sized university in New York State. A voter registration program combined with voting-related civic literacy and social capital development significantly increased student voting rates at our university, as comparisons demonstrate. Our findings are of interest because our population is suggestive of many other populations of college students and because our strategies could be easily replicated at all types of institutions of higher education. (For additional strategies, see Harvard University 2004.)

## Social Capital and Youth Voting Behavior

One study of youth voting behavior characterizes first-time voters this way:

As young citizens confront their first election, all of the costs of voting are magnified: they have never gone through the process of registration, may not know the location of their polling place, and may not have developed an understanding of party differences on key issues. Moreover, their peer group consists almost entirely of other nonvoters: their friends cannot assure them that voting has been easy, enjoyable or satisfying.” (Plutzer 2002, 42)

Young voters, this description indicates, lack crucial voting-related social capital. Voting is not yet normative; the first-time voter lacks a network comprised of voters and lacks trust that voting is satisfying. This suggests that the “costs” of being a new voter could be lowered and voting participation rates could be increased through civic engagement activities that foster voting-related social capital development.

Political scientists have argued that social capital is equivalent to a society's “civicness”—a quality crucial to the maintenance of democratic practice

(Portes 1998). According to Putnam (1995), the chief advocate of this position, a civically engaged, voting citizenry might best be maintained or increased by nurturing the development of norms of political participation, civic-minded networks, and certain forms of trust—the ingredients of a political version of social capital that “facilitates coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1993, 35). In democracies, benefits of cooperation such as changes in public policy are ultimately obtained through voting, what Milner terms “the sine qua non of political participation in a democracy” (2001, 1).

Milner, however, suggests that the relationship between social capital and political participation passes not through trust but through citizens' knowledge and capacity to make sense of their political world—what he terms “civic literacy” (2002). Benjamin Barber (1998) likewise argues that it is civic competence that is the irreplaceable ingredient of strong democracies. Dudley and Gitelson (2003) counter that while contextualized political knowledge is a necessary precondition to civic engagement, knowledge alone is not sufficient to motivate students to register and vote. Regardless of whether it is social capital or civic literacy that needs improvement in the young, or, as we will argue, a combination of the two, it is clear that in order to reproduce democracies, societies must pay special attention to inculcating in young citizens attitudes and behaviors that lead to voting and other forms of civic engagement.

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that youth involvement in school government or community service projects leads to a life of continued civic engagement and political participation through voting (Andolina et al. 2003; Flanagan and Faison 2001; Flanagan and Sherrod 1998). Youniss, McLellan, and Yates (1997; see also Yates and Youniss 1998) argue that these early forms of participation lead to the development of a “civic identity” that brings with it a sense of agency and social responsibility for sustaining one's community. Those who do not develop a civic identity

while young are at increased risk for being non-voters and non-joiners of community organizations as adults. Boyte and Kari (1996) have theorized, for example, that in the 1980s and 1990s, in contrast to previous eras, an increasingly extended adolescence for middle-class children, one that often did not include civic-minded labor, resulted in a kind of “marketplace democracy,” one in which young citizens often saw themselves as consumers rather than producers of civic life. A consumerist stance towards democracy evoked passivity and lack of involvement and a citizenry more prone to criticizing government from the outside as one might a faulty product rather than attempting to change it through civic engagement. Feelings of powerlessness over the content of the “product” led, at least in part, to low rates of youth voting for Generation X, those born between 1965 and 1982. These modern tendencies can be exacerbated among young citizens who are members of marginalized groups (Sherrod 2003).

Preliminary data on Gen Next (defined here as those born between 1983 and 1989) suggests a continuation of the growth in volunteering among youth starting in the 1990s and an upswing in interest in following public issues and voting since 2001 (Lopez et al. 2006). More than four in five (82.1%) of those entering college in the fall of 2004 reported having volunteered in the past year while 25.5% reported discussing politics (Sax et al. 2004). Still, fully 38% of current young citizens believe that “most issues in Washington don’t affect them personally.” Only 29% of Americans over the age of 25 feel this way (Pew Center 2007).

