

**The Resurgence of Youth Involvement in American Political Movements:
The Past 15 Years**

by

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Table of Contents

I. Introduction

1. Resurgence of youth involvement in American political movements

II. Youth Involvement in the Past

1. Discussion of anti-war/civil rights movements by students in the 50's/60's
2. The Black Panther Party

III. The Role of Youth in Political Involvement

1. What has interested youth to try and become politically involved?
2. Do adults make way for youth to actively participate or take leadership roles in these movements or organizations?

IV. Youth Involvement in the Past 15 Years

1. Youth in the Climate Crisis and how young leaders like Greta Thunberg have been launched to the forefront of the climate issue
2. How mass shootings involving students have caused them to have enough and rise up to fight
3. Efforts of youth during presidential and midterm elections, youth voter turnout, and mobilization in the Trump era
4. Youth and Black Lives Matter

V. Successes of Youth in Political Participation

1. How is success measured in youth political participation & examples of success

VI. Conclusion

1. Inevitable future resurgences in youth political participation and what resources can we provide to them as allies in an effort to work together in prosperity?

VI. References

1. References

Introduction

“Forgotten”, “determined”, and “empowered”; these are just some words that young people may describe themselves as feeling by participating in certain political movements or issues at a “younger than usual” age. Different social issues and political movements have noticeably taken the spotlight through technological means of social media, news coverage, and other outlets through perhaps each decade in our nation’s modern history. Though at times it may seem to the ordinary bystander that adults have exclusively been a part of these different social issues and movements, a group who has been involved and have even taken leadership roles in them have been young people. The youth, including students ranging anywhere from 16 to 25, have historically become particularly involved in protests, political movements, and important issues of the day.

Youth stepped up to the plate and were involved in previous movements from the 1950’s and 60’s including the Civil Rights movement, anti-war movements, and political organizations, such as the Black Panther party. These moments of the United States’ past serve almost as a blueprint and inspiration for young people who have participated in the political/social system or even considered in participating in a specific movement or issue. Though some of these students and young people may have been embraced by some at the time, not everyone was particularly ecstatic for these youth to dip their feet into waters that may seem most comfortably occupied by adults. A constant theme throughout youth participation in social issues and political movements has been criticism by adults and others who may already be leading these groups, not knowing the contributions that young people could present and will have put forth as time went by.

Heated political and social issues have driven the attention of some Americans to the forefront, including these young people. For some dire issues, it has been paramount for them to

stand up and become involved, rather than just sitting back and watching things from the sidelines. For many of today's youth, even if a specific issue or movement does not affect them personally, they may just feel enticed to participate, become active, and say that enough is enough. The neglect shown by lawmakers, leaders, and other adults in the broader society on important social and political issues has played a major role in the lives of the youth who refuse to continue to live and abide by the status quo for any longer. Specifically, some instances of youth standing up and having enough include young Parkland, Florida high school students that felt the sorrow, anger, and determination to rally and unite for comprehensive gun reform after the deadly Marjory Stoneman Douglass High School shooting in February of 2018. Also, the coalition and community of the youth empowered Sunrise Movement have had a realization and recognized the existential threat of climate change that looms closer every year. Additionally, there were mass efforts by youth in the 2008, 2016, 2018 and 2020 elections to try and successfully spread support, as well as elect a candidate who they see as best fit to run the country and address the issues most pressing to them. Finally, the empowering syndicate of the Black Lives Matter movement, whom youth have stood together with and who seek to stop white supremacy, police brutality, and violence on Black people motivated by race. Young people have been intimately involved and often at the center of social and political change.

Though youth involvement in the past has proven to result in several successes, today's resurgent and politically involved youth have been dealt with setbacks in their way. Among these obstacles are some adults who may try to be dismissive and minimize the voices of the youth in the respective movement or issue, or simply refuse to work alongside with these young people. Thankfully, the efforts of inclusive groups who even decide to have youth leaders in their

movements or become another face of the issue have been able to serve as an example and leave along guidelines or tips as to how to make an effort to be inclusive to politically interested youth.

Not only have the youth participated in these social and political movements and issues, but they have also been successful in their unique efforts and goals on several occasions. Success in youth political engagement can be measured in several ways. These successes can include: building up mass awareness to a specific issue, pushing legislation that becomes passed by our nation's Congress, or even community action on a local issue, among other ways.

In this thesis, the points stated above will be discussed and will also discuss the resurgence of youth involvement in American political movements and issues. The participation of youth in movements that had immense media coverage in the 50's and 60's share parallels to the resurgence of different movements of our modern society. This resurgence of youth political participation could very well have longer term implications as successful political movements; even those which achieve a small measure of success, could impact specific aspects of society for the better. Sasha Costanza-Chock of Civic Media at MIT has said, "Young people are often key factors in powerful social movements that transform the course of human history" (Costanza-Chock, 2012, 1).

Chapter I: Youth Involvement in the Past

When discussing social and political movements and issues, some people may think back to the anti-Vietnam war protests and the Civil Rights movement of the 50's and 60's as a blueprint for modern day protests or youth activism. The anti-Vietnam war protests came to fruition as opposition grew amongst the American people to the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War. After France was defeated by the Viet Minh and left Indochina as a result of the First Indochina War, North Vietnam directed the Viet Cong to attack the U.S. supported Southern Vietnamese state (Schreiber, 1973). In the late 1950's and into the 60's, under the leadership of President John F. Kennedy and President Lyndon B. Johnson after Kennedy's assassination, hundreds of military advisors and tens of thousands American soldiers were sent to South Vietnam to fight. By the late 60's, it started to become clear to the soldiers and American people that the country was not winning the war. With over 15,000 Americans killed and over 100,000 injured by late 1967, outrage and opposition to the war was increasing, especially among young college and university students (Schreiber, 1973).

Harvard University professor Julie Reuben has said, "The most successful formula students have followed is convincingly making an off-campus issue also a campus issue" (Jason, 2018, para. 14). That is exactly what happened when it relates to the issue of the United States being involved in the Vietnam war and even more so when they invaded Cambodia as it was seen as a type of safe haven by the North Vietnamese. Young university students across the country worked in conjunction with each other in order to orchestrate and plan out specific protests and movements against the war of their own. Specifically, at Harvard University, hundreds of students began the occupation of their University Hall in 1969, amidst the surging student led and participated anti-Vietnam war protests, in order to demote the school's ROTC

program into simply an extracurricular activity. A total of 10,000 students went ahead to declare a strike against Harvard and were able to accomplish their goal by showing strength and solidarity in numbers (Jason, 2018).

What truly made national headlines and gathered more press coverage were anti-war protests held by university and college students. In fact, the most popular issue when it came down to protest at accredited four-year colleges and universities was the Vietnam war during the 1967-1968 school year (Schreiber, 1973). Protests which were organized by students were reported as having taken place at 38% of those college and university institutions of that academic year (Schreiber, 1973). The opinions and voices of these student organizers and activists were emboldened and enhanced by partaking in these protests and their efforts helped to shift public opinion to the viewpoint of minimizing American participation in the war, or completely getting out of it. The national polarization and reality of what was happening in Vietnam to innocent Vietnamese people and American troops made it so there would be a similar social division among students and other people in terms of supporting the war or calling for a smaller role or even getting out of Vietnam overall. Students and Americans overall who supported the war were called “hawks” while those who were against the war and wanted a full withdrawal of American troops were called “doves”. Regarding the student population’s opinion and self-characterization as either a “hawk” or a “dove”, a Gallup poll showed that in spring of 1967, 35% identified as a “dove”, 49% identified as a “hawk”, while only 16% of students during that time did not have an opinion (Schreiber, 1973). As with many protest movements or regarding social issues, people (and especially youth and student activists) want to separate themselves and group up with others who they see as likeminded and have the same or similar opinions of them. Just two years later, in November of 1969, 69% of students identified as

“doves”, 20% identified as “hawks”, and just 11% said they still had no opinion (Schreiber, 1973). A majority of students chose to identify as “doves” and though specific anti-war protests were recorded as happening at less than half of accredited colleges and universities, the impact that student activists and organizers had is undeniable.

Youth organizers and others who have been socially or politically involved have not been exempt from tragedies. Tragic events, as happened during the 50's and 60's time period, went on to shape the short-term or even long-term future based off of reaction from the broader public. With some protests that have occurred, regardless of the movement or issue at hand, there have been people who participate or chose the right moment to disrupt the peace. University students were made aware of the United States' and the Nixon administration's decision to move into Cambodia just a few days after it had happened. Almost immediately, the university students planned together and held protests on campuses and on Kent State University's campus in Ohio, the Commons area of the school was packed with hundreds of student protestors at a time (Wallenfeldt, 2017). Those protests remained constant in the coming days and there were reports of students and police confronting each other and of students throwing bottles at some police cars. The mayor of Kent called in the Ohio National Guard after alleged extremist threats were made against Kent State University and the town; thus, the tensions that arose among those students reached an apex. There were about 1000 National Guards who were present at the school and on May 4th, 1970, students refused to leave, yelled at the guardsmen, and threw rocks at them. In response, the guardsmen allegedly pointed their rifles into the air and at the crowd of students and started firing their weapons (Wallenfeldt, 2017). In under 15 seconds, tens of bullets were fired both in the air and at the crowd which killed Jeffrey Miller, Allison Krause, William Schroeder and Sandra Scheuer, who were Kent State students, and just under 10 others were

wounded. Due to this horrific event, Kent State University closed its campus for close to two months and there was widespread outrage among people who were already opposed to the war and even those who did support it. Different pictures and stills taken of those young college students and activists' bodies and of those injured were printed in newspapers which not only circulated in the United States, but also across the world. A nationwide student strike, which started a few days before the Kent State shooting in which high school and college students walked out of their respective schools, was amplified in response to the shooting as well (Wallenfeldt, 2017). Also, in response to the University shooting, close to 500 college campuses were closed and received both violent and nonviolent protestors alike (Wallenfeldt, 2017). The actions of these young students and activists had an important impact in their efforts to go against the war and continued to fuel an anti-Vietnam war sentiment. Eventually, these sentiments resulted in the goal of students and activists being met, which was the end of the war occurring a few years later.

