

GENERATION PROGRESS



A Generation Without Representation

How Young People Are Severely Underrepresented Among Legislators

By: Maggie Thompson and Anisha Singh

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Contents

- 1 Introduction and Summary**
- 3 Methodology**
- 4 Historically Old Legislators**
- 5 Older Means Less Diverse**
 - Race and Ethnicity
 - Gender and Sexual Orientation
 - Disability
 - Religion
 - Education, Military Experience, and Family
- 12 Young Legislators Are More Conservative Than Young Voters**
- 13 An Overall Lack of Power**
- 14 Why This Matters**
- 16 What Can Be Done**
- 20 Acknowledgments**
- 21 Endnotes**

Introduction and Summary

For a representative democracy to function, it is essential that government reflects its people—whether by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, experience, age, or background. Diversity in leadership roles results in a more effective and fair government.¹ By this measure, our democracy is dramatically failing younger Americans. Approximately 62 million Millennials were of voting age during the 2016 general election, according to Pew Research Center.² In 2018, young voters, namely Millennials and Generation Z, are set to make up 34 percent of the eligible voting population.³ This gives young voters a larger share of the potential electorate than any other single generation.⁴ Yet, despite making up the largest potential voting bloc⁵ in the country today, young people are severely underrepresented at both the state and federal level.

This representation gap directly impacts young people, and the issues they care about. When elected officials aren't representative of their constituents, this can lead to policies that are not responsive to the needs of the governed. At the federal level, only one in ten members of Congress are paying off student loans,⁶ while four in ten young people are paying student loans. Young people today are more likely to be killed with a gun than die in a car accident,⁷ yet the 115th Congress has yet to vote on a single bill to strengthen gun laws. Americans overwhelmingly favor legalizing marijuana with 61 percent of support,⁸ but members of Congress have consistently voted to oppose its legalization. When such a gap exists between the lived experiences of a large portion of the electorate and the lived experiences of legislators, it should come as no surprise that issues largely affecting younger Americans are often not addressed.

These disparities in representation also exist at the state level. Our analysis found that despite young voters making up 34 percent of the U.S. electorate, only six percent of state legislators are 35 or younger. In other words, young people are facing a representation gap of 28 percent in state legislatures. To put this into perspective, currently only about one in every 16 state legislators is 35 years old or younger. To make the composition of these bodies proportional to the eligible voting population, lawmakers 35 and under would have to compose one out of every three state legislators.⁹ Nationwide, to fill the existing representation gap, the country would need 2,500 state legislators, of the 7,548 that exist, to be 35 or under.

This report explores the disparities in youth representation in state legislatures, the implications for diversity, and how proper representation translates to power.

