Motivating and supporting youth to vote using theory-driven approaches

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Abstract

Many Americans distrust the government, are disillusioned with the political process, and don't view voting as an effective form of political engagement. Such disillusionment is higher among young Americans, who are disproportionately underrepresented in government. Although voting is an essential action citizens can take to influence and reshape the government, the majority of youth don't vote regularly. Youth face substantial structural and psychological barriers that interact in particular ways during emerging adulthood to create friction that reduces youth voting and perpetuates cycles of political disempowerment. Executive Order 14248 and the SAVE Act will create new barriers to voting by requiring documentary proof of citizenship to register to vote in federal elections, which is expected to disproportionately affect youth who lack access to valid identification documents at higher rates than older Americans. In the face of mounting structural barriers, it is increasingly important to design effective interventions to motivate and support youth to vote. This commentary outlines a psychologically-informed approach to designing get-out-the-vote initiatives to help youth overcome psychological barriers. It describes the developmental context of emerging adulthood and the challenges and opportunities this period poses for voting, and how developmental factors interact with structural and psychological barriers to impede voting. It then reviews theory and research from psychology, communication, and political science to provide recommendations for creating developmentally appropriate, theory-based get-out-the-vote initiatives. It also describes participatory co-design approaches that can increase intervention effectiveness while also supporting youth civic identity development and democratic skill building.

Keywords

American democracy was founded on the principle that the government's authority and legitimacy is derived from the consent of the governed (*Declaration of Independence*, 1776). Under this framework, the government should work on behalf of, and be responsive to, the people. Yet today, the vast majority of Americans have low trust in the government (Pew Research Center, 2024) and are disillusioned with the political process (Gallup, 2024a; Hatfield, 2024; Pew Research Center, 2023). These frustrations reflect the fact that, in contrast to democratic ideals, public policy is almost exclusively shaped by elites and special interests (Gilens & Page, 2014; Page & Gilens, 2020). Disillusionment and dissatisfaction are higher among young Americans, who report feeling less well represented than older Americans (Pew Research Center, 2023). Young Americans are in the most racially and ethnically diverse generation (Igielnik, 2020), have different policy priorities than older Americans (Beshay, 2024; Kiley, 2025; Krogstad, 2025; Silver, 2024), and are disproportionately underrepresented in government (Stockemer et al., 2023; Stockemer & Sundstrom, 2022). For the government to be truly representative and reflect the will of the people, widespread political participation is critical.

Voting is an essential action citizens can take to influence the government and reshape it to work on their behalf. However, the majority of youth don't vote regularly; approximately 53% of eligible voters aged 18-29 did not vote in 2024 (CIRCLE, 2025b) and 77% did not vote in 2022 (CIRCLE, 2023). Despite low levels of voting, youth—here defined as 18-25 year olds unless otherwise stated—are not apathetic (CIRCLE, 2025a). Youth face substantial structural and psychological barriers to both voter registration and voting (Hill, 2020; McDonald & Hanmer, 2019; Wray-Lake et al., 2024). Consequently, youth turnout is lower than for older adults. For example, in the 2024 US presidential election, only 58% of eligible youth registered (vs. 76% of older adults) and 82% of registered youth actually voted (vs. 90% of registered adults; U.S. Census Bureau, 2025).

Psychological and structural barriers to voting interact in mutually reinforcing ways. For example, the combination of low participation and weak representation can create a vicious cycle of political alienation among youth: (1) structural and psychological barriers reduce youth voting, (2) low participation disincentivizes elected representatives from addressing youth concerns (e.g., climate action and gun control), (3) which in turn can heighten disillusionment and further depress youth voting (Stockemer & Sundström, 2025). It is important to note that structural and psychological barriers are not evenly distributed; they tend to more heavily impact youth of color and individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (CIRCLE, 2018, 2025c)—potentially worsening cycles of political disempowerment in these groups. Existing barriers are expected to be exacerbated by Executive Order (EO) 14248, "Preserving and Protecting the Integrity of American Elections" (Exec. Order No.14248, 2025) and related congressional acts, which create new hurdles to voting for youth, especially youth of color and youth from lower income families (CIRCLE, 2025).

Executive Order 14248

Among other things, EO 14248 creates a new requirement for documentary proof of citizenship (DPOC)—for example, a birth certificate, passport, or naturalization papers—to register to vote in federal elections. On its face, this requirement seems reasonable and indeed, a majority of Americans support it (Gallup, 2024b), highlighting concerns about how to balance election integrity and voting access. However, EO 14248 has been criticized as unnecessary

and suppressive, and is being challenged in court as illegal and unconstitutional (Just Security, 2025; Weiser, 2025). States already require people to attest their citizenship under the penalty of perjury when registering and voting by noncitizens is a federal crime that can result in serious consequences, including prison time and deportation (Morales-Doyle, 2024). Prior evidence indicates that these existing measures work and attempted voting by noncitizens is exceedingly rare (Keith & Pérez, 2017; Nowrasteh, 2020). Thus, requiring DPOC to register is not necessary to prevent noncitizens from voting.

