

The Other Black Voter:

Analyzing the Political Socialization of
Florida's HBCU Students

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FOREWORD

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Growing up in the South – where the scent of oppression lingers in the air and select cities are still shackled by the cruel chains of segregation in 2023 – I made the deliberate choice as a first-generation student to attend a Historically Black University. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), born from the era when Black students were denied access to the majority of colleges and universities have become the stomping grounds for black excellence. They have also been instrumental in nurturing student activists who, in the face of arrest and physical harm, courageously challenged a system that did not uphold the principles of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

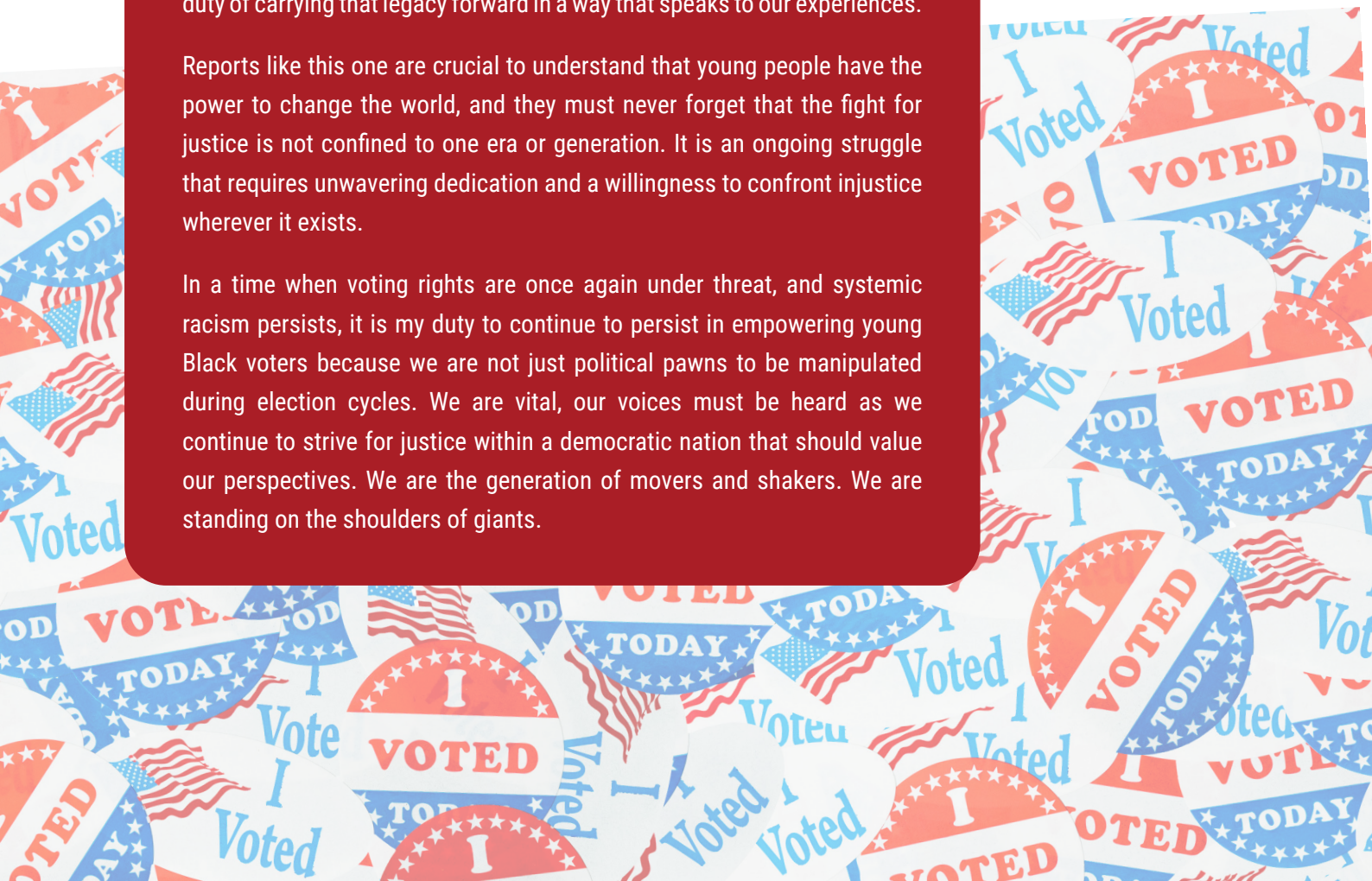
As a millennial organizer and activist I am deeply inspired by the trailblazing spirit of HBCU students who were at the forefront of the fight for voting rights and more broadly, a just society. The struggle for voting rights was and still is, the bedrock of American democracy. In the upcoming Presidential Election, Generation Z and Millennials are poised to shape our nation's destiny. The potential of Generation Z and Millennials to mold the American electorate speaks volumes about the surge of political power and the potential for disrupting the status quo. I believe that the killing of George Floyd, the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*, climate change, student loan debt, and gun reform all serve as significant factors contributing to this shift.