Prominent civil rights leaders such as Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and their adult peers were not the only leaders and vital participants of the civil rights movement. Some people may not realize how young popular civil rights leaders were at the time of important events such as the Montgomery bus boycott. When the boycott started in 1955, King was only 26 years old, as was Malcolm X; with both civil rights icons having been assassinated before they even turned 40 years old. The civil rights movement that Americans are most familiar with, which lasted from the mid 1950's to the late 1960's, was effective and driven by participants who included not just grown adults, but specifically youth activists and students. Each major event that happened during the civil rights movement involved young people; whether it was the

Montgomery bus boycott, the ruling of *Brown v Board*, and even the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

In the Supreme Court case of *Brown v Board*, the Court dealt with the issue of racial segregation of schools. Issuing their ruling in 1954, the Supreme Court ruled that any state in the U.S. with laws which required racial segregation of public schools was acting unconstitutionally (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483). The concept of separate but equal became legitimized after the 1896 Supreme Court decision of *Plessy v Ferguson*; the ruling allowed for racial segregation in public places as long as said facilities were of equal quality (Duignan, 2020). The *Brown* ruling rejected that concept as the Court stated that even having separate educational facilities was unequal (Duignan, 2020). This decision by the Supreme Court was praised by some, but received expected outrage from people who did not want their kids to be in a racially integrated school and some schools went as far as ignoring the decision and continued to bar any children of color from entering or learning at their school. For young black students and activists, this ruling would light a spark inside some of them to try and pursue their dreams, as well as want to band together in order to create change within their community. Historian R. Scott Baker has said, “The Supreme Court’s repudiation of state-sanctioned segregation inspired the activism of South Carolina’s black students, who believed the ruling signaled new educational possibilities” (de Schweinitz, 2009, 203). Though the court’s decision led to more politically and socially involved youth, it also set into motion a chain of events in the following years. Those events caused more Black and other youth to politically participate in relevant social and political issues.

An example of an event that occurred as a result of the *Brown v Board* ruling which involved politically active and interested youth was the situation that happened in Little Rock,

Arkansas in the Fall of 1957, just three years after the landmark Supreme Court ruling. Schools were pushed by the courts to speed up the process in racially integrating as the school year was about to begin in late 1957. With the help of Arkansas NAACP president Daisy Bates, a total of nine students were chosen by Bates to be the first black students to integrate into the Little Rock Central High School based off of their personal traits of being determined and also having the capacity and willingness to put themselves into the situation. These 9 students knew very well that they could face the reaction and wrath of angry and racist white people upon entering the high school on their first day. These youth were not just willing, but eager to participate in this orchestrated plan to have them be the first black students at the school by taking part in several counseling sessions during the Summer before the first day of school. These counseling sessions consisted of lessons on what the nine students should expect to face once they attempt to enter the high school on the first day, as well as working through multiple scenarios with them in order for them to act in the best way possible based off the actions of hate or possible violence that white protestors may inflict on them. On the first day of school, the nine students were met with white protestors who were furious at the students' presence and were also met with slurs being shouted to them and protestors spitting on the students as well. The was widely televised across the nation and got so intense that President Eisenhower was forced to federalize and activate the National Guard of Arkansas and effectively used them as protection from protestors to allow the nine young high schoolers into the building. The strength, determination, and courage that the nine, now politically involved, youth showed during this integral moment in history was seen as another catalyst in the civil rights movement which helped garner a reaction and sense of wanting to become involved with other youth

A few months before the bus boycott to end racial segregation on buses in late 1955, a 14-year-old boy named Emmett Till was brutally murdered for allegedly whistling to a white woman at a store in Mississippi. A picture of Till in his open casket at his funeral showed his disfigured face caused by the assailants of his murder; serving as a horrific callback to not only the brutality that he faced, but the hatred and cruelty other black and youth of color faced as well. Outrage spurred throughout the Black community and America as a whole after viewing the kind of brutality a Black child could go through. Young people brought it amongst themselves to defy the status quo and decided to become involved politically or act, instead of being on the sidelines after a horrific event like that had occurred.

With the desire to end segregation and being motivated by the use of nonviolence by the likes of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, as well as being fired up by the murder of Emmett Till, four North Carolina Agricultural & Technical College students had planned with a local business owner to participate in a nonviolent protest. The four North Carolina A&T College students were Ezell Blair Jr., Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil and David Richmond. After some orchestrated planning, on February 1st, 1960, the four students went to a Woolworth's department store in Greensboro, North Carolina with the intention of sitting at the store's lunch counter and ordering food (Wilson, 2020). The students knowingly did this even though they were fully aware that the store had a policy which stated that the lunch counter workers weren't allowed to server anyone who wasn't white. Going according to plan, the workers at the counter refused to serve the four students, but the students refused to leave and continued to stay seated at the counter. Even when local police arrived to try and disperse everyone, the four students stood their ground and remained in their seats, knowing to not physically act out of order to not give an excuse to the police officers to get physical. The local

businessowner that the students were in communication with, a white man named Ralph Johns, rang the phones of multiple media stations in Greensboro to make sure they would get coverage of what was happening at the counter (Wilson, 2020). With the cameras rolling, television coverage made it so others in the local or surrounding communities were informed of the peaceful protest that the four Black students were participating in and though the students left when the store closed, their efforts had already been seen by hundreds and would be back in the coming days with a powerhouse of other youth. Students by the hundreds packed the Woolworth's lunch counter and branched out their sit ins at other segregated businesses in the area to the point where the efforts of the youth reached nationalized attention and tens of cities had youth at the forefront of orchestrating and participating in sit ins (Wilson, 2020). Bennett College was a school that was nearby North Carolina A&T College and also had a big role in student activism. Students at the historically Black women's college expressed their decision to participate in the sit ins, not just as an expression of agreement with the four Black students from the lunch counter. Young women wanted to join in and elevate their voice because it had been a long time coming for them to be politically active due to the hardships and pain suffered in the Black community through segregation, racism, and more (Brown, 2018). Esther Terry, an alumna of Bennett College has said regarding her own and other students' motivations to participate in the local sit ins, "[Their motivation to participate] did not come out of nowhere and it was not divinely inspired by Bennett, as good as Bennett was. These young women came from places and had a brush with apartheid that had planted seeds in them that sort of grew into fruition here and they have continued" (Brown, 2018, 55).

The motivations of youth to participate politically do not always stem from spontaneity or solidarity with those who are at the time politically involved. Many times, even during this

time of the civil rights movement, the motivation to become politically involved as a young person can result from years of oppression or discrimination one group of people have faced for a long time and feeling as if they were never able to truly express how they truly feel on the issue until the point where they choose to be involved. With the efforts of young college students in North Carolina and even across multiple states, the televised attention helped to shine the spotlight on the efforts of the civil rights movement at the time as a whole, outside of just the sit ins. These four Black youth were able to get the national attention to successfully get hundreds of other students and allies involved. The tactic of nonviolent protest by sit-in was popularized by the Greensboro sit-in event and was continued throughout the civil rights movement and is still widely used in today's protests in different movements in which young people also participate in.

What perhaps was one of the biggest youth lead organizations that was founded and emerged during the civil rights movement was the Black Panther Party. By the mid 1960's, there had been several successes for the civil rights movement, from spreading awareness to participating in boycotts, to even getting legislation passed which would change American life forever. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed by then President Lyndon B. Johnson, and it was:

An Act to enforce the constitutional right to vote, to confer jurisdiction upon the district courts of the United States of America to provide injunctive relief against discrimination in public accommodations, to authorize the Attorney General to institute suits to protect constitutional rights in public facilities and public education, to extend the Commission on Civil Rights, to prevent discrimination in federally assisted programs, to establish a Commission on Equal Employment Opportunity, and for other purposes (Civil Rights Act, 1964).

People could not be discriminated against by employers on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, or national origin. The Act also outlawed racial segregation in public places and establishments and required that the requirements to vote should be the same for everyone, regardless of race. On the surface, the Act was a great step in racial equality in the country, but it failed to address the issues of unemployment in the Black and other minority communities, and also did not address housing discrimination which was still rampant in many communities in the country. In certain Black communities across the country, police presence increased, thus there were more incidents of police brutality that arose during this time as well (Lateef & Androff, 2017). These events and others led to more Black youth to becoming politically involved and a few years later in 1966, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, also known as the Black Panther Party.

