Overview

While young people continue to be underrepresented in our democracy, the 2020 election was a record-breaking success that saw youth turnout reach its highest point in years. But the increase in turnout didn't happen on its own. It was the work of youth organizations around the country that have invested in the year-round work of organizing and capacity building—stories we saw over and over again over the last year in states like Georgia, Arizona, and others.

The next two years represent an unprecedented opportunity to solidify these gains and raise the voice of young people in our democracy. Now is the time to invest in projects and organizations that build the capacity of young leaders to be involved in our political system, and make sure young people across the country—no matter their background or beliefs—are motivated to make their voices heard.

The Student PIRGs’ New Voters Project stands ready to capture the energy and passion of young people to leverage our more than 35 year history of running large-scale voter engagement drives on college campuses. To do this, in 2021-2022, the New Voters Project will continue our work at more than 150 college and university campuses across 26 states to:

- Directly educate 900,000 students about the upcoming election and how to avoid potential barriers to casting a ballot
- Make more than 300,000 personalized GOTV contacts
- Help register 60,000 young people to vote
- Work on our campuses to build lasting civic engagement programs to encourage voting and civic participation year-round
The Need to Invest in Youth Organizing

When young people don't participate in our democracy, several things happen. Elected officials and those seeking office ignore issues that young potential voters care about. Young people see they aren't being represented and decide that participation won't bring the change they seek. This “cycle of mutual neglect” is self-sustaining—as young people continue not showing up, politicians will continue to ignore their concerns. That is why breaking this cycle is so important.

Research shows that when you register to vote and then remind young people to vote, they are significantly more likely to engage in the political process. Our own data bears this out—85% of the young people who the Student PIRGs’ New Voters Project helped to register over the last year turned out to vote, along with 76% of the young people contacted through our peer-to-peer GOTV program.

We envision an America where young people are full participants in our democracy. To get there requires large-scale voter engagement and mobilization drives in the places where young people are most—college campuses. It requires everyone to do their part. Campuses must invest in engaging their students, local organizations must commit to engaging their members to participate, and there must be opportunities for young people to learn the ropes of our democracy and how they can help to shape it.

The Student PIRGs’ New Voters Project is the only program that addresses all of these needs.

Our History and Track Record

Created on college campuses almost 50 years ago, the Student PIRGs have built the nation's most effective youth civic engagement network consisting of 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) student-directed and funded organizations on more than 30 campuses, as well as PIRG Campus Action clubs on 60 additional campuses. PIRG campus chapters and Campus Action clubs organize students on a variety of issue campaigns year-round, maintaining and expanding a permanent organizing infrastructure and leadership development pipeline on college campuses. This decades-long investment in youth organizing means that campuses where we organize are more civically engaged and students are more likely to turn out to vote.

Since 1984, the nonpartisan Student PIRGs’ New Voters Project has helped register more than 2 million young people to vote, made more than 3 million personalized GOTV contacts, and helped dozens of college campuses develop civic action plans, all while training thousands of students in the citizenship, leadership, and campaigning skills necessary to run voter engagement and mobilization campaigns.
Reaching Young People from Every Background

We work to ensure that students from all backgrounds are represented—not only in the young people the New Voters Project helps to vote, but in the young leaders we recruit and train.

Students face competing priorities, especially as many of them are learning from home. While we may think of the typical college student as someone who just graduated high school and has relatively few attachments, in fact, nontraditional students are now the norm. According to The Center for Law and Social Policy, 51% of students are financially independent from their parents, 26% are parents of their own (15% are single parents), and 62% are either working full or part-time to put themselves through school. In addition, roughly 45% of college students are non-white. Of the over 100 campuses where we plan to run our program, 65 are minority-serving institutions (MSIs) and/or community colleges, and 73 have majority enrollment made up of students of color. This ensures that we are helping young people who come from every background participate in our democracy.

Further, we recruit and train any student who is willing to take on the responsibility of helping to lead a grassroots civic engagement campaign in their campus community. We’re proud that the students who take on leadership with the New Voters Project and the Student PIRGs reflect the diversity of their campuses. Students of color make up 51% of our boards for state-based Student PIRG chapters, and 74% of board members identify as female or nonbinary. In addition, half of chapter students who join our team as full-time organizers are people of color.

Organizing During COVID-19

When the coronavirus pandemic forced the shutdown of much of the U.S. last March, we retooled our entire operation to run digitally, at the same time working to respond to our students’ basic needs during the pandemic and provide whatever support we could to institutions and our student leaders who quickly transitioned to remote learning.

This work led to the creation of our Democracy Summer remote internship program that hired 2,000 students throughout the summer and fall of 2020. We expect that heading into 2021, our work will remain virtual for the foreseeable future, until there is widespread distribution of the COVID-19 vaccines.
Our 2021-2022 Youth Engagement Plan

Our plan over the next two years is to help end the cycle of mutual neglect between young people and politicians by executing the largest field-based youth voter mobilization drive while working with our target campuses communities to build a culture of ongoing civic engagement.