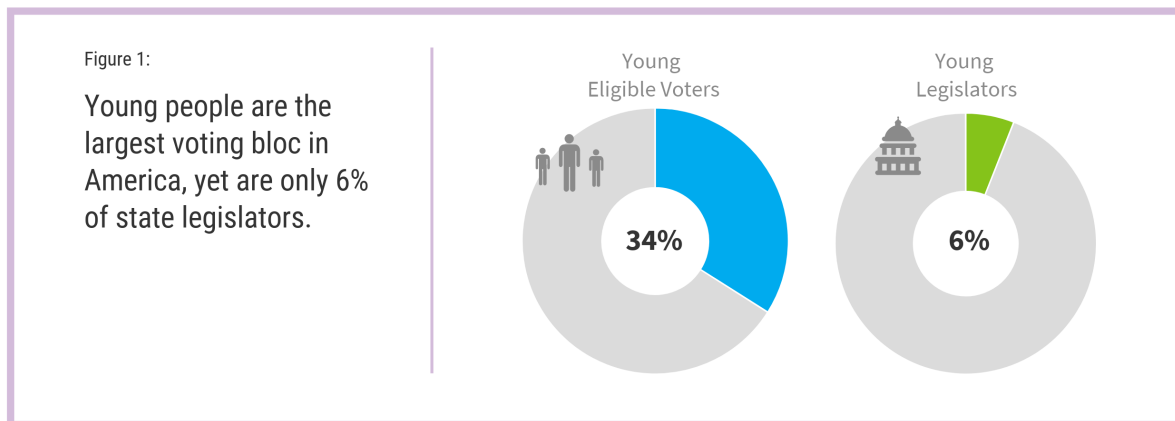
Methodology

To conduct this study, it was necessary to contact each state legislator currently in office. To do so, Generation Progress used a base data file from Quorum Analytics, surveying state legislators, or their offices, for dates of birth and demographic information. These efforts were completed in February 2018. Generation Progress was able to obtain age and demographic information for 5,478 of the 7,548 state legislators nationwide, or 73 percent. Our analysis is built on a database of state elected officials that was current as of April 2018. Quorum Analytics matched our data with their database of state elected officials. This allowed us to build a dataset that includes variables for race, ethnicity, party affiliation, gender, leadership roles, chambers, military experience, sexual orientation, education levels, and family life. Because the Quorum database does not include breakdowns of legislators with disabilities, or transgender or gender nonconforming legislators, we were unable to include analyses of these groups. For the purposes of this report, “young legislators” refers to legislators aged 35 years and under, while “older legislators” refers to legislators over the age of 35.

Historically Old Legislators

At the federal level, multiple analyses have shown that in recent years the House of Representatives and Senate have become historically old.¹⁰ In 2015 the average United States senator was 62 and the average House member was 58.¹¹ But in reality, only 19 percent of Americans eligible to run for Congress are 65 or older. According to a report by Quorum of federal office holders, today the average American is 20 years younger than their representative, and one third of representatives over the age of 60 represent districts with a median age of 35 or less.¹²

This lack of likeness for young people is echoed at the state level. Our analysis found that the average state legislator is 56 years old, while the average individual in America is 38 years old.¹³ Even the six percent of legislators who are 35 or younger are not depictive of young voters in diversity and political party affiliation. In short, our analysis finds that young legislators tend to be more conservative and less diverse than America's youth.



Older Means Less Diverse

Young Americans today are historically diverse. However, our analysis found that people of color, women, and religious minorities, are also severely underrepresented at the state level.

Race and Ethnicity

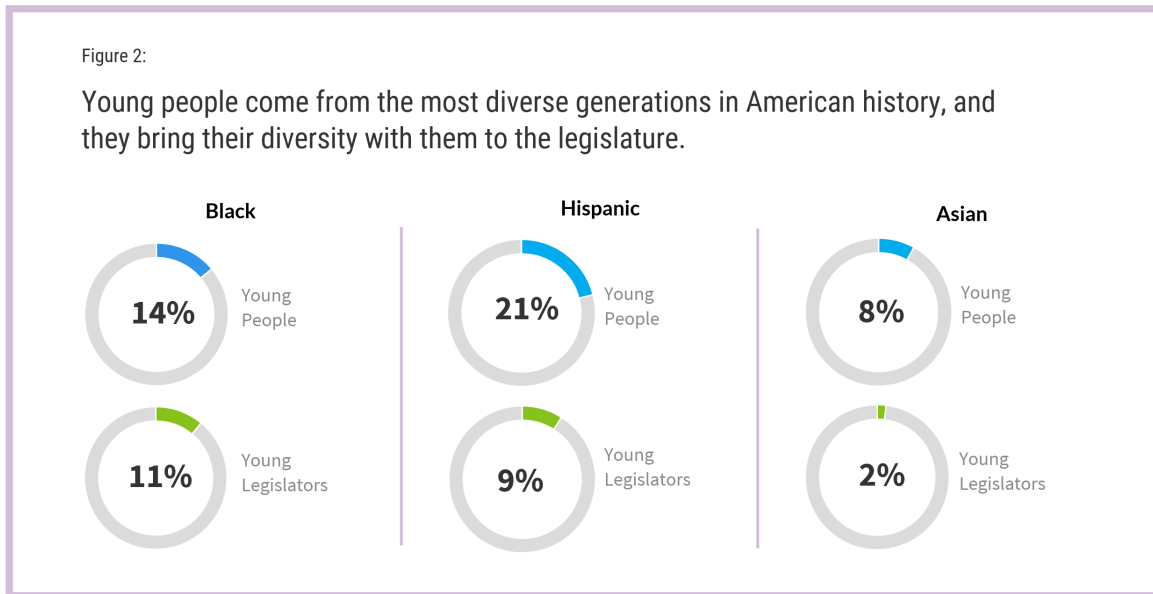
In a recent analysis of racial diversity among state legislators for the time period between 1971 and 2009, the share of African American state lawmakers jumped from two percent to nine percent.¹⁴ Unfortunately, since 2009, the increase of black state legislators has stalled.¹⁵ And while Hispanic representation in state legislatures has risen over the last six years, Hispanic members account for only five percent of state legislators, despite comprising 18 percent of the U.S. population.¹⁶