Both Newton and Seale met when they were in college and were successful in recruiting other Black youth who were also tired of being marginalized and wanted to proceed with the “revolutionary” ideas that the Black Panther Party had established. Some of the “revolutionary” ideas included those influenced from socialist thinking. The goals and ideas of the Black Panther Party were to benefit the Black community, arm Black people, including youth, for self-defense against any form of brutality, create a sense of Black nationalism, as well as being against a capitalist society in favor of a socialist one (Lateef & Androff, 2017). Among the many political and social accomplishments that the youth led and participated party had, one of their most impactful and successful accomplishments was their free breakfast program. The Party wanted to provide the most direct assistance to Black communities and their youth, as the federal government at the time was spending less than \$1 million to feed needy children (Lateef & Androff, 2017). It was clear that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was just a small success toward

Black equality, but the government's failure to address additional issues in the Black community such as youth hunger was another reason that the Black Panther Party was so determined.

Additionally, the Party wanted to do what they could to help their neighbors and loved ones in Black communities. Local Black Panther party chapters educated their communities and though feeding hungry youth wasn't their only objective, "...the Service to the People Programs also educated Black communities on the nature of their oppression in American society. The community programs educated members of the community about new conceptual frameworks, thinking about themselves as Black people who emphasized pride and dignity" (Lateef & Androff, 2017, 11). The Party's efforts to help communities also consisted of teaching other youth and their families in the best ways that they could empower themselves, despite the obstacles of racism and oppression that face them. The free breakfast program was one of the biggest successes that the Black Panther party had during the entirety of their existence. The youth who helped lead and work within the Party made sure to spread awareness of the fact that the federal government spent little attention and money on the topic of youth hunger, especially in Black and other underserved communities. The federal government introduced the School Breakfast Program in 1966 and functioned as a pilot project in some public and nonprofit private schools (US Department of Agriculture, 2019). The pilot project became permanent in 1975 after the federal government reviewed the success of the Black Panther Party's free breakfast program at each of their chapters in big cities nationwide.

This is another example of youth being politically involved during the 50's and 60's, whether it was with the antiwar movement, or civil rights movement. Youth during this time were able to orchestrate and plan in many ways in order to spread awareness or help to create change in the specific issue at hand. From the ruling of *Brown v Board* by the Supreme Court, to

the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, young people during this time were able to use the tools at their disposal to band together and meet the moment. This is something that youth of today would eventually follow up upon as the resurgence of youth political participation has led to more youth involvement in socially relevant issues and events of the past 15 years.

Chapter II: Youth Becoming Politically Involved and Adult Reaction

Youth becoming involved in political and social movements has become something that is unavoidable to witness and inevitable for young people living in such polarizing and critical times. Becoming involved in a political movement or issue in the present day for youth can be as simple as turning on their smartphones, opening up a social media app such as Twitter or Instagram, and posting or sharing a message about said movement or issue. Though being a simple task and can be seen as doing something minimal, there are different motivations that young people have for opening up social media or participating in a protest in wanting to raise awareness on an issue in the first place.

Family and environment have a significant role in the development of the political affiliation or ideology in young people. “Research has consistently emphasized the role of families in shaping the political orientations of youth, of schools in training young people to become engaged in their larger societies, and of community or government organizations...” (Gordon & Taft, 2011, 1500). The culture and institutions that children and young people engage with multiple times a week are responsible for building up their respective political affiliations and viewpoints as they grow older. In a study done in the early 2000’s, Maria de los Angeles Torres found that only two children of 40 that were interviewed for her study had parents who were previously politically engaged activists (de los Angeles Torres, 2007). Though this was the case, several other youth indicated that their parents took voting seriously and encouraged their children to make sure they vote when given the opportunity, as the right to vote by Black and other people of color had been restricted historically for them for a very long time (de los Angeles Torres, 2007). Simple acts such as a parent voting and being aware that important issues exist outside of their own personal obstacles can be enough for their child and other youth to

want to not only follow in their footsteps, but to also want to branch out and learn more about other issues and movements that may be of personal interest to them. Specific pathways to participation may also include youth coming from a family of higher socioeconomic status than their peers (Fisher, 2012). Research has also shown that less privileged families are less politically engaged overall and may not have the luxury or time to be active in politics (Fisher, 2012). The concept of political socialization comes into play as the institutions that young people frequent help shape their political lens. Their understanding of power and political values they come to interpret from their families and other institutions affects how they view others in society as well. Political socialization affects not just young people, but fully grown adults as well.

In addition, educational institutions such as a young person's school have the possibility of having a big impact and increasing a student's political confidence and efficacy. For the schools that have the proper resources and funding, gaining access to learning more about political issues or motivating a group to become involved can be as simple as joining a school club. Many schools have a student-run government and even clubs which serve as a forum for students to speak their minds and this building upon the desire for a young person to get more knowledge on an issue and become involved (de los Angeles Torres, 2007). If young people become politically involved once and make social connections with other people, they are more likely to stay politically engaged which leads to higher levels of participation (Fisher, 2012). An example of a big change occurring which led to youth needing to look beyond their political viewpoint was when the ruling of *Brown v Board* came from the Supreme Court. Desegregating schools would be a massive implication on the day-to-day life of many children and young people. This impacted students back then and, "The ruling also raised the consciousness of some

young whites. Zellner recalled that when he was in college, news about the Brown decision was everywhere, forcing people to think about it and ask questions about what was ‘the right thing to do’” (de Schweinitz, 2009). Sometimes, inaction or delaying your own reaction to a big change in your life will be nearly impossible. The world and our society is always changing and there may be instances where adults and young people must take action by looking beyond their viewpoint on a specific political issue.

Sometimes, all it may take for certain youth who want to learn more about political issues or want to participate in movements can be a simple push of encouragement by their peers or even adults as well. Especially in movements or issues that they participate in that are relevant today and will be discussed such as elections, gun violence, or Black Lives Matter, some young people want to feel as if their passion for an issue or contributions to a movement are valid. Some youth activists of today have come to the need to desire validation in their efforts at some points due to the immense criticism they sometimes face from outside factors including from politicians or regular adults across the nation. Some ways in which youth can be empowered or encouraged can be, “competence, confidence, and connection to the broader community. These keys lead to caring and character development, which eventually lead to young people defining themselves as citizens, developing skills, and becoming actively engaged in effectuating change in their community” (Livingston et al., 2017). If young people are given that extra push of motivation and solidarity, it in effect would help them proceed and build upon the political ideas they have developed and thus will be able to further participate in political issues or movements.

Regarding reactions from adults and other older peers, politically involved youth are often at the center of criticism from these groups, often times due to the fact that they are much younger and seen as inexperienced in comparison to their adult cohorts. Though not so frequent

as it may have been in decades past, criticism from adults is something that youth usually find themselves dealing with, not just relating to political involvement or activism. Some young people have faced what has been dubbed as “adultism” first hand while being involved in a political issue or movement. Adultism has been defined as the, “...assumption that adults are better than young people and are entitled to act upon young people in many ways without their agreement” (Gordon & Taft, 2011, 1511). This sort of mentality has made a few student activists wary of how they approach things relating to adults in political issues or movements. Though this has been the case for some, there are several instances where adults have stepped aside or have been willingly cooperative with young activists and been able to use their combined efforts for the better. Organizations such as the Sunrise Movement are partly led by youth and have its followers work together with those of all ages, young to older, in order to bring awareness to the issue of climate change and green jobs.

Adults have come to realize and understand several things regarding youth political participation including: that young people are in fact interested in becoming politically involved in specific movements or issues, understanding that young people are faced with their own issues and have their own solutions to them, and that they sometimes will need the assistance of adults or others involved in their respective political movement (Earl, 2018). Being able to work together is one of the biggest steps anyone, regardless of age, can take in political movements. Understanding that your specific age group can benefit from the knowledge of older peers, and vice versa, is critical as both sides will be able to possibly develop a new perspective or come to better understand the perspective of the other side. Overall, there are more instances than not of adults paving the way for young people to participate in the same political movement or raising awareness on the same issue. Though some movements and organizations may have youth

leaders and others may not, a vast number have done their part in the acceptance and willingness to listen to the ideas and perspectives of young people. The strategies and ideas that can come from young people can be a benefit and a supplement to the tools and strategies that adults or those already involved in a specific movement have established.

Chapter III: Youth Political Participation in the Past 15 Years

Part I: Youth and the Climate Crisis

Now knowing of efforts made by youth politically involved in the past and which elements or circumstances may lead to a young person becoming politically engaged in a movement or issue, four big issues and movements that youth have been notably part of will be discussed. These four issues or movements that have caused a resurgence in youth becoming politically involved include the climate crisis, presidential elections, gun violence, and brutality against the Black community. Of the many dire political issues and movements that young people have been interested and involved in, these four issues are among the most popular and serious. Though there has always been youth engagement in the political process in the modern era, these four issues and movements have acted as a catalyst for a resurgence of youth involvement and thanks to mass media coverage, it has become something inescapable to witness.

