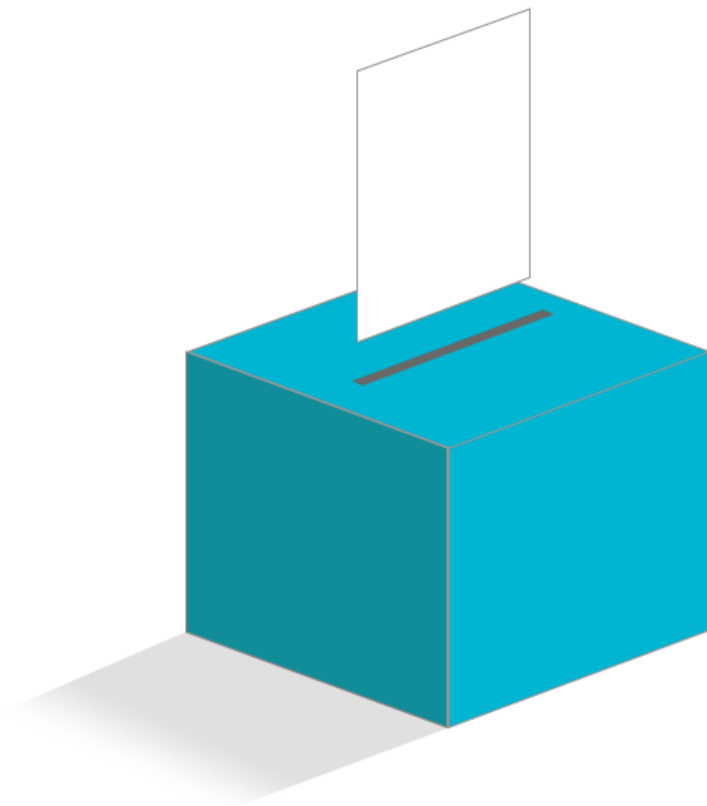




Neighborhood Young Voter Participation in Providence, RI



Neighborhood Young Voter Participation

Voter participation is a well-defined indicator of youth civic engagement, which in turn is a key driver of the future civic and economic vitality of our communities. With traditionally low voter participation, urban adults aged 18-24 offer enormous potential for long-term civic and economic growth through targeted voter engagement and education strategies. This is particularly true in Providence, where neighborhood-to-neighborhood differences in voting patterns are steep.

Key Cross Cutting Findings

- Factors such as language, education attainment, and poverty do not affect turnout among Providence's 18- to 24-years-olds as strongly as they do among adults over age 25. Nonetheless, neighborhood differences in youth turnout point to voter registration and education measures that will help specific populations overcome barriers to voting.
- Low income and poverty were associated with lower turnout among youth voters at the neighborhood level in both the 2012 and 2014 elections. Measures such as online registration and expansion of early voting options, which make voting easier for those with work and family obligations, may be a boon for young voters in low-income areas.
- Mail-in ballots, used by Rhode Island voters who are not able to be in present on Election Day, have lingual, educational, and economic correlations. Most notably, young voters with low-income indicators--especially those who had ever qualified for free/reduced lunch--are less likely to cast ballots by mail. Educating students about the ability to vote early may help reduce this gap.
- Provisional ballots—those cast by voters whose eligibility is in question—are correlated with low-income status. Targeted education initiatives to increase awareness of election procedures and policies may help ensure that young voters' ballots will be counted.
- In neighborhoods with a high number of limited-English households, young voters were both less likely to use mail-in ballots and more likely to cast provisional ballots. This indicates an opportunity to reduce voting obstacles by providing information in multiple languages.
- Youth party affiliation is associated with public schooling and poverty status.

Project Approach

This project explores civic engagement in Rhode Island by combining administrative data from the RI DataHUB with neighborhood data from Rhode Island Community Profiles. Working with a range of community and state stakeholders, we studied civic engagement among young adults aged 18 to 24. This report takes a close look at specific neighborhood factors that affect voting among young adults in Providence and offers specific policy recommendations to overcome barriers and increase engagement among this group. A companion quiz and data story offer high-level data on youth voting nationally.