According to our analysis, there are significant differences in the racial diversity of younger and older legislators. Young state legislators are outpacing their older counterparts in terms of diversity. Indeed, young state lawmakers are almost twice as likely to be Hispanic as older legislators. Our analysis did not find Native American legislators under the age of 35. A more detailed breakdown follows:

Eleven percent of younger state legislators are black compared to only nine percent of older legislators.¹⁷ Meanwhile, approximately 14 percent of young people in the U.S. are black.

Nine percent of young state legislators are Hispanic, compared to five percent of older state legislators. Meanwhile, approximately 21 percent of young people in the U.S. are Hispanic.

Two percent of young state legislators are Asian compared to only one percent of older state legislators. Meanwhile, approximately eight percent of young people in the U.S. are Asian.¹⁸

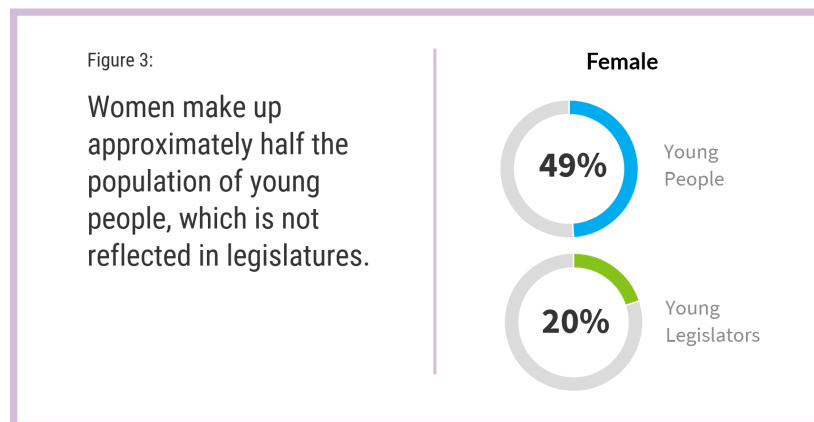


Young people come from the most diverse generations in American history, and they bring their diversity with them to the legislature.

Gender and Sexual Orientation

Like people of color, women remain underrepresented at virtually all levels of elected office. However, while young state legislators are more racially diverse than their older counterparts, there are fewer women represented among young lawmakers compared to older lawmakers. Women make up approximately 49 percent of young people,¹⁹ but only 20 percent of young legislators are female. Representation for women among older legislators

is slightly better at 23 percent, but representation for women lags far behind their share of the population. This is despite young people’s preference for more female representation, with a recent poll showing that 49 percent of Millennial voters believe things would be better if more women were elected to political office.²⁰



Regardless of generational gaps, there is an overall need for more gender diversity in legislatures. With women making up a slight majority—50.8 percent²¹—of the U.S. population, electing more women to legislatures is crucial in shaping policies on issues that impact young women, like reproductive health and equal pay.²²

In recent years, there has been immense progress in LGBTQ equality, from marriage equality nationwide to state efforts establishing non-discrimination protections. However, our analysis of the representation of LGBTQ-identified people in state legislatures shows a more nuanced picture. In 2016, there were 105 LGBTQ representatives serving in state legislatures around the country.²³ That number has declined since it reached its peak of 119 in 2014.²⁴ Notably, of the current 105 state legislators that identify as LGBTQ, as of April 2018, only 18 of those legislators are young. As we examine options to increase the representation of young people in state legislatures, we must also underscore the need for additional LGBTQ representation, especially among young Americans, a group that favors LGBTQ equality.