The issues of global warming and the desire to bring up issues regarding climate are not something that is new within our society. There has previously always been efforts by some to denounce environmental harm against our Earth and for those who are not so aware on the dire issue, the only time they may hear more about it would be on the 22nd of April of each year also known as Earth Day. The serious and blunt truth is that the issues of climate change and the climate crisis are tremendously important as they have long term effects on the way we and other people across the planet live. To many teens and other youth, the horrors and negative effects of the climate crisis are something they are not only aware of, but also truly concerned and anxious about. Over 40% of just over 10,000 young people aged 18-25 years old surveyed stated that climate change was the biggest issue they were concerned about in their future (Walker, 2019).

These youth concerned about the climate crisis understand that the implications of a changing climate affect not only the physical environment around us, but also the health and wellbeing of other people. A collection of statistics and data showed that: pollution in the air was fourth in leading risk factors which contribute to death worldwide,

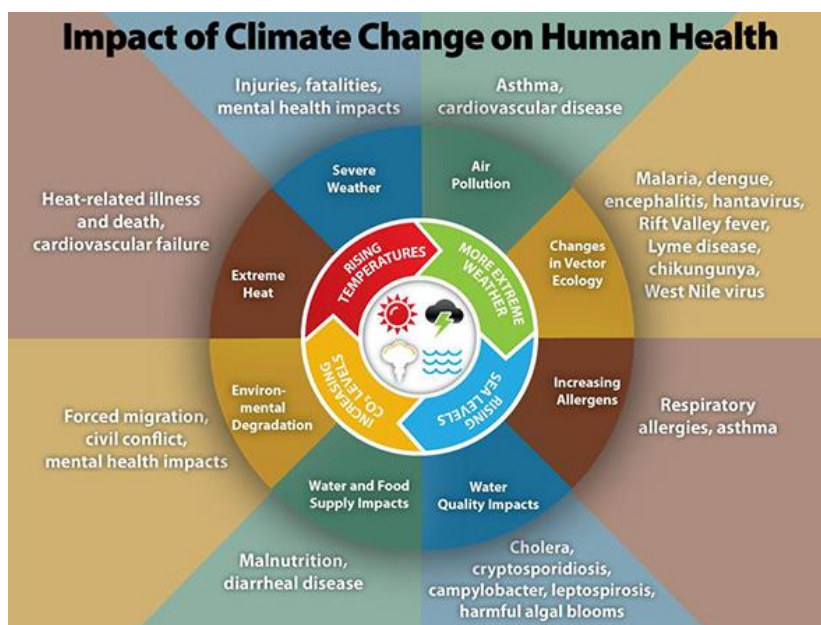


Figure 1.0

Note. Centers For Disease Control. (2021). Climate effects on health.
<https://www.cdc.gov/climateandhealth/effects/default.htm>

respiratory and heart issues in people were directly resulted from bad air quality, and over 7 million premature deaths are caused by air pollution each year, killing mainly elderly people and youth (World Bank, 2018). Additionally, in a graphic made by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as shown in Figure 1.0 above, we are able to see just how much the issue of climate change truly can affect not only the environment, but our loved ones, and those who are less fortunate across the nation and world. With the haunting facts of the effects of climate change becoming more known and mainstream and with inspiration from the efforts of youth

politically involved in other movements and issues, more young people have been inspired to step up and become involved in the climate movement we know today.

Though the efforts of young people becoming involved in the climate movement in raising awareness and advocating for action had been happening for years, many credit the resurgence of youth involvement in the current climate movement to the actions of Greta Thunberg. Thunberg is an 18-year-old Swedish activist who gained popularity and the international spotlight after she protested outside the Riksdag, also known as the Swedish parliament, during days where she would have otherwise been in school, every day for three full weeks in late 2018. Her motivation for the school strike and protest at the Riksdag came after Sweden had its hottest Summer to date and the country was faced with several heatwaves and several wildfires during the same Summer. Also, due to the inaction of Swedish politicians and the overall overlook towards climate change and the climate crisis, Thunberg felt as if it was up to her and obtained the responsibility as a moral obligation (Crouch, 2018). Young people, students, and adults alike from across the globe were able to witness the efforts of young Thunberg, who was 15 at the time of her protests, and she was able to create momentum for advocacy on the climate crisis globally. When interviewed and asked what was an inspiration for her to commit to the school strike and protest outside the Swedish parliament, Thunberg stated, “Well, it started with a couple of youths in the United States refused to go to school because of the school shootings. And then someone I knew said, “What if children did that for the climate?” (Goodman, 2018, para. 5). Similar to youth activism during the civil rights movement as mentioned earlier, one event involving youth being politically involved was able to serve as a catalyst and motivation for more youth involvement. Thunberg was referring to the students who

survived the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting which happened earlier that same year of Thunberg's strike in 2018.

With Greta Thunberg being a visible and representative voice to the climate crisis movement, this allowed for other young to become inspired to also engage themselves within the movement and gave the opportunity for youth to not just be involved, but to also take leadership positions in several instances. Organizations such as Fridays For Future and the Sunrise Movement have structured themselves as to being welcoming spaces for those, especially young people looking to become involved, who are passionate about stopping climate change and who want to create institutional change. Fridays For Future (FFF), which Thunberg herself has also been involved in, has members who are overwhelmingly youth and students who go on strike from school every Friday to participate in a demonstration to demand action be done by the political leaders of their respective country to act upon climate change (Fridays For Future, 2021). Young people in the United States and across the globe, in conjunction with groups like FFF, have acted in big ways in order to get their message out, including by methods of marching, sit ins, and strikes.

In late September 2019, multiple climate related organizations including FFF planned to have worldwide climate strikes for an entire week. In the United States, both the nonprofit organization Future Coalition and the US Youth Climate Strike Coalition were able to work with other smaller and local climate groups to plan out the protests and strikes nationwide during the week of September 20th to the 27th. With the use of digital methods of communication and spreading awareness about the strikes, young people, both already aware and concerned about the climate crisis and also not so informed on the issue, were able to find out how to participate through social media outlets. FFF has thousands of followers on platforms such as Instagram,

while Greta Thunberg herself has over 10 million followers on the same platform, making it easy to distribute a post or call to action to friends or neighbors at any given time. For some young people, even though being able to access information on how to get politically involved was easy, actually becoming engaged has been a dilemma for some. In discussing this very topic, some young people, "...were struggling with despondency and had a sense of futility about alarming accounts of climate change and its devastating consequences... I just felt despair—it was just sadness. I didn't think there was anything anyone could do" (Bandura & Cherry, 2019, 948). Imagining a grim reality due to the impacts of climate change can be alarming, but these young people have regardless been able to overcome their hesitancy and become politically involved like never before.

The turnout was unprecedented as there was over 1000 demonstrations happening across each of the 50 states in the nation and even the capital and Puerto Rico (Barclay & Resnick, 2019). Specifically in New York City, considered by a few during the strikes as the center of the demonstrations and having Greta Thunberg as the keynote speaker at Battery Park, there were a total of 315,000 young people and adults joining in solidarity on September 20th, the first day of the weeklong strikes (Martiskainen et al., 2020). Young people, not just across the nation, but worldwide were out marching and banding together in order to spread awareness and create a call to action for those in power to create meaningful change in order to address and combat the crisis of climate change. Aside from simply attending a protest or demonstration, other young people in the climate movement have veered towards lobbying for legislative change, even getting specific one on one support from very renown politicians in the U.S.

The institutional changes politically active youth have wanted to make with the climate crisis have included persuading countries to abide by the Paris Agreement, as well as to pass

“green legislation” such as the Green New Deal. The Paris Agreement is an agreement between just under 200 United Nations countries, including the United States, to make a strong effort to reduce greenhouse gases around the world, as well as trying to limit the increase in world temperature per year (United Nations, 2015). An organization, as mentioned earlier, which concerns itself with getting youth involved in climate issues and even has multiple youth leaders is the Sunrise Movement. This grassroots movement, founded in 2017, has established yet another precedent in openly recruiting young people to become involved and even lobby for the issues surrounding the climate crisis. The goal of Sunrise is to use all their resources and put their activists and supporters to work in order to help address and stop climate change, as well as create millions of jobs across the country (Sunrise Movement, 2021). Leaders of Sunrise chapters across the U.S. are all youth who are either around or are in their early 20’s and have tallied that about 15,000 youth taking part in direct in person action; while they say that just under 100,000 youth have acted in smaller capacities by sending out emails and contacting their Congressional representatives (Nilsen, 2019).

The political organization has been criticized for its rather blunt and direct approach in addressing or lobbying for specific climate legislation or ideas. At times, political organizations, like Sunrise, tactically choose when and how to act in a significant manner in order to receive mass attention and garner more eyes to the issue they are trying to push. This way, more people who may be interested in participating politically for the first time may have the opportunity to after finding out about a specific movement through press coverage. Leaving the door open and a political movement stretching out its hand to anyone, especially youth, can be the catalyst and reason why someone gets immersed into a political movement or issue; thus, then telling their friends or other day to day peers about the issue and then join the movement as well. The event

that pushed the Sunrise Movement into the national spotlight and encouraged an increase of youth participation in the climate movement happened in November of 2018. Around 200 Sunrise youth activists went into the Cannon Office Building in Washington, D.C. and stood outside of Nancy Pelosi's office demanding for there to be action and legislation to address the climate crisis. Pelosi was about to become House Speaker again after Speaker Paul Ryan's retirement from Congress, so they were fully aware of Pelosi's incoming promotion of power. Despite 51 activists getting arrested for failing to disperse, the rest kept singing and chanting for hours to get their demands across and were visited by Alexandria Ocasio Cortez of New York (who became the youngest member of Congress after being elected a week prior), and had given words of endearment and support (Nilsen, 2019).