At the same time, requiring DPOC has the potential to disenfranchise millions of citizens. Only about half of Americans have passports (Center for American Progress, 2025), an estimated 21.3 million Americans don't have DPOC readily available, and at least 3.8 million Americans do not have documentation at all (Rothschild et al., 2024). Applying for a passport requires planning and preparation, as it can take weeks or months depending on demand (U.S. Department of State, 2025). The application cost may also be prohibitive for low-income Americans, who have lower passport ownership rates (YouGov, 2023). Even for those with birth certificates or passports, changing one's legal name (e.g., when getting married) may make these documents invalid as DPOC, presenting a barrier for millions more Americans. Since young people tend to lack ready access to valid identification documents (Hill, 2020; Rothschild et al., 2024), have lower incomes than older Americans (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025), and typically marry (and change their legal names) in their 20s (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022), this provision is expected to disproportionately burden youth.

The SAVE Act (SAVE Act, 2025), which passed in the House of Representatives in April, 2025, would go even further by requiring individuals to provide DPOC in person. This would effectively end registration drives, online, automatic, and mail-in registration (Weiser & Garber, 2025)—key mechanisms by which youth register (Bennion & Nickerson, 2016; Michelson et al., 2024; Nickerson, 2015). Whether enacted by Executive Order or by Congressional Act, requiring DPOC creates another barrier to voting for youth and reinforces structural and psychological barriers to voting, which interact to undermine youth representation.

Commentary aims and scope

In the face of mounting structural barriers, it becomes increasingly important to motivate and support youth to vote—to increase youth representation, break the cycle of political disempowerment, and enact structural change. Removing structural barriers is critical, but policies take time to legislate and implement (see CIRCLE (2022) and Wray-Lake et al. (2024) for evidence-based policy recommendations). Furthermore, youth voting has remained low despite variability in election laws and policies, suggesting the presence of pervasive psychological barriers (Harder & Krosnick, 2008). Therefore, we describe a psychologically-informed approach to designing get-out-the-vote (GOTV) initiatives focused on helping youth navigate and overcome existing barriers that can be implemented in parallel with structural policy change. By taking an evidence-based and theory-guided approach, stakeholders—from academics and school administrators, to community and non-profit organizations—can better use limited resources and increase the chance of success, while avoiding unintended negative consequences associated with poorly designed outreach.

This commentary begins by describing the developmental context of emerging adulthood and the challenges and opportunities this period poses for voting. With this developmental

context in mind, we describe how structural and psychological barriers interact with developmental factors to create friction that impedes voting. We then review theory and research from psychology, communication, and political science to provide recommendations for designing developmentally appropriate, theory-based GOTV initiatives that motivate and support youth to overcome these barriers. Finally, we highlight the promise of participatory co-design approaches as a method to design interventions while simultaneously supporting youth civic identity development and democratic skill-building. Key points are summarized in each section and overarching design recommendations are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Overarching design recommendations

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1. Consider the developmental context to identify psychological barriers that are central in emerging adulthood and find developmentally appropriate ways to support youth to overcome them

2. Seek to design interventions that both motivate voting and help youth fulfill key developmental needs, such as identity and worldview exploration, to promote well-being and lasting civic engagement

3. Use behavior change theory to guide campaign and intervention design to more effectively identify which psychological barriers are relevant for a given population and which intervention strategies are promising targets to overcome them.

4. Invite youth to inform, co-create, and lead campaign and intervention development

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Emerging adulthood presents opportunities and challenges for voting

In order to understand barriers to voting among youth, we first consider the broader developmental context of emerging adulthood. With this broader backdrop in mind, we then turn more directly to how it intersects with specific voting barriers. Emerging adulthood (ages 18–25) marks the transition out of adolescence, with defining personal identities, goals, and values, refining a worldview, and beginning to assume adult roles and responsibilities being key developmental tasks (Arnett, 2015). This period is characterized by increased identity exploration, self-focus, and instability (Arnett, 2000, 2015), presenting important opportunities and challenges for voting.

Table 2

Key points about opportunities and challenges to voting in emerging adulthood

1. Emerging adulthood is a formative period for civic and political development, when youth are exploring personal identities and expanding their worldview

2. Voting is an opportunity to meet the developmental needs and support the well-being of emerging adults

3. Features of emerging adulthood, including identity exploration and self-focus, instability, decreased self-regulatory scaffolding and social support, and heightened vulnerability to mental health issues create challenges to voting

Developmental opportunities

Like adolescents, emerging adults remain highly attuned to their peers, sensitive to social norms (Nelson et al., 2016), and motivated to contribute to their communities (Fuligni, 2019). However, they also have greater cognitive capacity and agency to take self-determined action (Tim Urdan, 2006; Wehmeyer et al., 2017), making them better positioned to impact their communities civically and politically. During this period, emerging adults not only explore who they are, what they value, and where they're headed, but also deepen their understanding of societal structures and whether and how their values are reflected in them. This increased self understanding and critical consciousness combine to make emerging adulthood a formative period for civic and political development (Núñez & Flanagan, 2014).

