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**Failures to Mobilize and Invest in Youth Voters:
The Limitations of Presidential Advertising in Elections from 1996 to 2016**

An Honors Thesis
Presented By

Grace Killian

To the Department of Government and International Relations
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Abstract

Following the passage of the 26th Amendment to the United States Constitution, the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 years of age after a nearly three decades long fight for youth enfranchisement. However, once they were given the right to vote, young people turned out to vote at rates far below those of other age groups in 1972 and have remained persistently lower to the current day. This has left political operatives and scientists wondering why young people appear to be so separated from the electoral process. While many scholars have concluded that youth voters do not participate in elections because they are disinterested in politics, this thesis contradicts these verdicts. Instead, it finds that young people are interested in participating in politics, but face disproportionate barriers to electoral participation. While it is found that presidential campaign activity between 1996 and 2016 has no significant impact on youth voter registration and turnout, it is discovered that national party spending does have an influence over young voters' registration and turnout. Specifically, when the Democratic National Committee spends more money than the Republican National Committee, youth voter registration and turnout are significantly increased. As such, this study exemplifies how youth voters, when coaxed into it, are interested in participating in the electoral process. This study showcases that although they continue to be ignored by political operatives, young people are an untapped voting bloc that has the capacity to influence electoral outcomes.

**To Gramps –
“You are my sunshine.”**

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Chapter 1

Introduction

On July 1, 1971, President Richard Nixon certified the 26th Amendment to the Constitution, which reads: “The right of citizens of the United States, who are eighteen years of age or older, to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of age” (Claire, 2020). This landmark event that enfranchised millions of new voters came just 100 days after the Congress had passed the amendment on March 23, 1971 (Claire, 2020). In record breaking time, the 26th Amendment was ratified by the minimum three-fourths of the nation’s state legislatures in less than four months, but the ease of ratification is a misrepresentation of the struggle to enfranchise America’s youth. It took almost three-decades for Congress to pass the piece of legislation which lowered the voting age to eighteen, with efforts dating back to the 1940s (Zhou, 2013).

As an active participant in World War II, the United States was in desperate need for a larger source of manpower. So, the Army chief of staff, George Marshall, urged President Franklin Deleno Roosevelt to support his idea to reduce the draft age to 18 years of age. On October 12, 1942, President Roosevelt made his support for the effort known to the American public during one of his famous Fireside Chats. The following day, he called on the Congress to act and less than a month later, on November 11, 1942, the legislative branch voted to amend the Selective Service Act of 1940 to lower the draft age to 18 years old and raised the upper limit to 37 years old (Glass, 2014). In response to this change, questions about the fairness of this law were raised. If 18 year olds are permitted to die for American democracy, why were they subsequently excluded from participating in it?

After the passage of this law, the movement to lower the voting age's rally call was born: "old enough to fight, old enough to vote" (Claire, 2020). Senator Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan (R) once said, "If young men are drafted at 18 years of age to fight for their Government, they ought to be entitled to vote at 18 years of age for the kind of government for which they are best satisfied to fight for" (Claire, 2020). His words began to resonate with people across the nation. Senator Jennings Rudolph (D) of West Virginia, also known as the Father of the 26th Amendment, first introduced a bill later that year to lower the voting age from 21 to 18. He was ultimately unsuccessful in rallying support for its passage. Public opinion was not on the movement's side, either. According to a Gallup poll taken in 1942 that asked "Would you favor changing the law to allow men and women, 18, 19, and 20 years old, to vote?" only 39% of respondents said yes, 53% said no, and the other 9% said they had no opinion on the matter (Lyons, 2004). In fact, the senator from West Virginia would have to propose the legislation eleven times before it would be passed by Congress (Lyons, 2004). Despite the inaction of the federal government, between 1942 and 1944, 31 state legislatures proposed lowering the voting age from 21 years old to 18 years old. However, only Georgia was successful in lowering their eligible voting age (Claire, 2020).

As time went on, however, the momentum of the grassroots campaign to enfranchise millions of young people continued to grow and regained national attention under the administration of President Dwight Eisenhower. During his 1952 State of the Union Address, President Eisenhower lobbied Congress to pass legislation that would lower the national voting age from 21 years of age to 18 (Claire, 2020). The following year, a Gallup poll showed that the majority of Americans supported this legislation (Lyons, 2004). By 1960, three additional states had enacted legislation that reduced the voting age to include those 18 years and older:

Kentucky, Alaska, and Hawaii (Claire, 2020). Yet, the efforts made at the national level remained insufficient in achieving their goal.

However, as U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War began on March 8, 1965, the fight to lower the voting age was reignited (“Vietnam War”, 2017). As the United States committed more troops in the war, “old enough to fight, old enough to vote” made a resurgence across the country (Claire, 2020). At the same time, youth involvement in the fight for civil rights, campus free speech, and women’s liberation made America’s youth’s political voice nearly impossible to ignore. Young people were in the streets protesting, signing petitions, and advocating for social change across the entire nation (Claire, 2020). It was clear that young people across the country were interested in and passionate about politics. By 1968, a Gallup poll showed that two-thirds of the American people supported lowering the voting age to 18 (Lyons, 2004). The movement to lower the voting age became a unifying force amongst America’s youth; despite their ideological differences.

In March of 1969, a group of 2,000 young people came together from 33 different states and various racial and socioeconomic backgrounds to lobby Congress for youth voting rights. This event, known as the Youth Mobilization Conference, was sponsored by the NAACP and led by Carolyn Quilloin, a young Black woman heavily involved in the civil rights movement (Claire, 2020).¹ Riding on the momentum built by this conference, Senator Jennings Rudolph, D-WV, proposed an amendment to the Constitution to lower the voting age to 18 years old for the eleventh time. He was finally successful in rallying the support of his fellow members of Congress on March 23, 1971, with overwhelming bipartisan support (Lyons, 2004). Only 100

¹ Carolyn Quilloin, now Coleman, is currently serving as a board member at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, NAACP (“Carolyn Q. Coleman”). Throughout the 1960s, Quilloin was an activist working to enfranchise millions of youth voters through demonstrations, registration drives, and organized marches (Quinn, 2019). Though her story is often left out of history, like many other Black women in U.S. history, she was vitally important to the passage of the 26th Amendment.

days later, President Richard Nixon said upon certifying the 26th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America, “The country needs an infusion of new spirits from time to time... I sense that we can have confidence that America’s new votes will provide what this country needs” (Claire, 2020).

Despite this clarion call for youth participation, President Nixon was reelected in 1972, and barely half of newly eligible young voters turned out to vote. Supporters of the movement were perplexed (Claire, 2020). After decades of pursuing the vote for 18 year olds and their active involvement in protest and civil rights movements, why did young voters not turn out in droves the first election they were eligible?

The 1972 presidential election would turn out to not be an outlier, but a harbinger of patterns to come. Youth voter turnout today remains stubbornly low in comparison to voter turnout rates of other age groups. In presidential election years between 1996 and 2016, the youth voter turnout rate has consistently ranked far lower than all voter turnout rates of all age groups in the electorate; with the rare exception of President Barack Obama’s 2008 Presidential Campaign, when young and historically disenfranchised voters turned out in record numbers, and youth voter turnout approached the same levels of other age groups (Symonds, 2020; Hargittai & Shaw, 2013).²

This thesis considers the puzzle of youth voter turnout, considering the role that political campaigns and party organizations play in shaping the youth electorate. While other research has identified that political campaigns and party organizations are less likely to pay attention to youth voters, they have largely focused on young people’s disinterest in politics and barriers to participation as a primary reason for their low turnout levels. (Green, 2011; Rosenstone &

² 1996 to 2016 is the chosen timeframe for this study because following the rise of the Internet and the generational changes seen in American society following the 1980s, the ways in which political campaigns operated changed drastically (Medvic, 2011).

Hansen, 1993). This focus has persisted despite developments in campaign strategies that had the potential to disrupt stagnant youth voter turnout by energizing and mobilizing young voters over and above other segments of the electorate. (Hargittai & Shaw, 2013). As shown in Figure 1, however, despite advances in campaign strategies and the development of new technologies thought to be uniquely suited to mobilizing young voters, youth voter turnout has remained consistently lower than other age groups in the electorate.

Voter Turnout, Presidential Elections 1996 - 2016

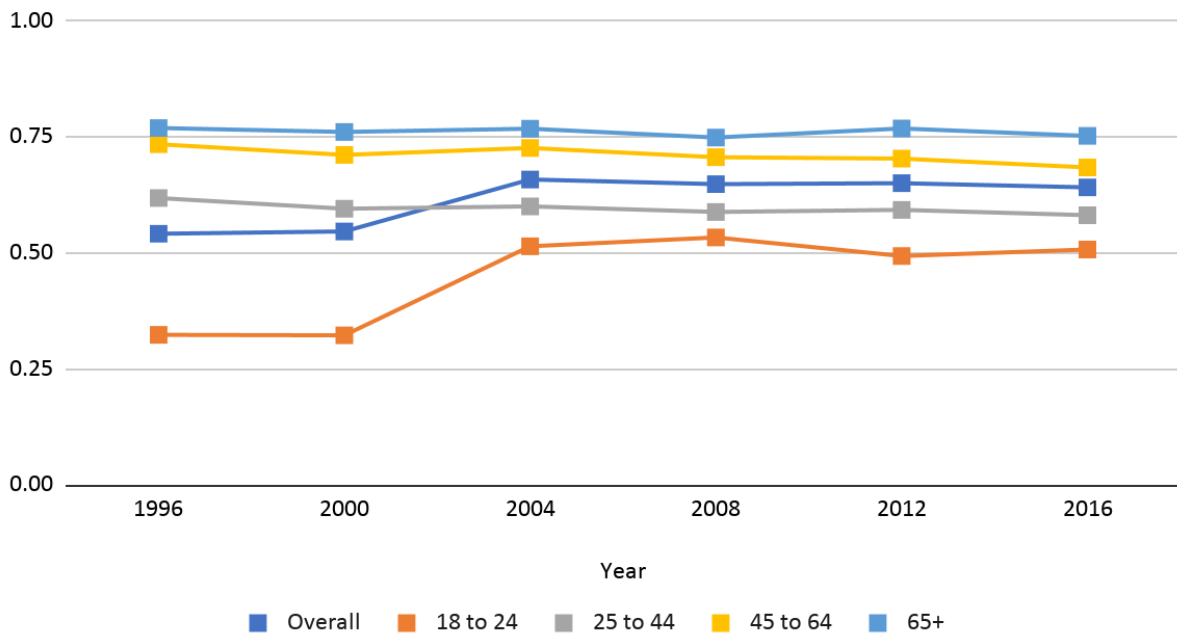


Figure 1. Youth voter turnout, ages 18 to 24, remains consistently lower than other, older age demographics’ voter turnout in the United States.

Source: Current Population Survey, compiled by the author.

One notable shift in youth turnout stands out in Figure 1, however. Between the 2000 and 2004 presidential election, turnout among voters ages 18 to 24 jumped from about 30 to 50%.

Although this spike demonstrates an increase in youth electoral participation, it also points to the time that political campaigns, particularly the Democratic Party, made significant adjustments in their campaign strategies following their narrow loss in the 2000 presidential election. By shifting to online mediums and blogs, presidential campaigns began trying to attract youth voters where they spent most of their time: on blogs, at concerts, on video games, and on social networking sites.

With this historical trajectory serving as a backdrop for understanding youth voter turnout, this thesis adds new theoretical insight and empirical observations to established research on youth voter registration and voter turnout in the United States. While it is widely concluded that youth electoral participation remains among the lowest of all age demographics in the United States, explanations for these patterns have not considered, in-depth, how shifts in campaign strategies over time moderate youth voter turnout. Ultimately, this thesis offers additional nuance for why young voters turn out at the lowest rates relative to other age groups in the American electorate. Specifically, it uses historical and quantitative evidence documenting the development of mobilization strategies for targeting youth voters over time to investigate the ways in which presidential campaigns and political parties have worked to alleviate the barriers to participation for young voters. In doing so, this thesis will help to understand if campaign strategies that encourage youth participation are sufficient enough to overcome the institutional restrictions that disproportionately impact eligible youth voters.

The Context

Overall Voter Turnout

Overall, the United States tends to have a lower rate of voter turnout than other developed countries. I consider four theoretical explanations for this phenomenon as the foundation for my expectations and hypotheses on the relationship between political campaign and party organization activity and youth voter turnout. First, eligible members of the electorate may not vote because they do not find utility in voting. More precisely, unless the benefits outweigh the costs and their vote has a high probability of being the deciding factor in an election outcome, people generally abstain from voting (Downs, 1957). At the same time, when taken to its logical extreme, this theory suggests it is a wonder that anyone votes at all. An important addition to this first theory, then, is the idea that people will vote when they are motivated by a sense of civic duty (Riker & Ordeshook, 1968).

A second theory suggests that people will vote when political leaders coax them into participating, and when there are valuable benefits worth the cost of participation. An important component of this theory is that political actors like campaigns and party organizations are not incentivized to target and mobilize *all* eligible voters, but to do so strategically so as to maximize their vote share (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Along the same lines, campaigns contribute to restrictions placed on the voting process by not targeting historically disenfranchised groups, which only exacerbates the already existing barriers to participation. In this way, campaigns are passively suppressing marginalized voters (Ross II & Spencer, 2019).

Third, barriers to voting that add to the costs of turning out, may also limit the likelihood of participation. These include not only the two step system of registration and voting that is unique to the United States, but also additional restrictions on voting such as requiring voter

identification (Timpone, 1998). These types of restrictive voting reforms, like voter identification requirements, create burdens that are proven to be insurmountable for already disadvantaged voters and, as such, suppress their electoral participation (Rutenberg, 2015).

Fourth, more recently, social identity, partisan identification, issue positions, and candidate evaluations have been identified as key factors that influence the decision to vote (Um, 2017). Broadly, a common thread in the literature on voter turnout, is that the more partisan an individual is, the more likely to vote and engage in politics they are (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993).

Within the framework of these four theories of voter turnout, changes in how campaigns operate may also explain low levels of voter turnout (Gerber & Green, 2000). Specifically, increase in the use of more impersonal modes of mobilization like direct mail and telephone calls in the 1990s and early 2000s may play a role in limiting overall voter turnout. This is because they were less effective than door-to-door canvassing that fell out of favor at the time. As such, “falling rates of voter turnout reflect a decline in face-to-face political activity” (Gerber & Green, 2000, 661). In recent years, however, with the rise of social networking sites, campaigns are now able to build connections and interactions with voters that may feel more personal, yet not require the cost and labor of face to face mobilization (Carlisle & Patton, 2013). Platforms like Twitter offer campaigns a rapid response tool to communicate directly with potential supporters (Urbanski, 2016). Young voters in particular are more likely to accept and adopt these kinds of interactions than older generations (Carlisle & Patton, 2013). Additionally, these platforms allow for more discussion and engagement among citizens, rather than just between the campaign and a potential supporter, another potentially mobilizing factor (Panagopoulos, 2017).