What has become the political movement's main push within the last few years has been advocating for "green legislation" and specifically a resolution introduced by New York Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio Cortez and Massachusetts Senator Ed Markey in early 2019, and reintroduced in April of 2021, called the Green New Deal. What this resolution entails is a call, "...to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions through a fair and just transition for all communities and workers; to create millions of good, high-wage jobs and ensure prosperity and economic security for all people of the United States" (Sweeney, 2019, 74). Efforts by groups like Sunrise and youth climate activists like Greta Thunberg were able to bring the climate crisis into the national forefront in the U.S. and made it so some members of Congress would finally address the crisis head on and attempt to act on the issue.

The political issue of climate and the Green New Deal became serious topics of discussion during the 2020 Democratic presidential primaries; as candidates would be pressured to answer whether they supported the resolution or green legislation. Though the Green New

Deal has been met with support from several members of Congress and American youth, it has been met with critics from all political parties and has not received the threshold for it to even pass both chambers of Congress. Though young climate activists have not been successful on this specific legislative front in the Congress, it has been yet another example of young people taking the spotlight of a dire political issue, raising awareness and acting towards the political goal they seek to meet. The voices of politically active youth have been bolstered in the past few years regarding the climate movement in big part by: the efforts of Greta Thunberg in Sweden, proceeding worldwide demonstrations with millions of participants demanding political reform on the issue, and in the United States, the Sunrise Movement's contributions and alliance with some members of Congress to push for legislation which will be a shining light to the many fears young people have about the long term future regarding the safety of the Earth and its inhabitants.

Part II: March for Our Lives: The Resurging Push for Gun Reform

Youth today mobilize themselves on issues that they see as relevant and salient in their lives and those of their neighbors, but some issues requiring political action are more direct and can have an immediate impact on those in local communities. Another political issue aside from climate change that youth consider a paramount and direct issue would be gun violence and the need for gun control. Media coverage of gun violence is seen by many on a daily basis and is often referred to as an epidemic in our country. Though the numbers and data change every year, around 3,000 teens and young people are killed by gunfire and an additional youth 15,000 sustain injuries from being shot per year (Everytown, 2021). Gun violence is something that has not only impacted youth in neighborhoods, but this calamity has existed at a location in which children and young people are supposed to feel safe and well protected. Shootings at schools are

not new and have not been unheard of, as there have been just under 650 instances of gun violence that occurred at schools; these instances have ended with 225 deaths and 440 injuries nationwide since 2013 (Everytown, 2021). Young people have immersed themselves politically into the issue of stopping gun violence by wanting to enact gun control in the past in reaction to high profile and mass media covered school shootings that have occurred for the past few decades.

Several school shootings of the past decade or two which were put into the mainstream and are well known events to a number of people across the nation include but are not limited to: the Columbine massacre of 1999, the Virginia Tech shooting of 2007, the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting of 2012, the Santa Fe High School Shooting of 2018, and the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting of 2018. Speaking from experience, having a plan of escape or possible locations to hide based off of the thought of a possible shooting happening at one's school is not a farfetched idea. The constant news coverage of mass shootings at schools has made it close to impossible for some youth to try and ignore the issue at hand. A student living in fear that one day their school will be the next one to experience the tragedy of a mass shooting is all but common for several young people. In a survey orchestrated by Pew Research Center in the months of March and April of 2018 on American teenagers who were between the ages of 13 and 17 (as seen in Figure 2.0 below), a majority at 57% of all teenagers surveyed were

Majority of U.S. teens worry a shooting could happen at their school

% of teens saying they are ___ about the possibility of a shooting happening at their school

	Very worried	Somewhat worried	NET
All teens	25	32	57
Boys	22	29	51
Girls	28	35	64
White	20	31	51
Black	27	34	60
Hispanic	37	36	73

Note: Whites and blacks include only single-race non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race. Figures may not add to net total due to rounding.
Source: Survey of U.S. teens ages 13 to 17 conducted March 7-April 10, 2018.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Note. "A majority of U.S. teens fear a shooting could happen at their school, and most parents share their concern." Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (April 18, 2018) <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/18/a-majority-of-u-s-teens-fear-a-shooting-could-happen-at-their-school-and-most-parents-share-their-concern/>

Figure 2.0

worried about the possibility that a mass shooting could occur at their school (Pew Research, 2018). The survey was conducted just one month after the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, which gained national coverage for not just its tragic outcome of 17 deaths and 17 injuries, but also because of the sturdiness of the student survivors who made sure to tell their experiences and express their anger and feelings of vex towards the inaction on gun control.

Immediately after the February 14th, 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida occurred, people across the country expressed their sorrow and sent thoughts and prayers to those affected from the shooting. Posting on social media or even expressing one's self in person by using the phrase "thoughts and prayers" has become a common occurrence when tragedy strikes in American society. Many of the Parkland students who had just survived a mass shooting were not so eager to be polite or accept any of these good thoughts coming from random strangers. All some of the students had on their mind was a sense to action and the feeling that enough was enough in regard to constant gun violence, especially at schools. Parkland students like David Hogg and Emma Gonzales decided to make sure they expressed their thoughts and truths about the shooting, doing the best they could to be the ones in control of the narrative that was going to be pushed out by television and mainstream media stations (Bent, 2019). People overlooking and following the reaction and response to the Parkland shooting understood that this event was not going to be just another shooting and that these student survivors were going to create a big impact.

The student survivors immediately started to have conversations and meetings with each other to try and strategize their next steps of action. Not only were they successful in recruiting other Parkland students to stand with each other for gun reform, but they were about to get the opportunity they needed to engage perhaps thousands of more youth and encourage them to

become involved in this important political issue. These politically active survivors acted just within a few days of the shooting to try and promote and demand gun reform as they decided to go to Florida's capital of Tallahassee to lobby to state representatives and other elected officials (Witt, 2019). A week after the shooting occurred, a town hall was scheduled and hosted by CNN with Florida Senator Marco Rubio, as well as many Parkland survivors and concerned members of the community. The fiery, tension-filled and televised CNN town hall had viewership of 2.9 million people, which served as another open door of opportunity for young people across the nation to feel the need to become politically involved and join the efforts of the Parkland students (Adalian, 2018). These youth from Parkland had expressed their feelings and demands for gun control, even to politicians on the national stage as they did with Senator Rubio, but were now about to show how much momentum their efforts through mainstream television and social media had garnered.

The Parkland survivors who were politically active and lobbied for gun reform created an event and movement called March for Our Lives (MFOL). The march was planned and held on March 24th, 2018 in Washington D.C. to a turnout of up to 800,000 people, though there were hundreds of other MFOL demonstrations that occurred across the country and internationally which garnered a few hundred thousand more people (Bent, 2019). Demanding action on gun reform and getting politicians to pass smart legislation was perhaps the biggest reason for the march. The extraordinary youth presence, participation and efforts of outreach by the Parkland survivors was undeniable as in just a few weeks, they were able to motivate hundreds of thousands of young people to political action and join the global marches. The efforts of those who planned and participated in the MFOL demonstrations would not stop there; as smaller gun reform and youth led movements continued to lobby not just their state politicians, but also

politicians at the federal level. The activism had turned into true action and change, as by late 2019, a whole year and a half after the Parkland shooting, 137-gun safety bills had been passed in states all across the country (Giffords, 2019). In addition, youth who chose to become politically involved in the issue of gun violence were able to pressure the state of national politics, as one of the demands of the Parkland survivors was to ban bump stocks. An additional accessory on a weapon, a bump stock is used to help ammunition cartridges fire in a faster succession, imitating a fully automatic weapon (Holpuch, 2018). The Department of Justice under President Trump in late 2018 announced a complete ban of bump stocks in the United States, giving a big victory to the youth who lobbied for the change.

These young shooting survivors from Parkland were able to not only inspire a new generation to become politically involved in the prime political issue of gun violence and reform, but were also able to convince and push politicians to create legislative change. Cameron Kasky, a Parkland shooting survivor and co-founder of MFOL has suggested that, “Hopeful politics reflect youth-activists’ willingness to reimagine and act upon their visions of a different future...the answer to the gun violence stalemate is... youth political leadership” (Bent, 2019, 60). What may have inspired some youth in this political movement could be their own visions of what a world would be like without gun violence in schools, or in general. By doing this, youth will be able to inspire others to join the same political issue or movement and can even lead to youth led organizations or efforts to create true and positive change. The fight for gun control and reform is still ongoing, as groups like March for Our Lives still have some demands that have yet to be met on a national scale. Though this may be the case, the demonstrations held by the Parkland shooting survivors and the events that followed were able to cause a big impact

on American society; both by finding success though passed legislation and causing a resurgence of interest and participation among politically interested youth on the issue of gun reform.