Indeed, the shared modern-day concerns have ignited a surge of activism and political involvement among Black college students. However, when I reflect on history, it becomes abundantly clear that the struggle for civil rights, including the relentless fight against segregation in the South, has a proud and enduring impact on the ability of Black voters to exercise their right to cast their ballots. Some of these tactics are still prevalent today; however, that did not and will not stop the movement. Instead, it continues to add fuel to HBCU students stepping forward as torchbearers of change. Students on HBCU campuses understand that their voices are crucial in dismantling the oppressive system and securing their place as equal citizens in America.

As a two-time graduate of Florida A&M University (FAMU), it would be remiss of me not to mention FAMU student activists like George Calvin Bess Jr. He worked as a voting rights activist with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and traveled frequently throughout the South, registering voters, and bringing attention to racial discrimination. Unfortunately, as per the Florida Memory Project, he “died under suspicious circumstances” while registering Black voters in Mississippi. Likewise, Wilhelmina Jakes and Carrie Patterson, both of whom were arrested for refusing to give up their bus seats to a white passenger and later harassed, with a cross burned in their front yard. But shortly after, the students once again organized to initiate a bus boycott that ended segregation on the city buses. The countless sacrifices and names of unsung heroes during this time cannot be forgotten. Many of the students stared into the eyes of death, and white supremacy, and even watched their fellow classmates die. Yet, their unwavering commitment to fight for justice and equality never wavered. They truly understood that they were fighting for something they may not see in their lifetime. But, above all else, the student activists illuminate an important truth: they were champions of justice. Now, as I and other students carry the torch of their struggle, we are entrusted with the duty of carrying that legacy forward in a way that speaks to our experiences.

Reports like this one are crucial to understand that young people have the power to change the world, and they must never forget that the fight for justice is not confined to one era or generation. It is an ongoing struggle that requires unwavering dedication and a willingness to confront injustice wherever it exists.

In a time when voting rights are once again under threat, and systemic racism persists, it is my duty to continue to persist in empowering young Black voters because we are not just political pawns to be manipulated during election cycles. We are vital, our voices must be heard as we continue to strive for justice within a democratic nation that should value our perspectives. We are the generation of movers and shakers. We are standing on the shoulders of giants.



INTRODUCTION

In a profound homage to the timeless civic empowerment messages of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., we delve into the ideas encapsulated within his seminal address, "The Other America." In his compelling piece, King astutely underscored the imperative of delineating the divergent facets that define our collective understanding of American identity. The dichotomy of the America we know versus the America we do not know has played a pivotal role in identifying distinct boundaries that systematically scrutinize the encounters of the predominant American population in contrast to the often-overlooked narratives of the marginalized "other" American population, with a particular emphasis on the experiences of Black Americans.

In a similar vein, the examination of political socialization has become a compelling area of study. That is to say that political socialization is an examination of the complex process through which the beliefs and values of voters, specifically Black voters in this context, are developed (Golden et al., 2021; Hong & Lin, 2017; Maurissen, 2018). Our research on this topic has provided us with a valuable opportunity to explore the intricate discourse surrounding American civic engagement, as expressed by Black Youth voters aged 18-29. It is worth noting that their perspectives on this crucial matter have been largely overlooked and inadequately represented in research.

