

## Why College Students Vote

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### Abstract

This project will look at what factors influence civic participation in undergraduate college students in order to understand their motivations to turn out in presidential elections. Glen & Grimes (1968) and Wray-Lake & Hart (2012) have explored various reasons for why the traditional students' age group is less inclined to vote now than in the past, including the salience of the issues and a postponement of facing adult problems with the extension of schooling age. This paper hypothesizes that the college students most likely to vote are the ones who are engaged on their campuses because it establishes a pattern of behavior that encourages civic participation, similar to the idea of the development of a civic identity (Bogard, Sheinheit, & Clarke 2008; Putnam 1995). A survey of undergraduate institutions, including Susquehanna University, is used to study the effect of post-secondary engagement, asking respondents about both their academic and extra-curricular pursuits, as well as their recent voting behavior. The survey results offer minimal support for the expectation that the students who are more active on campus are the ones who most likely voted in the 2016 general election.

**Keywords: voting behavior, college students, civic engagement**

### 1. Introduction

Political scientists have studied voting behaviors and motivations for a long time, but the youth demographic, specifically college students, is often glanced over or not researched in a satisfactorily detailed manner. Considering that education level is a generally accepted factor which influences voting behavior, this substantial lack of investigation is puzzling, at best. It may be in part due to the difficulties of quantifying the unique experiences that college has to offer a student, such as the access to resources and experts in various fields of study. But what is it about that experience that affects political engagement?

This paper will attempt to dive deeper into the correlation between education and voting habits at the college level, looking specifically at degrees of campus engagement to see how those activities influence the likelihood of a student to vote. Political disengagement among this general age group is increasingly common, typically with the lowest overall turnout rates despite increasing enrollment in higher education. There have been many studies dedicated to understanding the age cohort, hypothesizing about generation gaps,<sup>1</sup> a lack of civic identity,<sup>2</sup> and social cues that have delayed entrance into adulthood, especially compared to past generations.<sup>3</sup> But studies on college-specific factors as to why students do or do not vote are much rarer. My expectation was that students who are more engaged on their college campuses are more likely to be politically engaged as well, regardless of whether their involvement is socially, academically, or otherwise based. However, it is unlikely for every student to be involved in every aspect of college life, although I suspect that more diverse involvement will also increase political participation.

In some ways, college life is simply an isolated version of the social life that Robert Putnam finds encourages political participation. The higher levels of involvement in one's community through jobs, club membership, and social networks on a college campus builds relationships and increases levels of social involvement just as non-

students do. This similarity indicates that higher levels of social involvement lead to a higher likelihood of caring about what happens in and to a community – which is generally decided in the public, political arena. As in Putnam’s theory of social capital, community involvement is habit-forming.<sup>4</sup> Civic engagement on college campuses would still carry over into political engagement through the development of habitual actions and thought processes based on non- or indirectly political activities. In other words, there was an expectation that college students build a civic identity through campus life, which translates into either voting or not voting based on their levels of involvement at school.

## 2. Background

The last election in the United States was November 2016, the presidential election of Donald Trump. Predictions varied, and there was a general perception of a large voter turnout, but around 60% of eligible voters actually turned out on Election Day to cast a ballot.<sup>5</sup> This is not an unusual percentage of voters to turn out; in fact, it is about the same as the 2004 voter turnout. In other recent elections, turnout has varied between 54% in 2000 and 61% in 2008.<sup>6</sup> Although 2016 was a rather controversial election, overall turnout rates were not unusually high or low that year. Turnout by age or other demographic factors is currently unavailable, due to a time lag in census data accumulation. This is important because the data in this study uses this election as the standard for college student turnout.

There are some studies that look at college voters’ behavior pre-1971, but they focus on graduate students. The 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment, passed in 1971, lowered the voting age to 18 relatively recently. It has only been since then that the typical undergraduate student, rather than just seniors or graduate students, have been able to vote. This legal change increased researchers’ abilities to study college students as a population and their relationship to the political system.

