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Authors

Wray-Lake, Laura

Mirra, Nicole

Rottenberg, Julia

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Newark's Implementation of a Lower Voting Age: Research Brief



Laura Wray-Lake, Professor of Social Welfare, University of California, Los Angeles
Nicole Mirra, Associate Professor of Education, University of California, Los Angeles
Julia Rottenberg, Psychology & International Relations Major, Tufts University¹

Introduction

On April 15, 2025, Newark, New Jersey held an historic school board election in which 16- and 17-year-olds had the right to vote. Newark joins 10 municipalities in Maryland, one in Vermont, and three in California in allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in school board or local elections. The April 2025 election was Newark's first implementation of a lower voting age. Our research documents implementation in Newark to inform future efforts in Newark and elsewhere.

We conducted interviews via Zoom with 11 stakeholders in Newark in summer 2025. The sample included three youth organizers, four community organizers, three school staff, and one election administrator.² We asked about their views on and experiences with the policy implementation, including successes and areas of improvement. Additionally, we surveyed 334 11th-12th graders in one public high school in Newark. Students (median age 17; 52% male; 57% Latine, 17% biracial, 11% white) were asked about registering and voting, obstacles to election participation, and civic education. Our findings center on interviews with key stakeholders, supplemented by insights from the student survey.

Our findings are divided into three areas:

- ★ Implementation Successes
- ⚙️ Implementation Challenges
- 📊 Recommendations



Photo Credit: Former New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy's Office via New Jersey Institute for Social Justice

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²Despite multiple attempts at contact, we were unable to recruit any school board or city council members to participate, nor were we able to recruit any school district-level staff. The perspectives of these stakeholders may be missing from the study, which limits the scope of our results.



Implementation Successes

Although everyone acknowledged the low turnout of newly enfranchised young voters, the consensus across stakeholders was that Newark had a good start to implementing a lower voting age, and future years would be more successful based on the foundations laid in 2025. Implementation successes were particularly evident for registration and coalition building.



“This is the first year, like, it’s just gonna keep going up from here, so it was just like the test run anyway.”

— Youth Organizer

1. Registration

Stakeholders agreed that the number of young people registered (1,851) constituted a huge success, especially given the short time frame. This registration rate will have cascading impacts, as registered 16- and 17-year-olds will automatically be registered for all elections when they turn 18.

Different stakeholders launched various initiatives to inform 16- and 17-year-olds about the policy change and register them to vote.



“We registered a lot of kids!...that’s a win.”

— Teacher

A Collective Effort: Activities by Stakeholders that Led to Registration Success			
Schools		Community Organizations	
☐ The school district focused on maximizing the number of registrants across schools.		☐ Community organizations held voter registration drives and listening tours across Newark wards.	
☐ Teachers expended high effort to individually register eligible students.		☐ They spread awareness via social media.	
Youth Organizers		City Officials	
☐ Youth organizers focused on peer-to-peer organizing and registration.		☐ The city sent representatives to schools to provide information and registration forms.	
☐ They led initiatives with community organizations and in schools to raise awareness.		☐ They created and shared information with the public.	

2. Coalition Building

Different stakeholders partnered to register and educate 16- and 17-year-olds about voting in the school board election. Civic-focused community organizations led efforts to build partnerships with other youth-serving organizations, schools, and city officials. The partnerships developed during the compacted timeline of the 2025 election offer a foundation to build on for the future.



“The moment that the registration opened up, I think we all had, like, this big coalition to where everything that we thought about, it was gonna get done in a timely manner, and everybody's gonna have equal roles in it.”

— Community Organizer

Examples of Successful Coalition Building

The Victoria Foundation partnered with the Board of Education to offer cash prizes to schools with the most civic engagement. Efforts focused on registering young voters.

The New Jersey Institute of Social Justice convened monthly meetings among community organizations to strategize and plan collectively.

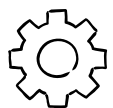
A town hall-style kickoff event was held in the community and attended by young people, school board members, school administrators and staff, elected officials, and city staff. This event was salient for many stakeholders, signifying collective investment in supporting implementation of the lower voting age.

A Deeper Look at Young People who Voted

Only 73 16- and 17-year-olds voted in the election. 17 of those voters completed our survey. Although it is hard to draw conclusions with a small sample, their survey responses are a start to understanding the profile of young voters.

