

## Transcript – Ways & Means Podcast – S5E2: Why Young People Don't Vote – And How to Change That

Emily Hanford: From the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, this is Ways & Means. We share bright ideas for how to improve society. I'm Emily Hanford.

**Reporter:** Five houses burned to the ground. We walk into the village with government troops while they're still ablaze....

In the 1960's and early 70's, the US fought a long war in Vietnam.

**[Chanting]:** Peace now, peace now...

Back at home, young people took to the streets.

**Archival announcer:** Thousands of demonstrators opposed to the Vietnam war assembled in the nation's capital for a mass protest...

Many of the protestors were young enough to be drafted to fight in the war but not old enough to vote against the politicians who supported it. The draft age was 18; the voting age was 21. Protesters held signs with phrases like "old enough to fight, old enough to vote."

And, in 1970, Congress lowered the voting age to 18 as part of the Voting Rights Act.

**Announcer:** Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United States...

The right to vote at age 18 was soon enshrined in an amendment to the Constitution. On July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1971, Richard Nixon certified the amendment in the East Room of the White House, surrounded by young people.

**Nixon:** ...we are certifying the 26<sup>th</sup> amendment to the constitution of the United States. That amendment, as you know, provides for the right to vote, of all of our young people between 18 and 21, 11 million new voters as the result of this amendment that you now will see certified...

But, it quickly became apparent that teens who now had the right to vote weren't necessarily going to show up at the polls. They were not registering. A couple of months after the passage of the Amendment, radio ads were chastising young people.

**Vintage Radio Ad:** The only time teenagers can register for the primary will be from September 30<sup>th</sup> through October 2<sup>nd</sup>, and you 18-21-years-olds are not registering, which means you won't be able to vote. And, the influence you could bring to bear on who lives in the White House won't happen. What a shame...

In the presidential election of 1972, youth turnout lagged more than 20 percentage points behind turnout among older voters. And, over the years, it's gotten worse – with a few exceptions.

**Obama:** If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible...

Young voters turned out in 2008 at their highest rate in decades. But, turnout plummeted in 2012. And, in 2014, fewer than 20 percent of those aged 18–29 cast a ballot during the midterm elections - an historic low.

(MUSIC)

Coming up on this episode of Ways & Means - Why do so few young Americans show up at the polls? And what can be done about it?

**This season of Ways & Means is supported by Polis, the Center for Politics at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy. I'm Deondra Rose, Director of Research for Polis. We prepare future political leaders, and foster innovative scholarship related to the most pressing political issues of our time. Find out more at [polis.duke.edu](http://polis.duke.edu).**

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**John:** Yeah, young people in the United States do not vote.

This is John Holbein [HOLE-bine]. He studies political participation at the University of Virginia.

**John:** And in fact, their rates of political participation are some of the worst in the world. So, if we look at the difference between older and younger citizens across the world, the United States has the biggest gap between older and younger voters, and it's the biggest gap by a long shot.

John Holbein and other researchers argue that if more American young people would vote, we'd see a different set of elected officials, and different kinds of public policies.

**John:** One example of this is the fact that Social Security, a policy that primarily impacts older citizens, is viewed with reverence and protected and fought for tooth and nail. However, things like public education funding that is directly impacting young people, gets cast by the wayside. And, we see this in other policy areas when we think about how public policy is targeted or not targeted towards climate change, gun violence, issues that young people really care about, but that have received sparing attention relative to other policy issues of today.

So why don't young Americans vote? Sunshine Hillygus [HILL-uh-gus] is a Duke University professor of political science and public policy. She says she's heard it all about why young people don't vote.

**Sunshine:** That young people are apathetic, that they're disinterested. That, you know, they are selfish and narcissistic and too busy taking selfies rather than thinking about the common good or civic life. And, we found that that's just doesn't match up to the data that the vast majority of young people are interested in politics, they care who is elected. And, the kind of kicker is, is that, you know, 80 percent, when asked before the election, said they would vote, and then

they don't. And, so that's where we started focusing on that gap between intention to vote and actual turnout and realize that that's the real problem that needed to be better understood.

For some reason, there's a big gap between young Americans' intention to vote and the chances that they will actually do it. Sunshine Hillygus and John Holbein set out to explore this gap. They met at Duke University when John was a PhD student at the Sanford School of Public Policy. They've conducted research together, and co-written a book called Making Young Voters: Converting Civic Attitudes into Civic Action. They say there's a wide variety of reasons why young people don't vote. Some are personal – like issues related to being young and inexperienced – and some of the reasons are institutional. There are things about how voting is set up in the United States that end up suppressing youth voting.