Part III: Youth in Elections and Voter Turnout Since 2008

Among the several freedoms and privileges that adults and youth who are 18 and older have as American citizens, having the right to vote and politically participate in our nation's democracy is perhaps one of the most vital rights to have. Voting can be considered by some to be one of the fastest and easiest ways to become politically active, as someone's vote can have ramifications that impact not just the country on a federal level, but also impacting them locally at home. Having the right and privilege to vote is something that groups who are non-white and not men have had to fight tirelessly for previous generations. Though this is the case, Americans including young people ages 18 through 29, have often taken the freedom they have and ancestors had to fight towards for granted. Though voting rates have constantly fluctuated for each age group throughout the past decades; one fact has stayed the same in that youth including those ages 18 through 29 have the lowest percentage of voting participation. The average voter

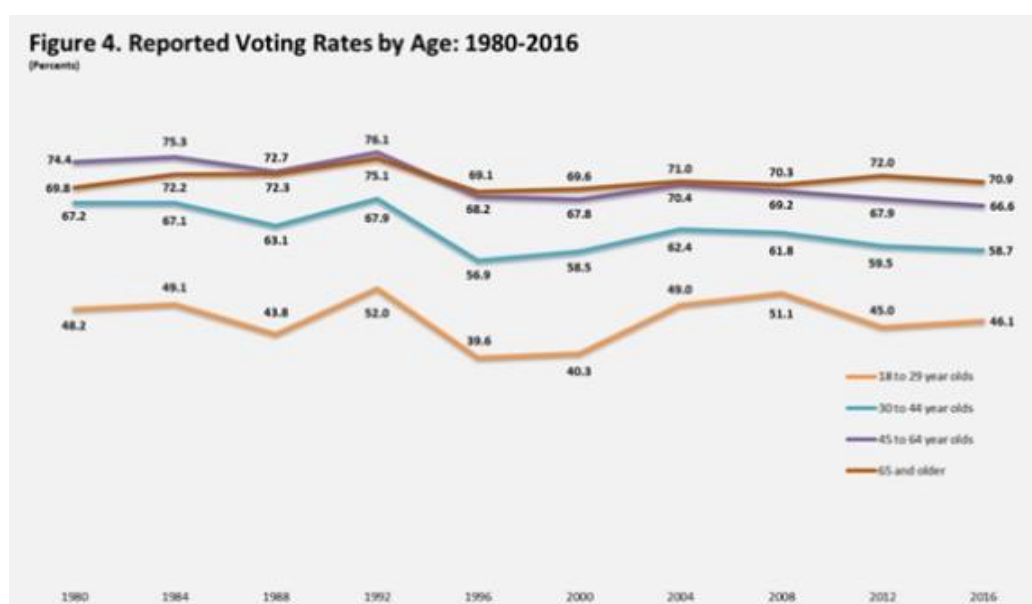


Figure 3.0

Note. File, T. (2017). Voting in America: A look at the 2016 presidential election.

https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2017/05/voting_in_america.html

turnout for youth from 1980 through 2016 has been about 46% while the voter participation of youth's older voting cohorts ranged from almost 60% to just over 70% turnout specifically for those ages 65 and older, as seen in Figure 3.0 above (File, 2017). For some youth and young adults who range from ages 18 through 29, there have been noted obstacles in the way which may account for part of the lack of grand youth voting participation. Of these obstacles, some may include: lack of motivation from not maintaining a previous habit of voting, restrictions in getting to a polling place, voter ID laws, and even believing that attending demonstrations may be the best way for them to be politically active or use their voice (Symonds, 2020).

Another instance of a roadblock to become politically engaged by voting would be that a young person is not informed the best they can be on a specific issue or candidate on the ballot. Voting is talked about in high regard every time a Presidential, other federal, or local elections are going to take place. Some young people of voting age may not be aware that getting information on who or what will be on the ballot when voting is available to them on several online websites. Websites such as Vote411.org, Ballotpedia.org and Vote.org are resources widely available to anyone with an internet connection in which the user can input their address and a sample ballot with issues and candidates on the real ballot will be displayed. Some youth have the advantage of having politically active and involved parents or households which makes it easier for them to immerse themselves into voting; while others of voting age who are less privileged have shown to be less politically involved (Fisher, 2012).

Though youth political participation in voting has more or less stayed the same over the past few decades in regard to the percentage of those who vote, the 2008 presidential election became a turning point in youth political participation in voting. The 2008 presidential election included the Democratic candidate, Senator Barack Obama, and the Republican candidate,

Senator John McCain. This was an especially historic election, as Senator Barack Obama would become the first Black president of the United States if he were to win against Senator McCain. A lot of Americans, including young people who were of voting age and under, were overwhelmed and fatigued by the Bush era under President George W. Bush. This era included the issues of the Great Recession and the Iraq War following the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks across America. Many were ready for a fresh start and therefore supported Senator Obama as they saw his candidacy as a fresh start for the nation.

Americans under 30 years old had increased their time in volunteering for a political campaign by 20% in comparison to the 2000 election and the efforts of young people included: phone banking, knocking on as many doors as they could in their neighborhood and organizing several different house meetings (Fisher, 2012). The way each campaign approached youth who were possibly interested in becoming politically involved mattered. Something as seemingly minimal as the accessibility and impression of a candidate's website can mean all the difference with youth who, during this time, were paying close attention to matters happening online. With the Obama campaign, a youth fellowship program was made available during the summer of 2008, structural leadership positions were available to youth, training was given to 3000 youth organizers, and an online virtual reward system was in place at my.barackobama.com for those who phone banked, fundraised, or did anything else to boost the campaign (Fisher, 2012). All these opportunities that were available for young people to participate in motivated them and other peers to also become involved in this political campaign. The November general election came and went, and Barack Obama was officially president-elect on November 4th, 2008, in part due to the efforts of politically active young people.

Youth involvement in the political voting process continued to trend as the state of American society and politics became more polarized, demanding an unprecedented response in political activism. As Barack Obama's presidency was reaching the end of its second term in 2016, the American people had chosen former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (a Democrat) and reality television star and businessman Donald Trump (a Republican) as the two nominees for the presidency from both of their respective political parties. Though some Americans considered both Clinton and Trump as undesirable and unlikeable candidates as they both had a national unfavorable rating of over 50% on the week of the election, many youth saw the possibility of a Donald Trump presidency as a nightmare (Saad, 2016).

On the campaign trail, Trump seemed to be carefree and oftentimes hostile, and he would spew racist, sexist, and xenophobic rhetoric during his many speeches and rallies which held thousands of his supporters each time. Many young people and youth led political groups took it upon themselves to support and advocate for the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, as they saw her presidency as one which would avoid the toxic rhetoric that was spewed from Trump. Close to two thirds of youth of voting age were against the idea of supporting Trump as president, and so they casted their ballot for Clinton instead (CIRCLE, 2016). On the night of the election in 2016, it had seemed as if the efforts of activists and politically engaged youth would pay off in a Clinton victory, but they were shocked and gravely disappointed with the news of Trump's victory. Regardless of the outcome being outside of their favor, young voters were nonetheless able to make strides and efforts to increase more youth political participation. Close to 24 million young people of voting age, with about 13 million voting for Clinton and 9 million voting for Trump, were able to cast their ballot and had a turnout of just under 50% (CIRCLE, 2016).

In response to Donald Trump's electoral victory, many students and other youth leaders in across the nation had planned and took part in peaceful demonstrations and walk outs from schools in the thousands to protest the president-elect. Trump's unforeseen and upset victory had sparked yet another instance where young people across the country felt a sense of activation and drive to step up to participate politically and effectively help create change for the betterment of their country. Groups such as the Alliance for Youth Action and Rock the Vote, among other youth led political groups in the U.S., were able to mobilize and effectively get more young people involved in the political process. By the 2018 midterm elections, youth voters were eager to show how much momentum they had built up over the past few years in relation to voting and political engagement. Youth voters from ages 18 to 29 had increased their turnout in this midterm election by 79% to almost 37% in comparison to the 2014 midterm elections, in which only 20% of eligible youth had voted (Frazin, 2019). This massive increase of youth voter turnout, specifically in a midterm election, was not an anomaly; politically engaged youth would continue to boost their efforts even more for the incoming 2020 presidential election.

Since the 2016 presidential election and into the 2020 presidential election, several events and issues had arisen which increased the tensions of Americans and motivated youth to act with those events that occurred in mind. These issues and notable events included: the Parkland High School shooting, the resurgence of the climate movement, more unarmed Black Americans being shot and killed by police, and the COVID-19 pandemic. President Donald Trump was now on the ballot again running for re-election; while former Vice President Joe Biden stepped up to meet the moment and spread a message of unity and healing during his campaign. Similar to the 2016 election, youth were still not satisfied with either candidate though support for Biden and favorability was higher than it was for Clinton in 2016. In the weeks leading up to the general

election, in addition to efforts by youth-led political groups nationwide, many high-profile celebrities that have big youth including YouTube star David Dobrik had shared or promoted links for people to register to vote ahead of the election. Dobrik worked together with HeadCount.org to run a giveaway of three Tesla electric cars in which a person may be eligible to win one of the cars if they proved that they were registered to vote, or to register using Dobrik's link (Brown, 2020). In just over 24 hours after Dobrik had posted the link to get youth registered to vote, over 100,000 people had registered to vote, making the registration effort one of the biggest in history (Brown, 2020). After a few days of waiting for states to count all of their ballots, many having an influx of absentee ballots cast by people not wanting to vote in person due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Joe Biden was declared the winner. The efforts of liberal voters including youth had paid off, and the numbers show a significant improvement in turnout by youth. By mid-November of 2020, the American people were able to see that youth voters aged 18 to 29 had a turnout that reached around 55%; which was a noteworthy improvement from the just under 50% turnout from the 2016 presidential election (CIRCLE, 2020).

