

# Duke University's Dr. Sunshine Hillygus on "Making Young Voters"



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Young voters are a simultaneously loyal and elusive group for Democrats. While they vote overwhelmingly for Democrats, their turnout is unreliable. In 2016, 80% of young people said they intended to vote. But in the end, youth voter turnout was only 43%. Young voters' importance to the Democratic Party coalition means that their turnout in elections gets a lot of media airtime and attention in campaigns. People theorize about what would make young people turn out to vote in any given election: ambitious policy ideas, flashy "get out the vote" campaigns, specific voting laws.

In their new book, "[Making Young Voters](#)," Professors Sunshine Hillygus and John Holbein dive into what it really takes to increase youth turnout. They challenge conventional wisdom about young voters, like the assumption that young people do not vote due to apathy. And they dive into the policies that really do make it easier to vote.

What follows is an interview with Dr. Sunshine Hillygus on this groundbreaking new research on young voters, including insights on potential new voter laws and civics curriculum that could *actually* increase youth turnout. This is part of a Third Way interview series with academics doing important new research that can help us better understand this political moment and bring relevant academic work into the political and policy sphere.

## **Before jumping into specific research, can tell us a little bit about yourself and your academic focus?**

I'm professor of political science and public policy at Duke University. And I also direct the initiative on survey methodology here. Over the course of my career, I've primarily focused on questions of public opinion and political behavior in the U.S. My current book *Making Young Voters* is focused on figuring out voter turnout as the outcome of interest and in particular, trying to understand why young people are voting at such low rates relative to older people and what we can potentially do about it.

## **In your mind, what was missing in the research and the academic literature when it comes to young voters? What were you trying to better understand through this research?**

My co-author John [Holbein] and I initially set out to see if preregistration laws—which allow those as young as 16 to complete their voter registration forms—might be effective at increasing youth turnout. We not only found that it was, but we found that it was especially effective when coupled with in-school efforts to increase voter registration. And it just started a process of us trying to figure out this puzzle of why it is that young people were voting at such low rates.

The first thing that we take on in the book is this assumption that the reason that young people are not participating at higher rates is because they're not politically interested, they're not motivated. That they're more concerned with taking selfies than with having an impact on politics. And that just doesn't match up to the empirical evidence, across a variety of different measures.

Young people, the vast majority of young people, when asked before the elections, say that they are interested in the election. They care who's going to win. And in fact, they say that they intend to vote. But then they don't. What we have focused on in this book is that part of the puzzle, the fact that so many young people have all of the civic attitudes, the precursors to participation, but they are not following through on those attitudes.

So, the problem is entirely different than what activists and party leaders had previously thought. The thinking was, “let's just convince young people that they just need to care and that they need to be interested in politics,” but the reality is they are already interested and that is not enough. And so, we set out to understand why that's not enough.

**I'm interested in the historical aspect here. Young people have always voted at lower rates than older people, but it looks like they did have somewhat of a decline in the past 50 years. Is there something about this political moment that's distinct and causing young people to vote less?**

Well, the gap between 18- to 29-year-olds and those that are 60 plus is enormous. In midterm and some local elections, older people are voting at twice the rate of young people. But the gap has actually been relatively stable over time. And what we really [need to] focus on is the fact that there are both internal and external barriers to participation, that for new voters in particular, make it hard to follow through on the intention to participate.

I think one of the main kind of takeaways of the book is about misplaced effort. Currently, so much of the work to increase turnout comes during campaigns, when organizations invest money in mobilizing young voters through get-out-the-vote efforts. One of our key messages is that the hard work should happen between elections through changing electoral laws and civic education.

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It comes from changing the policies that affect who when and how people can turn out. And of course, some state legislatures know this. That's why they are passing all of these laws in states to make voting more difficult, it's because those laws are going to make it so much more difficult for young people, for new voters who don't have experience, who have all kinds of reasons that it is more complicated to follow through on their intentions to vote.

**Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Some people say that when there are these new voter suppression laws, that maybe it's just going to motivate people extra to come out and vote, but it sounds like what you're saying is that that's definitely not the case with young voters. I'm really interested in the psychological aspect of how this is affecting young voters and especially young voters of color. Can you talk a little about that?**

There is some evidence that there can be a backlash or mobilizing effect of voting restrictions. But that backlash is likely short-lived. And the question is, how does it compare against the impact of making it more difficult to vote? What we find is that young people are the ones that are more likely to encounter barriers, and they're more likely to make mistakes in their registration or on their mail-in ballot. And so, there's all of these things that make it more likely that if you put up a new barrier, that it will end up with young people being less likely to participate. In terms of the psychology, one of the things that came out of our analysis that we think needs a lot more attention is this real gap between young and older people in terms of what they think it takes to be qualified to vote.

In our interviews with young people, there was this real sense that, "I want to vote. I think it's important to vote. And I intended to do more research, but I don't want to be a party voter. I don't want to show up and be uninformed. And so, I stayed home." They have a sense that everyone else out there is more informed than they are. I think that this is a reflection of two different things. One is the way that we are teaching civics. It's all about knowledge, memorizing facts and figures about politics. It is not about things that are actually relevant to participating in politics. If the goal of civics is to increase voter turnout, it's not working. And we show that, empirically, that a focus on political knowledge as the goal of citizenship teaches students about learning rather than doing. This creates this misperception of what it takes to be a good voter. I think young people make an assumption that other people know more. It's perhaps partly a reflection of the fact that we have such polarized politics right now, where they don't want to just vote straight ticket for a party.

But you could spend every minute of every day doing research about the candidates and the issues, and there would still be more to learn because we're in such a hyper-information environment. And the question is how much is enough? I think old people know you're not necessarily going to be informed about the dog catcher race or the city council race, or every single race that's on the ballot. I think that young people don't realize that it's okay to use heuristics. It's okay to use the information that you just carry around with you to make a choice between Democrats and Republicans, and you don't need to know the name and policy positions of every candidate on the ballot.

