

From The Ending Racism Task Force

Young Black Women Prove their Power at the Polls

By John Marshall

Young women of color have led civic and electoral participation in recent years. That's encouraging because issues that disproportionately affect those women are on the table this election season. In particular, as decisions about abortion rights devolve to the states, women of color are a critical line of defense.

It's a role they already are poised to play. In the 2020 election, voter turnout among young women (55%) outpaced that among young men (44%), according to the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (**CIRCLE**), which is based at Tufts University. But when CIRCLE dug deeper into its data last winter, the organization discovered racial- as well as gender-based disparities. Young women of color—specifically Black women and Latina women—outpaced young white women on almost every metric of civic engagement. Among other things, they were more likely to recognize their responsibility for improving society and to participate in political activity.

CIRCLE's **study** addressed not just perceptions but also actions. Young women of color were more involved in electoral activities, such as registering voters (28% of Latina women, 31% of Black women, and 37% of Asian women, compared with 20% of white women and 20% of young people overall). More

than twice the percentage of young Black as young white women had volunteered on political campaigns.

Perhaps not surprisingly, young Black and Latina women were more likely than white women to have taken concrete steps to battle racial injustice and to believe combatting violence against people of color should be a high political priority.

Young Black women also have been more active than white women in the reproductive rights movement. And with the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, the stakes have risen dramatically. In 2019, 38% of abortions were performed on Black women compared to 33% on white women, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. That disparity arises from more limited access to health care and, consequently, to contraception and sexual-health services.

That same lack of access for women of color affects their ability to obtain abortions in the post-*Roe* landscape. More than four in 10 women of child-bearing age who live in states where abortion is or will probably become illegal are women of color.

“Moreover, due to underlying structural inequities, women of color have more limited financial resources and may face other increased barriers to accessing abortions if they need to travel out of state for one,” reports Kaiser.

Access to health services, including abortion, allowed all young women to graduate from college in higher numbers and improved their opportunities to have professional careers. Poverty rates decreased as a result. “We...know that the single greatest contributor to persistent poverty among Black women is

an unplanned pregnancy,” wrote Marcella Howell, CEO of In Our Own Voice: National Black Women’s Reproductive Justice Agenda. “For Black women, Roe has always been the floor, not the ceiling.”

To be clear: supporting abortion rights does not require people to abandon their faith or beliefs. They just must agree that the government should not be able to make decisions for women about their own bodies.

According to CIRCLE, more than two-thirds of all young women believe voting and elections can affect racial injustice in this country. In 2020, young women of all races cast hundreds of thousands of votes in key battleground states like Pennsylvania, Arizona, and Florida. This year they once again can shape decisively election results at every level.

John Marshall is a member of the Ending Racism Task Force of the Philadelphia Ethical Society.

Links

CIRCLE

<https://circle.tufts.edu/>

Study

<https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/young-women-color-continue-lead-civic-and-political-engagement>