

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In November of 2018, Texas hosted one of the tightest and most closely watched senatorial races in the country. During the same election, a higher proportion of Americans voted than had in any midterm in a century. Together, these two facts should have led to blockbuster voter turnout in Texas – but they didn't. In fact, Texas ranked in the bottom ten states for turnout, contributing to the longstanding narrative that Texans just don't care about voting.

In fact, the opposite is true. Turnout among young Texans in 2018 was more than triple that of the last midterm. But for every vote cast by a young person, especially a young person of color, an unknowable number went un-cast – not because of “voter apathy” but because for more than a decade, Texas' elected leaders have made changes to the electoral process that have discouraged, diluted, or outright deterred the voting power of its young voters.

The best known of these is the voter ID requirement, which was repeatedly shown to discriminate against black and Latino voters. But more insidious is the raft of changes we term “cumulative disenfranchisement,” referring to the outcome of policies that make voting harder by increments small enough to escape judicial scrutiny but significant enough, when working in concert, to exclude certain groups from the ballot box.

The components of cumulative disenfranchisement include passive obstruction and active suppression. Passive obstruction refers to election policies that apply to all Texans but which pose a higher burden to new voters and groups with lower socioeconomic status, such as voter ID requirements and a cumbersome registration process. Active suppression denotes government actions that obstruct voting and are unevenly applied to underrepresented groups, including voter roll purges, voter intimidation, and restricted access to the polls.

In this report, we document the practices that make it more difficult for young Texans to be civically engaged. Despite state policies, low youth voter turnout isn't inevitable. Advocates in Texas are working to offer voter registration in high schools, expand quality civic education, create a culture of voting in schools, and prioritize culturally-relevant strategies to motivate student civic engagement. Educators and activists can use the second part of this report as a resource guide to join this movement. Together, we can create a state that welcomes the participation of all its residents, so on future Election Days, the electorate fully represents our young, diverse, and powerful state.