Background

National Voting Trends among Young Adults

Encouraging voting among young adults — particularly those in urban areas with high social and economic need — is a key strategy for building healthy communities. Voting is a key indicator of willingness to participate in civic life, and indicates some measure of trust in government and hope for future. Engaging young voters in particular confers long-term civic benefits, since those who vote when they are young are more likely to do so when they get older.[1]

Voter turnout among 18- to 24-year-olds in the U.S. has been in decline for decades, falling from 50.9% in 1964 to 38.0% in 2012. Bucking the trend, turnout among young adults rose in 2004 and again in 2008, when it reached a 32-year high of 44.3%. But in 2012, turnout dropped 6 percentage points among young voters while remaining steady among voters age 30 and older.[2]

A number of factors are correlated with voter turnout:

- **Education:** Nationally, voter turnout varies directly with educational attainment. In the 2014 general election, voting rates ranged from 22% among high school dropouts to 62% among those with advanced degrees. [3] This can partly be attributed to civics education; students who learn about democratic processes, including how to register, are more likely to vote than their peers.[4]
- **Income:** Turnout also varies directly with income, a finding that makes sense given that education and income have a strong correlation. In a Census Bureau survey, just 24.5% of those with family incomes under \$10,000 a year said they voted in 2014, far less than the 56.6% of those with family incomes above \$150,000.[3]
- **Unemployment:** Turnout was 29.9% for unemployed citizens in 2014, versus 41.2% for those employed.[7]

The registration process can be a significant barrier to voting, particularly among young adults. Those ages 18-29 are more likely than older people to report not registering due to failure to meet registration deadlines and lack of knowledge about where to register.[5]

Among young registered voters, barriers often have more to do with availability than apathy. In the 2014 election, a third of registered voters under age 30 who didn't vote said that schedule conflicts kept them from the polls. Another 10% said they were away at election time or forgot to vote. Just 17% avoided the polls because they weren't interested or felt their vote wouldn't count.[6]

Comparing youth (18-24) voter registration rates



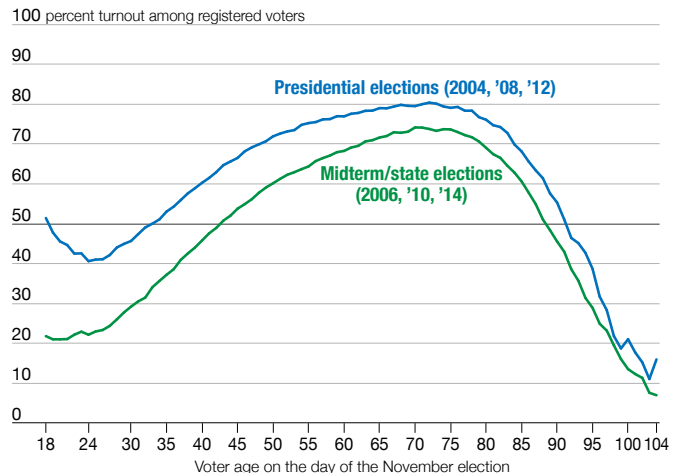
Young Adult Voting in Rhode Island

Rhode Island's young adults are registered at a significantly higher rate than the national average for 18- to 24-year-olds, but turnout rates do not differ significantly from the national average. In the 2012 general election, 50.3% of Rhode Island's young adults voted, versus 41.2% nationally. In 2014, Rhode Island had a 13.7% turnout for this age group, versus 17.1% nationally — both alarmingly low figures.[7] Engaging young voters is vital to the long-term health of Rhode Island's neighborhoods, particularly because state elections are held during low-turnout midterm election years.

Age differences in voting among Rhode Islanders are stark, particularly in midterm/state election years, when people in their mid-50s to early 80s vote at over three times the rate of 18- to 24-year-olds.