Yet, by exploring their untold perspectives and seeking to understand the underlying motivations of this crucial demographic, we gained profound insight into their political values in the molding of their civic actions. For instance, convincing evidence highlights the fact that Black voters are unequivocally acknowledged as a politically engaged demographic (Jones, 2020). They exhibit a steadfast and historical commitment to activism, notably in their unwavering quest for social and civil rights, as substantiated by seminal and existing research (Campbell et al., 1960; Grant, 2020; Tate, 1994). While other research documents Black voters through the disaggregation of voter turnout, and registration by age and race (MacManus, 2017). The Black Youth voter is an enigmatic force within our political landscape, possessing critical characteristics that are pivotal in unraveling their importance.

According to polling data, it is evident that the primary concerns of a significant portion of Black voters revolve around crucial matters such as education, healthcare accessibility, and the need for reform within the criminal justice system (Budiman, 2020). Further, it is worth noting that in the latest report on voting data, the state of Florida boasts nearly two million Black voters (Florida Department of State Division of Elections, 2022). Nevertheless, a pressing inquiry arises: Do we know the unique viewpoints of the Black youth electorate? How do we address them?

This report explores the complex thoughts and perspectives of Black Youth voters educated at HBCUs in the state of Florida. In the work, we uncover powerful themes within a crucial electoral state. Thus, our aim is to shed light on the complex mechanisms through which individuals shape their political identities, effectively debunking prevailing assumptions surrounding this crucial faction of the Black voting bloc. We hope that the perspectives unveiled in this report might compel readers to reassess, envision anew, and gain a deeper comprehension of the "Other" Black, youth, voter – an influential entity in the constantly evolving political terrain of Florida and beyond.



RESEARCH APPROACH

We received funding from the National Science Foundation (NSF) to support this study, and it was conducted with ethical guidelines, as determined by the University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board.

We used surveys and focus groups of Black, college-aged students at various HBCUs to collect data for this study. We worked with partners at the selected HBCUs to recruit student participants for the study. We also traveled to the campuses of the institutions in November of 2021 and February of 2022 to facilitate the surveys and focus groups. The week prior to collecting the data, our HBCU partners informed would-be participants about the opportunity to participate in the research study and explained the details regarding the survey and focus group, which would take place the following week.

The HBCU partners allowed us to administer the surveys and conduct the focus groups. We offered participants \$25 in Amazon gift cards and lunch as compensation for their participation. During the data collection process, we asked students to complete the 50-question survey.

The survey collected demographic information, as well as information regarding political socialization, political participation, political attitudes, and political affiliation. The surveys were conducted using Google Forms, and students used their phones or were provided tablets if they did not have a phone to complete the survey. Once all students completed the surveys, the researchers began the focus groups.

Each focus group had between 6 and 12 students. During the focus groups, we asked participants approximately 10 questions about political socialization, relevant political issues, political advertisements, and the importance of culturally relevant messaging. Each student had multiple opportunities to speak during the focus groups. Each focus group lasted approximately 60 minutes, and we recorded them using digital recording devices. Once the focus groups were completed, we uploaded the recording to OtterAI, an electronic transcription service. The OtterAI program converted the audio recordings to transcripts. We then uploaded the transcripts into Dedoose, a qualitative coding software.

After all surveys and focus groups were completed, we analyzed the qualitative and quantitative data. We first analyzed the qualitative data, using Dedoose, by coding for themes that emerged during the focus groups. Two members of our research team independently coded the transcripts and developed 44 parent codes as well as 48 child codes. When analyzing the codes, we focused on five aspects of psychological engagement, which were highlighted by previous research and included political interest, political efficacy, political information, partisanship, and family influences (Ritter, 2008).