Youth Voter Turnout

Amidst largely stagnant overall voter turnout rates, youth voter turnout has consistently remained one of the lowest voting demographics in the United States. Many believe it is due to young people's disinterest in politics, but this is not the case. Following the four theories outlined above, there are several explanations as to why youth voters turnout in such low percentages. First, youth voters are more likely to have lower confidence levels that their vote matters. As such, they cannot see the utility of voting because, in their eyes, the costs outway the benefits (Downs, 1957; Riker & Ordeshook, 1968). This is because they do not feel that they will be significantly impacted by the outcome of the election. Second, and most central to this thesis, is the idea that people will participate in elections when political leaders coax them into it (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). This theory is vitally important to consider because political campaigns tend to ignore youth voters due to the perceived limited vote returns (Alder, 2007). As a result, campaigns will devote less energy and resources to directly mobilizing youth voters and, thus, engage in passively suppressing the youth vote (Ross II & Spencer, 2019).

The third explanation follows the notion that barriers to voting only add to the costs associated with casting a ballot. It is believed that the two-step process to voting may limit participation, along with other restrictive voting reforms that disproportionately impact historically disenfranchised groups (Timpone, 1998; Rutenberg, 2015). Due to lack of experience in politics, American youth may feel less educated in politics and, therefore, less qualified to participate (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). As such, many researchers have concluded that young voters are disinterested, but that is not necessarily true. Recent research suggests young people are interested in politics, but do not necessarily express this through voting because they face higher information barriers as a result of being new entrants into the pool of eligible voters. In

2016, less than half of young people who reported they were planning to vote actually did so. This may be due to confusion surrounding the voting process. In interviews following the 2018 mid-term election, most young voters admitted to being confused by voting procedures. Thus, voting may increase as information barriers decrease through social networking and resource development, capitalizing on the interest young people have in politics and motivating them to vote (Holbein & Hillygus, 2020). The fourth and final theory to consider is one of identity (Um, 2017). The reality is that young people tend to have weaker partisan identities, so they tend to be less engaged in politics (Green, 2011). Given their weaker partisan affiliations, traditional campaign efforts that tap into partisan identity may be less effective in mobilizing young voters to the voting booth (Claibourn & Martin, 2012). Therefore, because they are weaker partisans and are more likely to feel detached from the political process, youth voters abstain from electoral participation.

Overall Voter Registration

Beyond the personal decision of whether or not to vote and how this is shaped by campaign activity, structural barriers also influence voter turnout in the United States. One of the primary culprits is the two-step process of voting where prospective voters need to first register to vote in order to cast a ballot. While this has been generally accepted to preserve the integrity of elections, the time between registration and the election itself — alongside the burden that is largely put on voters to register themselves — is one of the biggest deterrents to voting (Timpone, 1998). In short, early registration deadlines may prevent people who otherwise want to vote from being eligible to cast a ballot. This is all the more apparent when considering the effects of reforms that limit the time between registration and voting — like same day registration — which have a positive effect on voter turnout (Springer, 2014). As such, some

electoral institutions and laws may prevent those who are less familiar with the voting process to actually cast their ballots successfully, while others mitigate the barriers created by the United States' unique two step registration process.

Youth Voter Registration

The phenomenon stating that registration is a large inhibitor of electoral participation is especially true among younger segments of the population. Young people tend to be more mobile, which makes the residency requirements of registration more difficult to fulfill (Holbein & Hillygus, 2020). Furthermore, prior to the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, a non-universal registration process led to even more confusion about how to register in different localities. Therefore, mobility accompanied by non-universal registration processes made it extremely difficult for young people to successfully navigate the ever changing registration process. Although registration became more streamlined after 1993, it did not fully eliminate the difficulties and obstacles impacting youth voters. Thus, this highly administrative process tends to reduce the number of registered members of the youth voting bloc because they may not think about casting their ballots until registration deadlines have already passed, and are more likely to need to re-register after moving (Timpone, 1998). At the same time, reforms that ease the burden and cost of registration like same day voter registration, automatic voter registration, and pre-registration, a law that allows young people to register to vote at the age of 16, can offset the negative effects of the United States' registration system (Holbein & Hillygus, 2020; Singh et al., 2019). Ultimately, while the voter registration process may be a massive hindering factor in the mobilization of young American voters, there are structural reforms that can mitigate the costs of this system.

Political Participation in Youth Voters

Though voter turnout rates remain low among young voters, they are not disinterested in politics as a whole. Instead of voting, younger members of the electorate demonstrate their political participation in other ways. For example, young people channel their participation through protests, online activism, and volunteering (Holbein & Hillygus, 2020). According to an April 2015 Harvard Public Opinion Poll, young Democrats and young Republicans, ages 18 to 29, showed their political engagement through means outside of voting. The poll found that 40% of young Democrats and 35% of young Republicans signed an online petition, 27% of young Democrats and 29% of young Republicans liked a candidate on Facebook, and 13% of young Democrats and 19% of young Republicans engaged in an online political discussion (“How Millennials Engage”). Ultimately, these findings suggest that young voters may be using other means of engagement to make their political views heard and that social media plays an integral role in facilitating these engagements.

It may be easier for young people to show participation through less traditional means, as opposed to voting, because they have more mobility and can lack a permanent, long term residence. This makes the burden of registration more difficult for this group. Voting is a habitual act, so it must be taught and can take time to develop. Additionally, greater self-efficacy leads to an increased likelihood of turning out to vote (Holbein & Hillygus, 2020). As such, if young voters continue to feel as though their votes are insignificant in the larger scale of the election, they will feel as though their participation is a waste of resources (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Thus, young voters may not have a sufficient amount of self-efficacy to be compelled to vote. Exacerbating this is the strategic reality that campaigns are unlikely to put resources towards mobilizing young voters unless they believe they may be a possible supporter. In the age of

technology, campaigns target a candidate's base and those they deem are possibly persuadable voters in order to increase their likelihood of winning the election (Panagopoulos, 2017).

Young people may feel more pressure to demonstrate political engagement. However, voting is more private than other forms of engagement, so it may be less appealing to young people. Social pressure and surveillance has been shown to increase turnout when voting is presented as a social norm (Gerber et al., 2008). So, in the age of social media and mass communication, young people may feel that they are abiding by the social norms by participating in politics in more visible means even if they are not engaging in a more traditional sense by casting a ballot. Engagement in political life is inherently social. So, young people build their sense of civic duty within their own social networks, which tend to be made up of other young people (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Thus, because the younger segment of the electorate does not see high levels of voter turnout amongst their peers, there is less social pressure to do so within their networks (Gerber et al., 2008).

Campaign Purposes

The purpose of political campaigns is to present the candidate in a favorable way to the electorate, while providing information about policy positions and, ultimately, to win elections. Specifically, election campaigns seek to control the messaging that voters receive about their candidate to influence voters' decisions. However, campaigns do not have control over the contexts in which they operate, so voters' decisions are often out of the campaign's control. To preserve their narrative surrounding their candidate, campaigns have implemented a centralized bureaucratic structure since the 19th Century (Medvic, 2011). This has become increasingly more difficult for campaigns, however, as the rise of technology has made them increasingly interactive and information has become more readily accessible to voters and the general public,

and a wide range of other political actors like interest groups and grassroots organizations outside of the realm of campaigns' narrative control (Panagopoulos, 2017).

Despite these concerns, political campaigns have adopted new technologies to reach and engage with the electorate. Overall, the rise of the internet allowed campaigns to become more interactive and engage with more members of the electorate (Medvic, 2011). This is because the increase in digital campaigning lowers the cost and barriers facing campaigns in regards to engagement (Urbanski, 2016; Carlisle & Patton, 2013). One common narrative that has arisen from this transition is that digital media would play an integral role in mobilizing voters, particularly young adults who are not yet an established part of the voting electorate. Presently, however, there is limited evidence to suggest evidence that suggests that internet usage, however skillful, positively influences political engagement and participation (Hargittai & Shaw, 2013).

At the same time, there is some evidence to suggest that, some research has found that the development of internet based digital technologies *has* led more voters to seek political information through the internet. As a result, political campaigns have integrated the internet and social media into their campaign strategies to try to capitalize on this behavior (Gulati et al., 2013). Furthermore, mobilizing base supporters has become easier for campaigns with the rise of microtargeting and technological advancements (Panagopoulos et al., 2016). Yet, the, relatively, new nature of these kinds of advertising strategies are still yet to be fully understood, which is why campaigns are mindful not to invest too many resources into these new campaign technologies (Panagopoulos, 2017).

Hypotheses

I hypothesize that presidential campaigns alone will be unable to increase youth voter participation in the United States' electoral process. Even if campaign strategies include targeted advertising to increase youth voter participation, campaigns may be unable to overcome the institutional barriers of participation — particularly in the registration process. Youth voters are disproportionately impacted by structural restrictions in the registration process because they have less established residency and are less familiar than the registration process. Therefore, campaigns alone will have a difficult time in alleviating these barriers. However, I expect that political campaigns will be able to overcome the barriers to participation when it comes to casting a ballot. This is because if presidential campaigns strategically target youth voters, they may provide enough political stimuli to excite potential voters. Thus, translating into a rise in youth electoral participation. Furthermore, if national party organizations, like the Democratic National Committee and the Republican National Committee, also contribute to registering and mobilizing youth voters, there will be an increase in youth voter participation. This will be particularly true with youth voter registration because many state and local party organizations operate the bulk of registration drives and campaigns. This will then translate into an increase in youth voter turnout because once an individual is registered to vote, they have more incentive to participate in the election.

Chapter Overview

To explore these hypotheses, this thesis is split into four chapters. In Chapter Two, I create a foundation outlining the institutional, societal, and personal barriers that prevent the youngest segment of the electorate from partaking in the most traditional means of political

participation: voter registration and casting a ballot. To do so, I examine the previously conducted research on youth voter registration and youth voter turnout. Additionally, I closely examine how these barriers influence the ways in which presidential campaigns, and political campaigns more generally, change their messaging strategies to reflect these barriers. In doing so, Chapter Two will provide an in-depth analysis of the obstacles youth voters face in participating in the electoral process and how campaigns try to work to introduce new voters, including youth voters, into this process.

Chapter Three will specifically investigate youth voter registration before presidential elections from 1996 to 2016. First, I inspect the ways in which presidential campaigns worked to alleviate the barriers outlined in Chapter Two to help eligible youth voters register to vote. Then, using data compiled by Dr. Mara Suttman-Lea, I examine the impacts of campaign activity and national party activity on their ability to alleviate the barriers to participation in order to add youth voters to the voting roles (2021). The impacts of these strategies are measured with the percent change on youth voter registration rates that is correlated with each of these variables.

Chapter Four will look, specifically, at youth voter turnout during presidential elections from 1996 to 2016. First, I investigate the ways in which presidential campaigns worked to alleviate the barriers outlined in Chapter Two to help eligible youth voters to cast a ballot. Then, using data compiled by Dr. Mara Suttman-Lea, I examine the impacts of campaign activity and national party activity on their ability to alleviate the barriers to participation in order to mobilize youth voters (2021). The impacts of these strategies are measured with the percent change on youth voter turnout rates that is caused by each of these variables.

Finally, Chapter Five will present the implications of my findings. This chapter will expand upon my findings by discussing the significance and limitations of this work. In doing so,

I begin to explore different ways in which researchers can expand upon these findings to better understand youth voter participation and the ways in which campaigns can incentivize youth participation in the electoral process.

Chapter 2

Understanding the Youth Vote

Since the enactment of the 26th Amendment, youth voter participation has remained consistently low. Many researchers agree that this is not due to a disinterest in the political process or government, but, rather, an inability to understand and overcome barriers to electoral participation. Yet, researchers have not examined how campaigns interact with eligible youth voters to address these barriers. To better understand this phenomenon, this chapter begins by defining who youth voters are. Then, I outline the pre-existing literature on youth electoral participation. Next, it introduces the ideas scholars have about how youth participation may be improved and influenced by political campaigns. Despite being largely ignored by political campaigns, certain types of advertising and mobilization efforts may be conducive to alleviating the barriers of youth participation in the electoral process. As such, this chapter lays a foundational understanding of the complex dynamics that influence youth voter participation before conducting a regression analysis on the impacts of presidential campaigns on youth voter registration and turnout since the 1996 Election in the following chapters.

Who Are Youth Voters?

In the American electoral system, youth voters have the capacity to yield massive electoral power. Nevertheless, their electoral engagement has continuously been below that of other age groups. As such, campaigns tend to ignore youth voters and allocate the majority of their mobilizing resources elsewhere (Adler, 2007). Out of 24 developed democracies across the world, the United States has the fourth largest youth voter gap. Comparatively, where overall voter turnout rates are higher than the United States, there is less of a gap between overall voter

engagement and youth voter engagement (Symonds, 2020). Like other age demographics, youth voters are affected by a number of factors that have the capacity to increase and decrease their likelihood of participation in the electoral process. These factors include a lack of resources, a lack of knowledge, weak partisan affiliations, low levels of efficacy, lack of political socialization, naivete about the voting process as a whole, selective exposure to political information and advertising, and limited interactions with political campaigns. In this chapter, I lay out what existing research tells us about the factors that explain youth voter turnout.³

Literature Review

The research on youth voters and their electoral participation is extensive. From political interest to how campaigns interact with youth voters, scholars have made an effort to understand what factors influence young voters' engagement in the political process for years. In this section, I outline the established research on whether or not young people are interested in politics, youth voter registration, youth voter turnout, the implications of socioeconomic status, education levels, partisanship, feelings of efficacy, social networks, the habitual effects of voting, the impacts of electoral institutions and reforms on youth voters, how young people gather political information, how campaigns traditionally mobilize voters, and how campaigns interact with youth voters.

Are They Interested?

Although scholars and pundits have concluded that youth voter turnout is so low because the American youth is disinterested in politics, this is not an accurate assessment of this voting bloc (Green, 2011). These narratives often surround the idea of disaffected citizenship, which is defined as a withdrawal from public life. However, this only tells one part of the story of youth

³ For the purpose of this thesis, young voters are categorized as eligible voters aged 18 to 24.

voter turnout (Hargittai & Shaw, 2013). Challenging this narrative, the American National Election Survey (ANES) has found that while youth's interest in politics has grown in recent years, they fail to vote because they lack the skills and strategies for engaging in electoral politics (Holbein & Hillygus, 2020). As a result, young voters are not necessarily withdrawing from political participation and engagement, but rather engaging through less traditional methods that do not require the same resources needed for voting.

The more appropriate explanation of young Americans' engagement in politics is one of cultural displacement. In this theory, youth are interested in politics, but participate in ways that differ from their parents' and grandparents' participatory habits (Hargittai & Shaw, 2013). Young Americans, for example, are more likely to use the Internet for gathering political information than older age brackets (Tedesco et al., 2007). It was thought that increasing Internet and social media access may lower the barriers of participation and allow newcomers the needed information to more access to the political process. Being a part of the age bracket that is most likely to be exposed to campaign and party organization adoption of internet and social media strategies, scholars assumed digital media would play a central role in mobilizing the youth vote (Medvic, 2011; Hargittai & Shaw, 2013; Panagopoulos, 2017). However, there is little evidence to suggest that Internet and social media usage has a greater level of engagement with the voting process by young voters (Hargittai & Shaw, 2013). All in all, despite an increasing access to political information and knowledge through the internet, a large segment of eligible youth voters refrain from participating in the electoral process.