Though steps have been taken in recent years to increase civic engagement among adolescents especially by promoting community service, these programs often lack specific attention to building civic skills and therefore do not always translate into increased participation in the electoral process (Kirlin 2002; Kiesa et al. 2007). In addition, many young people are poorly informed about public issues and candidates. According to a recent Pew Research Center Survey (2007) only a third of 18–25-year-olds say they follow what is going on in public affairs most of the time. Indeed, the HERI annual study of college freshmen reported that only 34.3% of the 2004 entering class thought it was “very important” to keep up to date with political affairs (Sax et al. 2004), while 54% of those over 25 follow public affairs. Only 23% of 18–25 year-olds reported reading a newspaper “yesterday,” compared with, for example, 44% of Baby Boomers. Of

18–25-year-olds, 48% said they watched TV news “yesterday” while 25% said they read news online “yesterday” (though these categories are not mutually exclusive). When surveyed in May of 2006, only half knew that the Republicans held the majority in Congress (Pew Center 2007). These low rates of engagement lead to low levels of specific knowledge about politics, which likely further decreases voting rates or makes for uniformed decision making when these young adults do go to the polls.

By the time they arrive at college from a wide range of high schools, students have been exposed to varying degrees of formal and experiential civic education and community service. Some are well on their way to becoming involved and voting citizens while others are almost completely unfamiliar with the workings of their own government and are disdainful of participating in it as citizens. The range of politically relevant knowledge and social capital students come to college with makes voter encouragement at the university level a daunting prospect. A Harvard University study concluded that three factors accounted for voter apathy among college students. These were: (1) perceived lack of knowledge about the issues, (2) lack of understanding about how to get involved, and (3) lack of enjoyment in the political process (Dryer and Ashwell 2000).

The program we describe here endeavored to deal with all three of these reasons for nonvoting among youth. We found some indication that contextualized political information presented in a fashion that inspired trust, fostered political network building, and made voting a social norm—in other words, a program that both enhanced civic literacy and fostered social capital development—did encourage our students to vote in significantly greater numbers than might otherwise have been the case. We report below on voting behavior among students in the 2004 presidential election and the programs instituted to increase it. Similar data from the 2006 midterm election provide additional context.

## University-Based Programs for College-Aged Voters

### Voter Registration

In most states, including New York, citizens must be registered significantly before an election takes place (in New York it is 25 days) in order to be eligible to cast a vote. In addition, since many out-of-state and, in our case, upstate students cast their vote via absentee ballot,

even more time is required if students are to request and receive ballots in time to cast votes on or before Election Day. Because of this, volunteers from the university, in conjunction with volunteers from The League of Women Voters and the Association of American University Women staffed voter registration tables at each summer orientation for incoming students and during lunch hours in a major student conduit in the student center two days a week during the weeks prior to the close of voter registration for New York State in 2004 and 2006. Registration information and materials were available for both in-state and out-of-state would-be voters and information about the absentee voting process was also available.

### Voter Issue Information

The perceived importance of the 2004 presidential election to the nation’s future among a progressive faculty group prompted it to stage a series of political events for students during the early fall of 2004. There were two kinds of events: activities with a progressive point of view and a multiple-viewpoint, issue-oriented, one-day, 28-event—Day of Dialogue. The series of progressive events included an American Friends Service Committee-sponsored anti-war art exhibit, Eyes Wide Open (a display of soldier and Iraqi civilian empty boots and shoes with accompanying informational material about the Iraq invasion); films including *Unprecedented*, *Outfoxed*, and *Wag the Dog*; and speakers Benjamin Barber (on the “War on Terror”) and Stuart Schaar (on insurgencies). The one-day undergraduate conference, strategically entitled, “Hofstra Votes: Learning the Issues and Making a Difference,” was held October 13, three weeks prior to the 2004 presidential election. The Day of Dialogue, though chiefly organized by progressive faculty members, also involved ROTC, College Republicans, and conservative campus religious groups, as well as progressive student groups in a largely successful attempt to ensure that each issue session presented multiple points of view. The headcount at this day was 3,100 mostly undergraduate students, many of them brought by their professors. Some sessions were styled as expert speaker panels with time for student questions, some were student debates, several were themed discussions, a few involved art or performance, and the day ended with a large-group television viewing of the final presidential debate. For example, scholars, think tank specialists, politicians, and other experts debated and discussed the Patriot Act, Iraq policy,