First, the personal...

Our producer has come to an AP Government class at East Chapel Hill High School in North Carolina to talk to some potential teenage voters. The class is held in a crowded trailer behind the main school building. Students are in groups, working on an assignment related to Super Tuesday, which is a week away. Our producer is moving from group to group, talking to kids. It's pretty loud.

If there's one common sentiment among the seniors who are about to be able to vote for the first time, it's nerves...the whole idea of voting in an election – it's kind of intimidating, they say.

Take Natalie. She was really glad to hear that you can bring a cheat sheet into the voting booth with you. But still, a cheat sheet feels kind of wrong – she says her friends feel the same way.

**Natalie:** Yeah, it's just, I don't know why it's so weird to everybody. It just, 'cuz it feels so much like a test, and it's a big, like, government process, that feels like you can't like cheat on it, I don't want my, like, vote to be registered as invalid or something.

Natalie's classmate Ivy says she and her friends also feel a bit overwhelmed by the responsibility that comes with casting a ballot.

**Ivy:** When it comes to voting we say we'll go, but then we don't want to, excuse my language, pull up as a schmuck, right, and not know what we're doing. So, that's a daunting task, we don't do any research, so we then don't go vote because we don't feel prepared.

Sunshine Hillygus says she's talked to a lot of Ivy's in her research – teens who really care about preparation.

**Sunshine:** Their perception of what they needed to know was very, very different from what I know they need to know or what older people think they need to know. To explain that, there was a survey that said, if a voter doesn't know about the issues in elections, should they still vote? Old people said absolutely. Yes, right. It's a civic obligation to vote. They'll kind of figure it out. Young people said, no, they should stay home. And, I had a number of young people tell me that they, they, they intended to vote, but then they felt like they hadn't learned enough about the races. And so, they didn't want to, to go in unqualified. They didn't want to just vote straight party, that that was something that they viewed negatively. Older people are completely fine with a straight party vote.

Another issue is that young people tend to have busy, unpredictable lives. Many have afterschool activities and jobs with varying schedules. There's sports. The star basketball player is in the room and some cheerleaders. There's AP tests, they're coming up.

**Sunshine:** Schedules aren't as set as somebody who's an adult working a 9 to 5 job and kind of knows exactly where they're going to be on, you know, the first Tuesday after the first Monday of November. Young people have just far more, you know, activity and distraction going on.

Those are some of the personal barriers – unpredictable schedules, a desire to be prepared, a sense that with the right to vote comes a big responsibility. Sunshine Hillygus and John Holbein have also documented institutional barriers to young people and voting. As a society, we've created a system that actually makes it kind of hard for anyone to vote.

The United States is one of just a few democratic nations that place the entire burden of registering to vote on individual citizens.

**Sunshine:** Well, I mean, keep in mind the reason we have voter registration was a way to prevent people from voting. So, you know, while the argument is, is that we need registration and we need to have this to prevent voter fraud. It is absolutely the thing that means that the U.S. overall has lower turnout. I mean, registration is the single biggest deterrent to voting.

Voter registration has been used to limit political participation by certain groups. In the Jim Crow era for instance, state voter registration processes were used to discourage [Black voters](#).

These days, the voter registration process keeps many young people from voting. For starters, many states require people to register 30 days in advance. And, many locations require voter registration by mail.

**Sunshine:** If you were to ask college students how often they mail something, it, it's never. They never mail anything, right. You know, all finances are, you know, over the Internet, all shopping. It just, you don't use the mail. And to think that what we have to do is print out a registration form, fill it out, and then send it in. The mail, of course, becomes a barrier.

**John:** Voter registration seems really easy to those of us who have participated in American elections before.

Here's John Holbein again, from of the University of Virginia.

**John:** Those of us who are older and are used to filling out forms for various aspects of our life, be it financial or other things that we're applying for, health insurance forms. But, we have to remember that young people are sort of coming into their own as adults. There are many of them for the first time or are taking responsibility for the simple acts of their life, of which voter registration is just one. So, this process is seems new and foreign, and it's during a tumultuous and transitory period of their lives.

Some students told the researchers they didn't register to vote because they felt overwhelmed by the rules, or ashamed that they missed the deadlines.

**Sunshine:** Then there was a lot of young people who expressed embarrassment, that this is something that should seem so easy. Why was it that they needed to ask their parents how it is to request an absentee ballot? And there was a, a sense that they didn't want to admit to others that they had some question.