Civic and political actions such as voting provide opportunities for emerging adults to pursue development tasks in ways that support their well-being (Ballard et al., 2019; Korich & Fields, 2023; Mužík et al., 2025). As the popular slogan "your vote, your voice" communicates, voting is a means of self-expression, a way to act agentically, and a chance for emerging adults to use their political voice to influence government (Brennan & Lomasky, 1993). Considering who to vote for, reflecting on societal issues, and discussing opinions with others can help youth clarify their sense of self and their worldview. Taking action and working with others to make positive change can also deepen youth's sense of self-efficacy and purpose (Fenn et al., 2021, 2023; Malin et al., 2015).

Developmental challenges

Although voting can support emerging adult development, several developmental factors can make voting challenging during this period. This section outlines these factors, while the next section unpacks how they interact with specific voting barriers. First, emerging adults experience substantial instability—they typically move away from home and are more mobile than older adults (Ansolabehere et al., 2012), and tend to have busy and unpredictable schedules (CIRCLE, 2025a; Hill, 2020). Second, they have less self-regulatory scaffolding than in adolescence; emerging adults are still developing conscientiousness (Bleidorn et al., 2022) and the ability to autonomously self-regulate during goal pursuit (Ratelle & Guay, 2023). Third, as developmental milestones that root individuals in their communities (e.g., owning a house, having children) have become increasingly delayed, emerging adults now tend to have weaker

ties to and stake in their communities than previous generations (Flanagan et al., 2012; Smets, 2016). Fourth, as emerging adults gain independence and become more mobile—allowing them to focus on developing themselves through career and educational attainment—stable sources of social support from adolescence (e.g., from old friends, family, teachers, coaches) are diminished (Arnett et al., 2014). Finally, these reductions in social support and increased stress contribute to heightened vulnerability to mental health challenges, such as depression, that negatively impact motivation and cognition (Solmi et al., 2022).

Psychological barriers impeding youth voting

Structural and psychological barriers interact in particular ways during emerging adulthood to create friction that reduces youth voting and perpetuates cycles of political disempowerment. This section describes how structural voting policies can create psychological barriers to voting, and how psychological barriers related to information, motivation, and self-regulation, are impacted by developmental factors during emerging adulthood.

Table 3
Key points about psychological barriers that impede youth voting

1. Structural and psychological barriers interact in unique ways during emerging adulthood to create friction that impedes voting

2. Informational, motivational, and self-regulatory barriers are three sources of psychological barriers youth face

3. Interventions that are aligned with developmental needs can help emerging adults overcome psychological barriers to voting

Structural policies can generate psychological barriers

State election laws and policies influence how easy or difficult it is for citizens to vote. Structural policies, such as registration deadlines and restrictions, whether and what form of identification—including DPOC—is required to register and vote, and when and how voting takes place, influence voting directly and indirectly by creating psychological ease or friction. The cumulative impact of these policies is summarized in the "Cost of Voting Index" (Pomante et al., 2023), which measures the time and effort required to vote in each state. States with higher voting costs tend to have lower turnout rates overall (Juelich & Coll, 2020; Li et al., 2018) but voting costs also disproportionately impact youth; states with higher costs show wider turnout gaps between younger (18-29) and older (30+) adults (Juelich & Coll, 2020). This is consistent with evidence showing differential impacts of specific voting policies on youth, such as same day and automatic registration (Christy et al., 2024; Grumbach & Hill, 2022) and voter ID laws (Hill, 2020; Rothschild et al., 2024; Wray-Lake et al., 2024). These disproportionate negative effects demonstrate that structural voting policies are experienced differently by youth and suggest increased friction from developmentally-relevant psychological barriers.

Informational barriers that reduce self-efficacy

Emerging adults are disproportionately affected by informational barriers about how to register and vote (Hill, 2020). They report being less confident about these processes and how to find information, and many feel overwhelmed by the process (Ad Council, 2022). Their increased mobility also means they are more likely to navigate these processes multiple times. If they attend school out of state, they need to weigh many factors (e.g., deadlines, ballot knowledge, vote impact) to determine where to vote. Campaigns and voting organizations can help close knowledge gaps to promote voting (CIRCLE, 2025a; Niemi & Hanmer, 2010), but they frequently dismiss youth as they are low propensity voters and difficult to contact (Benenson et al., 2016). The accumulation of informational barriers can reduce emerging adults' sense of self-efficacy and hinder voting.