Voter turnout by age in Rhode Island

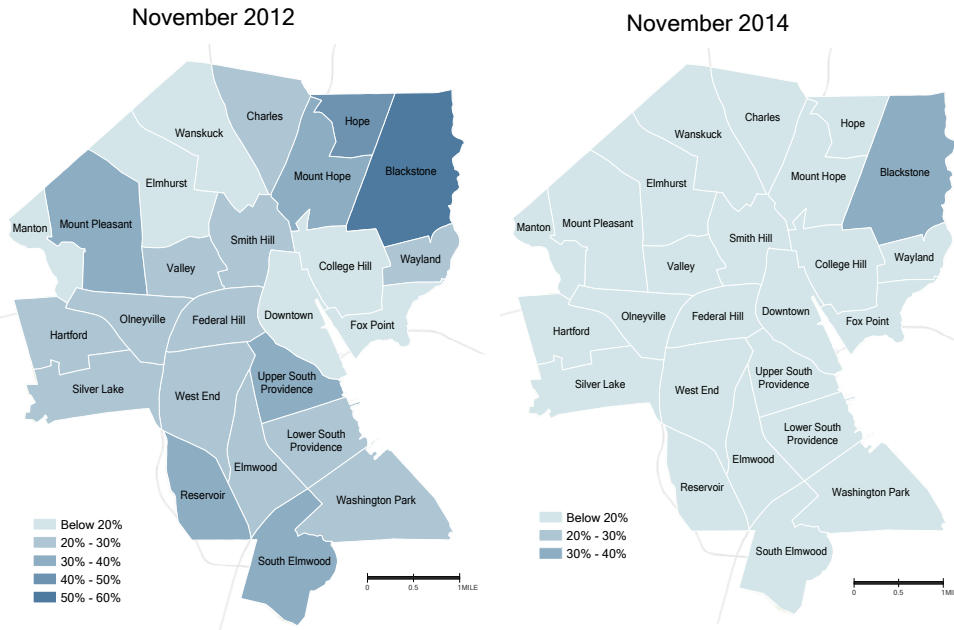
The highest voter turnout occurs among those in their early 70s. Young adult turnout is substantially higher in presidential election years than in midterm/state election years.



A Closer Look at Young Voters in Providence

We have chosen to examine voting levels and trends among young adults in Providence, by far the largest city in the state. By connecting voting data from the 2012 and 2014 general elections with language, economic, and education data, we are able to explore innovative civic engagement indicators over time and understand how social and neighborhood factors affect young adults' civic engagement. In addition to exploring engagement factors by age, the report investigates voting trends by neighborhood. Identifying whether voter disenfranchisement is concentrated in certain areas will help pinpoint neighborhood characteristics correlating with turnout, which will allow better targeting of voter engagement efforts.

