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"It's Important to Just Have Your Voice Heard": Young Voters Changing Perceptions of Political Efficacy [Poster]

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“It's Important to Just Have Your Voice Heard”: Young Voters’ Changing Perceptions of Political Efficacy

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Introduction

In 2002, a group of UNI students from a political communication class, under the direction of Dr. Catherine Palczewski, asked young voters if they were voting in the 2002 midterm elections, and why they had made that decision. They interviewed 66 participants, and published a 2004 paper entitled “It’s Just What I Do” to “It Doesn’t Really Matter”: Youth Voters’ Considerations of Voting as Instrument and Ritual.” To examine what changes, if any, have occurred since 2002, I, under the guidance of my adviser Dr. Ryan McGeough, decided to replicate this study for my honors thesis at the University of Northern Iowa.

Methodology

- IRB approval was applied for and granted.
- Interviewees were primarily recruited from UNI, and were all located in Black Hawk County.
- 37 interviews were conducted with individuals aged 18-24.
- Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured semi-open format, with the primary question being “Do you plan to vote in the 2018 election, and why that decision?”
- Interviews recorded and then transcribed verbatim and coded.
- The codes were used to help find the main themes.

Results

- UNI had the second highest voting percentage of any college campus in the country.
- 34 of the 37 people interviewed had already voted or were definitely going to vote in the 2018 midterm elections. This is a significant increase over the 2002 group.
- Of the 3 people who were unsure, they felt they were uneducated and did not want to vote without fully understanding the issues, but still realized elections are important. In 2002, over 50 percent of respondents were unsure if they would vote or did not plan to vote.
- Four main themes were identified:
 - Students in 2018 were more likely to identify the consummatory effects of voting (voting is its own reward).
 - As in 2002, identification of consummatory effects correlated with an increased identification of instrumental effects of voting.
 - Voters expressed a greater sense of internal political efficacy.
 - Increased identification of the consummatory and instrumental effects of voting led voters to have a greater sense of external political efficacy and optimism about political climate, voting, and the future in general.
- **Theme 1: Students were more likely to identify consummatory effects of voting.**
 - 25 respondents identified consummatory effects of voting.
 - Many of these effects were very similar to ones identified in 2002:
 - Responsibility to Previous Generations
 - Duty to Future Generations
 - Duty to Country/Civic Duty
 - A Precondition to Complaint
 - However, far more students articulated the importance of having their “voice” heard than in 2002.
- **Theme 2: Students were more likely to identify instrumental effects of voting.**
 - Nearly all respondents identified some sort of instrumental effect of voting, as they were able to identify an issue that was important to them as they voted.
 - Many of the same instrumental reasons identified in 2002 were identified:
 - Voting as an attempt to make or bring about change
 - Voting is the easiest way to create change
 - Voting for a greater good (through the issues they identified)
 - Voting because of the closeness of elections
 - However, far more students identified instrumental effects of voting than in 2002.
- **Theme 3: Students articulated a greater sense of internal efficacy.**
 - Voters in 2018 felt that they were better equipped to vote, as they were more informed about the issues and candidates.
 - They felt more confident that they understood the political system.
- **Theme 4: Students articulated a greater sense of optimism and external efficacy.**
 - Many voiced the same concerns as non-voters did in 2002, including frustration with the electoral college, the mathematical insignificance of a vote, the impact of money in politics, and the two-party system.
 - Unlike 2002, however, students in 2018 saw voting as a means to address their concerns.
 - Nearly everyone said they planned to vote in all types of elections in the future, even those who had not been doing so up to this point.
 - A majority believed that the political climate could improve, even though the consensus was that it is toxic.

Conclusions

- Far more students in 2018 expressed that it is important that their voices be heard.
- Many young voters believe that their voices are not currently being heard and they are not being well-represented.
- As in 2002, results continue to point to a link between being able to identify the consummatory benefits of voting and a belief in the instrumental effects of voting.
- The results again concur with the 2004 paper, which suggested a recognition of the consummatory and instrumental effects of voting led students to be more likely to vote.
- There are some young voters who believe their voice and vote could make the world a better place.
- A combination of structural and informational barriers prevent young voters from making their voices heard in off-year and local elections, but they still believe these elections are as important as, if not more important than, federal elections.
- **This study points to potentially significant shifts in how young voters perceive voting and citizenship: as young voters place greater importance on having their voices heard, they become more likely to recognize the effects of their vote and thus more likely to participate in elections at all levels of government.**



Selected Literature Cited

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Further Information

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