Motivational barriers that shape voting beliefs

Beliefs shape attitudes and expectations about the value of voting. Positive beliefs like viewing voting as self-relevant, socially normative, and a civic duty can increase the perceived value of voting (Blais & Achen, 2019; Cizmar et al., 2016; Lydic, Torres-Grillo, et al., 2025). Believing that voting is personally meaningful and value-aligned also bolsters autonomous ("want to") motivation to vote, which strengthens voting intentions and behavior (Lydic, Falk, et al., 2025). However, having had fewer opportunities to participate in elections, experience their impacts, and connect the process of voting to their lives, emerging adults tend to endorse such beliefs at lower rates than older adults (Feitosa & Galais, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2023; Sheldon et al., 2005). Having weak ties to their communities from increased mobility and delayed fulfillment of adult milestones can also make the consequences of elections less tangible, reducing motivation (Núñez & Flanagan, 2014). Emerging adults also tend to have lower external political efficacy and response efficacy, endorsing negative beliefs about voting more frequently than older adults—reporting less faith in democracy, lower confidence in the future of the government, and perceive voting to be less impactful (CIRCLE, 2025a; Pew Research Center, 2023). Such feelings of disillusionment, frustration, and dissatisfaction reduce motivation to vote (CIRCLE, 2025a; Lydic, Torres-Grillo, et al., 2025) and perpetuate the cycle of political alienation and disempowerment among youth (Stockemer & Sundström, 2025).

Beyond beliefs about voting, motivational factors impact the decision-making process itself. Mental health challenges like depression are characterized by anhedonia and impair multiple components of decision-making (Mukherjee et al., 2020). Depressive episodes peak in emerging adulthood (NIMH, 2023) and depression is associated with lower rates of voting both within and across people (Ballard et al., 2019; Landwehr & Ojeda, 2021; Ojeda, 2015; Ojeda & Pacheco, 2019). In contrast, having a clear sense of self can facilitate value-aligned decision-making (Berkman et al., 2017), such as whether and how to vote. However, given that emerging adults are actively exploring their identities and values, this self-knowledge may be less accessible to guide decision-making during this period (Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018).

Self-regulatory barriers that increase intention-behavior gaps

Voting has been described as a habit-forming behavior; if a person has voted previously, they're more likely to vote in the future (Gerber et al., 2003). Once voting habits are formed and repeated in stable contexts (e.g., voting at the same location), motivation and self-regulation are not required (Aldrich et al., 2011). However, these factors are important when a voting habit has yet to be formed or when the context changes (e.g., after moving to a new state; Aldrich et al., 2011). Given that youth haven't had the opportunity to develop voting habits and their mobility reduces the stability of the voting context, self-regulation is crucial in the beginning. However, emerging adults are still developing self-regulatory skills, such as goal setting, planning, and organization, that are important for voting (Hillygus & Holbein, 2023). Even those who have strong intentions to vote may not effectively act on their intentions due to poor planning, missed deadlines, or unforeseen circumstances.

Theory-driven approaches to overcoming psychological barriers to voting

Behavior change theories and frameworks from psychology and communication can be used to strategically guide intervention development. These models have been employed to describe and predict behavior change in youth and adults in other domains (Albarracín et al., 2024; Falk et al., 2025; Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018; Steinmetz et al., 2016) and we apply them here to the context of youth voting. Adopting a theory-guided approach can help practitioners identify intervention targets and understand why some interventions work in some contexts, or for some people, while others do not. We conceptualize voting among youth as an intentional, value-based decision, but also advocate for processes that promote voting habit formation. Figure 1 summarizes our conceptual model to show how structural and psychological barriers impact voting in emerging adulthood and how psychologically-informed intervention strategies can help youth overcome them.

Table 4
Key points about theory-driven approaches to overcoming psychological barriers to voting

1. Among youth, voting is initially an intentional decision

2. Value-based decision-making and behavior change frameworks highlight key ingredients that motivate intentional choice and can guide which strategies to use depending which barriers are relevant to the target population

3. Theory-guided, evidenced-based strategies that increase the personal rewards (e.g., planning, autonomous motivation, civic hope) and social rewards (e.g., social norms, civic duty, relational organizing) of voting can help youth overcome developmentally-relevant psychological barriers to voting

4. GOTV efforts that engage and reward youth across multiple elections can support habit formation and reduce reliance on motivation and self-regulation