Recent polling of Millennial voters shows that a majority, across race and ethnicity, “somewhat” or “strongly” favor establishing laws protecting the LGBTQ population from job discrimination, allowing LGBTQ people to adopt children, allowing transgender people to serve in the military, increasing government funding for the prevention and treatment of HIV and AIDS, and accepting more LGBTQ immigrants from countries that criminalize sexuality.²⁵

Disability

There are no reliable numbers of people with disabilities holding elected state office, so our analysis was unable to address this question in a comprehensive way. The portion of legislators with disabilities is especially difficult to determine given that many people who have a disability or chronic condition may not have a visually identifiable disability or identify as part of the disability community. A majority of candidate recruitment and development programs do not actively include “disability” in their targeted outreach or their language focusing on diversity. Given that one in five Americans lives with a disability, the National Council on Independent Living (NCIL) has identified this need and is working to encourage research institutions to develop methods for a solid quantitative analysis that answers this question.²⁶

NCIL has found that only 10 candidates with a disability are running for either the U.S. House of Representatives or the U.S. Senate in 2018.²⁷ Meanwhile, on the state level, there are several examples of young people who identify as part of the disability community attaining or running for state office. The most prominent example is Billie Sutton, the Democratic nominee for governor in South Dakota, who was paralyzed from the waist down in a rodeo accident in 2007. In Washington, Lieutenant Governor Cyrus Habib, age 37, is blind.

Millennials have also been shown to be more open to discussing mental

health.²⁸ This openness can impact conversations around representation of the disability community among elected officials. However, without solid data, we are unable to say how generational diversity could impact the representation of the disability community among legislators.

Religion

Young legislators are bringing religious diversity to state legislatures like never before. They are far less likely to identify as Christian than older state legislators. While 58 percent of older legislators are Christian, only about 38 percent of young state legislators ascribe to Christianity. Roughly two percent of both young and older state legislators identify as Jewish. Unfortunately, in our data sample, the number of young legislators identifying as members of other faiths or as having no faith was too small to make a definitive statement about differences between them and older legislators.

Education, Military Experience, and Family

While identity is important in diversity, so are life experiences and education levels. When it comes to education, Millennials have the highest rate of degree attainment of any generation.²⁹ A 30-year-old today is more than 50 percent more likely to have finished college than a 30-year-old in the 1980s. Mirroring this trend, young legislators are more likely to hold an undergraduate degree than older legislators. However, when it comes to graduate and doctoral degrees, young people fall somewhat behind.

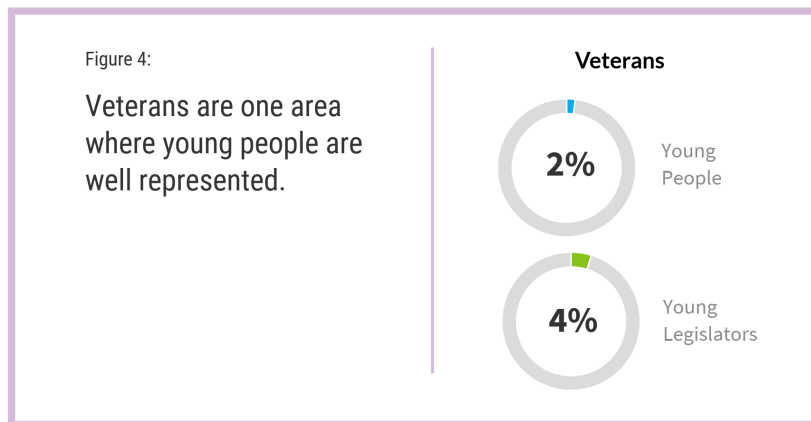
According to our data, 75 percent of young legislators have an undergraduate degree while 76 percent of older legislators have an undergraduate degree. However, 12 percent of young legislators have a graduate degree while 14 percent of older legislators have one. About 20 percent of young legislators have a professional degree while 25 percent of older legislators have one.