Percent of 18-24 year olds who voted

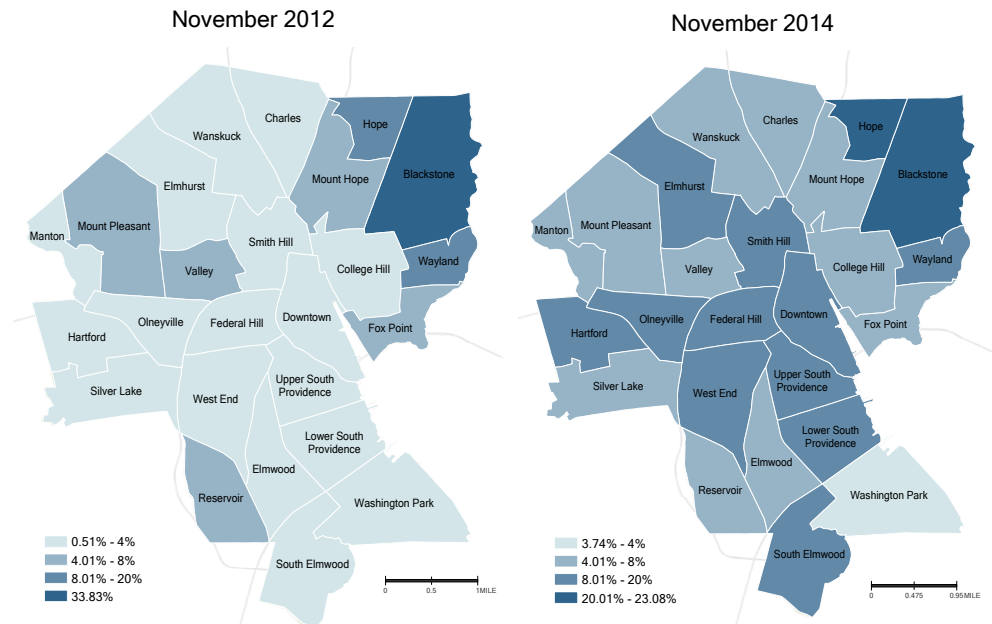


Looking at the 2012 and 2014 general elections, there was a significant drop in turnout in 2014, which is to be expected of non-presidential elections. In both years, Blackstone showed the largest turnout among 18-24 year olds.

Data sources: RISOS, ProvPlan, RIGIS

Percent of 18-24 year olds who voted with mail-in ballots

Going from 2012 to 2014, there was a significant increase in the percentage of ballots that were mailed in. A likely explanation is that the surge in turnout in presidential election years (like 2012) may be concentrated on in-person voting, thus reducing the percentage of votes cast that are mail-ins. The heaviest use of mail-in ballots among 18-24 year olds is in Blackstone, Hope, and Wayland.



Data sources: RISOS, ProvPlan, RIGIS

Income

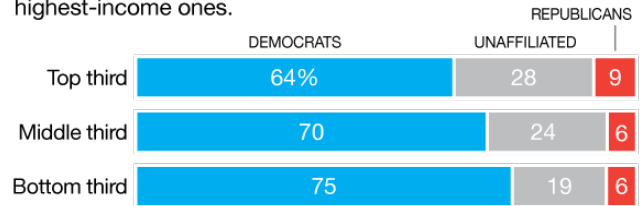
As with many neighborhood metrics, income is often a related factor. Voter turnout as well has strong associations with neighborhood income and poverty. Specifically, **low income and poverty are associated with lower turnout among youth voters** at the neighborhood level in both elections. In 2012, for example, one key poverty indicator (population aged 18-64 living below the federal poverty line) had a negative association with youth voter turnout of $-.442$. Another indicator of poverty household income of less than \$20,000 had an association of $-.397$ with youth voter turnout. As would be expected the reverse holds true, high income had a positive association. In 2014, there was a $.439$ association between youth voter turnout and household income of more than \$75,000. Households with an even higher income of more than \$200,000 had a $.563$ association with turnout.

The voting rates among specific neighborhoods bear out this association with income. The neighborhood with the highest youth turnout in each election ($> 25\%$ in 2014 and $> 50\%$ in 2012) was Blackstone, an area where the median household income is \$87,700 (compared with \$26,900 citywide) and just 1.1% of families live below the poverty level.[1] In contrast, the downtown neighborhood, where just 1% of those aged 18-24 voted in 2014, has a median household income of \$18,100, with 14.3% of families living in poverty.

The impact of poverty on mail-in balloting is even more pronounced. In both elections, low-income, high-poverty variables (e.g., % of population living below the federal poverty line, household income) had significant negative associations with voting at the neighborhood level—in the $-.4$ range. Percent of youth voters that

Income and party affiliation (2012)

Party affiliation of registered 18-24 year olds varies with income. If divided into three groups based on the percent of households with an annual income of \$75,000 or more, the lowest-income neighborhoods lean more Democratic than the highest-income ones.



ever qualified for free/reduced lunch had an even higher negative correlation with mail in ballots $-.716$ and $-.676$ with 18-24 mail in voting.. Household income above \$200,000 had a strong positive correlation with mail-in voting: $.868$ in 2012 and $.603$ in 2014. Given that Election Day conflicts are a significant barrier to voting among young people—especially those who may have inflexible work schedules—ensuring that mail-in or other early voting options are widely known and available may be an important mechanism for engaging youth voters in low-income areas.

