

Opinion: I'm a 17-year-old Oklahoma student and my peers don't see the point in voting

Kimberlee Wilson Sep 14, 2023 Updated 12 hrs ago 0

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Early voting takes place at the Tulsa County Election Board on Nov. 2. Oklahoma ranks last in the U.S. in voter turnout, and many voters are advocating for reforms to minimize extremism and motivate the electorate. Stephen Pingry, Tulsa World file



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If you've ever looked at the headlines and thought to yourself, "What the heck is going on?" you're not alone. I'm right there with you.

Have you thought, said or heard the phrase: "My vote doesn't matter." I hear this phrase from all sides of the political spectrum.

Republicans feel as if their votes don't matter because the current primary system heavily favors their party, so there's really no reason to participate. Democrats feel as though their votes have no weight at all due to their lack of representation in state government. Independents and Libertarians often share the same sentiment because they have few or no choices.

My friends and I want to be hopeful for our state's future, but we all feel completely powerless and like no one values us.

I'm 17 years old and a senior at Oologah-Talala. Many of my peers accept that their votes don't make a difference.

In the 2020 election, **Oklahoma ranked** next to last in the nation in voter turnout, with only Texas lagging, according to an analysis of federal election data. By 2022, Oklahoma had fallen to **last place**, with only 55% of the eligible population casting a ballot.

Yale University found that it's vital for young people to vote because voting is habitual. People who vote from the age of 18 are more likely to vote in the future.

My generation has lost faith in politics, so they are less likely to vote. Under 25% of eligible voters younger than 30 cast ballots last November.

Why does my generation have such a lackluster view of voting? Independents, the largest growing political group in Oklahoma, are barred from Republican primaries, yet Republicans hold every statewide and congressional seat in our state and a supermajority in the Legislature.

Democrats have voluntarily permitted unaffiliated voters in their primaries, but it's still not a level playing field for all voters. Regardless of their party affiliation, I want our elected officials to confront issues that young people worry about: education, health care, public safety and the cost of living.

The accomplishments, and lack thereof, have left Oklahoma 46th in the nation for youth well-being as reported by the **national Kids Count annual report**. This downward trend will continue as long as Oklahoma's voters neglect the ballot booth. Why? Because our collective apathy disconnects the people from the officials.

How do we restore faith in our political system? Many states have increased voter turnout through primary election reform.

An open primary system allows all voters to participate in primary contests, regardless of political affiliation or non-party registration. Six of the highest turnout states in 2022 were states with open primaries. Oklahoma is the only state among our neighbors with a closed primary system.

Voter turnout is a key sign of a healthy democracy.

Open primaries don't just increase voter turnout. They also have the ability to advance centrist political candidates motivated by topics that concern all aspects of daily life.

Moderates or centrists have few chances of appearing on the general election ballot, where all eligible Oklahomans can cast a vote. These results-oriented politicians have potential to help Oklahoma by focusing on commonsense legislation and responding with solutions that improve the quality of life for all of us.

Centrist representatives are more likely to end gridlock in Congress. Brookings found that the presence of centrists in elected bodies creates a 10% decrease in gridlock.

Oklahoma's growing number of independent or unaffiliated voters, now over 400,000 out of the approximately 2.2 million registered total, demonstrates that gridlock between two major parties is not what our citizens want. We want rational and relatable research, deliberation and solutions to issues impacting all Oklahomans, young and old.

All of these facts are why I volunteer for Oklahoma United for Progress, a nonpartisan organization working to repeal closed primaries to free Oklahomans to vote in all elections.

Oklahoma United is right there with us because it wants what's best for Oklahoma in a way I haven't seen in any other organization. Our grassroots efforts connect Oklahomans to the patriotic cause of a better democracy.

I'm channeling my frustration and disappointment into a positive and lasting reform that helps all of us.

All of our electorate deserves to be represented, including my friends and me. When we see higher voter turnout, moderate representation and a decrease in gridlock, we can get to a healthier Oklahoma.

At the end of the day, whether you're Republican, Democrat, Libertarian, or somewhere in between, that's a future that we can all hope for. I'm a high school senior, and I want open primaries.