Another issue is that many young people don't know what address to use when they register. They may attend college away from home, for example.

**Sunshine:** There is a question of what is their residence, you know? Is it at the college? Is it at where their parents are? There are fears that if they register to vote at their college, that will have implications for, you know, can they get financial aid based on their, their parents? There are all kinds of just, very confusing rules that the actual definition of what it takes to be a resident, again, varies across states and is, you know, not so easy to figure out. You know, if you expect to be there temporarily in a state for the sake of a college. So, So, it's just, it is a far more complicated system than many of us recognize if we are experienced long-term voters.

If you're one of those experienced voters, you might say – young people today! They need to show some grit. How hard is it to address an envelope, organize your schedule, register on time? But be careful not to throw stones at glass houses. Here's John Holbein again.

**John:** So, some of the people who are saying, "oh, it's just a lazy, apathetic generation of millennials", those were the people who are not voting themselves when they were young as well.

(MUSIC)

So – what can be done to get more young people to vote? Sunshine and John identify a few things in their book based on their own research and a review of the literature on young people and voting.

One thing they looked at was **early voting** – this is when there is not just one election day when everyone has to show up at the polls. Instead, there's a period of time you can vote, usually at least several days. You'd think that would get more young people to vote, because it's a bigger window of time, more opportunity to get to the polls despite a hectic, unpredictable schedule. But, that's not the case.

Here's Sunshine Hillygus:

**Sunshine:** The reforms that are most effective for young people are essentially those that allow them to procrastinate. So, so early voting is actually not effective in part because, you know, you can kick the can down the road and then you lose your opportunity to vote. On the other hand, automatic voting, same day registration. Right. You can remove the barrier and then you're able to, you know, wait until election day, and still get in.

**Automatic voter registration** – that makes voter registration the default for eligible voters. Unless citizens opt out, they are automatically added to voter registration rolls when they interact with other government agencies, such as the DMV. This approach shows promise for all voters, especially young people.

And **same-day registration** – that’s where you can walk up to the polls and register on the spot. This approach substantially increases the number of young people voting for the first time.

Something called **preregistration** also works – that’s where 16 and 17-year-olds fill out paperwork before they’re eligible to vote and then when their birthday comes, they’re automatically registered.

Young people who were preregistered were especially likely to vote two elections later if they’d also seen a classroom demonstration about the voting process. Helping them understand how to vote and getting them through the paperwork to be able to do it – those two things have a big payoff.

But, there’s more that could be done according to John and Sunshine. They think we need a new way of thinking about civics lessons in schools.

**Sunshine:** What we've argued is that we have to rethink entirely how civics is conceptualized and implemented.

Traditional civics lessons that focus on memorizing facts and figures about politics and American history – those don’t increase the chances that someone will vote according to data going back more than half a century-

**John:** So that's true. In the 1950s, all the way up to the present, as best we can tell, those who are exposed to traditional civics education are no more likely to vote than those who are exposed to less of it.

But, other kinds of lessons can make a difference. When teachers share the basics with students - how to register, where the voting locations are, what the rules are, who the candidates are -- and when they give these lessons at the right time, like right before an election, that has a significant impact on the chances that young people will then vote.

**Sam Atwood:** OK, we’re gonna get started. Josh can you grab a seat? We’re going to go over the ballot today, for on Tuesday, so I want to give you maximum time to read the summaries, go over the candidates.

We’re back in the AP Government class in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The teacher is Sam Atwood. His lesson today is just the kind of thing the researchers are talking about. As we noted earlier, it’s a week before Super Tuesday, and Mr. Atwood has designed a replica of the ballot that student voters will get on primary day.

**Mr. Atwood:** So, first step is this is two sided, you’re picking one side, right? The Democratic ballot, Republican ballot. Obviously, we talked about it, if you’re a registered party member, you, you have to vote in the primary for your party. If you’re an independent, you pick a side. That’s your first step.

Mr. Atwood’s ballot includes the title of each elected office - US Senate, US House 4<sup>th</sup> District, Governor, Lt. Governor -- all the way down to local offices. And then, next to each office, there are two fill-in-the-blank rectangles: What does the person in this office do? And, which candidate do you like and why?

**Mr. Atwood:** Any questions? What the office does, and a name that you like.

**Ivy:** We have commissioner of agriculture, treasurer, NC House District 56, excuse me, Board of Commissioners, a bunch of words I've never seen before" (laughter)

This is Ivy, a student we heard from earlier. She was worried about not feeling prepared. One look at the ballot confirmed her fears.