- **73%** did at least one thing to prepare for voting. The most common way to prepare was to research the candidates. Others talked to teachers, family, and classmates.
- **65%** had taken or were currently enrolled in a civics course.
- **75%** reported getting As or mostly As and Bs in school.
- **75%** had moderate political views or were unsure; few were liberal or conservative.
- **83%** had at least one parent born outside of the U.S.

When asked about their experiences voting, most felt positively and had a “great experience.” One stated, “It was pretty easy and fast when I voted. I was feeling excited, as it was my first time ever voting.” Several felt empowered, saying “I felt like I finally had the ability to make a difference first-hand,” and “I felt like my opinion mattered.”



Implementation Challenges

Stakeholders identified three key challenges that emerged in implementing a lower voting age in Newark for the first time.

1. Voting Accessibility Challenges

Students who were registered had challenges getting to their polling places on Election Day for two main reasons. First, voting times did not match up with high school student schedules. Poll hours were from 6:00am - 8:00pm. High school students in Newark spend their early mornings traveling from home to school (which are often in different areas of the city), then attend classes until after 3:00pm and many engage in after-school activities or part-time jobs. Second, voting locations did not match up with where students were during the day. With polling places located near their homes, but often far from their schools, it was inconvenient for many and impossible for some to get to the polls before they closed.

As the quote below from a Community Organizer illustrates, even some of the most engaged young people “ran out of time” to vote on Election Day.



“Some of the students I spoke to who were really involved in the outreach and organizing efforts...found themselves not being able to vote on Election Day because they kind of just ran out of time in their day. They spend the majority of their day in school. And of course, the polls were open to 8pm, but many of them have work or extracurricular activities. Mail-in voting is an option, but most young people don't know how to do mail - don't know how to send a letter or anything like that.”

— Community Organizer

Stakeholders noted that vote-by-mail was not used. More research is needed into the reasons for this, but stakeholders we interviewed mentioned students' lack of knowledge about how to request a ballot, which had to be done in advance, often by mail. There was also limited time available before the election to make these requests.

2. Limited Emphasis on Voter Education

Schools and community organizations focused a lot on youth registration, but emphasis on broader voter education efforts was more limited. This challenge was summed up by one Community Organizer who said, “How y’all gonna get the kids to vote? Then I’m like, ‘Wait, we never really talked about that.’” A teacher emphasized that the school district’s hyper-focus on registration led to an effort “just to mark things off on a checkbox,” and “we didn’t have a lot of voter education or even amping up the kids to want to vote.” Another Community Organizer, in the quote below, noted the lack of attention to voter education and broader civic engagement as a missed opportunity in the buildup to the election.

“The district was...just kind of getting the forms filled out and moving on. They weren't adding in this kind of education, or even like learning civic engagement and learning opportunities. So I think that that was missed.”
— Community Organizer

According to stakeholders, the lack of emphasis on voter education was due, in part, to a lack of coordination between the school district, city, and community organizations. Although the initial coalition building was part of Newark’s success story, challenges also arose as different priorities led to mixed messaging and added friction to implementation efforts. In the quote below, a Principal refers to tension between the school district versus the city, which was a dynamic alluded to by others but never fully explained to us by stakeholders. A Youth Organizer shared that, from their view, politicians expressed a lot of interest in public, but “behind closed doors, when the work has to be done, it’s not prioritized.”

“There's this whole school district versus the city thing, right, and they're not really working in parallel with each other on this. Because I think that, you know, the mayor versus the superintendent probably have different agendas.”
— Principal

Some tensions also emerged between schools and community organizations. One Community Organizer shared that there was some “gatekeeping that was being done to make it as difficult as possible for outside organizations to come to the schools.” Some community efforts to do more robust voter education presentations in classrooms were not implemented due to lack of MOUs in place to formally establish partnerships. This lack of systematic planning and coordination may have also been due to limited available time, which was the third challenge this research identified.

3. Not Enough Time for Full Implementation

Everyone we interviewed felt that there was simply not enough time for a robust implementation of the policy. The measure was passed by Newark City Council in January 2024, who announced in January 2025 that the lower voting age would be implemented for the April 15, 2025 election. Registration opened on February 1st and closed on March 25th, which was a 53-day window.

Stakeholders discussed the period of limbo in the year between the measure's passage and its implementation, during which concerted planning was not outwardly visible to the public and efforts to raise awareness were not salient to young people. As a Youth Organizer shared in the quote below, efforts began in 2025, which was not enough time to fully accomplish the goals of registering, educating, and motivating youth voters. A Community Organizer similarly reflected on "this huge gap where it wasn't implemented. And then when it was implemented, it was like, rush, rush, rush, you know, so that was where the flaws were."