Phase 1 Institutionalizing Voter Registration: Now-Summer 2022

Our goal is to work within the communities of our campuses to build comprehensive civic engagement action plans where the campus administration, faculty, student organization leaders, and other community members commit to making ongoing civic engagement a part of the campus culture. We work with campuses to adopt the leading best practices for ongoing engagement by securing commitments to adopting commitments including participating in Tufts University's National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), the Students Learn, Students Vote checklist, and the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge.

At the same time, we turn the campus community into a durable coalition in order to reach all sectors of campus and students from every background, representing local registrars, multicultural organizations, student government, interest-based groups, and campus Republicans and Democrats to ensure no young voter is left behind. Then, when we launch our voter registration and mobilization drives on a particular campus, it is done in the name of the local coalition, lending legitimacy and familiarity to the students who participate.

This year, we’re launching a partnership with The Civic Center, to expand our focus on the institutionalization of youth voter engagement onto high school campuses. The Student PIRGs’ New Voters Project and The Civics Center will partner to run an “Adopt-a-High School” voter registration program for college students involved in their campus PIRG chapter. Our partnership will increase youth voter participation and create a pipeline of high school student activists who excel at working on democracy issues and will be ready to bring their civic engagement experience with them for the rest of their lives.

Phase 2 “What’s Your Plan?”: Now-May 2022

The goal of this phase is to raise the level of youth involvement in primary and local elections so that local and statewide candidates for office talk about issues that matter to young people. We’ll be meeting candidates wherever they are to ask them “What’s Your Plan?” around an issue that matters to the student volunteer asking the question. This cycle, our plan is to make over 100 appearances at campaign events across the country, when it is safe to do so.

We’ll also encourage youth turnout in primary and local elections. We will organize youth parties, texting campaigns, parties at the polls and photo petitions events to create a campus buzz and encourage students to participate.
Phase 3  **Mobilizing Voters: August 2021-November 2022**

During this phase of the campaign we will help register 60,000 young voters, make 300,000 GOTV contacts, and do work to help remove barriers to voting that young people face.

**Voter Registration.** Voter registration is the heart of our program, because we know that registering someone to vote is the single best thing we can do to ensure they turn out to vote. We’ll combine technology (i.e. online voter registration) with pavement hitting tactics (registering students in classrooms, events on campuses) to make sure all students at one of our target campuses get a chance to register at least three times in the fall.

**Get Out the Vote.** Once we get folks registered to vote, we need to make sure they turn out to vote, in local, primary, and statewide elections. We’ll use multiple tactics to encourage students to vote. We’ll make one-on-one contacts through tabling and door-to-door canvassing. Students will present in classes and students groups, and run campus events where students will fill out pledge to vote cards. We’ll mail back the pledge to vote cards before Election Day as a reminder to vote.

In addition, we’ll use relational organizing tools to reach students by text to send them reminder messages from contacts they trust. At the same time, we’ll run nightly phone banks to call students and remind them to vote using the lists we built during our voter registration and recruitment drives. Finally, we’ll use both digital and in-person visibility tactics to build a general on-campus buzz about the election.

**Voter Protection.** Three main barriers will affect young people this election—students having inappropriate IDs, election officials unfairly interpreting laws, and students not knowing how to handle problems that come up when they go to cast their ballot. To preempt these barriers to voting, we will work closely with local registrars, Secretaries of State, local coalitions, and other elected officials to help mitigate potential barriers and educate students to make sure they know how to make sure their vote is counted.

**Partnering to Get out the Youth Vote**

To help make our work more successful and amplify the voice of students we work closely with State Youth Tables and State C3 Tables. We’re also excited to be partnering with other leading civic engagement organizations and projects, including:
The Student PIRGs’ New Voters Project is an Election Protection Coalition National Partner. Election Protection (EP) is the nation’s largest non-partisan voter protection coalition, working throughout the year to help ensure all eligible American citizens have the opportunity to cast a meaningful ballot and have that vote counted. National partners work to support the existing Election Protection infrastructure and play a pivotal role in the overall direction, strategy and implementation of Election Protection efforts. More information at 866OurVote.org.

National Voter Registration Day is a nonpartisan civic holiday celebrating our democracy. First observed in 2012, it has quickly gained momentum ever since. Nearly 3 million voters have registered to vote on the holiday to date. The Student PIRGs’ New Voters Project is a premier partner and will be helping to register students on this year’s date of September 21, 2021. More information at NationalVoterRegistrationDay.org.

Vote Early Day is a movement of nonprofits, businesses, election administrators, and creatives working to ensure all Americans know their options to vote early. Voting early and safely by mail ensures that school, work, long lines, or a bad commute on Election Day won’t stop your ballot from being counted. The Student PIRGs’ New Voters Project is a premier partner and will be reminding students to send in their ballots on October 23rd, 2021. More information at VoteEarlyDay.org.