Voting is an intentional, value-based decision among youth

Voting is initially an intentional, value-based decision to pursue a goal, meaning that individuals need to decide to take an action in the future. We highlight two theoretical frameworks that can be applied to understand this choice process in youth. First, value-based decision-making models presume that people assign subjective values to different choices, compare the choices, and then enact choices that are expected to produce the highest reward value. Choices can either move individuals toward or away from their goals. Personal and social rewards are key factors that influence the subjective values of different choices and therefore interventions can seek to increase these rewards to promote voting (Falk et al., 2025; Falk & Scholz, 2018). Second, the Integrated Model (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2011), which synthesizes multiple related behavior change theories (Ajzen, 2011; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Bandura, 1997; Prochaska et al., 1992), posits that people's behaviors are shaped by their intentions. This model proposes that intentions are determined by attitudes about a behavior and its expected outcomes, perceived social norms, and sense of self-efficacy or perceived control to engage in the behavior. These attitudes and perceptions are in turn shaped by behavioral, normative, and control beliefs, respectively. Thus, each of these factors are viable targets for intervention to overcome psychological barriers to form or strengthen intentions to vote, or bolster the link between intentions and behavior.
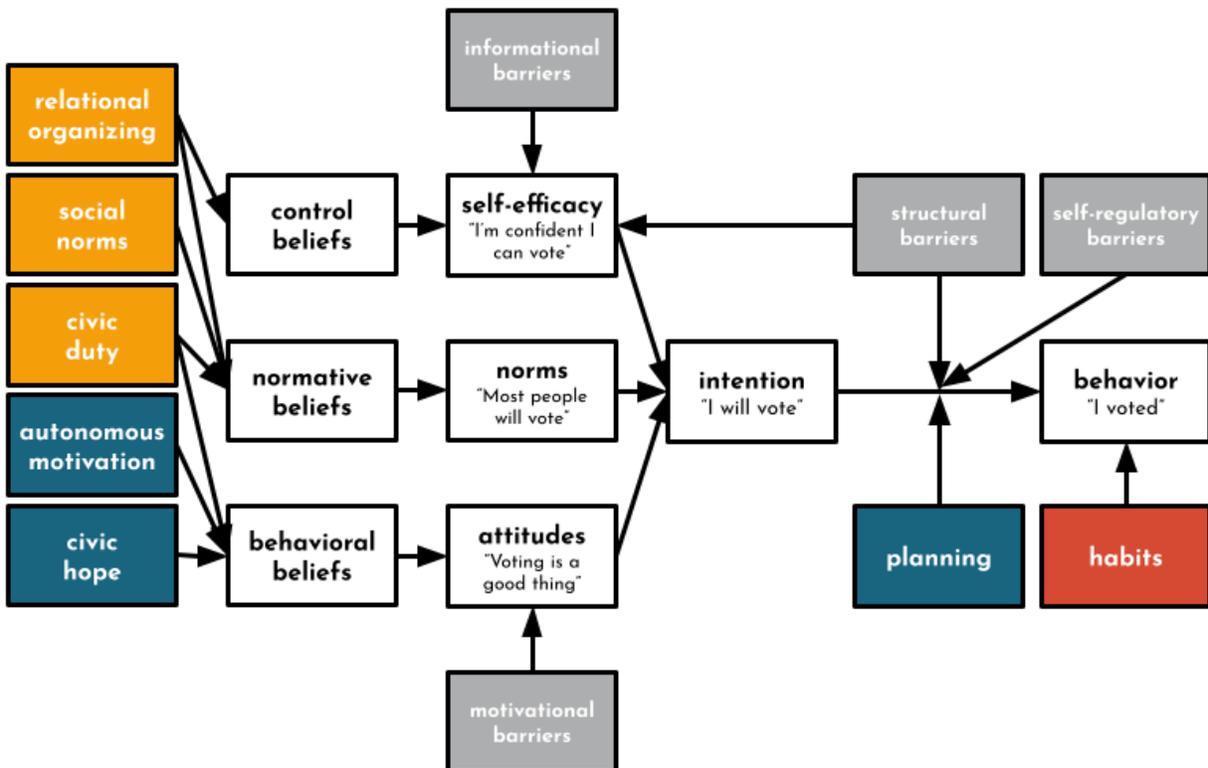

Figure 1. Overview of our conceptual model adapted from the Integrated Model including the barriers (grey boxes) and strategies (colored boxes) discussed in this commentary. Arrows are illustrative but not exhaustive. For example, structural barriers most directly impact perceived self-efficacy and intention-behavior links but may also influence perceived norms and behavioral attitudes. Similarly, motivational

barriers might also impact perceived norms and intention-behavior links. Blue boxes are interventions expected to increase personal rewards while orange boxes are interventions expected to increase social rewards. Habits operating outside intentional decision-making are in red.