**Ivy:** So, my initial impression, I kind of got very frustrated and I'm like, "Mr. Atwood, this is so annoying", and he was like, "why?" And, I was just saying that there is so many different offices to look at and I know that, just that, the president is not the most important thing. Our country is set up so then most of our policy and stuff that's affecting me individually is our state. But, there is so little information about, like, obscure Commissioner of Agriculture, Treasurer, right? So, I think my initial instinct was, this is frustrating, and the fact that if I wasn't in this class I would only know, like, one person that I actually knew about to vote for on the ballot and the rest would be, I guess, leave blank or pick randomly.

After spending time in class doing research, Ivy's feeling more confident that she knows enough about the offices and the people running for them to cast an informed vote. Teacher Sam Atwood says he's never done this kind of ballot lesson before.

**Mr. Atwood:** I guess I just, like, assumed that the kids would figure this out on their own, but then I realized like that's sort of why they're in this class. I think this time I just realized, like, if they're not going to do it here, they're not going to do it at all.

This kind of classroom activity is the kind of thing that's likely to result in more teens at the polls, says Duke professor Sunshine Hillygus. But, she says teachers often shy away from this type of lesson. They're worried that by talking with students about who they will vote for and why, their own partisan views might come across – or parents might perceive that teachers are sharing partisan views.

But the students we talked to said this project would help them feel more comfortable on election day.

**Natalie:** Oh, for sure! If I didn't do this, like I would be taking this sheet with me to the polls which I am really glad I can do.

This is Natalie again, the student who was worried that bringing information into the polling booth with her would be seen as cheating. She doesn't feel that way anymore. She feels prepared and grateful that this class helped her to do that.

**Natalie:** Like, I really don't know what I would be doing. I'd probably have to do a lot of this research on my own, and it would be much less organized, probably in the notes app of my phone, and I'd be, you know, taking it in and like, as it is my first time voting. I would be really nervous about, like, taking my phone out, like, worried I'd get in trouble or something. So, this is going to make me a lot more comfortable when going to the polls, for sure.

Going over the ballot prior to election day in a classroom is simple and inexpensive. If schools want to go further, Sunshine and John say having students participate in a more hands-on way is also effective.

**John:** So, one of the newer approaches that that has worked at sort of a smaller scale and various pilot programs is to have young people be actively involved in volunteering in their community to work towards a social cause with their classmates, to help other citizens who are eligible to vote, who are perhaps older than them to register and to turn out to vote, to canvass for higher levels of voter participation. It works when they meet with elected officials, when they study various contemporary political issues. These types of civics instruction that focus on active learning, actually do work to increase the chances that young people will vote at the ballot box.

Not everyone wants more young people to show up at the polls. There's a perception, for example, that efforts to get young people to the polls is kind of coded language for getting more Democrats to the polls. John says that's not necessarily the case.

**John:** So, when we do these types of things like improve civics education and really get more young people to participate in politics, it's not always the case that we're just activating a bunch of new Democrats. There is this is a misperception about the youth vote. There are a lot of independent minded and a significant number of conservative young people who, when given the chance and the opportunity and the skills needed to participate in American democracy, do so.

And here's Sunshine Hillygus again.

**Sunshine:** So, it's very short sighted to think about these rules in terms of political advantage or disadvantage. We should be trying to encourage everyone to register to vote rather than restricting it.

This season of Ways & Means is supported by Polis, the Center for Politics at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy. Find out more at [polis.duke.edu](http://polis.duke.edu).

Ways & Means is a production of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

D. Sunshine Hillygus is a professor of politics and public policy at Duke, where she is director of the Duke Initiative on Survey Methodology and co-director of the Polarization Lab.

She and John Holbein co-wrote the book Making Young Voters: Converting Civic Attitudes into Civic Action. John Holbein received his PhD from Duke Sanford School of Public Policy and is now on the faculty at the University of Virginia.

We'll have a link to their book at our website, [ways-and-means-show-dot-org](http://ways-and-means-show-dot-org).

Special thanks to teacher Sam Atwood and the students in his 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> period AP Government classes at East Chapel Hill High School.

Ways & Means is produced by Carol Jackson, Karen Kemp and Alison Jones. Our associate producers are Hunter Stark and Matt Majsak (MAY-jack). Our engineer is Johnny Vince Evans.

Artwork by Rae Hsu [Shoe].

Thanks so much for joining me -- I'm Emily Hanford.