Aside from the fact that the youth voting demographic now includes the majority of traditional college students – defined as a student 18-22 years old, give or take a gap year, who has gone through high school or obtained a GED and wants to pursue a higher level of education – a possible explanation for more recent studies into college voting behavior may be the rising number of enrolled students. This is an overall trend which also applies in more specific demographic capacities including age, race, and gender. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), post-secondary education enrollment in the United States increased from 2004 to 2014 by nearly 17% in both degree- and non-degree-granting institutions, and is expected to increase by another 14% over the next decade.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, overall voter turnout for presidential elections in 2004 and in 2016 are nearly the same – 60.1% and 60%, respectively.<sup>8</sup> This is counter to the expectation that a more educated population leads to higher levels of political engagement. Some experts posit that this is because this age group has no previous voting experience, and even suggest that the voting age should be lowered to 16 in order to establish the habit of political engagement and develop civic identities and responsibilities in citizens earlier than 18.<sup>9</sup>

For many college students, their four years at a post-secondary educational institution are their first years living away from home, at least for most of the year, which provides a level of independence and freedom not usually seen before the university years. It is, for most students, one of the first times that they are treated and expected to act as an adult – responsible for feeding themselves and maintaining their living conditions, going to class and completing coursework without a parent hovering overhead, and having the opportunity to lead and be led by peers rather than teachers or other authority figures. It is also considered a transitional period into adulthood, as many students live on campus or university-provided housing rather than their own apartments, and students are oftentimes still shielded from the adult responsibilities of rent or home-ownership, full-time jobs, etc. These factors are part of what make college such a unique experience, but have not been previously studied in-depth in relation to political engagement.

## 3. Literature Review

### 3.1 Overall Turnout

The question of why people do or do not exercise their right to vote has plagued political scientists for a long time, and so voting behavior in general has been studied extensively. Researchers have distinguished between executive and legislative elections, determining that turnout is generally higher for the former. Some researchers have found that the characteristics of the electoral process affects this disparity<sup>10</sup> while others find that the purpose of the election and characteristics of the populous within a country makes a difference.<sup>11</sup> Elections may be direct or indirect, but also vary according to how many elections there are – primaries, runoffs, etc. The party system within an electoral or campaign season affects turnout, as does the timing of the elections – whether they are spread out or if multiple offices are

elected on the same day, which increases the stakes and encourages a higher voter turnout.<sup>12</sup> Compulsory voting is also a factor that increases turnout. These characteristics decrease the cost for the voter – there is less of a commitment necessary in terms of time and other expenses so as to increase overall turnout.

Other factors in relation to the population include the country's level of economic development (more developed countries tend to have higher turnout rates), literacy rates (higher literacy increases turnout), and population size (smaller countries are able to reach their electorate more effectively, possibly due to a greater sense of community and/or civic duty, and so the voter turnout is greater).<sup>13</sup> Other research has looked at more external factors – such as the weather on election day<sup>14</sup> – or personal factors – such as the salience of contested issues during an election or perceived importance of the election itself.<sup>15</sup>

### 3.2 Turnout By Age

Age has been an important variable in terms of the research that has been done on voter behavior, and so the studies that have focused on college students are often described in reference to age rather than student status. Cynicism is very high among youth voters in terms of the impact of an individual vote and the candidates that are presented on a ballot.<sup>16</sup> Researchers have studied the gradual increase in political engagement and participation as subjects age, with the youngest cohort being 21-29 years old and the oldest 72-81 years old. Generational experiences were posited as the explanation for why certain cohorts did or did not vote in certain elections – the passage of women's suffrage increased the percentage of votes of women who were always allowed to vote versus the women who were only permitted to vote starting in their middle age – but a correlation was also noted between residence mobility and age in voting behavior. The younger generations were more likely to move and less politically inclined.<sup>17</sup>

According to the same study, youths are more occupied with completing an education, finding and establishing themselves in a job, beginning their families, and other nonpolitical “youthful” leisure activities such as sports and partying.<sup>18</sup> Granted, this study was done in the 60's, where the white American family was a much different nucleus than it is today – the reasoning above was directed to young men, while young women's disengagement was explained by a supposed preoccupation with finding a husband and raising children. The ‘distraction’ theory that was applied to young men is convincing in regards to all genders today, as the traditional female-male dynamic has since shifted.

Another study found similar results when studying mobility, though in comparison to education and socioeconomic levels. It found that the ability to be mobile increases with status and education, creating a contradiction in that mobility decreases voter turnout while both higher levels of socioeconomics and education, which are achieved over time, should increase it.<sup>19</sup> In agreement with the previous study, this is explained through a high concentration of college-educated voters in the youth bracket.