Finally, neighborhoods with high poverty rates—as measured by household income, proportion of high school graduates living below the poverty level, and proportion of young adults who were ever eligible for free/reduced lunch—have higher percentages of 18- to 24-year-olds registered as Democrats. Conversely, neighborhoods with low poverty and higher income measures have higher percentages of 18- to 24-year-olds registered as Republicans.

Education

Given the close association between education attainment and income, it might be expected that neighborhood findings broken out by education would mirror those of income. Interestingly, while adults aged 25+ who did not complete high school (as identified by the U.S. Census Bureau) showed a strong negative association with turnout in both 2012 and 2014, 18- to 24-year-olds who did not finish high school voted at the same rate as their peers. Registered voters who attended an adult education program show a similar profile to the pool of those identified as not completing high school. In particular, although there was a very strong negative

association between adult ed learning and voter turnout among those aged 25 and up in both elections, there was no significant correlation among those aged 18-24. Attainment of a bachelor's degree, which had a moderately strong positive association with turnout among those 25 and up, had no significant association with turnout among younger adults.

In contrast, higher educational attainment showed a consistent correlation with knowledge of election procedures, as measured by the casting of mail-in or provisional (questionable) ballots. Those with a bachelor's

degree or higher with were both moderately more likely to make use of mail-in ballots and less likely to cast provisional ballots. Registered voters who went to a Rhode Island public school had a moderate positive association with the casting of provisional ballots in both 2012 and 2014, indicating a potential area for voter education in schools.

Education was also associated with party affiliation, with those who did not complete high school showing a moderately strong negative association with unaffiliated registration, and those with at least a bachelor's degree showing a moderately strong association with both unaffiliated registration and unaffiliated turnout. Public school attendance also had strong negative associations with Republican and no party affiliation.

Language

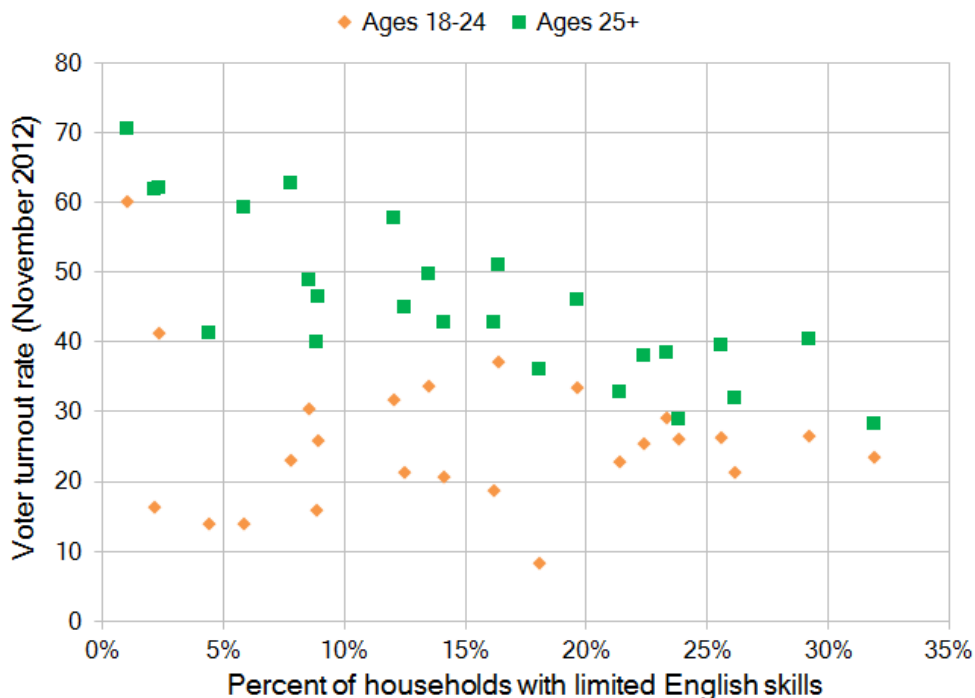
At a neighborhood level language offers interesting insights. 18 to 24 year olds voters in neighborhoods with higher limited English households as identified by the U.S. Census Bureau, were both less likely to use mail-in ballots and more likely to cast provisional ballots. This trend was also evident when looking at Spanish speaking households. Provisional ballots—those cast by voters whose eligibility are in question—could highlight Election Day obstacles for limited English speakers. Voting instructions and requirements such as Rhode Island's voter ID law, effective Jan. 1, 2012 may be obstacles for Providence's limited English speaking population. This population's limited use of mail in ballots signals that

targeted language outreach on Election Day could improve neighborhood turnout. Conversely, voters from English-only households were moderately more likely to use mail-in ballots and less likely to cast provisional ballots.