If a disinterest and a lack of access to information about voting are unable to adequately explain persistently low voter youth turnout, additional explanations are needed. There are three broad themes that explain the gap for youth voter electoral participation. First, voting is a habit

formed over time and, as such, youth voters have less opportunities to form and practice the act of voting. Second, youth voters are likely to face higher opportunity costs because of their less flexible employment schedules and less financial stability to take time off of work to vote. Third, while voter turnout remains low among the American youth, there has been a rise in other forms of citizen activism, like protest (Symonds, 2020). Therefore, the primary assumptions that are often attributed to low youth voter turnout — disinterest in politics or limited access to information — may not be demonstrating the full scale of the barriers impacting these eligible voters. Instead, we must examine the ways in which institutional barriers prevent youth voters from engaging in the electoral process at higher rates.

Youth Voter Registration

The first step in voting in the United States is registration. This fundamentally administrative act has been labeled as a bureaucratic hurdle by many researchers and scholars (Timpone, 1998; Bennion & Nickerson, 2011). As such, the process of voter registration has been tied to long term predispositions more so than the process of voting. Additionally, researchers have found the time between registration and the election is one of the biggest deterrents to participating in elections (Timpone, 1998). A large percentage of voter registrants register within a year of the official deadline before a presidential election. Furthermore, registration peaks in concurrence with political events like primaries, conventions, and debates. In this way, registration appears to coincide with the political stimuli of a presidential election and campaign (Gimpel et al., 2007). Thus, when there is a sense of excitement for an upcoming election or from a highly publicized political event, there are more registrants among the entire electorate, including young people.

Youth voters are registered to vote at significantly lower rates than any other age group, and registration has been identified as one of the biggest barriers to youth electoral participation (Cherry, 2012). This is in part because youth voters are more mobile than other age groups, which can make registration a challenge (Costa et al., 2018; Holbein & Hillygus, 2020). In addition to requiring these voters to need to reregister after moving to another jurisdiction, the lower levels of geographic stability makes the process of registration more daunting (Plutzer, 2002; Kaid et al., 2007). Therefore, registration among the youth voting bloc has remained consistently low over time. Yet, the percentage of registered youth who go on to cast a ballot in elections is very high (Cherry, 2012). As such, the burdens of registration may be stunting the electoral power of youth voters. Along this train of thought, registration may obstruct some youth voters from participating in the electoral process because of a lack of excitement surrounding the process.

Youth Voter Turnout

The act of voting is seen as a civic duty, but the United States has observed low voter turnout for decades across the entire electorate. This phenomenon has been attributed by four different theories, as outlined in Chapter One. First, voting depends on the personal value placed on democracy and personal self-efficacy (Downs, 1957). Therefore, voting is only viewed as a rational choice when there is utility seen in the act of voting, meaning that the benefits of voting outweigh the costs (Riker & Ordeshook, 1968). Thus, voting depends on the personal rationalization individuals place on the importance of going out to cast a ballot. Secondly, and most importantly, voters only participate in elections when politicians ignite electoral engagement (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Due to the fact that youth voters historically have low vote returns, this theory is incredibly vital to this thesis because youth voters are largely

ignored by politicians and political campaigns (Alder, 2007). As such, there is no one truly coaxing them into participating in elections.

Thirdly, youth voters are disproportionately impacted by barriers to voting that add to the burdens associated with the process. Specifically, the two-step process to voting may limit participation, along with other restrictions placed on voting such as voter identification laws and restrictions placed on absentee voting (Timpone, 1998; Rutenberg, 2015; Rao et al., 2020; Jarvis, 2020). Finally, participation in elections has, more recently, been closely linked to how partisan an individual is (Um, 2017). This is because more committed partisans are more likely to participate in elections (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Thus, youth voters whose partisan identities are still in flux may feel less inclined to cast a ballot. Additionally, younger and weaker partisans are more likely to be unfamiliar with the voting process, so scholars have concluded that rational calculations of voting are based more so on habit than on judgements about candidates and electoral situations (Riker & Ordeshook, 1968). In short, youth voters are less likely to have formed the habit of voting than older generations, which prevents them from engaging in elections.

In addition to having weaker ideological beliefs, unestablished voting habits, higher institutional barriers relative to older voters that prevent them from participating in elections, the daily lives of young people are often unpredictable and harder to plan. So, voting on Election Day may be more difficult for them than other age groups. Further, many young people are confused about voting procedures. In interviews conducted in the fall and winter of 2018, the majority of the interviewees admitted to being unsure about voting procedures and expressed a desire to know more (Holbein & Hillygus, 2020). In line with broader trends shaping voter turnout in the United States, youth voters are influenced by socioeconomic status, education

levels, partisan identity, efficacy, and social networks. While older citizens are also susceptible to variations in these predictors of voter turnout, the impact had, for example, by a lower socioeconomic status is particularly acute for young voters.

Socioeconomic Status

Voter turnout can be particularly challenging for youth voters because of the great costs associated with casting a ballot. Youth voters tend to have less flexibility in their employment schedules and less financial stability to take time off from work to vote (Symonds, 2020). Furthermore, because youth voters have less disposable income than other age groups, they are less likely to be targets for political parties and candidates seeking campaign contributions. As such, they are less likely to be compelled to join the electoral process because the probability of being contacted by campaigns and, thus, feel less integrated into the electoral process. This is significant because those contacted by political campaigns tend to feel more of a personal attachment to the candidate, which makes it more likely for the voter to engage in the electoral process (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). Without these connections, youth voters feel like outsiders and, in turn, care less about electoral outcomes. Therefore, translating into young voters sitting out of the election.

As income increases voting rates tend to increase as well. Youth from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tend to have higher voter turnout rates than their counterparts from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Plutzer, 2002). This is because those from a higher economic class are more likely to have access to political resources, like newspapers, that promote a stronger political development (Pacheco, 2008). Additionally, eligible youth voters from higher socioeconomic status households are more likely to have access to social networks that promote more political participation than those from a working class household (McFarland & Thomas,

2006). Furthermore, those who grew up in a higher socioeconomic class household are more likely to have observed their parents' participation in the electoral and political process than those who grew up in a lower class household (Pacheco, 2008). Ultimately, those who grew up in higher income households have had more exposure to the political process and, thus, are more likely to join the process sooner than those from lower income households because they feel more included in the electoral process.

At the same time, younger voters tend to have a lower socioeconomic status than older age groups in the eligible voting population, but this is a condition that many can overcome with age. Their lower earning potential inhibits their likelihood of participation. As they age, gain experience, and increase their education levels, individuals increase their earning potential (Costa et al., 2018). Thus, increasing their voting potential, which helps to explain why rates of voter participation increase with age. Another factor that increases the likelihood of electoral participation is home ownership, something many young voters are less likely to have. This is because home ownership promotes a sense of permanence, which, theoretically, makes individuals more interested in who will win elections and who will have control over their community (Plutzer, 2002). In addition to decreasing the barriers facing more mobile youth voters in voter registration, home ownership is a direct investment into a community. Thus, individuals may place more of an importance on electoral participation once they feel integrated into a community.

Education

Across all age demographics, individuals with higher education levels are more likely to vote. Through education, individuals develop stronger cognitive skills, thus increasing their earning potential and building social networks that are more interested in the political process

(Holbein & Hillygus, 2020; Pacheco, 2008; Plutzer, 2002). Simply by virtue of their position in their life cycle, young people tend to have less education than citizens who are older, which makes electoral participation less likely (Costa et al., 2018). Among youth voters, those who are college educated tend to have a higher voter turnout rate than their non college educated counterparts (Nover et al., 2010). Additionally, education levels are linked to higher income levels and socioeconomic status (Pacheco, 2008). Thus, engagement in electoral politics is associated with generational education levels because those who have more education tend to have more wealth. Parental education often leads to offspring education and offspring political knowledge. Those with highly educated parents are associated with higher political development in their youth because they were, likely, more exposed to political discussions in the home during childhood (Pacheco, 2008). Additionally, young people are more likely to be familiar with electoral processes like registration and voting if their parents exemplified those political behaviors while they were growing up (Plutzer, 2002).

Partisan Identity

Strong partisanship is one of the most reliable predictors of electoral participation. Those who are strong partisans are more likely to cast a ballot (Thomsen, 2014). This is because strong partisans are more likely to be associated with a group that values voting. Therefore, they are more susceptible to the social pressures placed on the act of voting within their chosen social network. Stronger partisans are most likely to have decided the candidate which they will vote for earlier than weak partisans because of their political affiliations, which may limit the amount of political research they will do before the election, which lowers the costs of participation (Gerber et al., 2008). This is because partisans will seek out information that affirms their political beliefs, which decreases the likelihood of voting across party lines (Bello & Rolfe,

2014). However, strong partisan affiliations are likely to form later in life, so this phenomenon is unlikely to impact youth voters.

Due to the notion that youth voters are less likely to have strong partisan beliefs, they are less likely to be in social networks that place a high importance on electoral participation, to have made a firm decision on a candidate well before Election Day, and require less political information to feel as though they are making an educated decision. Youth voters tend to hold liberal leaning beliefs, but not strong enough beliefs to warrant the denotation of a strong partisan (Plutzer, 2002). Overall, partisan registrants vote at significantly higher rates than unaffiliated registrants do (Gimpel et al., 2007). Thus, youth voters, who tend to be unaffiliated with a political party are less likely to cast a ballot than older, more partisan age groups.

Efficacy

Self efficacy is the feeling that an individual has the ability to influence the political process (Kaid et al., 2007). In other words, those with lower levels of self efficacy will see electoral participation as a waste of time. They do not see the value in their vote because they do not believe their efforts can make a real difference to political outcomes (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Youth voters are more likely to feel that they have no say in the government than members of older voting groups (Kaid et al., 2007). Thus, they tend to have lower levels of self efficacy. This is also another important piece of the explanatory puzzle in explaining youth participation in the electoral process. Higher levels of self efficacy increases the likelihood of voting, while the lower self-efficacy among youth voters in particular lowers this probability (Holbein & Hillygus, 2020).

Another form of efficacy that youth voters are particularly demobilized by is political information efficacy.⁴ Political knowledge is a crucial predictor to electoral participation. If an individual is less confident in their political information levels, they are less likely to participate in the electoral process. Youth voters in particular have low levels of confidence in their political knowledge (Kaid et al., 2007). Following the 2000 Presidential Election, the most often reason the eligible youth electorate cited for not voting was because they did not have “enough time or information” (Kaid et al., 2007, 1095). This was because they felt they did not have an adequate understanding of politics and did not feel as though they were more informed about the government than most other Americans (Kaid et al., 2007). Despite observations that political information efficacy does increase electoral participation in politics, political knowledge is not always the most reliable predictor of voting, although it does lead to increased civic activity and participation in politics more generally (Wells & Dudash, 2007).

Social Networks

Social networks play an integral role in overcoming the paradoxes of participation and rational ignorance. Within these networks, people convey expectations to others about the behaviors that are appropriate and desirable (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Thus, when a social network sets voting as an important act, members of said group are more likely to be compelled to enter into the political process. People of all ages are influenced by what their friends and peers do. However, older age groups are far more likely to see their friends vote than youth age voters are (Symonds, 2020). As voters age, their peer cohort will have increasingly higher voter turnout rates (Plutzer, 2002). In turn, youth voters have deficient political socialization as a result of their social networks (Kaid et al., 2007). As such, if social networks have the capacity to

⁴ Political Information Efficacy is defined as the “extent to which individuals have sufficient confidence in their level of political information or knowledge to participate in the political process” (Kaid, 2008).

increase voter turnout, then youth voters may see an increase in participation if they enter into social networks that facilitate and advertise electoral participation (Holbein & Hillygus, 2020).

Peer pressure plays an integral role in the effects of social networks on voter turnout. Even the perception of surveillance or that one's voting habits are being watched can ignite greater electoral participation (Gerber et al., 2008). Moreover, young people are particularly susceptible to the influences of interpersonal communication and peer pressure plays a major role in their decisions (Kaid et al., 2007). Furthermore, because youth voters tend to be weaker partisans, they are more susceptible to be influenced by social networks' political attitudes than strong partisans. In turn, youth voters, and weak partisans more generally, are more likely to be influenced by discussions when speaking to a strong partisan (Bello & Rolfe, 2014). As such, social networks have an immense opportunity to engage potential youth voters by placing the conversation of politics on the agenda, and conversely, incentivizing them to *opt out* of politics if their networks are embedded in non-political conversations.

Young people tend to “learn more from talking with others, often using knowledge they gain from media sources as the basis of their political conversations” (Wells & Dudash, 2007, 1287). Youth voters appear to obtain their political information through conversations with family and peers, which is why parental political involvement in elections often translates to offspring involvement (Plutzer, 2002). Families who are politically active raise children who are politically active, which translates to higher voter engagement rates among this segment of the youth population (McFarland & Thomas, 2006). Additionally, it has been observed that exposure to politically competitive races at the local and state level during childhood is associated with increased voter turnout rates in the future (Pacheco, 2008). This is because these potential voters would have been exposed to the heightened political activities that come with competitive races

throughout their childhoods, which places an importance on electoral and political engagement in adulthood.

There are several social networks that are demonstrated to ignite greater electoral participation among youth voters. In addition to a politically engaged family, youth voters have demonstrated that voluntary membership in organizations has made it more probable that they engage in the electoral process. This, of course, is dependent on which kinds of associations they are engaged with. Organizations that require public speaking and public service like National Honors Society, service organizations, student council, debate, drama, vocational associations, and religious organizations are correlated with high levels of political involvement. Meanwhile, activities like sports teams and more social clubs have shown to have a null effect on electoral participation (McFarland & Thomas, 2006). Thus, exposure to organizations that are more closely related to political engagement early on in life can provide a baseline for the habitual side of voting. These organizations allow individuals to build the skills necessary to successfully enter into the electoral system.

Voting is Habitual

Several scholars have found that voting is a habit formed overtime. Yet, because eligible youth voters have less opportunities to form and practice the habit of voting simply by virtue of their age, they are less likely to cast a ballot in the early years of their eligibility (Symonds, 2020). Once voters begin to vote, the factors working against them tend to diminish, which is why voting increases the probability of voting in subsequent elections (Plutzer, 2002; Gerber et al., 2003). Some have concluded that voting persists because people make similar choices under similar circumstances (Gerber et al., 2003). So, when an individual makes the decision to participate in an election through voting, they are likely to make the same decision in the future

because the process becomes more familiar. Further, when an individual becomes a voter, they will become an insider to the political process, which may increase efficacy and attentiveness to the electoral process (Holbein & Hillygus, 2015). Therefore, voting makes an individual feel more informed about the political process, enters them into social networks that endorse voting as a desirable action, and reduces transaction costs of gathering information.