Designing campaigns and interventions

Knowing where someone is in their behavior change journey is key to effective campaign development (Fishbein & Cappella, 2006). For people who already intend to perform a behavior, an important goal for campaigns or interventions is to strengthen the link between intention and behavior. This can be accomplished by reducing environmental barriers, improving policies, and building people's skills to convert intentions into action (Albarracín et al., 2024). In the absence of strong behavioral intentions, interventions should focus on forming or strengthening intentions by shifting beliefs (Fishbein & Cappella, 2006). Methods that compare the relative influence of beliefs like the Hornik and Woolf method (Hornik & Woolf, 1999) and network-based approaches (Lydic, Torres-Grillo, et al., 2025) can be used to identify "promising" beliefs that are the most likely to increase intentions and behavior. Once specific promising beliefs are identified, practitioners can then design campaigns and interventions targeting them to strengthen behavioral intentions.

Our research on voting beliefs among college students suggests that voting beliefs are weakly held in emerging adulthood, making many beliefs viable intervention targets [removed for peer review]. Consistent with the strategies we highlight below, the most promising beliefs we identified were related to planning, self-relevance, disillusionment, civic duty, and social norms. Critically though, we found that some beliefs were more effectively targeted in GOTV messaging than others. Specifically, we found that informational messages targeting control beliefs (e.g., about planning) were the least effective, whereas motivational messages targeting behavioral beliefs about the self-relevance of voting were the most effective. This suggests that reducing informational barriers—while important—may not be sufficient to motivate voting.

Psychologically-informed strategies

In this section, we highlight examples of theory-based strategies with the potential to address developmentally-relevant psychological barriers by shifting voting beliefs, strengthening voting intentions, and closing the gap between intentions and behavior (Figure 1). Strategies are grouped based on whether they're expected to increase the personal or social value of voting. For each strategy, we describe the theoretical basis and review evidence from voting interventions. Because few studies have focused specifically on youth, we review evidence from youth when possible and from adults generally when not. This set of strategies is illustrative and not exhaustive; for further discussion on evidence-based voter mobilization from a political science perspective, see e.g. McDonald & Hanmer (2019); Bennion & Nickerson (2019); Bennion & Michelson (2023); Green & Gerber (2024); Holbein & Hillygus (2023).

Reduce intention-behavior gaps through planning

Planning is one effective way to overcome self-regulatory barriers and turn intentions into action (Ludwig et al., 2018, 2019). Making a plan increases the probability of goal attainment (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2025) and therefore the expectation of personal rewards. Evidence from hundreds of studies shows that thinking through the steps necessary to achieve a goal and identifying potential obstacles and solutions promote goal pursuit across a range of behaviors (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2025; Sheeran et al., 2025), including collective actions (Lydic, Sinclair, et al., 2025).

In the context of voting, prompting potential voters to plan using implementation intentions—if-then statements that make plans concrete—can increase turnout in adults (Anderson et al., 2018; Nickerson & Rogers, 2010; Rogers et al., 2015). Given that most people underestimate barriers to voting (Mazar et al., 2022), the process of explicitly identifying obstacles and solutions is useful. Asking people to make a voting plan has become a widespread GOTV canvassing strategy. However, planning interventions are most effective when they support value-aligned goals (Holding et al., 2024; Sheeran et al., 2025). Asking people to first engage in mental contrasting by visualizing their goal, reflecting on why it matters to them, and imaging the outcomes can increase the impact of planning (Adriaanse et al., 2010). Considering the link between voting and values may be especially useful for youth to help them integrate voting into their identity and build autonomous motivation.

Strengthen behavioral beliefs by developing autonomous motivation

An important predictor of whether or not a person achieves their goal is why they're pursuing it (Sezer et al., 2024). Pursuing goals because they're personally meaningful, value-aligned, or enjoyable—called autonomous or "want to" motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Werner & Milyavskaya, 2018)—increases perseverance, success, and positive affect (Clegg et al., 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004). In contrast, when people feel pressured to pursue a goal or do so to avoid guilt or shame—called controlled or "have to" motivation—it can negatively impact goal pursuit and well-being (Clegg et al., 2023; Vansteenkiste et al., 2014).

In the context of voting, youth and adults with greater autonomous motivation who view voting as value-aligned have stronger intentions to vote and are more likely to act on them (Koestner et al., 1996; Losier & Koestner, 1999; Lydic, Falk, et al., 2025; Maffly-Kipp et al., 2023; Wuttke, 2020). Our research shows that youth who are more autonomously motivated to vote have a stronger sense of civic duty, and the degree to which they've internalized social norms about voting and integrated voting into their sense of self strongly predicts voting intentions and behavior [removed for peer review]. In contrast, feeling pressured to vote is negatively associated with voting intentions and does not predict behavior (Koestner et al., 1996; Lydic, Falk, et al., 2025; Wuttke, 2020). These findings suggest that interventions supporting youth to consider how voting is connected to their values and what's at stake for them in the election have the potential to increase the self-relevance of voting and strengthen autonomous motivation to vote (Lydic, Falk, et al., 2025; Lydic, Torres-Grillo, et al., 2025). While no interventions we're aware of have targeted autonomous motivation to promote voting

directly, such interventions and message campaigns have been successful in other domains (Kirkpatrick et al., 2025; Ntoumanis et al., 2021; Sheeran et al., 2021; Williams et al., 1999).