Young voters had made it clear that they are a force to be reckoned with and their efforts to be involved in the political process would not die down. Discussing young people's efforts in being politically active by voting, Generation Progress executive director Brent Cohen has said, "What was proven in 2018, and again in 2020, is that millennials and Gen-Z are voting generations...we will hold elected officials accountable...we were not building to an election; we're building through an election" (Stauffer, 2020, para. 15). From youth who were eligible to vote and to those who are not, they were able to participate in phone banking, local door to door canvassing, and digital outreach to advance their efforts in encouraging people to vote. Those who were not eligible due to age or other factors still have had a place within political organizing

in elections. This generation of young soon to be voters will be the ones to continue the strides and efforts of politically engaged youth and movements to increase voter turnout in future elections, and also boost youth political participation among their peers.

Part IV: Youth and Black Lives Matter

An issue that transcends past this generation into 400 years in the past is racism and brutality that Black people in this country have faced. Just over 400 years ago, 1619 was the year in which the first enslaved Africans were brought into the colony of Virginia. Since then, Black people have dealt with generations of hatred, cruelty and more recent in American history on an institutional and systemic level, racial segregation and overall racism. Though there have been moments and legislation of progress in the betterment of Black lives, the issues of police brutality and racism are painful obstacles that the Black community still deals with to this day. Police brutality against Black people has been a racist systemic issue that has occurred for generations and has been in the national spotlight at several times in recent history. What has helped advance and expand the efforts of civil rights organizations and youth activists in the past few years has been the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement (also known as BLM). Black Lives Matter was a term first coined by Alicia Garza, an activist from California, who wrote the phrase and BLM hashtag on a post to Facebook in 2013. Garza's post said the

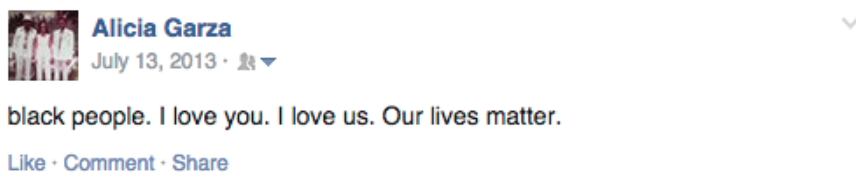


Figure 4.0

Note. Garza, A. (2013). Alicia Garza's Facebook post.
<https://scalar.usc.edu/works/blacklivesmatter/media/alicia-garzas-facebook-post>

following, "...stop saying we are not surprised. That's a damn shame in itself. I continue to be surprised at how little Black lives matter. And I will continue that. Stop giving up on black life. Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter"; the latter part of her post can be seen in Figure 4.0 above (Garza, 2013). The post was written by Garza in reaction to the acquittal of George Zimmerman; a man who shot and killed a 17-year-old unarmed Black student named Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida after suspecting him of acting suspicious the night of February 26th, 2012. Being a part of the neighborhood watch within the gated community he lived in; Zimmerman ignored the 911 dispatcher he spoke on the phone with and pursued Martin until an altercation between the two occurred and got physical, and Zimmerman fired a single fatal shot into 17-year-old Martin. The story reached the national and worldwide spotlight, with the feelings of both sorrow and outrage being expressed all over the world. After Zimmerman was acquitted, activists in the U.S. of all ages marched in multiple cities and demonstrations were held in support of Martin and Black lives.

Black Lives Matter is not just a phrase, movement, or private organization; it has transformed into a mentality to do whatever one can to help the Black community seek justice and prosperity on several different issues. The Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation was founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi and has since jolted young people to become politically active in tackling state-sanctioned violence, systemic racism, and extreme unemployment of young Black people (Honwana, 2019). In addition, the prosperity of the Black community that BLM advocates for, especially important in Black youth, includes the creation of more opportunities for a decent education and ending the mass incarceration of Black and other people of color (Honwana, 2019). The phrase and hashtag of BLM did not reach viral success and use until the killing of an 18-year-old named Michael Brown by police officer

Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9th, 2014. After each killing of an unarmed Black person which garnered national attention through mainstream news media, protests and other demonstrations would continue not just nationally, but worldwide as well.

Young people have been able to immerse themselves into the BLM movement by: sharing links to different social justice organizations in need of donations, physically participating in protests, holding sit-ins and die-ins, lobbying politicians for legislative change and even strategizing next steps while on school grounds. The BLM movement has also gained momentum within young students in middle schools, high schools, and colleges. Issues that black youth face on school campuses are often overlooked and underserved when called to attention by students to faculty or school leadership. Specifically, some youth have become politically involved to enhance the lives of other Black youth by helping to increase the number of black students applying and enrolling into college (Campbell, 2018). Though racial segregation at schools has been outlawed since the *Brown v Board* Supreme Court decision in 1954; there are several elements which play into the systemic racism that still exists in the school process today.

Young black BLM student activists have taken upon themselves to try and create several alliances with numerous students to combat and face elements of racism and micro-aggressions head on in the school system (Campbell, 2018). Though supporters of BLM are not restricted by race or ethnic background, the movement does include many young people and students of color. These youth are able to comprehend the complex issues that the Black community faces, as many of these youth are Black themselves and understand several issues and roadblocks facing the Black community from first-hand experience. In a study done in 2016 surveying almost 550 Black and Latinx students from multiple colleges and universities across the United States, it

found that just over 65% of Black students surveyed were involved both online and in person in the BLM movement while almost 30% of Latinx students were involved in the same way (Durkee et al., 2016). With many BLM demonstrations consisting of marches and protests, youth have been able to show up after school or even participate in a walk-out from school to march for social justice. In fact, out of all age groups who have taken part in marches and protest demonstrations, young people who were under 35 were responsible for the biggest share of those who attended (Buchanan et al., 2020).

As the years have progressed, tense race relations, systemic racism and police brutality in the Black community has not seemed to slow down, thus youth and other activists have continued demonstrations and action to support Black people. In addition to the killing of Michael Brown and other unarmed Black people such as Eric Garner and Breonna Taylor by the hands of police, one recent incident has changed everything and created yet another resurgence of youth political engagement. The killing of George Perry Floyd Jr. on May 25th, 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota caused what felt like an entirely new uproar which polarized and shocked people like never before not just in America, but worldwide. As Floyd was being arrested for allegedly using a fake \$20 bill at a convenience store Derek Chauvin, a white police officer, used his knee to kneel on Floyd's neck for over 9 minutes and later died at a local hospital. This horrific event was captured all on cell phone video; the footage went viral as virtually every major news station and network covered and played the graphic video for viewers to watch. "Crystalizing" and once again resurfacing the vital issue of police brutality on the national stage, protests immediately started across the nation, with young people mobilizing as fast as they could to organize and participate in demonstrations, both in big cities and locally, to demand justice and emphasizing that Black lives matter (Stone, 2021). Despite the ongoing

COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on large groups gathering nationwide, these protests (sometimes referred to as the George Floyd protests) dominated the Summer of 2020 and further emphasized the principals of Black Lives Matter like no other time before. Despite criticism and claims coming from conservative and right-wing political pundits that the protests turned into riots, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (also known as ACLED), has gathered data showing that just over 93% of these protests over the Summer of 2020 have in fact been peaceful (ACLED 2021).

The Black Lives Matter movement and mindset is one that young people all across the United State and globally have adapted with in their daily life. From physically participating in protests or lobbying demonstrations, to digital activism by spreading important information and pro-Black resources, youth have continued to stand in solidarity and action with the BLM movement and their Black neighbors. From first-hand experience by attending BLM protests during the Summer of 2020, the atmosphere exerted by participants of these protests was a sense of solidarity, teamwork, and hope. In addition to showing out to demonstrations such as protests to lobby for legislative and local change in policing and treatment of Black people, some youth have also shown up just to feel a sense of hope again. In a time where many of them and their peers are in pain due to what is happening in the Black community across America, they still decide to participate and be a voice for the voiceless especially in the middle of global pandemic. Though sharing some parallels with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 60's through using similar protest tactics and fighting for similar reasons, Black Lives Matter is an entirely new and vibrant movement of its own. To distinguish BLM from previous efforts to advance the prosperity of the Black community, some have said that BLM is, "...not your grandfather's civil

rights movement”; it has turned into a massive powerhouse of political action which welcomes youth and has already changed the lives of many struggling Black Americans (Stone, 2021).