Finally, only a third of a percent of young legislators have a doctoral degree while three percent of older legislators have one.

This gap in education may be attributed to younger legislators simply not having yet pursued an advanced degree, but another possible factor could be the increasing financial burden and debt endured by young people. Student debt may be a factor preventing young Americans from pursuing elected office, especially at the state level, which often entails minimal pay. The student loan crisis has reached new levels, and with \$1.5 trillion in student debt in the United States alone, the average undergraduate today graduates saddled with more than \$37,000 in loans.³⁰ In a country where some state representatives are paid as little as \$100 per year, this is hardly a sustainable career path.³¹

Crushing student debt and low compensation for those in state-level elected office may also influence the decision to start a family. Approximately 80 percent of older legislators are married, compared to 35 percent of young legislators. Young legislators have an average of one child, and it follows that older legislators have a slightly higher average of two. Given that young Americans are marrying and having children later than previous generations,³² it is unsurprising to find that younger elected officials are also significantly more likely to be unmarried than their older counterparts.

Veterans are one area where our analysis shows young people are well

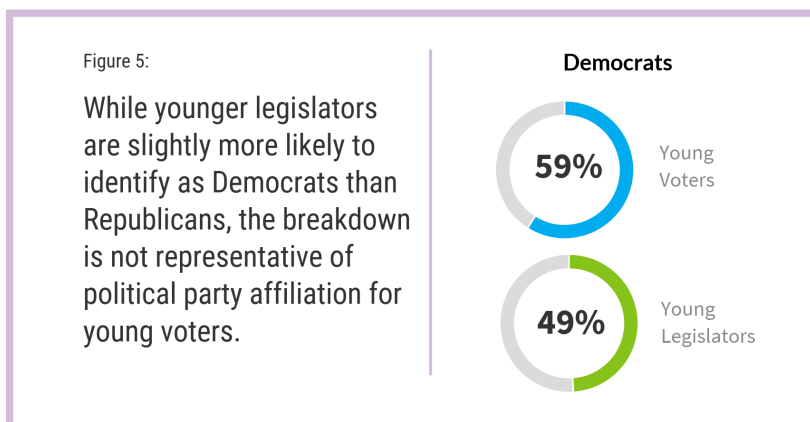


represented. Of veteran legislators, four percent are young, meaning veterans are slightly overrepresented given they make up just two percent of the young voting population. The Millennial generation has come of age during two lengthy wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and there are more than 1.6 million³³ young veterans nationwide.³⁴ State legislators decide on legislation that impacts homeless veterans, mental health services, veteran benefits, and whether we militarize local law enforcement. Including young veterans' perspective is vital in shaping the policies impacting these issues.

Young Legislators Are More Conservative Than Young Voters

There is a stark contrast in the political views of young legislators and the voters they speak for. According to our analysis, approximately 48 percent of young legislators identify as Republicans while 49 percent identified as Democrats. However, during the 2016 election, 59 percent of young voters identified as Democrats.³⁵ Young Americans with no declared political party also frequently vote for Democrats—in the 2017 Virginia elections, 69 percent of young people voted for the Democratic gubernatorial candidate, Ralph Northam.³⁶

While younger legislators are slightly more likely to identify as Democrats than Republicans, the breakdown is not representative of political party affiliation for young voters. This discrepancy between voter party identification and representation is almost nonexistent for older generations. Fifty-six percent of voters over the age of 65 picked Republicans in 2012, and our analysis finds that 53 percent of legislators over 65 identify as Republicans.



