

YOUTH IN ACTION

Young voices have always been at the heart of movements for justice in this country, and elections are one of the places those voices carry real weight. Research on voting behavior consistently finds that the habit of voting is formed early: people who cast a ballot in the first three elections for which they are eligible are significantly more likely to become lifelong voters. The years between 16 and 25 are decisive. What happens in this window shapes a generation of civic participation.

For College-Aged Voters (18+): Make a Plan, Make It Stick

If you are voting for the first or second time, three steps move you from eligible to engaged.

Register, and register at the right address. College students get to choose: you can register at your school address or at the address you consider home, but only one. Each has tradeoffs. Registering at school means your vote shapes the community where you actually live nine months of the year, including the local races (city council, school board, ballot measures) that touch housing, transit, and policing where you study. Registering at home keeps your registration stable across moves and connects you to your home community, though it usually means voting absentee. Whichever you choose, confirm the deadline in your state and check your registration at vote.gov or [vote411.org] well before Election Day. If you have moved across state lines or even across town, your old registration will not follow you. Update it.

Research the issues, especially down-ballot. Presidential races draw the attention, but the offices that most directly shape daily life (sheriffs, prosecutors, state legislators, school boards, judges) often appear at the bottom of the ballot. Vote411.org offers a personalized ballot guide based on your address. The UCC's Our Faith Our Vote issue briefs are a starting place for thinking through how your faith informs your engagement with the policies on your ballot.

Make a plan. Decide now whether you will vote early, vote by mail, or vote on Election Day, and put it on your calendar like a class. If you are voting by mail, request your ballot as early as your state allows and return it promptly. If you are voting in person, locate your polling place in advance and know what ID you need to bring.

Get Involved Beyond the Ballot

Voting is the floor, not the ceiling. Consider:

Serving as a poll worker. Most states pay, training is provided, and many jurisdictions face shortages. Research finds that 33% of young people would serve as poll workers if asked, but only 8% have. Sign up at powerthepolls.org.

Volunteering with nonpartisan GOTV efforts in your community through groups like the League of Women Voters, When We All Vote, or Rock the Vote.

Running a registration drive on campus with your campus ministry, student government, or a partner like The Civics Center or New Voters.

Plugging into local advocacy on the issues that move you, whether that is housing, climate, immigration, or peace.

For Youth Under 18: Your Work Starts Now

You cannot cast a ballot yet, and that does not mean you sit this one out. The work of building a free and faithful democracy belongs to you too.

Pre-register where you can. Most states allow 16 and 17-year-olds (some allow younger) to pre-register so that your registration activates automatically on your 18th birthday. Check your state's rules at vote.org.

Volunteer. In many states, 16 and 17-year-olds can serve as poll workers. You can register voters in your community (no age requirement in most states for handing someone a form), help with literature drops, write postcards to new voters, and join phone banks. Groups like The Civics Center and New Voters are built specifically for high schoolers.

Be the reminder your people need. The single most effective predictor of whether someone votes is whether the people around them are voting and talking about it. You have a parent who has not registered since they moved. A sibling who is in their first semester of college and has no idea how absentee ballots work. A grandparent who is unsure where their new polling place is. A youth group that has never had a conversation about what voting means to people of faith. Your voice in their lives carries weight precisely because it is personal. Text three people this week. Ask if they are registered. Send them the link.

Form the habit before you cast the ballot. Pay attention to local races. Read your sample ballot when one comes home. Sit in on a city council or school board meeting. Ask questions. The vote, when it comes, will land in soil you have already prepared.

“Let us not love with words or speech, but in action and in truth.” (1 John 3:18) Voting is one way young people put love into action, and getting their friends, families, and neighbors to the polls is another. Every voice, including yours, makes a difference.

Youth Ministries or Sunday Schools

Election seasons offer youth ministers and Sunday school teachers something rare: a moment when the questions young people are already overhearing at the dinner table, on their phones, and in school hallways line up with the deepest questions of Christian formation. Who is my neighbor? What does justice look like when my neighbors disagree about it? Where is God at work in a contested public square? The point of taking up these questions in a youth setting is not to produce the “right” political answer. It is to help young people develop the moral muscles they will use for the rest of their voting lives.

Discussion Questions

The questions below assume disagreement in the room and reward youth for thinking out loud rather than performing a correct answer.

A candidate you mostly agree with holds one position you find deeply wrong. A candidate you mostly disagree with happens to be right on that one issue. How do you decide what to do? What does the decision cost you either way?

Scripture treats kings, governors, and empires with a complicated mix of respect, suspicion, and outright resistance. Read 1 Samuel 8, where Israel demands a king. What is God's

warning, and what does it suggest about how Christians should hold political power, our own and others’?

Jesus tells his followers to “render to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” (Mark 12:17). What do you think actually belongs to Caesar? What belongs only to God? Where is the line hardest to see?

The prophet Amos thunders against people who “trample on the needy and bring the poor of the land to an end” (Amos 8:4). If Amos were preaching in our state this year, what would he likely name? Would your congregation be uncomfortable hearing it? Would you?

Most people do not vote on every issue. They pick one or two that matter most and weigh from there. If you had to name the two issues most central to your faith right now, what would they be, and why those two?

Think of someone in your life whose politics differ sharply from yours and whom you also love. What does loving that person well look like during an election year? What does it not look like?

People sometimes say “I don’t vote because both sides are the same” or “my vote doesn’t matter.” Take that seriously for a minute. What is true in it? What is incomplete in it? How would you respond without dismissing the person?

The early church lived under Roman rule and could not vote at all, and yet Paul wrote letters that reshaped how Christians thought about authority, citizenship, and community. What does it mean that the most formative period of Christian political thought happened without ballots? What does that free us to do, or refuse to do, today?

Group Activities

Interview across generations. Send youth to interview three voters from different generations in the congregation. Suggested questions: What was the first election you remember caring about? Has your faith ever made you change your mind about a political issue? Have you ever voted for someone you had real reservations about? What do you wish young people understood about voting that you have learned the hard way? Bring the interviews back and look for patterns. What do faithful voters across generations seem to share?

Map the ballot. Pull up a sample ballot for your area from vote411.org. Most youth (and most adults) recognize the top of the ballot and have no idea what the rest of it does. As a group, research what each office actually controls. Where do school board, county prosecutor, judges, and state legislators show up in the daily life of your community? Where do they show up in the lives of the most vulnerable people in your community?

Write your own voter’s prayer. Have youth write a short prayer they would want to pray before voting for the first time, or that they would want an older voter in their family to pray. Collect them and share with the congregation in worship the Sunday before the election.

The goal is formation, not conclusion. Youth who learn to hold political questions with seriousness, humility, and scriptural depth will be better voters than youth who learn the right slogans. Trust the questions. Trust the young people. Trust the Spirit at work in the room.