Reforms that Influence Rates of Registration and Voter Turnout

In the United States, voting laws are primarily left to state and local governments to determine how the electoral process operates within their own jurisdictions. As such, there are a wide range of laws that influence the democratic process across the country. Some reforms have been shown to increase voter turnout, while others have demonstrated a decrease in voter turnout. From same day voter registration to early in person voting to voter identification laws, each voting reform has a specific impact on different eligible age groups in the electorate. While reforms like identification laws and non-voting purges typically inhibit youth participation, pre-registration and election day registration laws have the capacity to boost youth electoral participation (Springer, 2014; Juelich & Coll, 2020). Overall, researchers have found that certain voting reforms may disproportionately and negatively impact historically disenfranchised voters who are less likely to vote, including youth voters (Symonds, 2020).

The first example of these types of reforms are voter identification laws. In certain states there is a strict list of acceptable identification materials that can be used to cast a ballot. For example, in Wisconsin, college students' identification cards are only permitted to be used for voting purposes if they display a date of issue, an expiration date no more than two years after the date of issue, show a proof of residency and enrollment, and have a signature. This is particularly challenging for out-of-state students who have decided to vote within their school's

jurisdiction because they do not have another form of identification to prove residency in Wisconsin. As such, it prevents those who are uncomfortable or unprepared to go through the absentee voting process from being able to cast their ballot. Out-of-state students in Texas face a similar problem. In their voter identification law, Texas allows the use of concealed-handgun licenses as a valid form of identification, but student ID cards are not accepted (Jervis, 2020). Therefore, out-of-state college students in Texas and Wisconsin are typically unable to participate in elections in their schools' jurisdictions because of an immense burden placed on them from strict identification requirements.

Restrictions on absentee voting also provides an extra barrier to youth electoral participation. While most states allow for no-excuse absentee ballot voting, others place restrictions on the process that may inhibit youth participation (Rao et al., 2020). In Texas, only those 65 and older, disabled, in jail, or will be out of the country on Election Day are eligible to obtain an absentee ballot. Thus, students from Texas who go to college or university in another state are not eligible to cast an absentee ballot (Jervis, 2020). In other states, like Iowa and Minnesota, absentee voting must be done in person at an auditor's office (Rao et al., 2020). These restrictions make it difficult for those who are out of the state for extended periods of time to be able to cast a ballot. Specifically for youth voters, this is likely to disproportionately disadvantage college students who attend a school outside of their home state who are more likely than their non college educated peers to participate in the electoral process.

Though it has been outlawed after the passage of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, prior to the 1996 Presidential Election, youth voters may have been deterred by non-voting purges. This process removed eligible nonvoters from registration lists. Some states across the country did this as often as every two to four years (Springer, 2014). As such, those who may

have been registered to vote, but were unable to cast their ballot one election cycle, would no longer be registered to vote in the following election. Therefore, voters would have to go through the burdensome and bureaucratic process of registration to be eligible to vote again. Currently, no state practices this reform because it has been outlawed on the national level.

Though some voting reforms have a demonstrated negative impact on youth voter turnout, there are a few reforms that have the potential to increase voter turnout among eligible youth voters. Research has shown that election day registration and same day voter registration, which allows eligible voters to register and cast their ballots on the same day, is associated with an increase in voter turnout, especially among youth voters (Springer, 2014). The other reform that is usually associated with an increase in youth voter electoral participation are pre registration laws, which allow young people to register to vote prior to turning 18 so they are automatically added to the voting rolls on their eighteenth birthday. Scholars believe that this earlier integration into the electoral process has the capacity to ignite earlier habitual engagement and, thus, bring in new voters rather than retaining existing ones, like early in-person voting does. The preregistration reform is particularly effective in attracting voters who turn 18 during a presidential election year (Holbein & Hillygus, 2015). Thus, reforms that make the process of voter registration easier may be the best way to introduce youth voters to the electoral process.

How Youth Gather Political Knowledge

Scholars often point to the idea that the rise in social media and internet usage should translate to a more engaged youth voter bloc. However, thus far, there has been mixed evidence that supports these claims. Some suggest that more and more of the electorate now use the internet to gather political information since the 2006 midterm elections (Gulati et al., 2013). Young adults, ages 18 to 29, are more also likely to go to the internet for political purposes than

any other age group (Tedesco et al., 2007). Other research suggests that youth voters gather the majority of their political knowledge through interpersonal communication (Kaid et al., 2007). Regardless, this means youth voters are more likely to gather their political information through highly selective means. As such, they must actively seek out political information, which indicates that those who do actively seek out information are already more likely to have voted in past elections or be politically inclined. Ultimately, it is harder for political campaigns to reach youth voters because they tend to self-select into political engagement.

Traditional Mobilization Strategies

Traditional voter mobilization strategies focus on those centrally positioned in social networks and on those who are more likely to respond to the efforts by casting a ballot (Rosentone & Hansen, 1993). As such, there has been a growing emphasis placed on mobilizing a candidate's base, compared to trying to persuade swing voters (Panagopoulos et al., 2016; Panagopoulos, 2017). Therefore, campaigns tend to invest the majority of their funds and energy into television and radio advertisements than online advertising. This is because television and radio ads are less risky and much more likely to reach the target audience: those they have reason to believe will vote for them. On the other hand, campaigns invest less money on online advertisements because they allow for selective exposure that may not reach their target audience due to the danger of selective exposure (Panagopoulos, 2017). Furthermore, technological advancements allow campaigns to use data to target likely voters and supporters, which further removes weak partisans from the electoral process because they are less likely to be targeted by a campaign (Chester & Montgomery, 2017). Considering the newfound emphasis on base mobilization, youth voters are likely to be excluded from campaign strategies because they are not well-established partisans, integrated into social networks that are unlikely to prioritize

voting, and less likely to have the resources that make their mobilization advantageous and desirable to political campaigns. However, there may be a partisan divide when it comes to the mobilization of youth voters. Democratic campaigns, believing higher turnout among youth voters benefits their party's prospects, may be more likely to target this group in their mobilization efforts (Panagopoulos, 2017).

Campaigns and Youth Voters

Overall, however, as campaigns in recent years have focused their attention on their supporters rather than risky independent or swing voters in their mobilization efforts, youth voters tend to be consistently overlooked and ignored. Those with inconsistent voting histories, like youth voters, are less likely to be contacted by campaigns (Panagopoulos, 2017). While mobilization is key to getting people out to vote, few strategies focus specifically on youth voters because of low anticipated vote returns among this segment of the population (Costa et al., 2018). Additionally, it is not probable that campaigns focus mobilization efforts specifically on youth voters because they most likely have less consistent voting histories, have less ability to make monetary contributions to the campaign, and are less predictable on who they would vote for. So, with such low anticipated vote returns, candidates tend to ignore eligible youth voters, which leaves them and the interests they care most about largely ignored (Kaid et al., 2007). Overall, this is significant because the youth electorate is likely to be excluded from traditional mobilization strategies, which may limit their ability to engage in the electoral process because no one is actively coaxing them into participating.

What's Missing?

As outlined, the current research on youth voter participation is vast, but has done little to understand how interactions with political campaigns can influence youth participation in the electoral process. This thesis works to investigate how presidential campaigns have worked to advertise registration deadlines and use mobilization strategies to boost rates of youth voter registration and youth voter turnout. In doing so, this thesis outlines the presidential campaign strategies from the 1996 Election to the 2016 Election that worked to mobilize the youth vote. Through the process of outlining these strategies and integrating empirical evidence on youth registration and turnout, this investigation determines if mobilization strategies are effective, if at all, in exciting youth voters and getting them to the voting booth.

Hypotheses

I hypothesize that registration is the biggest deterrent of youth electoral participation. This is because voter registration is a highly administrative duty, which demands less excitement around the process than the action of voting. Due to the fact that registration efforts are usually conducted by nonpartisan organizations, businesses, and state and local partisan organizations, campaigns will spend less time mobilizing voters ahead of registration deadlines than right before Election Day. As such, youth voters have less access to political information than they would have immediately before Election Day. Additionally, their social networks are less likely to have high levels of political investment, so they are unable to gain political knowledge through conversations with their peers. Thus, their limited access to social networks placed directly in the political process and their selective consumption of political communications halts their ability to navigate the voter registration process.

Despite the anticipated low registration levels among eligible youth voters, I predict that among registered youth, the rate of youth voting will be close to the overall national voter turnout rate. This is because youth voter turnout rates are assumed to be persistently lower than that of any other age demographic because of their low rates of registration. Further, past research has shown that voter turnout rates among registered youth is significantly higher than that of overall youth voter turnout rates. Finally, I hypothesize that Democratic presidential campaigns will be more likely to contact and mobilize youth voters than Republican campaigns. This is because youth voters tend to hold more liberal views than older voters, so they may see more electoral prospects in mobilizing the youth vote than the Republican Party may see. Additionally, it is generally believed that high rates of voter turnout favors the Democratic Party in the electoral process.

Methods

To test these expectations, my analysis begins by conducting historical research on the trends of presidential campaign activity in regards to youth voters. To further emphasize these historical findings, empirical evidence is used to understand the impacts of these strategies on youth electoral participation. To do so, my research is broken into two chapters: Chapter Three, which focuses on youth voters and registration rates, and Chapter Four, which focuses on youth voters and voter turnout rates. Both of these chapters begin with an investigation into campaign strategies and activity over the 1996 to 2016 election cycles. Chapter Three also focuses on the strategies used by nonpartisan and party organizations that sponsored youth registration drives and initiatives over this time period because they are, primarily, the groups that organize and oversee registration campaigns, opposed to political campaigns. Chapter Four focuses entirely on

the changes of presidential campaign strategies over time, paying particular attention to how campaigns have interacted with youth voters during this time period.

Then, I evaluate national party activity through expenditures and presidential campaign activity through advertising in presidential elections from 1996 to 2016. State-election years are the unit of analysis, and the variable I am explaining is registration and voter turnout rates for young people ages 18 to 24.⁵ I compiled registration and turnout information from the Current Population Survey November Voter and Registration Supplement. Party expenditures by the DNC and the RNC are measured as the dollars transferred by these organizations to state and local party organizations during a given election year, and were compiled by Suttman-Lea (2021) and Wichowsky (2012) from the Federal Election Commission public database of campaign expenditures. Data on advertisements for the presidential elections held in 1996, 2000, and 2004 come from the Wisconsin Advertising Project, and the Wesleyan Media Project for presidential elections held in 2008, 2012, and 2016. I also include additional control variables measuring the presence of registration deadlines and electoral reforms, political competition, and other voter demographic information compiled by Rigby and Springer (2011) and Dr. Suttman-Lea (2021).

⁵ State-election year is the chosen unit of analysis because it allows for a more holistic view of the American electorate than national registration and turnout rates offer. This is because it allows the model to reflect the differences of regional turnout and the variances in competition levels across states.

Chapter 3

Youth and Registration

After decades of stagnant turnout among young voters following the passage of the 26th amendment to the United States Constitution, steps were taken to make youth voter participation easier by streamlining the registration process. In this chapter, I outline out a historical narrative that details the shift in focus to youth voter registration, first by new legislation and third party organizations in the 1990s, followed by political parties and presidential campaigns in the mid 2000s. I then develop a set of theoretical expectations for how this shift by campaigns in the mid 2000s shaped youth voter turnout, testing these expectations with a quantitative analysis that examines the relationship between youth voters and national party expenditures and political campaign strategies for presidential elections between 1996 and 2016. Importantly, I develop different expectations contingent on Republican Party and Democratic Party and campaign activity, respectively.

Youth Registration Initiatives Through the Years

In 1996, Motor Voter Registration was introduced to make it easier for citizens to obtain a voter registration form at numerous different government offices. Shortly after the reform was passed, Beck Cain, the president of the League of Women Voters, said, “The electorate is going to look different in 1996. It’s going to be more diverse and it’s going to be younger” (Karl, 1996). This reform was passed with the incentive to alleviate the barriers of participation that face youth voters and other demographics that have low rates of electoral participation. In one year, 11 million Americans registered to vote under the motor voter registration reform, 40% of which were under 30 years of age (Karl, 1996). Therefore, this reform may make it easier for

eligible youth voters to register to vote. Voting reforms tend to take some time to see its real effects, so there should be an increase in youth voter registration overtime and is unlikely to have an immediate impact on rates of youth voter registration.

The American electoral system follows a two-step process: voter registration and casting a ballot. The registration process tends to be seen as the more bureaucratic of the two steps, which means it is far less enticing for campaigns to highlight. Furthermore, the laws, procedures, and timelines for each state's registration process varies greatly across the United States, which creates challenges for campaigns and voters alike in navigating the patchwork registration processes. As a result, registration initiatives have mainly been handled and organized by nonpartisan and partisan organizations in recent years. Therefore, these efforts typically are not connected to the political campaigns of that election cycle. As such, presidential campaigns tend to not explicitly launch registration campaigns independently. Rather, they rely on organizations, both partisan and nonpartisan, across the country to register new voters.

Alongside legal-institutional changes, in the early 1990s, nonpartisan organizations like Rock the Vote have worked to register the youth vote. This attention placed on the youth vote was meant to alleviate the limited knowledge and experience with the voting process thought to be a key factor inhibiting youth electoral participation. Around the same time, other nonpartisan organizations began to work towards the same goal: getting eligible youth voters into the voting population. MTV's Choose to Lose utilized a bus to travel across the country to various college campuses and concerts to register youth voters ("WWE Undertakes Voter", 2000; "College Voter Registration"). Even still, these registration drives are more likely to be accessible to more educated and higher income eligible youth voters who are already more likely to be registered to vote (Plutzer, 2002).

In the mid 2000s, political parties and presidential campaigns made shifts in their strategies that have implications for understanding and explaining youth voter registration. Specifically, shifts in party strategies around 2004 suggest there may be convergent effects of party activity on youth voter turnout between Republicans and Democrats. The Republican Party focused heavily on maintaining established voters, while Democratic campaigns were looking to expand their voter base by bringing in new voters, including youth voters, to the electoral process. In 2004, Democratic local and state organizations began to focus their registration efforts on primarily low-income and minority neighborhoods in highly competitive states. Following the controversial 2000 presidential race, for example, these Democratic organizations focused their efforts in swing states like Ohio and Florida in the hopes that an expanded voting pool would benefit them electorally. Additionally, in the same election cycle, America Votes — a Democratic organization — spent \$300 million on registration and turnout efforts in swing states (Fessenden, 2004). These initiatives suggest the Democratic Party believed electoral competition is a reason to increase campaign activities, and focused their efforts on activating new voter bases in these places. Meanwhile, Republican local and state organizations devoted more resources to Get Out The Vote efforts through grassroots voter mobilization, including door-to-door canvassing and phone banking, opposed to efforts to register new voters (Fessenden, 2004).