In the 2012 election, language indicators like limited English households, spanish speaking households, hispanic, and ever identified or monitored as English language learners (ELL) have significant positive correlations with being registered democrat.

Voter turnout and English proficiency

When comparing neighborhood voter turnout rates with English proficiency, those neighborhoods with more households with limited English tend to have lower turnout rates, but only for people ages 25+.



Policy Implications for Increasing Youth Political Engagement

How can we encourage voter turnout as an expression of political engagement among young adults in Rhode Island—especially in urban neighborhoods that are most in need of the personal, civic, and economic gains that engagement confers?

Getting young voters past the registration hurdle is a key strategy for increasing voter turnout. In the 2008 election, a whopping 84% of 18- to 29-year-olds who were registered cast ballots nationally.[8] For those who have registered, voter education and access measures are important for increasing turnout by generating interest in elections and ensuring that young adults with scheduling issues can vote. Following are specific recommendations for engaging Rhode Island's young adults in the election process:

- Target voter turnout efforts to specific neighborhoods and neighborhood characteristics. Providing election information in multiple languages will help engage young voters in areas with a large number of limited-English households. Information on polling times and locations and voting procedures may benefit those in neighborhoods with factors tied to high provisional ballot rates and low use of mail-in ballots.
- Encourage voter education campaigns at schools and colleges. Although education was not a huge factor in youth turnout for recent elections, school-based information campaigns offer a consistent way to reach young voters. The lack of association between turnout and attainment of a bachelor's degree means there's plenty of room at the college level to boost turnout. High provisional ballot rates among those who attended a RI public school similarly offer an opportunity to educate students about election procedures.
- Increase access to early voting options. Rhode Island is one of just 14 states that do not offer early in-person voting,[9] which allows voters to cast ballots up to 45 days before an election, often on weekends or at "satellite" locations that may be more convenient. Among young adults surveyed who were registered but didn't vote in the 2010 election, being too busy / work conflict was the most common reason cited.[6] For these and other young adults who have difficulty getting to the polls on Election Day, providing other options is important. RI did implement no-excuse mail-in balloting in 2011, but the ballot still asks "eligibility" questions, which can be confusing; educating young people about this option can help expand their access to the polls.
- Implement online registration. Online registration in other states has shown to be a good way to reach young adults. When California launched its online system in 2012, more than half of voters who registered used the new system; 30% of those were under age 25, which helped drive an 8% increase in registration among this group.[10] This option is particularly valuable for young adults, as they tend to be highly mobile and therefore less likely to know where to register in person.[9] Low-income youth in particular may have difficulty finding the time and transport to get to a registration site. Moreover, states with online systems have found that such systems reduce costs and improve the accuracy of voter rolls.[11] They also make it easier to allow registration in multiple languages, thus reducing another barrier to turnout.
- Educate young people about preregistration. Rhode Island statute allows those as young as 16 to preregister, making them eligible to cast a ballot once they reach the legal voting age of 18. Preregistration occurs at points of contact such as high schools and the Division of Motor Vehicles, but is available to a "non-uniform slice of students, new drivers, and young people." [12] Broadening outreach efforts among schools and community organizations can have a major impact on voter turnout, particularly among low-income and non-English-speaking voters, who may otherwise have difficulty with this aspect of voting.
- Expand registration drives, particularly in targeted areas. Registration drives work, particularly in poor areas. [13] Drives targeting neighborhoods with high poverty rates and other barriers to voting can engage young adults who might otherwise not participate.

More Information

Related data story and quiz: <http://ridatahub.org/datastories/young-voters>

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