Israel and Palestine, the economy, media responsibility, gay marriage, the military draft, and gender policy in the Bush Administration. Third Party candidates explored their views, our campus clergy and interfaith organization organized a discussion on religion's effects on politics, and a NGO-sponsored photojournalist and a returning U.S. Army officer displayed contrasting photography of the effects of the Iraq war. Students led discussions about how protest should be treated in a democracy and on youth disenfranchisement and apathy and soldiers, and former student soldiers returning from Iraq talked about their experiences and views. Students also acted in a play about nursing in wartime. The 28 events ran in multiple, adjacent venues, two to four events simultaneously, from 8 a.m. until 10 p.m. on a single day.

In 2006, no Day of Dialogue and only a few politically oriented and progressively slanted activities (a speaker series and a few films) were held prior to the election. Mostly, students attended these at their own discretion, though a few professors brought their classes.

### *Data and Methods*

The population of undergraduates at the university in 2004 was approximately 8,400, 56% of which were commuter students. Female undergraduates (54%) outnumbered males, while minority enrollment constituted at least 22% of our student body (9.5% Black, 8.1% Latino, 4.2% Asian, 0.1% Native American; 15.2% declined to specify race/ethnicity). Our population is likewise economically diverse. Nearly a quarter (23.1%) reported a parental pre-tax income of less than \$50,000, 32.1% reported incomes of \$50,000–\$100,000, 20.3% were in the \$100,000–\$150,000 range, while 24.5% reported incomes higher than \$150,000. A third of our students (33%) are in the first generation in their family to attend college.

We conducted post-election follow-up surveys of over one-tenth the undergraduate student body in both 2004 and 2006. Students filled out surveys in class to assure compliance. We randomly selected 56 classes within two categories, social science courses and math and computer science courses. Because of the structure of required courses at the university, this strategy assured maximum exposure to the full range of undergraduate students. We conducted the 2004 survey the semester after the election, which additionally randomized the students surveyed and ensured that no classes brought to the Day of Dialogue by a professor were part of the sample. Our

return rates were 65% and 78%, respectively, which resulted in  $n = 897$  for 2004 and  $n = 980$  for 2006.

Demographic information from the 2004 survey indicated that while racial characteristics of the sample were similar to the university population, males and first-year students were slightly over-represented. Since these two demographic categories are also those least likely to vote (compared with females in the U.S. generally and more advanced students at our university) our findings can be viewed as somewhat conservative.<sup>1</sup> In 2006, our sample slightly over-represented males and sophomores but sampled racial groups in proportions similar to those of the undergraduate population.

Survey questions in both years included whether students had registered to vote or not, had received help from the university with registration and had voted or not, and the reason if they had not voted. We also asked students whether they had attended the various civic engagement activities and asked if they could identify specific films, speakers, events, and sessions of the Day of Dialogue they had attended (in 2004). In addition, we asked what they liked most and least about the activities they had attended and whether they had found them helpful or not. Finally, we asked them for suggestions for fostering civic engagement activities on campus.

## **Findings**

### *Voter Registration*

Discounting students who were not eligible because of youth or non-citizen status, almost 80% (79.3%) of the sample did register to vote for the 2004 election, 14.5% with the help of the voter registration program.<sup>2</sup> Our reported rates of registration compare quite favorably with U.S. Census data; only 64.8% of 18–24 year olds with “some college” in the nation as a whole reported registering to vote (U.S. Census Bureau 2005), while an estimated 67.7% of New York state 18–24 year-olds with “some college” registered (U.S. Census Bureau 2005, Table 4B). Higher registration rates resulted in a higher total proportion of our total student population eligible to go to the polls on Election Day.