Strengthen behavioral beliefs by cultivating civic hope

Generating hope can be a powerful way to increase efficacy and overcome disillusionment. Individual hope is the capacity to find pathways and think agentically to achieve one's goals (Snyder, 2002). Civic hope relies on these individual capacities and reflects a commitment to using democratic means to realize democratic ends for government (Snow, 2018). Cultivating civic hope has the potential to help youth who are justifiably disillusioned visualize pathways for change. Though a relatively new concept, initial evidence suggests that civic hope increases voting motivation among youth and can increase voting behavior by making voting feel more value-aligned (Maffly-Kipp et al., 2023). These findings dovetail with research showing people who believe moral progress and social change are caused by human actions are more likely to engage in civic actions, including voting, by increasing perceptions of personal moral responsibility (Lewry et al., 2024; Lewry & Lombrozo, 2025). Future research could build on individual-focused hope-based interventions (Abeyta, 2023; Leontopoulou, 2020) and identify promising beliefs about civic hope among youth to strengthen voting intentions.

Strategies to increase social rewards

Strengthen normative beliefs by highlighting social norms

People are attuned to what others do and approve of and are motivated to fit in and belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Consequently, social influence can motivate voting. For example, creating social pressure by mailing registered adult voters their past voting record alongside their neighbors' increases turnout (Gerber et al., 2008; Panagopoulos, 2010; Rogers et al., 2017). Publicly pledging to vote also increased turnout among college students (Bergan et al., 2022; Costa et al., 2018). Similarly, descriptive social norm interventions that tell adult voters turnout is likely to be high are more effective than telling people that their vote carries more weight because voter turnout is likely to be low (Gerber & Rogers, 2009).

While effective, such efforts have the potential to elicit controlled motivation and backfire if voting norms have not been internalized or if voting is difficult (Bergan et al., 2022; Wenzel & Woodyatt, 2025), which is frequently the case among emerging adults. Framing normative appeals as invitations rather than demands can increase autonomous motivation and reduce potential reactance (Howe et al., 2021). Similarly, normative appeals that emphasize working together to make change through voting may avoid backfire effects (Sparkman et al., 2021).

Strengthen normative and behavioral beliefs by internalizing civic duty

Believing that voting is a civic duty is one of the strongest predictors of voting behavior (Blais & Achen, 2019). Sense of civic duty develops across the lifespan and youth report lower levels of civic duty than older adults (Feitosa & Galais, 2020). Over time, social norms and values related to voting are internalized and integrated into identities (Campbell, 2010; Sheldon et al., 2005), producing a sense of moral responsibility (Blasi, 1983). Consequently, civic duty shifts from being an external, controlled motivator to an autonomous motivator with age

(Sheldon et al., 2005). Across ages, when individuals view civic engagement as more authentic and value-aligned, or feel morally responsible, they have more positive attitudes toward voting and are more willing to participate in civic actions and vote (Bali et al., 2020; Gause et al., 2025; Lewry et al., 2024; Lewry & Lombrozo, 2025; Maffly-Kipp et al., 2023; Vess et al., 2023).

With respect to interventions, mailers and in-person canvassing appealing to civic duty (without the heavy handed social pressure tactics described above) can be effective in adult samples, but they do not typically perform better than other message frames (e.g., emphasizing community solidarity) to increase turnout (Gerber & Green, 2017). More broadly, engaging civically in national service programs like Teach for America substantially increases subsequent voter turnout among youth (Mo et al., 2022). This is consistent with developmental studies demonstrating that service learning shapes civic identity and behavior in adolescence and emerging adulthood (Wray-Lake & Ballard, 2023).

Strengthen normative and control beliefs by engaging in relational organizing

Leveraging individual social networks for social and political change—relational organizing—is a fast growing, scalable strategy used by many movements to overcome informational and motivational barriers (Green & Gerber, 2024). This method recruits individuals to contact their social ties directly to encourage and support them to act. Since voting spreads in social networks (Bergan et al., 2022; Campbell, 2010; Hirvonen et al., 2025; Siegel, 2009), pre-existing relationships make individuals well-positioned to influence and support their ties to take action. Initial field studies in adults have yielded impressive effects on turnout (Green & McClellan, 2020; Schein et al., 2020; White et al., 2024). Beyond turnout, activating individuals to engage their networks has the potential to increase social support and connection in ways that promote individual and civic well-being.