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**That's interesting. That makes me think about how a lot of young people seem like they're engaged in politics and might project that they are very informed. Maybe they**

## **have posted on social media about politics or maybe have been to a protest. Are these people turning out to vote? Or are there people who seem like they might be outwardly engaged, but might not get to a polling place or return their absentee ballot on Election Day?**

One thing to keep in mind is that participating in a protest and posting about politics online have different barriers to entry than voting. Consider what it takes to post about your political views online versus registering to vote 30 days in advance in a state like Texas, where you can't even register online. Then you show up to vote and you can't use your college ID to vote. You can use your gun card, but not your college ID. There's just so many more barriers to participation for voting compared to other forms of political expression and behavior.

Now, what we do know is that that person who says “I'm not interested in politics and I'm not going to vote,” they for sure aren't going to vote. But what we are emphasizing in this book is that we can have so much more bang for the buck in terms of our investment, if we can figure out how to help those who are interested and do care, which is the vast majority of young people, get over the hurdles to participate.

**“[There] is this real gap between young and older people in terms of what they think it takes to be qualified to vote.”**



**So, I have a question on ideology of young people. I think young people are typically defined in politics as just very progressive on a right-left spectrum and their views are very much simplified the way that older people might not be simplified in media narratives. And of course, young people are diverse ideologically, just like everyone else. What are some things that people get wrong about the young people ideologically and the things that they care about?**

There is this assumption from policymakers and activists that if we can reduce the barriers to participation for young people, that it will inherently and always benefit Democrats. Now that might be true in this moment. But that is not always true. In some of the research that we've done, we found evidence that although young Democrats are more likely to have used preregistration, the young Republicans who preregistered were actually more likely to turn out to vote. And so,

preregistration actually closed the gap in the Democratic advantage in the state of Florida. In North Carolina, pre-registration was predominantly used by those who were unaffiliated.

**So, here at Third Way, we are on the center-left. We try to balance policies that are really transformative with what we think is attainable. And sometimes it seems like these attitudes butt up against how a lot of young people think about political change. The 18 to 29 age group is the only age group where Bernie Sanders beat out Joe Biden in the 2020 primary. And Hillary Clinton faced the same challenge. So why do you think that candidates who are further left are less focused on pragmatism might be more appealing to young people?**

I think it's related to the fact that young people look around and think that partisan politics is awful. Because it is awful, and it is dirty on both sides and it is unappealing on both sides. I think that when you are relatively new to making sense of the political world, there's a lot of idealistic thinking about preferences. I think that in some ways the political system is a little bit at fault because it seems so unappealing to be a party loyalist.

What we see over time is that as people age, they come to have stronger partisan loyalties and accept that we have a two-party system. That is something that is a little bit of a difficult pill to swallow initially, that we have to play within the party system. I'm not sure that it is necessarily ideological purity that is driving support for Bernie among young people. I think it is in part this disaffection with the usual party politics.

Again, part of what makes me say that is the fact that there is so much less support among young people for voting for the party. That is, using party as a heuristic to make a candidate choice. And that becomes one of the barriers to participation.

**That's really interesting that there are lots of young voters who are reluctant to identify with one party because Democrats consider young people to be a core part of their coalition. It seems like there's a dissonance there between how the Democratic Party is thinking of young people, and how young people are thinking about themselves.**

Yeah. In political science, this is the distinction between identity versus behavior or attitudes. When you ask the question "do you consider yourself a Democrat or Republican," if you ask that a week before the election, someone might say they're a Democrat because they're going to vote Democratic. When asked in a different context, that same person might not consider themselves to be a Democrat. There's a whole battery of questions that we would normally use to measure social

identity, which are different from how we often measure party identification. That's where you start seeing these gaps between older and younger people, where you might be getting the votes of young people, the minds of young people, but it's not clear that they're getting the hearts of young people.

**You had both identified some policies that really do increase turnout with young voters. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about those ideas and what we could implement at a state or national policy level that could really make it easier for young people to vote.**

So, we grouped them into two different areas. One area is voter laws. The key thing we find is that the type of reforms that have an impact on people are those that essentially allow young people to procrastinate. Having to register 30 days in advance is a significant barrier for someone who is newly registering, and young people of course are far more likely to be mobile and have to register again and so on.

We did our analysis prior to 2020, but we found that early voting on its own was not necessarily effective at increasing youth turnout. What you really needed was same-day registration. Things like automatic voter registration, same-day registration, online registration, those are the things that are incredibly important for increasing youth turnout.

The other set of reforms we looked at were education reforms. We really take to task the way that civics is taught right now and look at experimental evidence that shows how it can be done differently. One of the important lessons is the importance of getting people into the political system while they are in high school. That requires something like preregistration, so that you can remove the registration barrier prior to people leaving their parents' house, while they're in an institution in which they can receive support and there are social norms around registration.

The thing that I would really love to see is in-class voter registration. It's not sufficient to put a table in the cafeteria and expect people to come up. What you need is in-class initiatives, students filling out registration forms, with the teacher there to answer questions and review that there are no issues with how it's been completed.

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And that should go along with focusing in school, not just on political knowledge, but on the things that actually matter to participation. Rather than “who's the chief justice of the Supreme Court?” we should ask, “what do you do if you show up at the voting place and they say that you're not on the roll there?” Learning about the practical aspects of the registration and voting process is something that is not necessarily currently covered in civics courses and is the type of knowledge that is actually necessary to be able to participate.

**Looks like our time is up, but thank you so much for joining and chatting with us today.**

Thank you.