Ask Every Student uses the framework that full student voter participation comes from integrating person-to-person voter registration into existing processes, such as orientation or classes that reach all students. The Student PIRGs’ New Voters Project is working to ensure our target campuses create programs that ask every student about their democratic engagement plan. More information at StudentVoting.org.

CALPIRG Students is partnering with the California Secretary of State's office to launch the California University and College Ballot Bowl, a friendly competition designed to encourage universities and colleges to engage their students in the democratic process and register them to vote. More information at sos.ca.gov/elections/ballot-bowl/.

In Florida and Michigan, the Student PIRGs’ New Voters Project launched a joint project with the NAACP College and Youth Division to leave no voter behind. This effort is part of the NAACP’s Black Voices Change Lives project. PIRG and NAACP chapters host joint trainings and events to reach young voters. In Florida, leading up to the 2020 election, the project made 90,000 reminder contacts to both on and off-campus youth.

Request for Support

Experience has shown time and again that early investment yields greater civic engagement outcomes than later ones. In short, we need organizers on the ground now. It is essential to ensure youth voter turnout continues to increase in the next two years, solidifying young voters as a consistent and dedicated part of the electorate.

We are seeking general support of PIRG New Voters Project, Inc. towards our $6.5 million budget, which will allow us to run our youth civic engagement program in 26 states over the next two years.
Project States

We will be focusing our efforts on 150 campuses in 26 states. We choose our target campuses primarily based on where we have existing staff and field capacity, focusing on the schools that have existing Student PIRG chapters or where we have staff already on the ground. We also prioritize campuses where we have relationships with administrators, faculty, and students.

Note: Additional New Voters Project work in CA, CT, MD, and MA is not included here while our student leaders finalize state plans.

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Project Leadership

Staff

Manny Rin, New Voters Project Director
Manny directs the strategy, fundraising and field work for the New Voters Project so we can engage as many young people as possible in our democracy. Manny got his start organizing in 2009 as a student volunteer with CALPIRG and came on to full time staff after he graduated from University of California Davis. During his time with CALPIRG, he recruited and trained hundreds of student activists on campuses across the state, running projects that helped register thousands of students to vote and protected California's air, water and environment.

Dan Xie, Student PIRGs Political Director
Dan directs the national political strategy and grant fundraising for the Student PIRGs. Dan has managed successful campaigns from coast to coast to cap global warming pollution, fight the high cost of higher education, and make voting more accessible for students. She has recruited and trained hundreds of students and staff on public interest campaigns and got her start as an intern with CALPIRG Students. Dan lives in St. Petersburg, Fla., where she is an avid cyclist and climber.

Leigh-Anne Cole, Student PIRGs Deputy Director
Leigh-Anne is Deputy Director of the Student PIRGs. She coordinated the Student PIRGs’ New Voters Project from 2008 to 2012, which registered more than 300,000 people to vote and made more than 1 million “get-out-the-vote” contacts. As Director of Recruitment for The Public Interest Network, she recruited thousands of candidates to apply to join our network, hundreds of whom have found jobs or careers here, while others have gone on to pursue other public interest positions. Leigh-Anne lives in Somerville, Massachusetts, where she loves to go hiking with her dog, Aspen, and her daughter, Rosie.
Alex Gordon, Eckerd College (Florida)

Alex Gordon is the Statewide Board Chair for Florida PIRG Students and a student at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida. In 2019, Florida PIRG Students helped register over 80% of Eckerd’s incoming freshman class by registering students during move-in day. Alex led efforts to make it easier for students to vote at a dozen colleges across the state, building diverse coalitions and getting each campus to commit to a civic engagement action plan. For example, at the University of Florida, Alex teamed up with the Bob Graham Center, Greek Council, Multicultural Council and orientation leaders, reaching 7,000 new Gators at orientation alone.

Milu Parrilla, Georgia State University (Georgia)

Milu Parrilla is a biology pre-med major at Georgia State University. She has been a star throughout the campaign, highlighting and representing the potential and excitement of Georgia youth. During Georgia PIRG’s voter registration blitz, she phonebanked every single night, including texting her peers until midnight on the day of the deadline. She also delivered almost half of our Georgia team’s voter registration class presentations, which brought in the most amount of registrations of any single tactic.

Andres Cubillos, Florida State University (Florida)

Andres helped hundreds of students at FSU join him in voting for the first time this election. He worked with student housing administrators to host a vote competition between on-campus dorms to see who could help register the most residents before the deadline. Andres helped bring the competition to even more local schools during this year’s National Voter Registration Day, helping to kick off a citywide competition with student housing from FSU, Florida A&M University and Tallahassee Community College.

For more detailed plans, please reach out to Manny Rin, New Voters Project Director, at manny@studentpirgs.org or by cell at (925) 234-1457.