An Overall Lack of Power

According to our analysis, not only are young people less likely to be in the state legislature, even when present, they are less likely to hold leadership roles. They are disproportionately likely to hold a position in the lower chamber (such as a state assembly or house of representatives), not the upper chamber (such as a state senate), with less influence and power to lead in policy- and decision-making processes. Of the 1,663 state legislators for whom we have birthdays, in the upper chamber of their respective state legislatures, only 56 were young, while 1,607 were older. Of the 3,815 state legislators in the lower chamber of their state legislature, only 271 were young, while 3,544 were older. This is particularly distressing for youth representation, since upper chambers have an outsized influence on decisions coming out of state legislatures.³⁷

Overall, state legislature leadership is comprised of only four percent young people—just 13 percent of young legislators hold leadership roles. Additionally, only five percent of committee leadership is 35 or under. While some of this is likely attributable to seniority in state legislatures, the repercussions remain concerning.

Why This Matters

The dearth of young people in public office results in legislative bodies that are quick to dismiss the voices and concerns of young generations and policies that prioritize the needs of America's future. Polling reveals a consistent theme: young Americans believe that voting is not an effective means of change.³⁸ This has resulted in low rates of participation among young Americans in elections. Considering the steep generational gap between young people and the government bodies that represent them, it is perhaps unsurprising that young people feel excluded from the democratic process and skeptical that their views and opinions matter. Young people may be more inspired to participate in elections if they feel candidates are reflective of their generation and responsive to their needs. The state-to-federal office pipeline means this scarcity of young people has repercussions for representation at the federal level as well. State legislatures are often proving grounds for higher office.

Yet all of this is starting to change. Young voters have made an impact on gender diversity at the state level by electing the first transgender American to a state legislature. Danica Roem became the first out transgender person to be elected to a state legislature in 2017 during an unprecedented surge in youth voter turnout.³⁹ Since the 2016 election there has also been a surge in female candidates. However, our analysis shows that there is still a significant gap to fill in state legislatures.

In the last year young people have become more active in policy fights, such as gun violence prevention, many celebrating their 18th birthdays by registering to vote; others running for office. In 2017 we watched as youth

voter turnout surged,⁴⁰ and in 2018 young people are showing up⁴¹ and registering.⁴² Young people are also running for office in higher numbers; for example, 34 percent of current Democratic challengers are under the age of 40. There are also 11 young Republican challengers running in competitive races including four young candidates listed in CNN's "toss-up" races.⁴³ In several gubernatorial races this year, challengers are decades younger than the governors they are running to replace.⁴⁴ In addition, 244 midterm election candidates have student debt,⁴⁵ demonstrating that as younger leaders are running for office, their lived experiences are more aligned with their generation's.

This surge in youth candidates has already dramatically shaped the political landscape leading into the midterms. In August 2018, Andrew Gillum won Florida's Democratic nomination for governor in an upset and is poised to possibly become the youngest governor in the state's history. Young voters turned out overwhelmingly for Gillum, and the surprising nature of his victory may have been due to polls in the race underestimating the youth vote.⁴⁶ In Wisconsin, 31-year-old Mandela Barnes won the Democratic primary for lieutenant governor with 68 percent of the vote. In South Dakota, Billy Sutton is running for governor at 34. In Minnesota's fifth congressional district, 36-year-old state legislator Ihan Omar handily won the Democratic nomination, taking 48 percent of the vote. She's expected to become one of the first Muslim women in Congress. In Michigan's competitive 11th district, 31-year-old Haley Stevens won a crowded Democratic primary. In a rare matchup, she will go on to face another Millennial in November's election. Earlier this summer, in New York's 14th district, 28-year-old Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez shook the political establishment by beating a powerful incumbent. Ocasio-Cortez proved that building a platform that centers issues that matter most to young people—debt-free college, gun control, criminal justice reform, climate change, and expanded access to healthcare—motivates young people to be politically engaged and can win an election.

What Can Be Done?

Despite the hopeful signs that in 2018 more young people are running for office both at the state and federal level, parties, elected officials, donors, voters, and other stakeholders must take steps to ensure there is a path to elected leadership for young and diverse Americans. Providing young people opportunities to act on their ambition will result in more representative and responsive legislatures that can govern effectively on the issues of today.