Related to this shift, there has been a possible change in the development of young people.<sup>20</sup> Recently a trend has developed of delaying young adults' transition into established community members, possibly due to further education, a poor job market, etc. Evidence did support the hypothesis that higher education levels imply a higher likelihood to vote, but the study did not test this further. Instead, it focused on socioeconomic status and how it related to differing education levels. It also studied how socioeconomics affected the development of a “critical consciousness” – in other words, active political thought and community engagement due to social disparities. Furthermore, sociopolitical action was predictive of voting behavior,<sup>21</sup> an idea expanded upon within the survey questions concerning civic or community engagement on college campuses for this research.

Similarly, the idea of social capital and the development of civic participation habits in youths ages 18-25 is a large part of the research around this topic.<sup>22</sup> This is around the typical age of a college undergraduate, but the research also includes subjects of this age who are not enrolled in undergraduate institutions, finding that they were less likely to vote than their enrolled peers. However, that study does not account for non-traditional college students, such as those attending part-time, completing school after entering the workforce, military students who return from tour of duty, etc. This paper focuses on those who are currently enrolled in college, regardless of age or ‘traditional’ attendance.

Another theory of social capital, as defined by Robert Putnam, is explained as “networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.”<sup>23</sup> Putnam's definition is broad in the sense that the terms he uses are easily applicable to non-voting and non-political behavior. Instead of emphasizing the development of voting behaviors, Putnam argues that the establishment of civic engagement, specifically in the form of service, across all aspects of community augments a sense of reciprocity and collective action from which social capital emerges.<sup>24</sup> This integration into the community rather than simple membership amplifies the perceived importance of individuals within the network, forming a pattern of similar habits as they connect to each other.

He states that this habitual development reinforces active participation and extends the reach of those actions into the public – and political – sphere. These habits imply a replacement of non-voting political participation (such as attending rallies, writing to representatives, serving on local government boards and organizations, etc.) and that with

the decline of those activities, other measures of civic engagement may be replacing them in the development of social capital among youth. As a result, the young voters that are developing civic identities through other forms of civic engagement are more likely to vote than those who do not have the same practices and habits of participation. College provides the opportunity for such development, and this research will in part address a question that Putnam posed himself: “What types of organizations and networks most effectively embody—or generate—social capital?”<sup>25</sup>

This is explored more in another study on personality and political engagement. Sociability was found to have a large impact on political behaviors – more social people, across different age cohorts, are more likely to participate in political institutions.<sup>26</sup> Putnam, then, was on the right track with his idea of networks developing this political engagement; this study looks at specific types of social engagement to further understand this connection.

### 3.3 College Voter Turnout

The research that has been done in reference to college student voters in particular and not just on age are often studies on partisanship and how the status of a college town could affect election results.<sup>27</sup> This research also examined the differences between national, state, and local elections in those towns, finding that students were more likely to vote in national elections than for local offices. Researchers have also found distinct similarities between college voters and their parents, particularly in ideological and partisan identification.<sup>28</sup> That same study found that voting choices also generally mirrored parental choices, indicating the influence of home life on political behaviors.

Within universities, what a student studies also seems to affect political ideology – not just a partisan preference on for whom a student votes<sup>29</sup> but also the likelihood of a student to vote at all.<sup>30</sup> In their research, Niemi & Hanmer found that STEM students turned out to vote less often than other majors. They also found that living in a battleground state increased the likelihood of voting, that a greater distance between college and hometown decreased turnout, and that political parties’ contact on college campuses increased turnout.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, the study examined the effect of voter registration laws, finding that students preferred to register in their hometowns rather than at their school. However, they construe this as a dismissal of ambiguous and varied registration laws<sup>32</sup> which other researchers see as an explanatory variable for students’ low voter turnout.<sup>33</sup> Instead of looking at the specifics of registration, the survey for this research addresses the question of living in-state versus out-of-state, which may indicate some effect of registration laws, difficulty in returning home to vote, or hardship in obtaining an absentee ballot, especially since many college students are first-time voters. Relatedly, there have been studies that found that provision of information to clarify registration laws and hosting registration drives on campuses increases turnout rates among college students.<sup>34</sup> This result is based on making information more easily available through accessible material like brochures rather than get-out-the-vote posters.