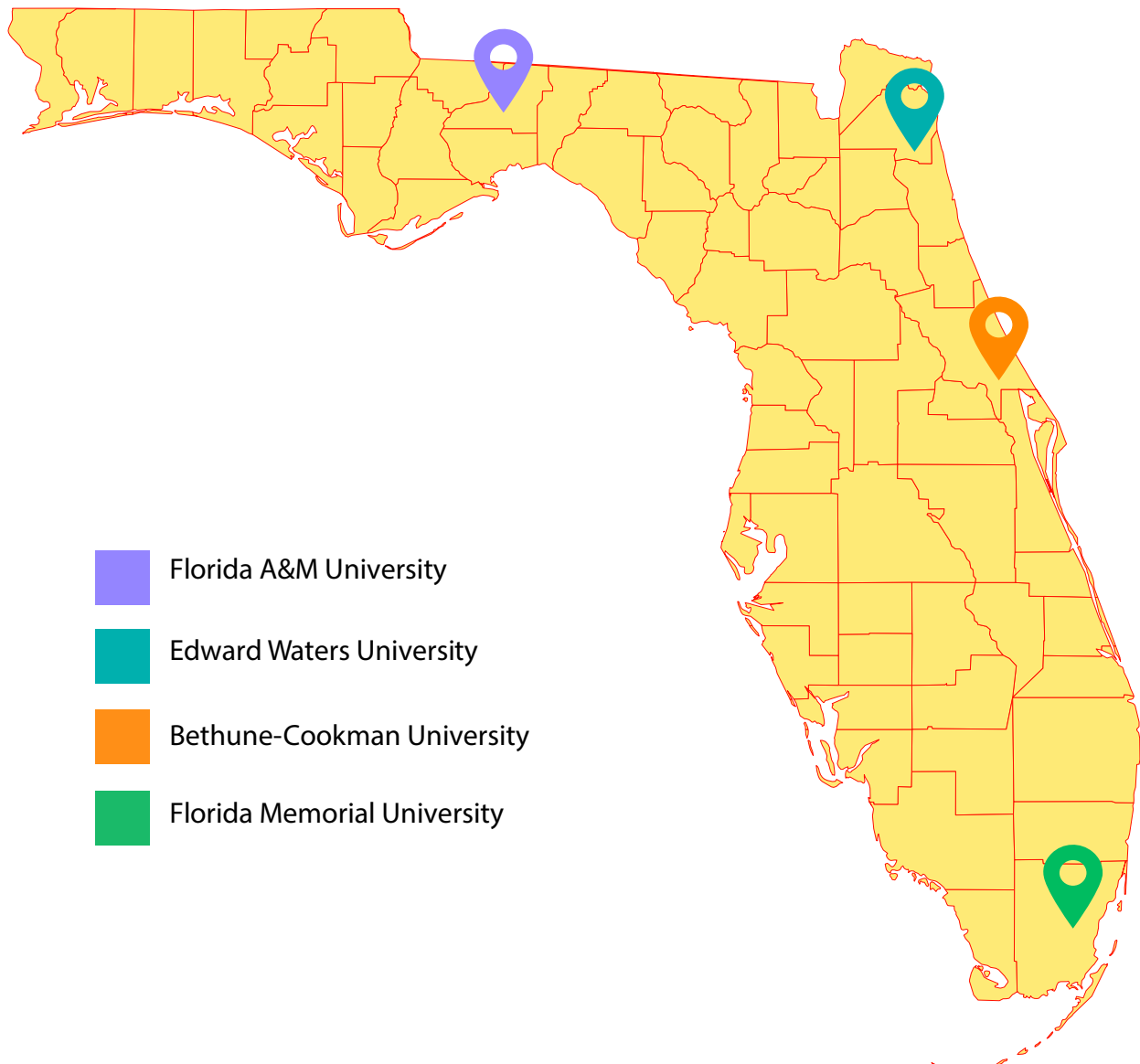
To analyze the surveys, we downloaded data from Google Forms and analyzed it using Stata 15.1. We analyzed the descriptive statistics, including

the distribution of demographic information. We then conducted three logit regression models, to understand the relationship between the frequency of discussing politics with family members or friends and three types of political participation: attending a protest in the last 12 months, volunteering on a campaign during the last election, and voting in the last presidential election. A grand total of 118 participants participated in the study. The respondents' average age was 21 years old. A significant proportion of the survey participants, specifically 67%, identified as female. In terms of political engagement, a significant proportion of students demonstrated their civic duty by actively participating in the most recent election, with an impressive turnout rate of 79%.