In 2008, the sharp divide between the two parties' campaign strategies was heightened by the 2008 presidential campaign of then-Senator Barack Obama. Contrary to the typical role presidential campaigns play in registration efforts, the Obama campaign launched the largest voter registration drive in the history of presidential campaigns, targeting 23 states. The campaign was entitled "Vote for Change" and focused on registering Black voters in the South

and youth voters across the country through rallies (Hayes, 2008). The most concentrated efforts were focused in competitive swing states like Ohio, Michigan, Florida, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. To carry out this large scale registration campaign, the Obama campaign utilized party organizations to help organize their efforts on the ground. Meanwhile, in 2008, Republican Party organizations were more effective in getting their voters out to the polls. As a result, Republican registration rates in competitive states lagged behind Democratic efforts (Wolf, 2008).

Over time, third party organizations continued to play a role in bringing new, young voters into the electorate alongside the Democratic Party. In 2012, Rock the Vote partnered with national and community organizations, technology companies, college campuses, and artists to register more youth voters. By utilizing SMS text message technology, online advertisements, and other virtual technologies, the campaign focused on online youth voter registration efforts. The campaign used QR codes to allow efficient access to registration forms and sent first time voters to both the Democratic National Committee and Republican National Committee national conventions to show the potential of the youth vote and to increase their visibility (“Rock The Vote Launches”, 2012).⁶ As such, the campaign worked to highlight youth involvement in the electoral process, which aimed to incentivize more youth participation through the pressures of social networks. Additionally, President Obama’s 2012 campaign continued their registration efforts from 2008 with 24 field offices in Florida alone (“President Barack Obama”, 2012).

A wave of voter registration innovation in 2016 incentivized at least six major social media applications launched their own voter registration drives on their platforms. Facebook placed registration reminders on users’ timelines until their names showed up on voter rolls. Snapchat launched a series of advertisements of celebrities like Jared Leto and Ciara to encourage people to vote. Additionally, Instagram, Twitter, and Spotify launched their own voter

⁶ QR is an abbreviation for Quick Response.

registration campaigns (Martinez, 2016). Though these drives were not mentioned as a youth-focused campaign, many researchers believe that the increased social media and online usage that is often attributed to eligible youth voters are associated with higher electoral participation rates (Medvic, 2011). Therefore, these online advertisements and reminders would work to remind youth voters that an election was upcoming and encourage them to register to vote.

Expectations and Hypotheses

Alongside established theories of youth voter turnout, this historical narrative provides the foundation for a series of expectations about the effects of political parties and presidential campaigns on youth voter registration. In this section, I develop a series of expectations about the relationship between political party and presidential campaign activity, and youth voter registration during presidential elections between 1996 and 2016. My central expectation revolves around differences on the basis of party activity. During the time period of analysis, the Democratic Party worked to expand the number of eligible voters to include historically disenfranchised populations like racial and ethnic minority voters and youth voters. My analysis focuses on two major sources of party and political campaign activity: the transfer of funds from the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Republican National Committee to state and local party organizations, and the advertisements aired by the presidential campaigns of the two major party organizations in the United States.

First, I expect to see higher rates of youth voter registration with more activity from the DNC. From a strategic perspective this makes sense given that young voters tend to be more liberal and in line with Democratic policies than their older counterparts (Plutzer, 2002).

Furthermore, it is likely that transferred funds will be used for registration drives in electorally competitive states. This is because they will spend more money in states where the race is most competitive in order to expand the pool of their possible supporters in those tight races. Although youth voters have historically been overlooked by political campaigns, the shift in resource allocation by the DNC during the time period of study suggests that these efforts will increase the registration levels among young voters (Alder, 2007; Costa et al., 2018; Kaid et al., 2007; Plutzer, 2002).

Conversely, I expect that Republican Party efforts from the Republican National Committee will not have a significant impact on youth voter registration. This is because the Republican Party tends to work to maintain their party's voting population, rather than expand the voting pool to include new, unpredictable voters (Plutzer, 2002). As a result, the funds transferred from the RNC are more likely to be allocated to Get Out The Vote efforts closer to Election Day and to mobilize regular voters, rather than bringing new voters into the electorate. Thus, there is unlikely to be Republican-led efforts to register youth voters ahead of state registration deadlines.

Because political advertisements tend to focus on persuasion and Get Out The Vote efforts rather than voter registration, I do not expect the volume of advertisements aired by the Democratic and Republican campaigns to have a relationship with the registration of young voters, although I include them in a model as an additional measure of campaign activity.

Methods

To test these expectations, I evaluate national party activity through expenditures and presidential campaign activity through advertising in presidential elections from 1996 to 2016.

State-election years are the unit of analysis, and the variable I am explaining is registration rates for young people ages 18-24. I compiled registration information from the Current Population Survey November Voter and Registration Supplement. Party expenditures by the DNC and the RNC are measured as the dollars transferred by these organizations to state and local party organizations during a given election year, and were compiled by Suttman-Lea (2021) and Wichowsky (2012) from the Federal Election Commission public database of campaign expenditures. Data on advertisements for the presidential elections held in 1996, 2000, and 2004 come from the Wisconsin Advertising Project, and the Wesleyan Media Project for presidential elections held in 2008, 2012, and 2016. I also include additional control variables measuring the presence of registration deadlines and electoral reforms, political competition, and other voter demographic information compiled by Rigby and Springer (2011) and Suttman-Lea (2021).

The time series include 244 observations.⁷ The statistical analyses examine the effects of campaign and national party activity on youth voter registration rates. To do so, I run two models using data for presidential elections during the time period being considered. The key independent variables of interest are variables measuring, per state-year observation, the total party dollars transferred by the DNC and the RNC to state and local party organizations, and the total number of advertisements aired. I run two models, one that looks at the effects of the two parties separately from one another, and one that considers them in relationship to one another by taking the difference in spending and advertising between the Democratic and Republican parties. For party transfers, the models measure the effect on youth voter registration of each additional dollar spent per eligible voter on youth voter turnout. For campaign advertisements, the models measure the effect of each additional advertisement aired in a given state. I estimate

⁷ Some variables were omitted from this data set due to insufficient data. A few state-election year data points did not break down age groups that explicitly include voters age 18 to 24, which made it impossible to accurately determine the numerical value of these variables (Suttman-Lea, 2021).

multivariate regression models and use pooled time-series cross-sectional models with state and year fixed effects. Year effects work to address the broader trends in participation and electoral competitiveness. State effects work to consider the cross state variation with unmeasured factors that influence voter registration (such as election administration and laws). Due to the fact that the units used in this model (states) are fixed, it is not possible to use a random effects model. Instead, I weigh for variables that may influence outcomes. Potential methodological concerns over using this model includes the limitations of understanding how campaigns and parties allocate resources to target specific voting blocs, which I address in my discussion.

Additional Control Variables

I also include a series of control variables to account for other factors that may also affect youth voter registration. These control variables include five separate categories: race, socioeconomic status, political competition, and electoral institutions.⁸ Each of these categories are based on prior evidence suggesting they are important factors to account for when assessing voter registration.⁹

The first control variable is race, which for the purposes of this data set is categorized as non-hispanic white. This is important to consider when running my analysis because, historically, people who are now consider to be “non-white” would not have had the ability to vote for a large portion of American history. As a result, minority voters tend to have less trust in our electoral institutions than white voters who have been given more support in accessing the polls (“Harvard Youth Poll”, 2020). Therefore, researchers have found that white voters have a consistently higher voter turnout rate compared to minority groups’ voter turnout rates from the

⁸Race and socioeconomic data come from the U.S. Census Bureau Statistical Abstract of the United States, and were compiled by Rigby and Springer (2011) and Suttman-Lea (2021).

⁹ Education was chosen to be left out of these models. Due to the fact that youth voters are younger than other voting age groups, they are inevitably among the least educated in the electorate, which would detract from important findings related to young people’s interactions with national political parties and presidential campaigns.

1972 presidential election until the 2016 presidential election (Fraga, 2018, 39). This is important when examining youth voters because America's youth tends to be more racially and ethnically diverse than older age groups (Fry & Parker, 2018). In turn, the diverse voting bloc that youth voters create is less likely to be contacted by campaigns because they have lower anticipated vote returns, which only exacerbates their barriers to electoral participation.

The next control variable category for this model is socioeconomic status, which is measured as per capita income in 2010 dollars. This is important to consider because it has been observed that higher socioeconomic status is associated with higher voter turnout and registration rates. This is because they have easier access to resources that promote more political engagement and are more likely to be situated within social networks that prioritize traditional forms of political participation, like voting (Pacheco, 2008; Plutzer, 2002). Furthermore, more affluent people are more likely to be contacted directly by a campaign because they have more disposable income to be able to donate to campaigns financially. As a result, youth voters, who tend to have less disposable income, will likely be negatively impacted by this control variable (Costa et al., 2018).

The third important control category is political competition, which is measured on a scale rating the level of political competitiveness of each race. This is because voter turnout tends to increase in electorally competitive states and districts. As such, there will also be high registration rates because higher turnout is associated with higher registration (Cherry, 2012). Additionally, it has been observed that young people who have been exposed to electoral competition during childhood tend to have higher rates of electoral participation in early adulthood (Fry & Parker, 2018). Data on electoral competition comes from the Cook Political Report as compiled by Suttman-Lea (2021).

The final category that is necessary to control for in this analysis is the electoral institutions that determine how elections are conducted in each state. First, we must consider whether or not registration rates will be significantly impacted in states with longer gaps of time between registration close to Election Day. I expect that this will significantly impact youth voter registration. This is because earlier registration deadlines increase the barriers to participation for young voters. This will be especially true for young voters who moved to college in a new place that may have an earlier registration deadline than their previous home state's. However, in states with election day registration, a registration deadline is effectively eliminated, which has the capacity to increase voter registration (Springer, 2014). With, essentially, no registration deadline, youth voters face less barriers in the registration process because there will be fewer nuances and dates to remember.

Findings

Table 1. Party Expenditures and Advertisements and Youth Voter Registration

	Dependent Variable:
	Percent Change in Youth Voter Registration
Republican Advertisements	0.526 (0.860)
Democratic Advertisements	- 1.18 (0.364)
Republican Party Spending	0.00546 (0.802)
Democratic Party Spending	0.0234 (0.013)**
Rating	- 0.000546 (0.827)
Election Day Registration	- 0.000409 (0.880)
Close Date	- 0.000781 (0.590)
Income	- 0.00000698 (0.0252)**
Race	- 0.00229 (0.0141)**
Observations:	244
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Source: Data from the Current Population Survey, Wisconsin Advertising Project, Wesleyan Media Project, and Cooks Political Report as compiled by author and Suttman-Lea (2021)

Following what my historical data alludes to, as seen in Table 1, political advertisements — from both Republican and Democratic candidates — appear to have a null effect on youth

voter registration. This is in line with my expectations given that presidential campaigns tend to use advertising for mobilization and Get Out The Vote strategies, opposed to encouraging registration (Panagopoulos, 2017). In this way, it is unlikely that either party's campaign advertisements will have an effect on youth voter registration. In line with my historical narrative, registration efforts tend to be driven by party efforts and shaped by party expenditures. In particular, the Democratic Party appears to be putting more effort into ensuring eligible youth voters are registered to participate in elections. In Table 1, each additional dollar transferred by the DNC to state and local party organizations increases youth voter turnout by about 0.02%. While substantively small, it is important to consider this variable in the context of the range of expenditures by the DNC, which ranges from a minimum of 0 to a maximum of 3.82 dollars spent per eligible voter. RNC spending is both substantially smaller, and has no significant impact on youth voter registration in this model. This dataset does not specifically determine where these funds were directed, however it is able to demonstrate that party activity does have an impact on youth voters, regardless if they were explicitly targeted or not. This holds when controlling for variables like electoral competition, income, and race.

Table 2. Differences in Party Expenditures and Advertisements and Youth Voter Registration

	Dependent Variable:
	Percent Change in Youth Voter Registration
Party Spending (DNC - RNC)	0.0194 (0.0360)**
Campaign Advertisements (Democratic-Republican)	- 0.00000499 (0.122)
Income	- 0.000073 (0.0176)**
Race	- 0.00269 (0.0037)***
Rating	0.00346 (0.816)
Election Day Registration	- 0.00298 (0.913)
Closedate	- 0.000914 (0.545)
Observations:	244
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Source: Data from the Current Population Survey, Wisconsin Advertising Project, Wesleyan Media Project, and Cooks Political Report as compiled by author and Suttman-Lea (2021)

Considering the differences in party expenditures and campaign activities, there were three statistically significant variables found and an additional four variables that had a null effect on youth voter registration rates. For each additional advertisement run by Democratic campaigns more than the number of advertisements run by Republican campaigns, there was no significant difference in youth registration. In regards to party spending, it was discovered that for each dollar the Democratic National Committee spends more than the Republican National

Committee spends, there is a statistically significant (p-value = 0.0360) increase in youth voter registration rates by 0.0194%. This again echoes the historical narrative pertaining to Democratic mobilization efforts, and supports the findings in Table 1 that, on their own Democratic Party expenditures can increase youth voter registration. Conversely, when the RNC transfers more money than the DNC to state and local party organizations, youth voter registration decreases.

Next, I analyze the key independent variables that worked as control variables, to further understand how presidential campaigns and party efforts during presidential elections interact with eligible youth voters. First, it was discovered that in states with higher average incomes, there was a significant decrease (p-value = 0.0176) in youth voter registration by 0.000073%. Second, in states with a higher proportion of non-hispanic white racial make-up, there was a statistically significant decrease (p-value = 0.0037) in youth voter registration by 0.00269%. However, my model found that the rating of electoral competitiveness, whether or not a state had instituted the election day registration reform, and the gap in time between the voter registration deadline and Election Day all had insignificant effects on youth voter registration rates in presidential elections from 1996 and 2016.

Discussion

Campaign Advertising

In this model, campaign advertising did not have a significant impact on youth voter registration rates. This finding aligns with my expectations for campaign activity's impact on registration rates among eligible youth voters because campaigns use advertising for voter education, mobilization, and Get Out The Vote efforts (Panagopoulos, 2017). Therefore, advertisements are expected to be more effective in voter turnout, opposed to registration. This is

due to the timelines of campaigns. Advertisements tend to be run at a much higher rate during the time period directly before Election Day than the time period around when registration deadlines are. As a result, there is less political stimulus surrounding registration deadlines than surrounding Election Day, which makes potential youth voters less inclined to register (Gimpert et al., 2007). Additionally, registration is a bureaucratic act in nature and often viewed as a tedious necessity to the voting process (Timpone, 1998; Bennion & Nickerson, 2011). Therefore, eligible voters feel less incentivized to register when there is less excitement surrounding the registration process.

It is also important to recognize that campaigns typically do not focus on voter registration in their messaging strategies. Instead, as the historical data demonstrates, they allow party organizations and non-partisan groups to handle and strategize the bulk of voter registration efforts — with the exceptions of then-Senator Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign and President Obama’s 2012 re-election campaign. Typically, neither major party spends a substantial amount of resources on registration efforts in their advertising campaigns. Therefore, it is logical that for each additional advertisement run by Democratic campaigns more than Republican campaigns, there is not significant impact on youth voter registration. This is because campaigns tend to use their advertisements for mobilization and persuasion efforts closer to Election Day, not around registration deadlines.