Lastly, researchers and the Higher Education Research Institute indicate that college voters are more likely to vote than non-college voters in the same age group.<sup>35</sup> But voter turnout is such a vast topic that the question of why this is true has not been addressed in terms of the college lifestyle and opportunities that are available on campus. It is a different way of living, which I expected my survey results would support by showing that social capital is uniquely developed on college campuses to create a habit of engagement that carries over into the political sphere.

## 4. Methods & Hypothesis

In order to study the effects of campus engagement on political participation, a survey of current college students was conducted at Bucknell University and Susquehanna University. Both of these schools are along the same stretch of the Susquehanna River in central Pennsylvania, with population sizes between 2,000-4,000 students. At Susquehanna, the survey and research proposal were submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) as well as the Director for Institutional Research, both of whom approved the project. The survey was then distributed via email (see Appendix B for message) to every 3<sup>rd</sup> email address listed in the Susquehanna student directory, which ended up being 782 students. A different distribution method was necessary for Bucknell; ideally, the student directory would have been used at both schools in order to randomize the sample and maintain consistency, but that material was inaccessible at Bucknell. Instead, the avenue available was through the help of Bucknell faculty. The approval letter from the Susquehanna IRB served as Bucknell’s IRB approval, and then a faculty member there distributed a message with the link to the survey on the intra-university message board for all students, which emailed the survey to the 3,571 undergraduate students enrolled there.

This survey was distributed to all subjects on March 6, 2017 with a follow-up email sent on March 21, 2017 to remind students after their spring break to complete the survey. All data was collated by the end of that week, March

25, 2017. All responses were recorded through Qualtrics, a survey distribution software. These responses were then exported and recoded in STATA to run the regression models.

Out of the 4,353 students invited to participate, 255 responded, which is an approximate 5% response rate. It was impossible to determine which school several of the responses came from, but 204 were definitively from Susquehanna. The non-Susquehanna cases were either from Bucknell, students abroad, or undeterminable locations. Out of the 255 responses, there were 209 that were viable, completed cases for use in the regression analysis.

The dependent variable is the political engagement of these students, measured in the survey by question 13, “Did you vote in the 2016 presidential general election?” Based on the survey responses, several regression models were used to see which factors measuring civic engagement had any effect on this political behavior (See Appendix C: Figure 1).

These independent variables are derived from questions that include campus-specific behaviors such as on-campus employment (“Are you employed on campus?”), how many on campus clubs or organizations does the respondent actively participate in (including athletics), and if a student lives on campus. There are also independent variables that measure more abstract community concepts, such as student leadership (measured by the question “Please list each of your leadership titles – e.g. president, secretary, historian, supervisor, coach, etc.”), if a respondent is in student government, and how many hours of community service a student completes each month. There is also a question about how many hours are dedicated to academic studies to help understand the effect of a student lifestyle (“How many hours outside of the classroom do you devote to academic studies per week?”).

All regression models account for control variables, such as age, the urbanity of the student’s hometown, familial socioeconomic status, how often a student reads the news, and if a student has taken a government course in high school or college. The other variables included in the models were the independent variables, intended to test the hypotheses. There were well over forty regressions run over the course of this research; however, only the models that are significant or close to being significant are included below.

My expectation for these regressions was that the more highly involved a student is on campus, which for most college students is their community, the more likely they are to be politically active and engaged. Essentially, this is transferring the theory of Putnam’s social capital from a general community to a specific environment. Therefore, my hypotheses are as follows:

1. Students who live on campus are more likely to vote
2. Students who work on campus are more likely to vote
3. Students with more leadership roles are more likely to vote
4. Students who complete more service hours are more likely to vote
5. Students who participate in more clubs are more likely to vote
6. Students involved in student government are more likely to vote

## 5. Results & Discussion

As seen in Model 2 of Table 1, the number of leadership roles a student had was significant at the 95% interval, but only once a student hit a certain number. Students with only one or two roles were no more likely to vote than those with none. However, once a student had three or more, he or she was more likely to have voted in the 2016 presidential general election. This is also illustrated in Figure 1: Leadership Roles Comparison. As seen in that graph, there is nearly continual overlap among each consecutive gain in leadership roles, but looking at only the first and last markers it is clear that there is a great difference between having no leadership roles and having three or more. This shows that there are some grounds for supporting my hypothesis that students more involved on campus are more likely to vote than those who are less involved, at least after a certain point.