### *Voting Behavior*

As is true of the general population, fewer students voted than registered in 2004 but 84.4% of those who were registered did vote (compared with 83.3% of this age group nationally). Of those who

voted, 25% voted by absentee ballot, the rest in person, and 85% voted in New York State with New Jersey and Connecticut being the two other states most commonly mentioned. For nearly three quarters of student voters (74.2%), this was the first time they voted. Of all survey respondents who were eligible to vote, 67% did so.

### *Program Impact on Voting*

Four in 10 students sampled (40.5%) attended at least one of our civic engagement events in 2004, including the anti-war exhibit (11.6%), one or more of the films (13.7%), the speaker series (13.8%), and the Day of Dialogue (27.3%). The Day of Dialogue did reach a substantial number of students, but a bit under half (46.6%) of these reported that they attended the day because their professor required it while 20% reported that they attended out of self interest. The remainder reported that their professor required it but that they were also interested in attending.

Chi-square analysis indicated that attending the progressive events, either singly or in combination (the anti-war exhibit, films, and/or speakers) had no significant impact on voter turnout. Attending the Day of Dialogue, however, did significantly impact voter turnout on Election Day (regardless of whether a student had also attended the progressive events).<sup>3</sup> Of those registered to vote in our sample, 82.4% who did not attend the Day of Dialogue voted on Election Day but 89.3% of those who attended the Day of Dialogue voted. This difference is significant ( $p = .034$ ) using Pearson's Chi-square test.

The difference between voting rates of registered voters who attended and did not attend the Day of Dialogue remained significant even when we took into account their differing motivations for attending. Students who said they had attended because of their own interests did vote at slightly higher rates (91.9%) than those who were required to attend by their professors (89.3%), though the difference was not significant. (In the third group, those who said their professor required attendance but they were also interested, 87.5% voted.) Those who attended the Day of Dialogue voted in statistically significantly higher numbers than other registered student voters regardless of why they had gone to the events.

Several comparison measures help to place this result in context.

First, according to estimates by Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), 59% of those aged 18–24 with “some

college” voted in the 2004 presidential election nationwide (Lopez, Kirby, and Sagoff 2005, 10, Graph 15). Compared to these national findings, our voter turnout rate—at 67% of all those eligible—is appreciably higher.

Second, U.S. Census data for New York eligible voters 18–24 indicates that 45.8% voted (U.S. Census Bureau 2005, Table 4b). If the state ratio in this age demographic for voting rates of those with “some college” compared to those without college is similar to that in the nation, an estimated 57.5% of New York State 18–24-year-olds with “some college” voted. Our surveyed students, 85% of whom voted in New York, did better at a 67% turnout rate.<sup>4</sup> This difference is statistically significant ( $p < .0001$ ) using Pearson’s Chi-square test.

Third, in 2006, we did not organize the Day of Dialogue. Instead, several separate, primarily progressive events were held and students attended largely at their own discretion. We subsequently conducted a survey similar to that conducted in 2004. Significantly fewer (only 22%) students reported attending an event in 2006. (In 2004, 40.5% attended at least one event.) Additionally, in contrast to the high rate at which our students, especially those who attended the Day of Dialogue, voted in the 2004 election, in 2006 only 23.5% of all eligible students voted. In New York State 22% in that demographic did so (Lopez, Marcelo, and Kirby 2007). Our students were no more likely to vote than other students like them in 2006. More students who attended events than those who did not did go to the polls in 2006 (40% compared to 34% of registered voters overall), but this difference was not statistically significant ( $p = .149$ ). This provides further indication that the Day of Dialogue may have made the difference in 2004 turnout rates at our university. In 2004, when the Day of Dialogue was held, 67% of our students reported voting (compared to an estimated 57.5% of New York college-student voters in general). In 2006, without a Day of Dialogue, our student voting rates reverted to being similar to those for New York undergraduates in general.