National Party Spending

For each dollar spent per eligible voter by the Democratic National Committee more than the Republican National Committee, youth voter registration significantly increased by 0.0194%, thus demonstrating how party spending has the capacity to, and does, impact youth voters. This finding supports my hypothesis that when the Democratic Party spends more money than the

Republican party within any given state, there will be a boost in youth voter registration rates. This finding is particularly significant because my model is a conservative test, meaning I am looking for independent effects on rates of registration when youth registration is already likely to be high. By focusing my analysis on presidential election years, which already attract more media attention and excitement than mid-term and off-year elections, the capacity for effects over and above the usual factors shaping voter turnout like electoral competition, resources, and institutions, is quite low. Additionally, this increase in youth voter registration associated with more DNC spending also supports the historical observations I made previously that the Democratic Party makes more of a concrete effort to register youth voters more than the Republican Party. For example, during the 2004 presidential race, the Democratic organization America Votes spent \$300 million on registration and turnout efforts in swing states. Meanwhile, Republican local and state organizations focused the majority of their resources on Get Out The Vote efforts through door-to-door canvassing and phone banking (Fessenden, 2004). Therefore, demonstrating how the Democratic Party was more effective and interested in expanding the voting pool to include youth voters, while the Republican party was more effective in mobilizing their voting base closer to Election Day.

These observations support the notion that the Democratic Party has more interest in expanding the voting pool to include youth voters and, thus, make a concerted effort to register them to vote. This is because youth voters tend to hold more liberal beliefs, which makes them more likely to support the Democratic candidate over the conservative Republican candidate (Plutzer, 2002). My finding is important because it shows that party activity does influence youth voters in regards to registration. We cannot definitively determine how money was allocated by the DNC or RNC, however it demonstrates that there is a correlation between increased

Democratic National Committee spending and increasing youth voter registration rates. This is also important because it demonstrates that youth voters are interested in the electoral process, and politics more generally, because they are paying attention to the initiatives surrounding them and are responding to them (Holbein & Hillygus, 2020; Symonds, 2020).

Additional Control Variables

This model included other important variables, which are vitally important to understanding youth electoral participation and youth registration: income, race, competition, and electoral institutions. Each of these variables help us to understand the ways in which presidential campaigns interact with youth voters based on previously established research and this empirical data. It was discovered that when a state has a higher average income, youth voter registration significantly ($p\text{-value} = 0.0176$) decreases by 0.000073%. Therefore, supporting the established research stating that political campaigns are more likely to contact potential voters who have higher income. This is because individuals with higher and more established incomes have more disposable income to donate to campaigns (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Plutzer, 2002; Pacheco, 2008; McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Costa et al., 2018). Youth voters tend to have less disposable income due to less established employment and living conditions, which translates into the unlikelihood of being able to donate to campaigns in a substantial amount. Therefore, campaigns are less incentivized to contact youth voters.

This model found that youth voter registration decreases by 0.00269% ($p\text{-value} = 0.0037$) in states with a higher proportion of non-hispanic white within the state's population. This was found because youth voters tend to be more ethnically and racially diverse than older voting age groups (Fry & Parker, 2018). Therefore, they are more likely to feel uncomfortable and unfamiliar with the voting process. Additionally, due to the historical disenfranchisement of

minority groups, non-white voters are less likely to feel as though their vote mattered, which decreases the likelihood of electoral participation (Kaid et al., 2007; Wells & Dudash, 2007). Additionally, in states with a higher non-hispanic population, there may be fewer youth voters there (Fry & Parker, 2018). As such, there would be even fewer youth voters for campaigns to be concerned with, which would only work to disincentivize presidential campaigns to contact youth voters even more than they already are. This is because there is an even smaller expected segment of vote returns campaigns could rely on to achieve their ultimate goal of winning the election.

The next important variable I included in this model is competition. This is because competition is a large determinant of how many resources campaigns will devote to each state throughout the election cycle. As seen in the historical data, the majority of party funds allocated to states for registration purposes were sent to swing states, which have the highest competitive rating (Wolf, 2008; “President Barack Obama”, 2012; Hayes, 2008; Fessenden, 2004). Despite this, the model found that the slight increase in youth registration rates was not statistically significant. Therefore, competition had, essentially, a null effect on youth registration rates. This did not align with my expectations because, typically, research finds that competition increases interest in the electoral process and, thus, invigorates more activity among the electorate (Pacheco, 2008). Yet, this was not the case with youth voter registration. A possible explanation for this may be that because political parties and presidential campaigns already have to allocate more money and resources towards the most electorally competitive states, which may translate into having less of an ability to focus on youth voters. This is because, strategically, youth voters have low anticipated vote returns, so it is a wiser decision for campaigns to target other voting demographics that have higher anticipated vote returns (Costa et al., 2018).

The final category of control variables that is important to consider when examining youth voter registration is electoral institutions. For this model, I included whether or not a state has election day registration instituted and when the registration close date, measured number of days between when registration closes and Election Day, is. However, it was determined that neither of these variables had a significant effect on youth voter registration. Typically, the election day registration reform is associated with higher registration rates, especially among youth voters, because there is more stimuli surrounding the election closer to Election Day, which excites the voting bloc and encourages them to register to vote in order to participate in the election (Springer, 2014; Gimpel et al., 2007). However, a possible explanation for why this was not seen in this model, and why the number of days separating registration closing and Election Day, did not have a significant impact on youth registration rates is that youth voters typically get their campaign information from online sources. Therefore, they are more susceptible to the negative impacts of selective exposure (Tedesco et al., 2007; Kaid et al., 2007; Panagopoulos, 2017). Thus, they may be less impacted by the political stimuli leading up to Election Day and, therefore, are not impacted by events that are associated with an increase in registration.

Chapter 4

Youth and Voter Turnout

Chapter Three established that youth voter registration rates are significantly influenced by national party spending, but are not significantly impacted by political advertising. However, changes in campaign and party strategies have also had a meaningful impact on voter turnout as well (Gimpel et al., 2007). In addition to following a highly centralized structure, presidential campaigns have begun to utilize new technologies to reach more of the electorate. With the rise of the internet and information and communication technologies, campaigns have become increasingly interactive. In turn, information has become more readily accessible to the electorate (Medvic, 2011; Panagopoulos, 2017). The analysis in this chapter considers how campaign strategies have shifted over time and how these shifts have affected youth voter turnout. It provides a historical overview of how modern presidential campaigns have changed since the 1980s, focusing specifically on the implications of these changes for youth voter turnout, before developing and testing expectations about the differential effects of Democratic and Republican campaign efforts on youth turnout.

Targeting the Youth Vote Through the Years

During the 1980s, microprocessors were developed and became a staple in political campaigns. As a result, campaigns could more easily access and sort through registration and donor lists and organize campaign events than ever before (Medvic, 2011). During President Ronald Reagan's 1984 reelection campaign, his team used computers to fundraise, register voters, and schedule candidate appearances. This technology made it easier for an Electoral College strategy to be implemented because it allows for "51 distinct campaigns which each

have their own very separate characteristics” (Burnham, 1984). In this way, computers allowed for presidential campaigns to curate each state’s campaign strategy to match their unique political contexts. In addition to the creation of microprocessors, the 1980s saw the creation of cable television, which made targeted communication theoretically possible (Medvic, 2011). Cable television allows campaigns to select specific channels to air their advertisements. As such, they can target potential supporters based on viewership demographics in order to talk to them directly and to gain their electoral support.

In the 1990s, the rise of the internet and cell phones increased the ability for campaigns to connect and communicate with the electorate more effectively. These technological advancements strengthened the link between resources and the command of information (Medvic, 2011). In doing so, targeting specific audiences was becoming more and more realistic. By 2000, microtargeting¹⁰ made it easier for campaigns to target likely supporters and direct their advertisements towards them (Panagopoulos et al., 2016; Hoferer et al., 2020). Therefore, campaigns now hold the capabilities to target their communications to reach their most likely supporters. In doing so, campaigns — particularly Republican led campaigns — became more interested in mobilizing their base of supporters, rather than working to persuade unpredictable, new voters like youth voters.

Despite advancements in microtargeting, political campaigns continued to utilize more traditional campaign advertisement strategies to ensure they do reach as many eligible voters as possible. Here, there was less divergence in strategy between the two parties than in Chapter Three with voter registration campaigns. In 2004, both the Kerry and Bush campaigns allocated more funds to television advertisements than ever before. Less partisan and less knowledgeable

¹⁰ Microtargeting “leverages information from surveys and other research to develop sophisticated statistical models that can be used to predict voters’ preferences and behaviors” (Panagopoulos 2017).

voters are more susceptible to persuasion from television advertisements, and campaigns saw this as an opportunity to persuade newly registered youth voters (Kaid et al., 2007). Moreover, after youth voters reported using the internet for news and political information, both campaigns attempted to explicitly target potential youth supporters through online blogs for the first time in the history of presidential campaigns. About half of the blog readers were under the age of 30, but these blogs were not found to have had a significant impact on youth's attitudes towards either major party candidate (Tramell, 2007). As time has gone on and more of the electorate has become more dependent on technology, the number of people who gain political information from the internet has increased.

Since 2006, more voters began to gather their political information from the internet. In response, political campaigns have integrated the internet and social media into their communication strategies (Gulati et al., 2013). It is believed that the increase in digital campaigns has the capacity to lower the costs and barriers between constituents and candidates to become more interactive and engaged with the people they are vying to represent. While this is true, it also allows for the electorate to have more selective exposure to campaign communications and advertisements (Urbanski, 2016). As such certain demographic groups, like youth voters, that are historically left out of campaign strategies may become even harder to reach than before. Still, the 2008 Election saw the first usage of social networking sites, which made it easier for political actors to reach constituents through selective exposure (Carlisle & Patton, 2013).

In 2008, the Obama campaign again led the way with a groundbreaking youth campaign using all of these new technologies. They utilized a short message service, or SMS, to provide supporters with "insider information" and announcements via text message, aired advertisements

on online gaming services, and created their own social network (my.barackobama.com) with over three million users (Carlisle & Patton, 2013). In doing so, the campaign hoped to reach eligible youth voters on platforms that they use on a daily basis. Unlike other campaigns, the Obama campaign tried to overcome the barriers of selective exposure that prevents many online campaign messages from reaching youth voters.

In 2012, President Obama's reelection campaign, again, used new technology to expand the voting pool and the reach of their campaign communications. There were over 40 million names on his email list, compared to the only four million names on Republican opponent Mitt Romney's email list. The campaign utilized social media platforms, especially Twitter, to be used as a rapid response and engagement too. During the 2012 Election, Romney's campaign also used Twitter in a similar manner to reach and engage with his own supporters (Urbanski, 2016). Overall, the two campaigns worked to ensure there was more consistent communication throughout the election campaign through online platforms while also implementing more traditional television, print, and radio advertisements.

Expectations and Hypotheses

As with the chapter on voter registration, I develop expectations for the effects of political campaigns on youth voter turnout surrounding Democratic and Republican National Committee efforts as well as Democratic and Republican television advertisements. I expect that in more electorally competitive states when the Democratic National Committee transfers more funds to state and local organizations, youth voter turnout rates will increase. Conversely, I expect that in more electorally competitive states when the Republican National Committee transfers more funds to state and local organizations, youth voter turnout rates will not be

significantly impacted. This is because, although the data does not precisely lay out how funds will be allocated, it is unlikely that transferred funds will be used to specifically target youth voters because they are largely ignored by political campaigns (Alder, 2007). Historically, youth voters have low anticipated vote returns, which makes them too risky to invest a significant amount of resources towards (Costa et al., 2018; Kaid et al., 2007). However, I expect a higher amount of Democratic Party spending to positively influence voter turnout rates among eligible youth voters because youth voters tend to be more liberal, which makes them more likely to support Democratic candidates (Plutzer, 2002). Additionally, the historical narrative suggests that the Democratic Party and Democratic presidential candidates tend to take on a more active role in mobilizing the youth vote than their Republican counterparts.

I expect both Democratic and Republican campaigns to air more advertisements in competitive states compared to in less competitive states. This is because voters tend to gain a significant amount of political knowledge from advertisements, which may help in persuading their support to the candidate who sponsored the ad (Tedesco et al., 2007). That being said, I expect that when Democratic campaigns run more advertisements than Republican campaigns, youth voter turnout will increase. Conversely, if Republican campaigns run more advertisements than Democratic campaigns, youth voter turnout will not be impacted. This is because Democratic campaigns are more likely to work to mobilize youth voters because they tend to be more liberal and are more likely to be persuaded to vote for Democratic candidates.

Methods

To test these expectations, I evaluate national party activity through expenditures and presidential campaign activity through advertising in presidential elections from 1996 to 2016.

State-election years are the unit of analysis, and the variable I am explaining is voter turnout rates for young people ages 18 to 24. I compiled turnout information from the Current Population Survey November Voter and Registration Supplement. Party expenditures by the DNC and the RNC are measured as the dollars transferred by these organizations to state and local party organizations during a given election year, and were compiled by Suttman-Lea (2021) and Wichowsky (2012) from the Federal Election Commission public database of campaign expenditures. Data on advertisements for the presidential elections held in 1996, 2000, and 2004 come from the Wisconsin Advertising Project, and the Wesleyan Media Project for presidential elections held in 2008, 2012, and 2016. I also include additional control variables measuring the presence of registration deadlines and electoral reforms, political competition, and other voter demographic information compiled by Rigby and Springer (2011) and Suttman-Lea (2021).¹¹

The time series include 244 observations.¹² The statistical analyses examine the effects of campaign and national party activity on youth voter turnout rates. To do so, I run one model using data for presidential elections during the time period being considered. The key independent variables of interest are variables measuring, per state-year observation, the total party dollars transferred by the DNC and the RNC to state and local party organizations, and the total number of advertisements aired. I run two models, one that looks at the effects of the two parties separately from one another, and one that considers them in relationship to one another by taking the difference in spending and advertising between the Democratic and Republican parties. For party transfers, the models measure the effect on youth voter turnout of each additional dollar spent per eligible voter on youth voter turnout. For campaign advertisements,

¹¹ Education was chosen to be omitted from these models. Due to the fact that youth voters are younger than other voting age groups, they are inevitably among the least educated in the electorate, which would detract from important findings related to youth interactions with national political parties and presidential campaigns.

¹² Some variables were omitted from this data set due to insufficient data. A few state-election year data points did not break down age groups that explicitly include voters age 18 to 24, which made it impossible to accurately determine the numerical value of these variables (Suttman-Lea, 2021).

the models measure the effect of each additional advertisement aired in a given state. I estimate multivariate regression models and use pooled time-series cross-sectional models with state and year fixed effects. Year effects work to address the broader trends in participation and electoral competitiveness. State effects work to consider the cross state variation with unmeasured factors that influence voter turnout (such as election administration and laws). Due to the fact that the units used in this model (states) are fixed, it is not possible to use a random effects model. Instead, I weigh for variables that may influence outcomes. Potential methodological concerns over using this model includes the limitations of understanding how campaigns and parties allocate resources to target specific voting blocs, which I address in my discussion.