About Florida HBCUs

In the state of Florida, there are four HBCUs; 1. Bethune Cookman University, 2. Edwards Waters University, 3. Florida A&M University, and 4. Florida Memorial University. Each of the listed HBCUs is strategically located across the north-central, northeast, central, and southern regions of the state. Relatedly, these institutions have taken the initiative to establish specialized centers dedicated to civic engagement, social justice, democracy, or a comprehensive amalgamation of these crucial democratic domains.



Description of Florida HBCU Centers

Name of the Institution	Center Name	Center Mission
Bethune Cookman University	Center for Law and Social Justice	The Center for Law and Social Justice (CLSJ) at Bethune-Cookman University works to develop programs and activities that address historic and contemporary issues of social justice which align with the mission of the university, while also providing high-quality professional learning experiences for students pursuing careers in the legal and criminal justice field. Specifically, it is the Center's mission to cultivate the next generation of social and criminal justice leaders committed to creating a more just and equitable world.
Edwards Waters University	A. Philip Randolph Institute for Law, Race, Social Justice, and Economic Policy	Provides opportunities for students, scholars, practitioners, and community members to examine and exchange ideas related to race, law, and socioeconomic policy matters through research, lectures, symposia and scholarship. Advancing the University's goal of developing excellence in scholarship, research, and service for the betterment of humanity, the Randolph Institute will facilitate generative partnerships and programs to interrogate and dismantle the root causes of racial and socioeconomic inequality.
Florida A&M University	Center for Deliberative Democracy, Civic Engagement, and Census Information	The Center for Deliberative Democracy, Civic Engagement, and Census information is in the Department of History and Political Science at Florida A&M University. The CDCC conducts research about democracy, public opinion of voters, and public policy.
Florida Memorial University	Social Justice Institute	Social Justice Institute is to create in South Florida a society bereft of social injustice and racial disparities. Our students have taken an interest in becoming change agents and will make an impact in the world and their local communities.

KEY FINDINGS

While extensive research has explored the subject of political socialization, there remains a significant knowledge gap concerning our understanding of non-white voters, particularly in terms of how political beliefs and values are developed among young Black voters.

This research report presents an overview of field-based research, which included the participation of Black college students enrolled in Florida HBCUs. In this report, our unwavering dedication lies in shedding light upon the profound discoveries that have emerged from our exhaustive research concerning the political socialization of Black youth voters educated at HBCUs. We examine students' shared experiences, dissecting the dynamic process behind the formation and nurturing of their political beliefs and values.

Our purpose for this inquiry is to offer valuable insights that can greatly benefit HBCUs in general, including those located in Florida. We share these insights to help civic engagement centers consider how to better align their work with the distinct political and social backgrounds of the student populations. Furthermore, offering such insight is crucial in a state where Black voters face legislative changes that might impact their understanding of civic engagement leading up to the 2024 presidential election.



HBCU Student Voices: Critical Themes and Key Findings

1 Digital Messaging Doubts

Social media platforms possess the capacity to reach a vast audience and enable direct access to political messaging from candidates to voters. It is crucial to acknowledge that their true impact is constrained in its scope as participants found messaging on social media to be untrustworthy.

“Social Media doesn't have any regulation you can post anything...it doesn't mean it's true, so I block political ads and mute people that talk about politics, especially during election season.”

2 Campaign Messaging Failures

Our research has unveiled a significant observation: negative campaign advertisements tend to instill a heightened sense of uncertainty among participants, primarily directed toward the sender of the advertisement rather than the subject matter it addresses.

“If you talk bad about the person you running against, I tend to look at you and wonder what would we find out about you.”