## Discussion

### *First, They Must Be Registered*

It is quite likely that the voter registration program had a significant, though unmeasurable, effect on the percentage of students who went to the polls on Election Day by virtue of increasing registration. Eligible voters may have gone

elsewhere to register had the university not had a registration drive. However, one study indicates that “lowering the cost” of registration by making it easier can substantially raise voting rates (Ansolabehere and Konisky 2004). Helping students register on campus, where they live and study, enables participation.

As young voters frequently express a desire to vote and make up their minds about candidates only as Election Day grows near (Kirby and Marcelo 2006), encouraging them to register “just in case” also aids in producing successful youth turnout rates. As a CIRCLE study points out, 22% of young voters reported that they didn’t register because they did not meet registration deadlines and another 6% admitted they didn’t know where or how to register to vote (Marcelo 2007). Our comparatively high voter registration figure perhaps indicates that it is would-be voters who are less aware of deadlines and procedures who are most assisted by a campus voter registration program. Our university’s accessible and visible voter registration program may have managed to register some students who otherwise would not have been motivated or thinking about the election by the time voter registration ended. Once registered, we were then in a position to sustain their motivation to turn out to vote through the follow-up programming of the Day of Dialogue.<sup>5</sup>

### *Civic Literacy, Social Capital, and the Day of Dialogue*

Our results suggest that a one-day, event intensive, political issue conference held shortly before a national election can raise the voting rates of undergraduate students (if they have registered previously). Several elements of the Day of Dialogue may have had an impact.

First, comparisons to progressive-slanted events suggest that the multiple perspective approach to discussing political issues may well have inspired a particular form of civic trust in our students. Because of its eclectic nature, students perceived information obtained during the day’s events as reliable and thus empowered them to make up their own minds about which candidates best represented their views and deserved their votes. Our qualitative data suggested that students saw the day as more interesting, informative, and fair-minded than the more typical speakers and the film series. Enhanced student trust levels in the information possibly increased their likelihood of voting because they felt they could better make an informed choice. This may have been especially the case

for more cynical and less informed students.

Recent national-level focus group research on college voter participation conducted by CIRCLE lends credence to this view. College student participants in the study cited the lack of reliable information as a major deterrent to participation in electoral politics (Kiesa et al. 2007). They distrusted information the media provided (which they viewed as biased) and from politicians (who they viewed as self-interested and focused on promoting negatives about the other side). This type of (dis)trust can be distinguished from general notions of communal trust typically employed by social capital theorists such as Putnam or measures of general trust in others collected through political polling. The lack of trust expressed by students was of a specific type—they distrusted the main purveyors of political issue and electoral choice information. The very specificity of this lack of trust, however, perhaps makes it more amenable to amelioration by programs such as the Day of Dialogue.

Second, unlike the individual, unconnected events in either 2004 or 2006, a sizable proportion of the undergraduate population and faculty attended the Day of Dialogue and attended on a single day. The Day of Dialogue, with its masses of students entering and leaving adjacent venues throughout the day, may have created a strong impression that “learning the issues and making a difference” through voting was normative—something everybody did—to the students exposed to the conference. This impression was further enhanced by the number of sponsor organizations for the day listed on the program. These included student and faculty organizations from all political persuasions, administrative and academic offices, and the president of the university, who opened the day with a short speech. A Gladwell-type “tipping point” may have resulted for those students in attendance (2000).

Third, many professors brought their classes to Day of Dialogue events. Although we didn’t collect data on this point, many professors probably did require their students to write reflection papers on what they experienced. This could have further solidified the importance of the experiences in students’ minds or reinforced one main underlying reason for the conference in the first place (to provide motivation to vote).

Finally, the Day of Dialogue focused on increasing student knowledge of the issues in a form that stressed dialogue between those with contrasting views and invited participation. This structure may have been more empowering, involving,

and enjoyable for students than typical speakers or films. Also, planning and participating likely increased student political interest networks. Thus, the Day of Dialogue may have proved an effective vehicle for civic literacy development as well as civic-involvement-focused social capital development, thus lowering the costs of first-time voting. (See findings from the Carnegie Foundation's 2007 Political Engagement Project to corroborate this assertion.)