Additional Control Variables

My key explanatory variables capture political party and campaign activity for presidential elections held between 1996 and 2016. To measure Democratic and Republican Party activity in each state over time, I include a measure of the amount of money transferred per eligible voter to each state from the DNC and the RNC. Democratic and Republican presidential campaign advertisement activity are measured by a variable that captures the total number of advertisements aired per state for each election year in the study. In addition to these key explanatory variables, I also include a series of control variables to account for other factors that may also affect youth voter turnout. Each of these variables fit into five categories: race, socioeconomic status, party competition, and electoral institutions. Each of these categories are proven to have an influence over overall voter registration in American elections and, thus, must be accounted for in this model reflecting youth voter turnout during the 1996 to 2016 presidential election cycles.

The first control variable is race, which for the purposes of this data set is categorized as non-hispanic white. This is important to consider when running the analysis because, historically, people who we now consider to be “non-white” would not have had the ability to vote for a large portion of American history. As a result, minority voters tend to have less trust in our electoral institutions than white voters who have been given more support in accessing the polls (“Harvard Youth Poll”, 2020). Therefore, researchers have found that white voters have a consistently higher voter turnout rate compared to minority groups’ voter turnout rates from the 1972 presidential election until the 2016 presidential election (Fraga, 2018, 39). This is especially important to consider among youth voters because they tend to be more racially and ethnically diverse compared to older age demographics, which makes them less likely to be contacted by presidential candidates (Fry & Parker, 2018).

The next control variable for these models is socioeconomic status, which is measured in per capita income in 2010 dollars. This is important to consider because it has been observed that higher socioeconomic status is associated with higher voter turnout rates. This is because they have easier access to resources that promote more political engagement and are more likely to be situated within social networks that prioritize traditional forms of political participation (Pacheco, 2008; Plutzer, 2002). Furthermore, more affluent people are more likely to be contacted directly by a campaign because they have more disposable income to be able to contribute to political campaigns financially, which makes potential voters feel more connected to the electoral process and the candidate they are supporting. As a result, youth voters, who tend to have less disposable income, are likely to be negatively impacted by this control variable (Costa et al., 2018; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993).

The third important control category is political competition, which is recognized as the electoral competitiveness rating. This is because voter turnout tends to increase in electorally competitive states and districts (Plutzer, 2002). Furthermore, when overall voter turnout is higher, youth voter turnout has been seen to increase as well (Symmonds, 2020). Additionally, for young voters in particular, the exposure to competitive elections in childhood, translates into a strong likelihood of casting a ballot once they become eligible to do so (Plutzer, 2002).

The final category that is necessary to control for in this analysis is the electoral institutions that determine how elections are conducted in each state. First, we must consider whether or not a state allows for early in-person voting. Though important to consider, this reform is unlikely to influence voter turnout rates of youth voters because research shows that those who decide to vote early tend to be the strongest partisans who would have already voted on Election Day (Stein, 1998). As such, youth voters, who tend to be weak partisans, are unlikely to take advantage of early in-person voting (Plutzer, 2002; Gimpel et al., 2007). Furthermore, campaigns have to increase their spending in states with early in-person voting, which may exacerbate the already limited resources being directed towards youth voters (Rosenfield & Kimberling, 1994). The next electoral institution that is important to consider is whether or not a state allows for universal absentee voting. This is because some restrictions placed on absentee voting may disproportionately impact youth voters who go to college or university outside of their home state (Rao et al., 2020). Therefore youth voters most likely to engage in politics through electoral participation, those with more education, may face more obstacles to participation without universal absentee voting in place (Pacheco, 2008).

Next, we must consider whether or not youth voter turnout rates will be significantly impacted in states with longer gaps of time between registration close to Election Day. Similar to

youth voter registration, this is likely to have a negative impact on youth voter turnout. This is because earlier registration deadlines increase the barriers to participation for young voters who are unfamiliar with the electoral process. However, in states with same day voter registration or election day registration, there is more stimuli surrounding the election closer to Election Day, which is correlated with increased voter registration and, in turn, increased voter turnout (Gimpel et al., 2007). This is because voters tend to gain political knowledge from advertisements, which may help in persuading their support to the candidate who sponsored the advertisement (Tedesco et al., 2007). Therefore, advertisements are used more to gain support and Get Out The Vote, which may excite eligible youth voters into participating in the election.

Findings

Table 3. Party Expenditures and Advertisements and Youth Voter Turnout

	Dependent Variable:
	Percent Change in Youth Voter Turnout
Republican Advertisements	1.96 (0.480)
Democratic Advertisements	- 1.12 (0.421)
Republican Party Spending	0.00915 (0.675)
Democratic Party Spending	- 0.0307 (0.0202)**
Rating	0.0152 (0.356)
Election Day Registration	- 0.0152 (0.526)
Close Date	- 0.000823 (0.453)
Early In-Person Voting	- 0.0340 (0.462)
Universal Absentee Voting	0.0189 (0.223)
Income	- 0.00000484 (0.223)
Race	- 0.00142 (0.182)
Observations:	244
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Source: Data from the Current Population Survey, Wisconsin Advertising Project, and Wesleyan Media Project, compiled by author and Suttman-Lea (2021)

As seen in Table 3., political advertisements — from both Republican and Democratic candidates — appear to have a null effect on youth voter turnout. Though this was an expected finding in the registration model, it was far less expected in this model on voter turnout. This is because political advertisements are used to mobilize voters, so it was expected that Democratic campaign advertisements would have an impact on youth voter turnout (Panagopoulos, 2017). Yet, this was not observed in this model, which brings me to the main constraint of this dataset: This data does not demonstrate how advertisements were targeted. So, it is hard to determine if there was a significant effort to specifically mobilize youth voters. However, based on the historical data, it can be assumed that Democratic campaigns ran more advertisements targeting potential youth supporters than Republican campaigns. In regards to national party spending, it appears as though Democratic National Committee spending is the driving force behind an increase in youth voter turnout. This is because while Republican National Committee spending had no significant impact on youth voter turnout, there was a 0.025% statistically significant increase (p-value = 0.014) per additional dollar spent per eligible voter by the DNC.

Table 4. Differences in Party Expenditures and Advertisements and Youth Voter Turnout

	Dependent Variable:
	Percent Change in Youth Voter Turnout
Campaign Advertisements (Democratic - Republican)	- 0.000000119 (0.783)
Party Spending (DNC - RNC)	0.0197 (0.0398)**
Income	- 0.00000471 (0.101)
Race	- 0.00161 (0.110)
Rating	0.0258 (0.0287)**
Election Day Registration	0.01408 (0.593)
Closedate	- 0.000927 (0.384)
Universal Absentee Voting	0.0182 (0.222)
In-Person Early Voting	- 0.0307 (0.0202)**
Observations:	244
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Source: Data from the Current Population Survey, Wisconsin Advertising Project, and Wesleyan Media Project, compiled by author and Suttman-Lea (2021)

Based on this dataset, analyzing the impact of political campaigns on youth voter turnout in presidential elections from 1996 to 2016, there were three statistically significant variables found and an additional six variables that had a null effect on youth voter turnout rates. To begin with the two prominent measures of campaign activity, it was discovered that for each additional

advertisement run by Democratic campaigns more than the number of advertisements run by Republican campaigns, there was no significant difference in youth voter turnout. In regards to party spending, it was discovered that for each dollar the Democratic National Convention spends more than the Republican National Party spends, there is a statistically significant (p-value = 0.0398) increase in youth voter turnout rates by 0.0197%. Therefore, demonstrating that party activity has a significant effect on youth voter electoral participation.

Next, I analyze the key independent variables that worked as control variables, to further understand how presidential campaigns interact with eligible youth voters in regards to voter turnout. First, it was found that a state's electoral competitive rating significantly (p-value = 0.0287) increases youth voter turnout by 0.0258% for each step. Competition is measured on a scale: least, likely, lean, and toss up. Therefore, moving from the least to the most competitive state, turnout is expected to increase by 0.07%. Second, when a state has enacted in-person early voting, there is a significant decrease (p-value = 0.0202) in youth voter turnout by 0.0307%. However, it was discovered that whether or not states have enacted election day registration, whether or not states have universal absentee voting in place, the gap in time between registration closed dates and Election Day, the average income, and the proportion of non-hispanic whites in a state's population do not have a significant impact on youth voter turnout.

Discussion

Campaign Advertising

Campaign advertising did not have a significant impact on voter turnout. In other words, the slight decrease in youth voter turnout per each additional advertisement run by Democratic

campaigns relative to Republican advertisements does not have a substantial impact on youth voter turnout. This finding does not support my hypothesis. I expected for each additional advertisement run by Democrats relative to Republicans, there would be a significant increase in youth voter turnout. This is because the historical data demonstrates that Democratic campaigns over this 20 year period did, in fact, attempt to attract young voters during their campaign. For example, in 2004, John Kerry's campaign sponsored more online blogs directly aimed at increasing youth voter electoral participation than George W. Bush's campaign (Tramell, 2007). Then again in 2012, Barack Obama's campaign made the explicit decision to increase youth voter turnout, while John McCain's campaign did not. They did this through advertising on gaming sites, creating their very own social networking site, and using SMS technology to reach potential youth supporters where they spend the majority of their time (Carlisle & Patton, 2013). From this evidence, I made the assumption that youth voters would be mobilized through these tactics, but this was not the case.

Regardless, there are explanations as to why this may have occurred. The substantive effect per additional advertisement is quite small. Therefore, each additional advertisement is unlikely to be able to sway the rate of youth voter turnout on its own. However, it is necessary to measure campaign activity in this way because it allows for the best measurement for competition. This is because both parties devote more resources and advertisements to swing states, which demonstrates how effective their most strategic advertising is on youth voter turnout. Additionally, youth voters gather the majority of their political information through online platforms, which make them more susceptible to selective exposure. As such, it is feasible that youth voters who were already planning to cast their ballots on Election Day were reached

by these advertisements. This is because selective exposure requires voters to seek out political information, thus those who were uninterested in participating are able to not be exposed.

National Party Spending

It was found that for each dollar spent per eligible voter by the Democratic National Committee more than the Republican National Committee spends, there is a statistically significant increase in youth voter turnout of 0.0197% (p-value = 0.0398). This supports my expectation that more Democratic spending will increase voter turnout rates among eligible voters ages 18 to 24. This is because youth voters tend to hold more liberal ideological beliefs, which means they are more likely to support Democratic candidates (Plutzer, 2002). Therefore, the Democratic Party would have more interest in committing more resources into mobilizing this segment of the electorate than the Republican Party does.

This data set does not demonstrate where funds were allocated by the national party committees. However, it does demonstrate that to some extent the Democratic Party was better at mobilizing youth voters than the Republican party. This could be, in part, due to youth voter registration efforts, which we saw had a very similar effect. This is because higher registration rates of registration are correlated with higher rates of voter turnout (Cherry, 2012). It is also important to note that this model is conservative. By focusing my study on presidential election years, which already demand more media attention and excitement than mid-term and off-year elections, the ability for effect that go beyond the impacts of the usual factors shaping voter turnout like electoral competitiveness, resources, and institutions, is quite low. As such, this increase in youth voter turnout is even more significant because it demonstrates parties have the capability to influence youth voter turnout even during elections where media attention and interest in the process is already heightened. So, the observation that the Republican National

Committee spent less money in trying to register youth voters demonstrates they still will not see an impact of their spending on youth voter turnout. Therefore, it is logical that when more DNC spending relative to RNC spending is shown to be statistically significant in youth voter registration, it would also be statistically significant in youth voter turnout.

Important Control Variables

This model included other important variables, which are vitally important to understanding youth electoral participation and youth voter turnout: income, race, competition, and electoral institutions. This is because each of these variables help us to understand the ways in which presidential campaigns interact with youth voters based on already established research and this empirical data. It was discovered that income does not significantly impact youth voter turnout. This aligns with my expectations because political campaigns are more likely to contact and interact with voters who have a higher socioeconomic status because they have more disposable income to donate to campaigns (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Pacheco, 2008; Costa et al., 2018). Therefore, youth voters do not typically fall within this category because they tend to have less established employment opportunities, which means they are less likely to make substantial donations to campaigns (Symonds, 2020).

The next control variable is race, which is represented as the proportion of non-hispanic white residents within a state. Within the model, this variable also had no significant effect on youth voter turnout rates. This is likely due to the fact that youth voters tend to be more racially and ethnically diverse compared to older segments of the electorate (Fry & Parker, 2018). As a result, they may feel less comfortable with the voting process and as though there is little efficacy in voting (Kaid et al., 2007; Wells & Dudash, 2007; Holbein & Hillygus, 2020). Additionally, political campaigns tend to ignore historically disenfranchised members of the

electorate, so these diverse young voters are even less likely to be contacted directly — even less so than their white counterparts. Furthermore, states with higher proportions of white voters may have less young people living in their state. Therefore, campaigns are less incentivized to court young people for their support because they make up such a small percentage of the electorate within those states.

The third important control variable within this model is competition, which is represented as the competitive rating of each state. This rating is set on a scale from least, likely, lean, to toss up. For each step, it was discovered that youth voter turnout significantly increases by 0.0258% (p-value = 0.0287). Therefore, moving from the least to the most competitive state, turnout is expected to increase by 0.07%. This finding supports my expectations because electoral competition increases the excitement, attention, and interest in elections. Additionally, when young people grew up in electorally competitive districts, they are more likely to participate in elections because they see voting as a norm (Pacheco, 2008). Therefore, they are placed into social networks that expect and prioritize electoral participation. Additionally, campaigns are more likely to direct more advertising and national parties are more likely to allocate more resources to highly competitive states (Panagopoulos, 2017). As such, there is more stimuli surrounding Election Day, which encourages more people to go to the polls, including youth voters.

The final category of control variables within this model is electoral institutions. This is important because electoral institutions dictate how early a campaign begins and how many resources a campaign allocates to any given state. The first institution of importance is early voting. As seen in the model, youth voter turnout statistically significantly decreases by 0.0307% (p-value = 0.0202) when a state has in-person early voting enacted. This follows my theoretical

expectations because early voters tend to be more politically aware and stronger partisans, which young people tend not to be (Stein, 1998; Gerber et al., 2008; Plutzer, 2002; Gimpel et al., 2007; Thomsen, 2014). Additionally, this electoral reform does not bring in any new voters, which would encompass many young voters. Instead, it works to maintain the preexisting electorate. Early in-person voting requires campaigns to take a new approach in campaigning and in deciding how to best allocate resources. This is because they need to strategize when to emphasize key points of their campaign before the early voting period begins and again before Election Day. As such, campaign costs increased by 25% on average (Rosenfield & Kimberling, 1994; Dunaway & Stein, 2013). Therefore, with an already necessary increase in campaign spending, the youth voters, whose vote returns are far lower than other age demographic groups, continue to be ignored by presidential campaigns (Adler, 2007). So, resources that may have been directed towards mobilizing youth voters would be allocated to other voting blocs who are more likely to participate in the election to ensure a more secure electoral victory.