3 Historical Meaning of Voting

Participants exhibited a discernible departure from the exclusive influence of the historical struggles and sacrifices that characterized the Black suffrage movement. In contemporary times, individuals have made a conscious shift in their approach towards exercising their voting rights. Rather than engaging in the electoral process solely for the sake of honoring access to participation, they now opt to cast their ballots when they possess a sense of assurance regarding the elected officials' unwavering commitment to advancing their interests.

“I get people died for me to vote, but what are you bringing to the table that will help me?”

4

Voter Apathy Doesn't Stop Voter Activism

When participants felt like no political contender hit the mark for them, they might take a pass on the voting booth. But here's the twist: some of them won't just sit on the sidelines; they'll unleash their inner activists, zeroing in on the candidate they're least thrilled about and making their voices heard through powerful protest actions.

"When I don't like who is running I'm sorry I just can't vote for you. But that doesn't mean that I'm not going to hit the streets and fight against injustices that I care about."

When young voters adopt pragmatic strategies in their civic participation, such as voting for the candidate perceived as the lesser of two evils, it has a moderating effect on their enthusiasm for active involvement in civic affairs. This approach leads to a decrease in electoral participation, while not necessarily diminishing their overall level of political activism.

"I cast my vote for the lesser evil, but let's be real, it's a band-aid on a broken system. I'm tired of empty promises and inaction – our voices need to spark real change."

5

Political Party Dissonance

Within the domain of political party discourse and partisanship, a prevailing observation arises; the sentiment articulated by participants tends to lean unequivocally toward a critical standpoint.

"I don't care about political parties, they should care about me. I only know who they are when I see a candidate running for office and they have a "D" or "R" by their name. The parties don't mean nothing to me."

6

Administrative Voting Burdens

Increased bureaucratic challenges encountered by Black college-aged individuals have fundamentally transformed their involvement in the electoral process, signifying a significant alteration in the dynamics of voting engagement.

"If I can't figure out where to vote, then I'm not voting, it's that simple"

In a comprehensive analysis of HBCU student voices, a myriad of critical themes and key findings emerged, shedding light on the intricate landscape of modern political beliefs. The prevailing sentiment surrounding digital messaging on social media is one of skepticism, primarily stemming from its inherent lack of regulation. This absence of oversight has led to a significant number of participants resorting to blocking or muting political content, thereby further exacerbating the issue at hand. The utilization of negative campaign advertisements, instead of effectively persuading the audience, frequently engenders a sense of doubt regarding the moral compass of the sender.

Moreover, participants have undergone a significant shift in their perception on the act of voting. No longer are they solely motivated by the weight of historical significance, but rather, they now insist on tangible and substantial actions from those individuals who are elected to public office. The phenomenon of voter apathy, while often seen as a deterrent to civic engagement, does not necessarily stop activism. In fact, we found participants become proactive in protesting when no candidate aligns with their views. The calculated approach of strategically voting for the “lesser evil” can temper enthusiasm for electoral participation but not political activism. The prevailing sentiment surrounding political parties is predominantly characterized by criticism, as participants prioritize individual candidates over party affiliations.

Lastly, administrative voting burdens have transformed the way Black college-aged individuals engage with the electoral process, with simplified access to voting information being crucial to their participation. These findings reflect the changing landscape of political involvement among young Black voters and provide useful insights for increasing civic participation and education.





RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations we present are poised to engender a shift among researchers, practitioners, post-secondary educational institutions, and non-partisan voting organizations regarding their conceptualizations surrounding the socialization of Black youth voters. Shifting our perspective on Black youth voters requires a comprehensive understanding of this demographic, to truly grasp who the “other” Black voters are and how to effectively support their socialization.