Part of the overlap found in this model as well as others can be explained through the homogeneity of the college student population. The lack of variation among the sample is due to all respondents being taken from the same region, mostly the same educational background (attending a 4-year college), and about the same age. Although there were some responses from non-traditional students, of a different age than most of the population, the majority college students are between 18 and 25 years of age. Going to schools in the same region means that they may share other characteristics as well, leading to a population that shares a similar culture and lacks in diversity, which is difficult to study through these regressions and responses.

Table 1. Regression Analyses

Variables	Model 1 Coefficient (Standard Error)	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Constant	.661 (2.369)	1.978 (2.486)	1.774 (2.452)	.505 (2.418)	1.406 (2.357)
Urbanity	.276 (.323)	.329 (.332)	.353 (.332)	.349 (.330)	.337 (.320)
Socioeconomics	.258 (.191)	.323 (.200)	.294 (.197)	.234 (.193)	.270 (.190)
Age	-.022 (.116)	-.082 (.123)	-.093 (.122)	-.015 (.118)	-.052 (.117)
Government Class	.306 (.376)	.403 (.401)	.386 (.397)	.375 (.385)	.236 (.370)
ReadNews	-.447 (.198)*	-.490 (.212)*		-.451 (.202)*	-.441 (.196)*
Often/sometimes			-.658 (.354)		
Rarely			-.981 (.467)*		
Leadership			.415 (.186)*		.466 (.327)
1 role		.277 (.394)			
2 roles		.477 (.517)			
3+ roles		1.754 (.806)*			
Service Hours	-.006 (.034)	-.013 (.034)	-.011 (.034)	-.007 (.034)	.001 (.033)
Clubs	.203 (.137)				
1 club				-.073 (.638)	
2 clubs				.839 (.645)	
3 clubs				.865 (.665)	
4+ clubs				.473 (.693)	

\*p<.05    \*\*p<.01

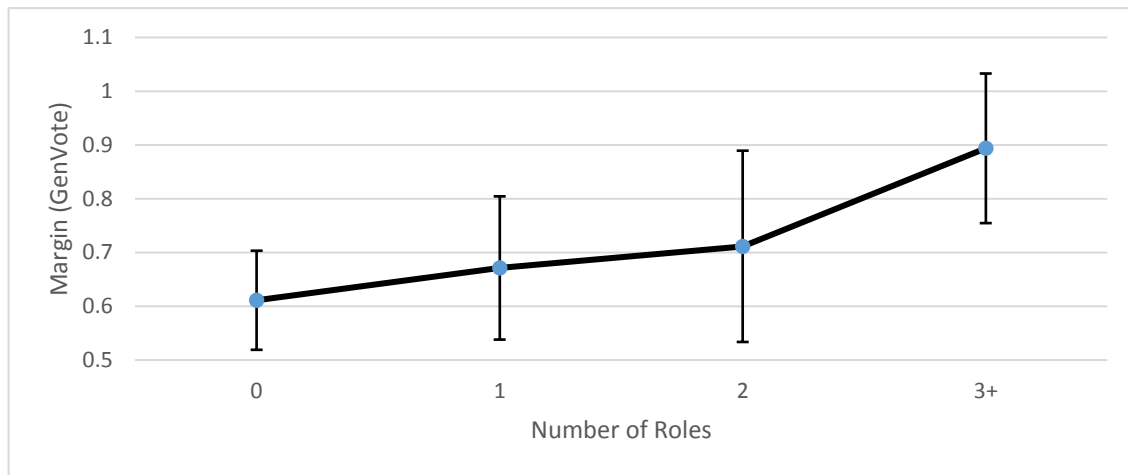


Figure 1. Leadership Roles Comparison

The only other variable that was significant was how often a student read the news, which makes sense since this was intended as a control variable for civic-mindedness – students who read the news often would be more interested in their community and therefore more likely to vote. The results are very similar to those regarding leadership roles in that there is overlap among all the categories, as seen in Figure 2: Reading News Comparison. Comparing the students who read the news most often to those who read least often indicates that there is an effect on

those respondents' voting behaviors, as seen in Model 3. It is not enough to imply causation, but there is a relationship present in the data, especially as this was a consistently significant control variable in the other models (Table 1).