The next important electoral institution to consider in this model was whether or not a state had election day registration in place. The model demonstrated that this reform does not have a statistically significant impact on youth voter turnout, which goes against my theoretical expectations. This was an unexpected result because, typically, this reform increases youth voter registration and turnout because there is more political stimuli surrounding the election closer to Election Day. As such, this reform should excite young voters, make it easier for them to participate in the electoral process, and encourage them to cast a ballot (Springer, 2014; Gimpel et al., 2007). The next reform considered in this model was the gap in time between when registration closes and Election Day. This was not found to be statistically significant, which goes against my expectations. I expect this reform to negatively impact youth voter turnout

because it adds additional burdens to the process of voting. However, it had a null effect in this model, which may be due to the idea of selective exposure. Youth voters tend to gather their political information online, which makes them more susceptible to advertisements and political news, unless they actively seek it out. As a result, the stimuli that is typically associated with an increase in voter registration, and in turn voter turnout, may not have the same impact on young people (Gimpel et al., 2007; Cherry, 2012; Panagopoulos, 2017; Kaid et al., 2007; Tedesco et al., 2007).

Finally, it is important to consider whether or not states allow for universal absentee voting. In this model, there was no significant difference in voter turnout for states that allow for universal absentee voting and those that do not, which contradicts my theoretical expectations. This is because this reform allows for out-of-state college students to vote in their home states with more ease. However, this process also can be seen as a bureaucratic extra step to the electoral process, which may obstruct youth voters from participating in the election. This is because in many states, individuals have to fill out another form to have a ballot sent to them (Jervis, 2020). As such, this process could have a similar effect as voter registration on youth voters because it is seen as a bureaucratic and boring process, opposed to the instant gratification voters get from voting in-person on Election Day.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

On July 1, 1971, the decades-long fight to give voting rights to those above the age of 18 came to an end. President Richard Nixon certified the 26th Amendment to the United States Constitution, which lowered the voting age from 21 to 18. This historic event enfranchised millions of new voters and gave them the potential of shifting the American electorate. However, when the 1972 Presidential Election came around, merely half of the newly eligible youth voters cast their ballots on Election Day (Claire, 2020). Supporters of the movement were left confused at the apparent disinterest in politics: Why did young people show up in droves to cast the ballot they worked so hard to earn?

Unfortunately, the low turnout rates in the 1972 election was not an outlier, but the beginning of an abysmal trend. Between the 1996 presidential election and the 2016 presidential election, youth voter turnout remained the lowest among all age demographics. Still, today, youth voter turnout remains stubbornly lower than every other age group in the voting population, leaving scholars, politicians, and campaign operatives alike wondering why youth turnout has not significantly changed over the past 50 years. However, between 2000 and 2004, there was about a 20% increase in youth voter turnout, from 30% to 50%.¹³ This is due to the reactionary change the Democratic Party made after Al Gore's infamously narrow loss to George W. Bush. In response to Gore's loss, the Democratic Party shifted their campaign strategy to target a larger segment of the eligible voting population, while the Republican Party continued to mobilize their base of supporters.

¹³ As seen in Figure 1.

Considering this change in presidential campaign strategy, my thesis worked to understand the implications of these alterations in strategy on youth voter registration and turnout. In doing so, I expected that presidential campaigns alone would not be able to increase youth voter participation in the electoral process. Regardless of concentrated efforts made by presidential campaigns to target advertising aimed at increasing youth voters' electoral participation, campaigns are unable to help eligible youth voters overcome the institutional barriers of participation, particularly during the registration process. This is due to the fact that youth voters are disproportionately impacted by structural restrictions in the registration process due to their less established residency, less established employment, and unfamiliarity with the registration process as a whole. However, I expected that political campaigns would be able to overcome the barriers to participation when it comes to casting a ballot. This is because an increase in campaign stimuli directed towards youth voters may excite potential voters in this age group into voting.

Furthermore, I hypothesized that if national party organizations, like the DNC and the RNC, contribute to register and mobilize youth voters, there will be an increase in both youth voter registration and turnout. This would be especially true when the DNC worked to do so and spent more money than the RNC. I expected this to be particularly true for youth voter registration because many state and local party organizations operate the bulk of partisan led registration drives and campaigns. Thus, this increase in registered youth voters should have translated into a rise in youth voter turnout as well. In this chapter, I present my concluding thoughts into four sections: a summary of the study conducted, a restatement of the findings, the significance of these findings, and recommendations for future research on youth voting.

Summary of Study

To conduct this research, I exemplified how youth voters tend to be ignored by political campaigns because of their low education levels, low anticipated vote returns, less established and disposable income, and their increased mobility. Despite their interest and engagement in politics as a whole, youth voters have a much more difficult time entering into electoral politics because of their lack of contact with political campaigns directly and the institutional barriers that prohibit electoral participation.

My thesis then laid out historical research on the trends in presidential campaign activity in regards to youth voters and accompanied that research with empirical findings to understand the impacts of these strategies on youth electoral participation. To do this I broke these findings into two chapters: Chapter Three, which focused on youth voters and registration rates, and Chapter Four, which focused on youth voters and voter turnout rates. Both of these chapters begin with an investigation into campaign strategies and activity over the 1996 to 2016 election cycles. Chapter Three also focuses on the strategies used by nonpartisan and party organizations that sponsored youth registration drives and initiatives over this time period because they are, primarily, the groups that organize and oversee registration campaigns, opposed to political campaigns. Chapter Four focuses entirely on the changes of presidential campaign strategies over time, paying particular attention to how campaigns have interacted with youth voters over the years. Then, both chapters include a time-series cross-sectional multivariate regression model to understand how campaign strategies and party expenditures impact youth voters.

I used two models to evaluate national party activity through expenditures and presidential campaign activity through advertising in presidential elections from 1996 to 2016. State-election years were the unit of analysis, and the variable I explained is registration and

voter turnout rates for youth voters, ages 18 to 24.¹⁴ I compiled registration and turnout information from the Current Population Survey November Voter and Registration supplement. Party expenditures by the DNC and RNC were measured as the dollars transferred by these organizations to state and local party organizations during a given election year, and were compiled by Suttman-Lea (2021) and Wichowsky (2012) from the Federal Election Commission public database of campaign expenditures. Data on advertisements for the presidential elections held in 1996, 2000, and 2004 came from the Wisconsin Advertising Project, and the Wesleyan Media Project for presidential elections held in 2008, 2012, and 2016. I also included control variables measuring the presence of registration deadlines and electoral reforms, political competition, and other voter demographic information compiled by Rigby and Springer (2011) and Suttman-Lea (2021).

Overview of Findings

In Chapter Three, I discovered, based on historical data, that youth registration drives and campaigns were primarily conducted by nonpartisan organizations and businesses along with state and local organizations connected to the Democratic Party. It was discovered that, generally, presidential campaigns did not engage in registration campaigns. This, of course, has the exception of then-Senator Barack Obama's 2008 registration campaign, the largest registration push coordinated by a presidential campaign in modern history, that worked to register historically disenfranchised voters, including minority and youth voters. Meanwhile, the Republican Party made no significant effort to register youth voters. Instead, they focused on Get Out The Vote efforts closer to Election Day to mobilize their base. As such, it is implied that the

¹⁴ State-year was the chosen variable in these models because it offers two important controls. First year effects work to address broader trends in participation and electoral competitiveness. Second, state effects work to address the cross state variation within unmeasured factors that influence voter registration and turnout.

Democratic Party saw more utility in registering more people and increasing the number of people on voting roles throughout the country.

To enhance my historical findings, I included empirical data to determine if these efforts made a significant difference on youth voter registration. While advertising did not have a significant impact on rates of youth voter registration, it was discovered that national party spending does significantly increase youth voter registration. These findings follow my expectations because political advertising is used to mobilize voters, not get them registered to vote. At the same time, I discovered that for each additional dollar per eligible voter spent by the Democratic National Committee than the Republican National Committee, youth voter registration increases. In doing so, this suggests that the Democratic Party's initiatives to mobilize youth voters through registration drives and registration campaigns have some effect on their target audience. It also solidifies the idea that the Democratic Party makes more of a concerted effort to get youth voters entered into the electoral process than the Republican Party does.

In Chapter Four, I laid out the major shift in presidential campaigns to mobilize young voters beginning around 2004. During this year, both major party candidates, President George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry, began using blogs to gain youth support by going to where they get the majority of their information: the internet. However, it was not until 2008 did we see the full capacity of youth voter targeting in then-Senator Barack Obama's campaign. Through the creation of his own social networking site, advertisements on online video games, and his massive email list, the Obama campaign worked to gain youth supporters. Through my findings, it was clear that, again, the Democratic party felt more inclined to, and interested in, help youth voters enter into the electoral process.

To emphasize my historical findings, I incorporated a multivariate regression analysis to further document the relationship between presidential campaigns, national parties, and youth voter turnout through empirical evidence. I found that, again, campaign advertising does not have a significant effect on youth voter turnout. This was a particularly surprising finding because I expected more Democratic advertisements than Republican advertisements to have a significant increase in youth voter turnout. However, this was not the case. As I suggest elsewhere, this is likely because advertisements tend to be targeted more towards persuasion, rather than mobilization. In regards to party expenditures, for each additional dollar spent per eligible voter spent by the Democratic National Committee over the Republican National Committee, youth voter turnout increases. This followed my expectations based on the asymmetric targeting of youth voters by these two political parties, and is in line with the effects of DNC expenditures on youth registration rates documented in Chapter Three.

Significance

My findings in this study are noteworthy because the test chosen to run is very conservative. By focusing my analysis on presidential election years, which already garner more media attention and excitement than mid-term and off-year elections, the ceiling for effects over and above the usual factors shaping voter turnout like electoral competition, resources, and institutions, was quite low. Therefore, the small, but significant, increase in both youth voter registration and turnout when the Democratic National Committee spends more than the Republican National Committee per eligible voter demonstrates that campaigns and parties do have the power to influence electoral engagement among young voters. It is likely that these effects may be more pronounced during mid-term election years.

My findings suggest that political party organizations, in particular, have the capacity to positively influence and increase youth voters' electoral participation. My findings demonstrate that something the Democratic National Committee is doing in regards to registration and mobilizing the youth vote is increasing the rates of both youth voter registration and turnout. Whether or not youth voters are directly targeted by national party organizations, something they have done has excited them and coaxed them into increasing their electoral engagement. Therefore, my study demonstrates that youth participation is more impressionable than many operatives believe them to be because of their historically low vote returns (Alder, 2007). This evidence demonstrates that youth voters are susceptible to, at least some, political targeting as a means to mobilization. Regardless of party activity, my findings demonstrate that youth voters are engaged with the political process. They highlight that young people are interested in participating in politics, but may need more help in doing so.

At the same time, my findings suggest that presidential campaigns have a more limited capacity to increase youth voter registration and turnout. Based on these findings, political advertising alone does not have the capacity to influence youth voter registration and turnout rates. This conclusion does make sense because young voters tend to be largely ignored by political campaigns (Alder, 2007). This is because this age group has low anticipated vote returns, has less of an ability to financially support campaigns, and are more likely to be weaker partisans, campaigns may not see the value in courting young voters for their support.

Ultimately, this thesis offers new empirical insights into the understanding of youth electoral participation in the United States. By demonstrating that party expenditures can have an influence over rates of youth voter registration and turnout, my findings support previous evidence and assumptions made by scholars that registration may be the biggest inhibiting factor

of youth voting (Springer, 2014; Timpone, 1998; Holbein & Hillygus, 2020). This is because the historical findings suggest that party expenditures, particularly Democratic National Committee expenditures, are primarily allocated towards registration drives, which help alleviate barriers to registration that disproportionately impact young people. Additionally, this highlights the notion that young people, ages 18 to 24, are interested in the electoral process and politics as a whole. However, their lack of understanding of procedural and structural barriers prevents young people from expressing their interest through the ballot box.

Finally, my findings offer a few important implications for political scientists and campaign operatives alike. First, the impact of these findings suggest that more research must be conducted to better understand how specific practices and reforms disproportionately and negatively impact youth voters who are interested in participating in the electoral process. Second, my findings suggest that if political operatives, specifically Democratic operatives, work to mobilize the youth vote, they can utilize a voting bloc that can, if given the opportunity, influence electoral outcomes. Finally, for both political scientists and political operatives, my findings suggest it is necessary to reevaluate the assumptions made about youth voters and their participation in the political process. By doing so, an enhanced understanding of how and why young people participate in politics can allow researchers and policymakers to effectively engage with youth voters and, as such, mobilize a new generation of voters earlier in their adult lives.

Recommendations for Further Study

To better understand how political campaigns and national party organizations interact with youth voters, it would be beneficial for future research to break down the allocation of resources directed towards youth voters. Although this was not possible on the data I utilized for

this thesis, this would empirically demonstrate the extent to which national party organizations and political campaigns are interested in mobilizing the youth vote by examining these breakdowns. Additionally, it would help demonstrate what strategies and types of advertisements and initiatives are most effective in engaging young voters.

Additionally, based on these findings, to better understand the youth vote, it would be beneficial to run a similar test examining youth voter registration and turnout rates during midterm election years between 1998 and 2018 to see if national party organizations and political campaigns have the same, or different, impact on youth voters than as in presidential election years. This is because midterm elections tend to gain less media attention, and so there is greater room for improvement in turnout in the presence of more campaign and party activity. Additionally, as previously mentioned, this would help researchers and campaign strategists better understand what factors are most effective in incentivizing the youth vote to participate in elections.

Similarly, it would be interesting to examine the interaction between national party expenditures and political competition. Though this thesis found that political competition increases youth voter registration, it is unable to fully explain the contexts in which this is most effective. As such, future research could test whether party expenditures are more or less effective at different levels of electoral competition; it may be, for example, that DNC expenditures are only significant at higher levels of electoral competition. Next, it would be important to explore other contextual factors that influence electoral engagement, like electoral institutions and reforms. For example, this might involve whether or not the effect of DNC expenditures is more effective in contexts that have more accessible voting systems, such as states with Election Day Registration, early in-person voting, and universal absentee voting.

Shifting away from electoral politics and towards youth voters as a whole, it would be interesting to investigate the ways in which youth voters participate in politics most often. Whether that is voting, online activism, protest, or membership in certain organizations, this kind of research would help political scientists, campaign operatives, and politicians better understand how youth voters are engaged politically and why, outside of electoral participation. This may help to explain why levels of youth electoral participation continue to be so persistently low.

Final Thoughts

This thesis began as a conversation with my grandparents about how, in their view, young people are disinterested in politics. In their view, this is why young people do not actively participate in elections. Knowing myself and my peers, I could not accept that disinterest was the reason why young people abstain from voting. From my perspective, young people wanted to engage with the electoral process, but they lacked the confidence to do so. So, I designed this thesis to investigate the truth about youth voters.

Based on my historical research and empirical findings, my hypothesis was supported: Youth voters do care about politics and they want to be involved in the electoral process. However, the institutional barriers that impact young people make it immensely more difficult for them to cast a ballot on Election Day than for other age groups. Regardless, this thesis demonstrates that eligible youth voters are susceptible to national party activity. My findings demonstrate that young adults, ages 18 to 24, are a vitally important and untapped voting bloc that has the potential to influence presidential and other election outcomes in American politics if they are adequately invested in.

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