Similar to previous Center for American Progress research that made recommendations to increase the number of women in elected office,⁴⁷ below are several basic steps that can be taken to increase the number and diversity of young people in elected office.

Make State Elected Offices Financially Feasible for Young People

The Millennial generation graduated into the Great Recession. With student loan burdens noted previously, as well as depressed wages, the financial barriers to holding elected office at a low-paying state level can be insurmountable. Additionally, having a job with the flexibility to allow for absences for session, can often be a hurdle for young people in a way it wasn't for previous generations, who were better off economically in their 20s and 30s than Millennials today. Today's average 30-year-old makes around the same amount of money as a 30-year-old in 1984, despite being 50 percent more likely to have finished college and have the debt that often comes with a degree.⁴⁸ If state legislatures do not pay a living wage, it may be

unfeasible for many young people to hold elected office. To address this, states should do the following:

Pay officeholders a living wage to permit those without independent means or highly flexible careers to pursue public service. Compensation for state legislators varies widely across states, ranging from Pennsylvania, which pays legislators \$86,000 per year, to New Hampshire, which pays legislators \$200 per two-year term.⁴⁹ Compensation for travel and lodging to the state capitol during session also varies, an important factor for legislators in large states or states with long sessions.

Ensure that legislatures adopt the same sorts of family-friendly workplace policies that private-sector employers now use to attract and retain diverse talent. This is especially important for attracting young women to run for office, given that currently eight in ten births are to Millennial mothers.⁵⁰

Engage the political community to coordinate on shared goals for increasing the number of young people in office:

Individual donors and political action committees should set voluntary goals to increase funding for young candidates, particularly in open-seat elections, which offer the best opportunities for outsiders. Programs that encourage women, people of color, and LGBTQ individuals to run should consider how youth recruitment and training plays a part in their programs. Research has shown, for example, that to increase the number of women running for office, a focus on younger women could pay dividends, as young women are substantially more ambitious than older women.⁵¹ Additionally, programs that recruit, train, and support young candidates and officeholders such as

Emerge, Run for Something, and the Young Elected Officials Network, should be grown and invested in by the broader political community.

Create a leadership development pipeline for young people that starts well before they are candidates:

Political parties must deliberately set numerical goals and have training and recruitment programs targeting young candidates. Parties should, in part, measure their progress in building their future by measuring the percentage and diversity of young people on ballots for races across the country. However, to truly shift the makeup of our elected officials, civic leadership development must begin earlier for young people. Investments in youth leadership development and training, with a focus on programs that develop civic leadership more broadly among young people, will help a new generation feel empowered to pursue elected office. Participation in activities like team sports⁵² and student government⁵³ have both proven positive ways to nudge young people, especially young women,⁵⁴ into a leadership pipeline. Nonprofits that focus on youth training and development play a key role as well. As our recent research has shown, progressive nonprofits are being outspent at a rate of three to one by conservative nonprofits on youth-focused programming.⁵⁵ To address the youth-representation gap among elected officials, progressive organizations must invest in young people early and deliberately to develop a new generation of civic leaders.

Address the high costs of running for office:

In 2016, total spending by candidates, parties, and interest groups for the average congressional race was \$4.05 million.⁵⁶ According to an analysis done in 2014, an individual candidate could expect to spend \$88,000 on his or her own campaign for a state legislative office.⁵⁷ The cost of elections has steadily risen over the past decades, and the prospect of huge campaign costs, as well as the increasing amount of time candidates and elected officials must spend fundraising, is a serious deterrent for potential candidates. To address this, cities, states, and the U.S. Congress should enact legislation to reduce the role of big money in elections and adopt systems of small-donor public financing.

Young people are poised to take over the electorate and their representation needs to increase accordingly. Young voters recognize that they can gain power and shape policy priorities and conversations if they show up to vote and take on leadership roles. It is imperative Americans support more young leaders so 18- to 35-year-olds can achieve the representation they deserve.

Acknowledgments

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