Black voters play a crucial role in electoral outcomes (Hamel et al., 2022). To effectively engage Black voters, we must consider the diversity of their perspectives, influenced by age, education, and personal experiences intersected by political messaging and organizing. Younger Black voters, including participants in this study, often view political communications, such as references like “hot sauce” in one’s bag, as being more transactional rather than fostering relational connections (Breakfast Club Power 105, 2016). Thus, we offer recommendations tailored to three distinct groups, HBCU student voters, HBCUs with centers focused on civic engagement, and political actors on distinct topics Civic engagement efforts, Political Messaging, and strengthening the civic engagement landscape.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OPTIMIZING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS

Civic Engagement Communication

1. Power up civic engagement efforts, and put the individual, the issue, and the desired outcome at the forefront of communication efforts so the recipient can act.
2. Address generational differences in messaging strategies, tailoring messaging for Black voters based on their generational perspectives.
3. Craft messages that deeply resonate with diverse experiences and perspectives.
4. Humanize interactions by focusing on life experiences and concerns shared with voters.

Diversifying Engagement Approaches

5. Incorporate diversity initiatives that extend beyond race and gender, including different student identities like Greek life or sexual identity, to enrich civic engagement programmatic efforts.
6. Partner with campus radio stations, leverage trending social media hashtags, and collaborate with influential student advocacy groups to amplify engagement impact.
7. Establish student inclusive task forces to facilitate collaborative programming, ensuring that the centers work with students, not just for them.
8. Cultivate collaborations with like-minded HBCU centers for civic engagement to consistently generate valuable insights, such as annual reports, innovative programming strategies, and best practices that enhance the depth and breadth of programming initiatives that extend beyond election cycles.

Elevating Participation and Learning

9. Make efforts to be visible and present in spaces where students gather; sit, listen, and learn from them.
10. Prioritize understanding and demonstrate a willingness to engage with students before soliciting their involvement in your political activities.
11. Bridge gaps in understanding of electoral policies: develop concise, informative one-pages for updates on policy, sharing crucial details about issues (voting location, voter registration) to facilitate electoral participation.
12. Tap into campus events, Greek step shows, and student orientations to powerfully connect with students through tabling, and pamphlet handouts, that direct them to vital information available through your centers.
13. Be a persistent source of information. Elevate year-round student-centered communication on civic engagement to the forefront, setting themed goals for the year that revolve around impactful activities.

Civic Student Involvement

14. Amplify student voices and foster civic engagement learning.
15. Recognize student efforts with certificates or digital badges, celebrating their understanding and utilization of tools for political socialization.
16. Promote sincere and genuine involvement in democratic processes.

Civic Accessibility in Educational Institutions

17. Improve accessibility by advocating for polling locations to be near educational institutions. (HBCU Centers)

Leveraging Social Media in Political Messaging

- 18.** Utilize the extensive reach and accessibility provided by social media platforms for political messaging through the development of a civic engagement editorial calendar.
- 19.** Prioritize transparency, credibility, and trusted voices to unlock the full potential of campaign messages sent through social media.
- 20.** Scale messaging strategies, talk to students, and have students converse with each other, as a crucial component of messaging strategy.

Strengthening the Political Landscape and Engaging Black Voters

- 21.** Promote organizing Black youth voters around important issues rather than party partisanship.
- 22.** Empower students to actively act on utilizing their voices through diverse avenues of civic engagement, voting, volunteering, and civic colloquiums.
- 23.** Prioritize meaningful engagement with Black Youth voters in spaces where they can have brief interactive conversations, i.e., university quad, dorms, and centers.

CONCLUSION

Within the report's pages, we unearth findings, echoing the voices of Black youth voters educated at HBCUs. Their insights, gleaned from surveys and focus group discussions, cast a brilliant spotlight on uncharted avenues for campus-based, non-academic support. This isn't just an academic exercise; it's a call to action for post-secondary professionals. We urge a bold reimagining of student support – one that embraces political socialization as a vital dimension of student growth. The resounding impact of the discoveries presented cannot be overstated, as they carry a significant amount of influence from participants' voices that are rarely heard. As we stand at the edge of an imminent presidential election, let us remember the lessons from Dr. King's 'The Other America' and embrace the importance of comprehending the 'Other Black Voter,' our Black youth voters. Your role in this understanding is paramount in shaping a promising system of support for the future of Black youth voters.



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