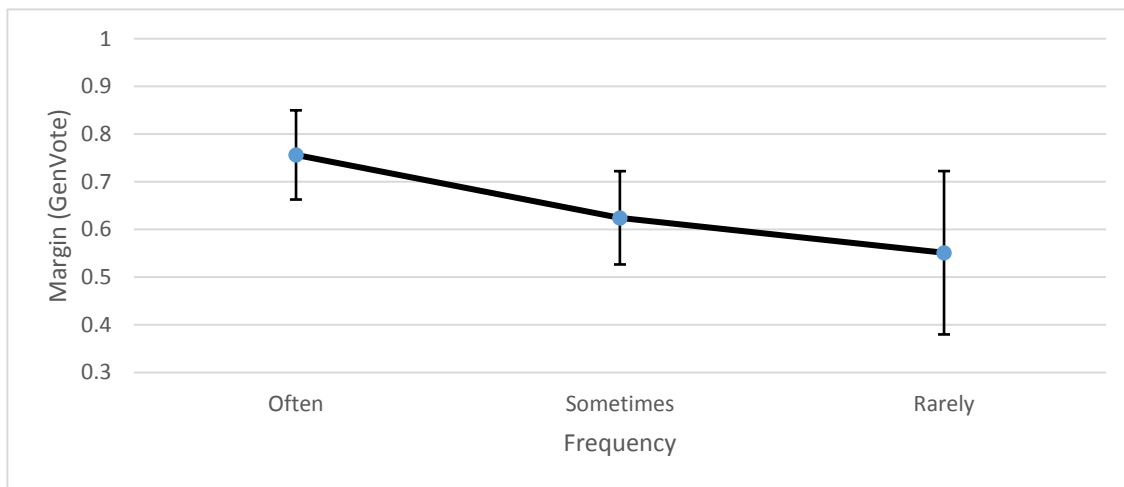


Figure 2. Reading News Comparison

The number of clubs a student was involved in, their employment, their service hours, and their campus residency seemed to have some effect in some models, but nothing that was significant. Further research would be needed to establish the actual relationship between those variables and the student population in the context of the general population. It is important to recognize that even the significant variables do not imply causation, only that there is a relationship present. Therefore, most of the findings are inconclusive. Being that few variables were significant, and those only at the 95% confidence level, there is very little to be drawn from these regressions and data without further research.

## 6. Conclusion

I expected that the more involved students, particularly those with leadership positions or more community service hours, would be most likely to vote due to their dedication to their community. According to the same theory, involvement in certain types of clubs such as student government should mean that a student was more likely to turn out to vote. Most of the hypotheses were not directly supported by the data; although there was an effect present, it was not significant except for the number of leadership roles and reading the news. This may be due to college students being a rather homogenous population or due to a culture specific to the two schools involved in this study. In the future, it would also be necessary to explore the inherent biases within the survey and their effects – it is possible that the students who were most likely to vote and be civically engaged were the students most likely to respond to the survey, thereby excluding a segment of the population that is imperative to the study (that is, non-engaged students).

These results are important because they provide information about student populations that has not been previously explored. Universities that focus on active citizenship may use this knowledge to similarly understand their student populations. Having more resources to improve that research design would greatly enhance the effectiveness of the study as well as its ability to explain causation rather than only finding a relationship in the data.

Future studies should expand this research to a variety of schools with a higher and more evenly distributed response rate in order to compare other college campuses to these results. Data from schools with assorted characteristics would be interesting as well, diversifying the data with responses from smaller and larger population sizes and different geographic regions. Including college students in a study among a greater population, perhaps within the neighborhoods and surrounding college town, would also be interesting in that it puts college voters into a context and may decrease the effect of the homogeneity within this study. Another way to alter the research design would be to study high school students as well as college students, or to do a time lapse study as high school students move into college and become eligible to vote. Such panel data would be more indicative of explanatory variables.

This research is not just applicable to college students – further research must be done, but adults who were more involved as youth may be more likely to vote as they grow older than their peers who were less involved as youths due to their established habits. It would be interesting to do a similar panel study not of high school students, but of college students to see if their civic and political involvement change after college, and how their college habits influence their political lives at later times. College provides the opportunities for students to be active citizens and educates them on how to maintain that relationship with their community beyond school, encouraging continued political participation through civic engagement. However, from the data collected and analyzed here, there is much more to be done to understand how a college lifestyle influences the political inclinations of college students.

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