Chapter IV: Success in Youth Political Involvement: What is it & Success Yet to Come

It is no secret by this point that young people across the country and worldwide have caused large impacts and have left their mark on several political issues and movements by engaging themselves and their peers to lobby and stand for justice. As discussed previously, youth have been able to immerse themselves into several resurging political issues and movements such as the climate crisis, gun reform, elections, and Black Lives Matter with each group having some of their demands and goals being met and reached. Some groups and movements have different types of goals and endgames they would like to accomplish and each have their own definitions of success.

Success in political issues and movements is never a one size fits all; the measure of success in these political movements is subjective and can be determined by a specific group leading the way on an issue, or have different people involved in the same movement come up with their own determinations of success. Several examples of a success can be: recruiting a certain number of youth to a movement within a certain deadline, raising enough money while fundraising for a specific initiative, getting a high-profile or celebrity endorsement of one's issue or movement, or getting the mass attention of mainstream media to spread awareness to millions on the specific political issue or movement you are involved in. With that being said, a common measure of success present in many political movements is true legislative change or reform. It is not so simple or easy to get laws surrounding important or controversial political issues or movements introduced or changed, let alone passed. If efforts in demanding and finally getting politicians and other lawmakers to create legislative change was simple, there would be no institutional issues in our country as everything would be solved.

Youth engaged in the political process in issues and movements have seen several successes as a result of their own efforts. When it relates to the activism itself that young people participate in, their efforts can range from being more of a digitally focused activist or physically present activist at in person demonstrations. Both very different forms of youth activism, each have their unique benefits to activism as a whole and specifically the movement they are a part of. The activists who show up to demonstrations with their peers and fellow community members are able to build upon an in-person coalition that most likely will be covered by news media; thus, showing the strength in numbers of a movement. Those activists who decide to stay home and engage themselves through social media and spreading awareness on the movement or issue of their choice, or even participate in other activities such as phone banking use a more physically indirect, but just as impactful and useful way to get their message across. Especially in the COVID-19 pandemic which has disrupted the normalcy of American society and restricted physical gatherings since March of 2020, success from digital activism has seen the spotlight; though politically involved and passionate youth had gone to physical in person protests and demonstrations, specifically concerning the Black Lives Matter and George Floyd protests. These specific routes of action all have led to several successes in each of the politically engaged youth's respective movements.

Several legislative and non-legislative successes in different political movements or issues that youth have engaged in that has been discussed include: the Civil Rights Act of 1964 signed by President Johnson which prohibited racial segregation in a public place, the Green New Deal resolution (highly supported by the Sunrise Movement and by many overall in the climate movement) being introduced in 2019 and reintroduced in April of 2021, 137 gun safety laws being passed nationwide as of 2019 in response to the Stoneman Douglass High School

shooting of 2018, and more recently has been Breonna's Law and the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act. Breonna's Law is a law named after Breonna Taylor, a black woman who was shot and killed by police last year in Kentucky as she slept after they had executed a no-knock warrant at her place of residence. Breonna's Law has been adopted and passed as law in several cities and some states across the country with the purpose being to either severely limit or ban the use of no-knock warrants by police departments (Diavolo, 2020). The George Floyd Justice in Policing Act was originally introduced in June of 2020, two weeks after the police killing of George Floyd, by Representative Karen Bass of California's 37th district in response to Floyd's killing and rising unrest in the country. What the bill seeks to do is to address policies and issues in policing which include accountability and discriminatory practices; mainly lowering the standard to more easily convict an officer of misconduct, limit qualified immunity, and gives more power to the Department of Justice in cases to subpoena individual police departments (Congress 2020). The bill passed in the House of Representatives during the previous Congress and the current 117th Congress on March 3rd of 2021. Though not becoming law yet, youth activists have put the pressure on politicians across the country to support and pass this bill which would be a huge success for the Black Lives Matter movement.

The feeling of success and accomplishment is one of encouragement and assurance that the actions taken by a specific person or group were effective in creating significant change. Youth being politically engaged in a respective movement or issue means that they will also be part of any successes that the movement or issue reach. Success being a reflection of strong efforts made by young people can be encouraging for them to continue to be politically active in the future. Specifically, several studies have been done in previous decades that suggest being politically engaged as an adolescent and younger age has a long-term impact on the same

person's political participation as they grow into an adult (Terriquez, 2015). At any age, an accomplished success can definitely be encouraging and inspiring enough to want to continue doing whatever task you have been doing to reach even higher levels of success. Around 71% of politically engaged youth who became adults in the study mentioned volunteered politically on adulthood and also were able to take on specific responsibilities with confidence such as organization of a movement, continue to criticize unjust laws, and go against the status quo, even on an institutional level (Terriquez, 2015).

Overall, success is subjective when relating to youth in political participation, but is often times measured through responses such as introduction and passing of legislation. Multiple numbers of political groups and movements have met success in their respective issues throughout decades of hard-fought effort by young people. Though successes have been reached for multiple political movements, the only way each group or movement meets more success is the continued efforts and push by youth and those involved in the movements. Momentum has to continue being built and pressure must be placed on politicians and lawmakers as a whole to demand further change to reach other goals and successes. Successes youth experience while in a political movement may drive them to continue to be involved as adults and step up to take on groundbreaking new roles. The fight for more successes in youth involved and led political movements will never stop and will continue going for as much continued success and prosperity they can reach.

Conclusion

To conclude, several notable events have happened in American society within the past 15 years or so which created national action and thus has caused a resurgence in youth engagement in political issues and movements. American youth for multiple generations have faced unprecedented conflicts or barriers which cannot be solved or fixed by one single person. Being surrounded by critical and pressing issues that have made their way into the daily life of our society, these issues have been made it so facing them at some point is unavoidable.

Multiple scholars have even gone to conduct studies and state that youth themselves are a paramount reason for the increase and boost of political and social movements in the past five decades, and that young people have established a new “landscape” when it comes to American activism (Earl et al., 2017). With the encouragement by their student peers, friends, or even family with ties to political or social movements and activism, young people have been able to comfortably immerse themselves into the political spectrum. These youth may go about and choose a specific or a select number of issues to focus on; joining the movements of these issues may constitute different kinds of participation from each respective youth. Political engagement can range from; mass sharing important information on a number of political issues, attending a protest or in person demonstration, organizing and giving guidance to a movement which can inspire others, or even lobbying public officials and other lawmaking politicians to effectively support and create effective legislative and institutional change.

The resurgence of youth political participation has been emphasized and boosted by several cardinal issues that young people care about deeply including the existential threat of climate change and the climate crisis, gun violence (especially in schools) and the need for smart gun control and reform, voter participation in presidential and midterm elections, and the

constant killings of unarmed Black people by police officers. Among other issues that young people believe need reform such as education, immigration and criminal justice, politically active youth have made it their priority to input constant effort into movements and issues that they are most passionate about to keep building up momentum. This constant momentum and drive to boost up any respective issue or movement happens so they can become one step closer to a significant form of success. Though different political issues and movements desire different kinds of successes, a common form of success which continues to be sought for in the majority of those issues and movements includes effectively passing legislation. By changing laws and legal norms in the country regarding specific topics or issues, goals can start to be met and tensions may continue to ease as specific movements and organizations may be having their demands met.

In order to continue seeing resurgences and successes by youth in political issues and movements, young people must have access to the tools they need in order to prosper to the best that they can. Aside from physical tools, a main tool that they must use would be assistance from and solidarity with adults. Though some youth have felt elements of “adultism” as mentioned previously, a way in which they can overcome this feeling and accompanying resentment towards some adults based on past negative experiences can be for adults to step along side with them and allow themselves to become a role model. By serving as a mentor or a coach-like figure to politically active youth in the same movement, young people may be a step closer to reaching or realizing their maximum potential and challenge themselves to learn from said adult mentor (YSOC & Zimmerman, 2007). Speaking from experience, working as a youth with others who are much older than you may be can be intimidating and confusing at first. But if given the opportunity to connect and learn from each other, both will be able to continue to grow the issue

at hand alongside each other, regardless of a specific political issue or movement. The concept of guided participation, defined as increased and distinct interaction between politically involved youth and young adults, can also elevate and lift up youth who decide to become politically engaged in a specific movement or issue (Kirshner & Geil, 2010). Some other lessons that adults can learn so that they can play a role within the same political movement or issue as youth in the best way possible are: to understand that the issues of younger people are distinct and youth often times have their own thoughts on solving them, realize that some youth have been politically engaged for a longer time than they have and are aware of the complexities that exist in some issues, and also that youth can also think of inventive and new ideas that may be able to help a specific situation and enhance one's odds of political and legislative success (Earl, 2018).

Politically engaged youth in the past 15 years have proven that they have been a sturdy force to be reckoned with and have shown that they are serious about activism and eager to reach as many forms of success possible. The resurgence in youth political participation of the past 15 years has been similar to previous resurgences in activism in the past; as momentous and historic moments such as the murder of Emmett Till and Greensboro Four had activated a sense and call to action for many youth during the 1950's and 60's. As time within our American society continues on, there is no doubt that there will be other tragic or alarming events that happen which will cause significant increases and interest in political participation and activism among young people. Though this may be the case, it is up to young people and their allies to continue the fight in their respective issues and movements they are passionate for in order to create substantial change and a closer to prosperous future for generations to come.

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