Moving from intention to habits

Once a person has voted multiple times, it can become a habit, and shift from intentional focus to more automatic rendering (Gerber et al., 2003). Indeed, forming habits is among the most effective ways to change behavior (Albarracín et al., 2024). Although no studies have tested psychological strategies to build voting habits in youth, research suggests that habits form when behaviors are repeated and rewarded in stable contexts, becoming context-triggered and resistant to change once established (Verplanken & Orbell, 2003; Wood, 2024). Thus, habit formation among youth could be fostered by making voting meaningful and rewarding (e.g., through movements like Civic Holidays or Joy to the Polls), encouraging participation in every election, and maintaining a stable, consistent voting context

Participatory approaches to GOTV intervention design

The previous section describes how theory can be applied to develop interventions, but the process itself also shapes its success. Community-based participatory research approaches bring together researchers and community members to co-create solutions (Collins et al., 2018). By integrating scientific evidence with lived experience and local knowledge, this approach can improve intervention development and tailoring to the needs and strengths of different groups (Collins et al., 2018). Here, we highlight one form of community-based participatory research,

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), as a promising method for designing youth-focused civic solutions while simultaneously supporting positive youth development (Ozer et al., 2024). We illustrate how this approach can be applied to voting by describing our collaboration with youth partners to identify promising voting beliefs and co-design a GOTV message campaign.

Table 5
Key points about participatory approaches to GOTV intervention design

1. Community-based participatory research approaches that bring together scientists and community members are flexible and can address a wide range of civic issues using diverse sets of scientific tools

2. Participatory approaches like YPAR can be used to conduct impactful research, teach civic skills, and promote democratic practices and attitudes

3. YPAR can lead to better tailoring of GOTV interventions by centering youth expertise

Youth Participatory Action Research

YPAR recognizes youth expertise (Kikut-Stein et al., 2024; Ozer & Piatt, 2017) and aims to increase youth agency and voice through mutual learning and power sharing (Ozer et al., 2024). This framework seeks to raise critical consciousness and empower youth as agents of change (Ozer & Douglas, 2013). YPAR also provides an opportunity for youth to develop skills in research, critical thinking, and civic action through experiential learning (Cornish et al., 2023; Ozer & Piatt, 2017). Furthermore, by democratizing the research process, it creates space for youth to practice civic skills such as problem identification, deliberation, and coordinated action for social change. As such, YPAR is particularly well-positioned to facilitate civic development in important periods of identity formation such as in emerging adulthood (Ozer et al., 2024).

GOTV message co-design

We partnered with undergraduates from the nonpartisan, youth-led GOTV organization on our campus to design GOTV messages to motivate student voting in an upcoming election. We adopted the theory-guided approach described here to improve our partner's GOTV messaging while also creating generalizable scientific knowledge. We identified beliefs about informational, motivational, and self-regulatory barriers to voting based on prior research and students' lived experience. We followed the Hornik and Woolf method (1999) to identify promising beliefs (e.g., related to civic duty, self-relevance, disillusionment, social norms, and informational gaps) that could be shifted through a messaging intervention to strengthen voting intentions [removed for peer review]. We then co-created a set of messages targeting these beliefs to address barriers highlighted above and tested message effectiveness. Using voting motivation as a proxy for voting intentions, we found that the messages we co-designed with youth targeting promising voting beliefs were more effective than GOTV messages from a national youth-focused campaign. Although limited to voting messages here, these findings

underscore the promise of participatory approaches to develop effective and scalable, psychologically-informed GOTV interventions with and for youth.

Throughout this project, our student partners were deeply engaged and had influence over every aspect of the project—from brainstorming beliefs to designing messages, analyzing the data, and preparing the manuscript for publication. Their insights and interpretations were instrumental in crafting effective messages. We learned from each other, created strong community bonds, and our student partners indicated that this was among their most educational college experiences to date. As researchers, this experience was transformative and inspired us to more deeply embrace participatory approaches to research. Democracy requires hope, agency, and action, and participatory research offers a forum to develop these skills to strengthen community relationships and democratic attitudes.

Conclusions

Widespread political participation is essential for making democracy representative. Youth are already underrepresented electorally and by creating new structural barriers to voting, Executive Order 14248 and the SAVE Act threaten to further diminish their voice in electoral politics. Many existing and proposed strategies to improve voter turnout focus on removing structural barriers to voting, but these solutions take time to legislate and implement; psychologically-informed interventions offer a complementary approach that can be adopted immediately.

In this commentary, we described methods to design GOTV interventions that are developmentally appropriate and theoretically grounded. Moving forward, we hope to see deeper collaboration between researchers, youth, campuses, and community partners to design and test psychological interventions in the field (Michelson & Ostfeld, 2024). Doing so has the potential to create generalizable scientific knowledge about *what* works, *why* it works, and for *whom* it works in the context of behavior change, while simultaneously creating immediate civic impact. For emerging adults, voting and other forms of civic engagement can help to shape identities, affirm and clarify values, and facilitate social and community connections during a key developmental period. For society, broad participation from all citizens can strengthen American democracy by ensuring that the government represents and is responsive to the people.

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