## Conclusion

A faculty group at Hofstra University set out to enhance voter registration and participation among students at their university in the 2004 elections. Our evaluation of their efforts indicates that they had some success. Voter registration efforts probably increased rates of students eligible to vote. Attending a multi-perspective, one-day undergraduate conference on issues facing the nation held three weeks before the presidential election produced a significantly higher voter turnout rate among surveyed registered voters than those not exposed, even if their professors required that they come. Moreover, the turnout was higher than other comparable group estimates in New York and the nation in 2004. It also compared favorably with the no-better-than average turnout achieved in the 2006 midterm elections when the univer-

sity held no such program. Multi-perspective issue presentations offered in a concentrated form also showed more success in raising turnout rates than more typical, scattered single-event, single-perspective programs, which had no measurable impact on voter turnout.

These results constitute preliminary evidence suggesting that that civic literacy promotion that pointedly provides trustworthy, multiple-perspective information on political issues in a fashion that encourages students to view political involvement as normative can raise voting levels among young voters. Since early voting and civic participation produces lifelong voting habits (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995), if programs like the Day of Dialogue continue to demonstrate success at raising voter turnout among young voters, they should be widely promoted.

While Hofstra University's undergraduate population cannot be said to be representative of college students across the nation, we argue it can be considered suggestive of many populations of college students because it is both ethnically and economically diverse. The university serves a significant population of first-generation college attendees as well as both residential and commuting students. Our outcome in our setting, therefore, suggests that a strategy of youth voter turnout enhancement such as we pursued could work in a variety of other post-

secondary institutional settings. Moreover, it is fully replicable. (See also Addonizio 2006 who found similar results with an information program for high school students.)

The study results suggest obvious directions for programs and evaluations in future years. First, voter registration efforts should continue and be enhanced where possible. Second, the Day of Dialogues should be continued, improved, and evaluated.

There is some additional good news for the progressive faculty members who were chiefly responsible for these efforts. A recent poll suggests that Gen Next is proving to be the most left-leaning generation in many years (Nagourney and Thee 2007). It is likely then that these organizers were successful at energizing progressive young voters—an ironic consequence given that voter registration was completely nonpartisan and the Day of Dialogue emphasized multiple perspectives. Possibly, assisting Generation Next to become lifelong voters is best achieved by providing trusted information and a feeling of membership in a civically engaged community. Democracy is more likely to thrive when there are sustained efforts to foster attentive, involved citizenship; there are good reasons to think that emphasizing that process early can yield dividends for years.

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## Notes

1. U.S. Census Data 2005 Table 5 indicates that, among 18–24 year olds with some college, 55.2% of females voted in 2004 while only 52.6% of males voted. This continues a pattern of female prominence in presidential voting started in 1984 ([www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p20-556.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p20-556.pdf)).

2. These efforts helped 16.4% of first-year students to register, 17.8% of sophomores, 14.8% of juniors, and 5.7% of seniors. Since 2004 was the first year voter registration took place at summer orientation, first-year students were especially likely to be exposed to this op-

portunity to register to vote. A higher percentage of seniors live off campus and therefore are less likely to pass by the conduit in which the voter registration took place. Thus, they were least likely to be exposed to our voter registration tables (as well as most likely to be already registered due to their older age).

3. Voting rate comparisons between non attendees and those attending only the progressive events produced a non-significant chi-square of  $p = .492$ . A chi-square analysis also demonstrated that students who attended the Day of Dialogue and other events were no more likely

to vote than those who had only attended the Day of Dialogue.

4. For a discussion of CIRCLE's methods of estimating youth voting rates, see CIRCLE working paper #35 (Lopez et al. 2005).

5. Our university's voter registration rate for the midterm 2006 elections was 46.5% and about half of these (23.5% of all eligible voters in this demographic) voted in the midterm. Interest in midterm elections is traditionally much lower than in presidential year elections and so it proved for our students as well.

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