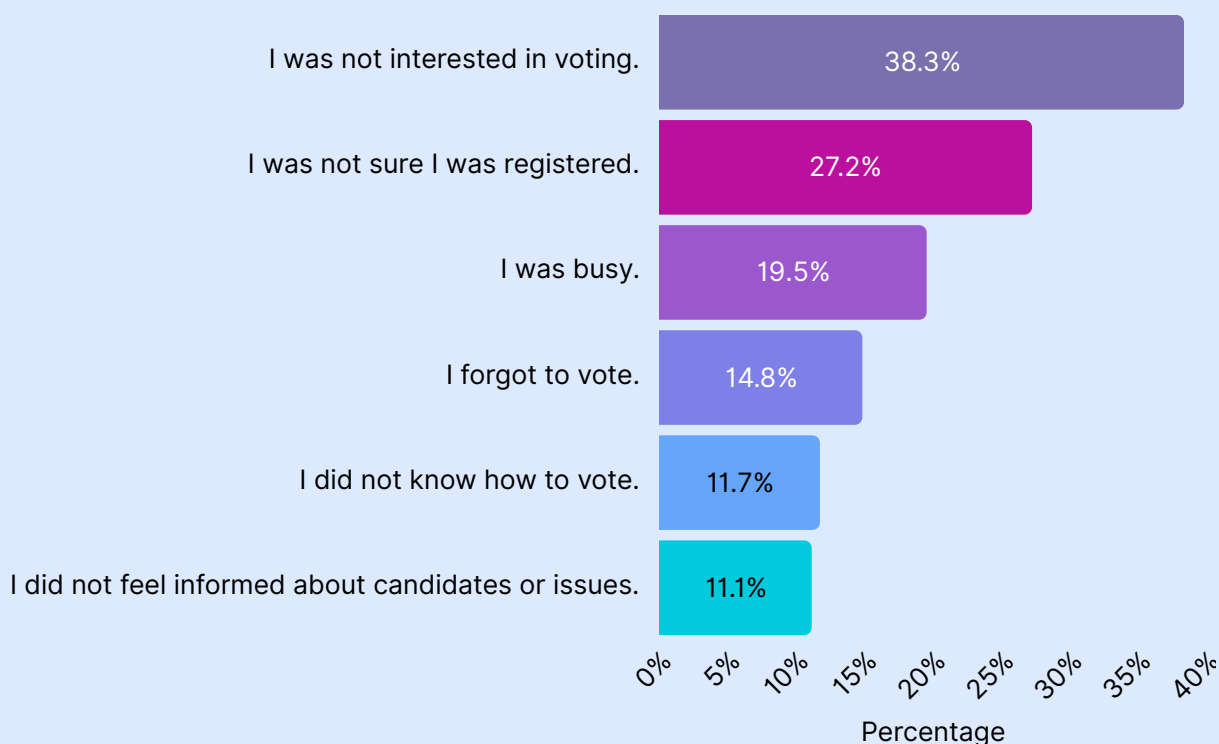
“We only had a two-month window to actually, like, build a campaign, to get you know, students registered, to get them motivated, and everything we didn't [do]...The ordinance was passed in...January of 2024. We were in limbo, not really knowing if they're going to...enact it in 2024. They ended up not doing so. They said, 'Okay, next year, maybe, right?' Then we didn't know for sure until January [2025], right? So now we had to build something from scratch in two months, or, I think, like a month and a half, because they made the registration window really weird.”

— Youth Organizer

Establishing partnerships across stakeholders, coordinating efforts, and designing and implementing high-quality voter education all takes time. As another Youth Organizer put it, “My key thing to take away from this thing is preparation.” They went on to say that young people are “not passionate” about things “they’re not required to care about...So, it will take a bit more time and patience to inform them, right? And I don’t think we had enough time to do that.”

Top Six Obstacles to Voting: Insights from Students

The 334 Newark 11th-12th graders we surveyed reported on obstacles to voting in the April 2025 school board election. Below are the top six obstacles identified by students. The most commonly reported obstacle was not being interested in voting. Among other common obstacles, substantial proportions of students weren't sure they were registered, did not know how to vote, or did not feel informed about the candidates or issues.



These findings point to important gaps in students' feelings of competence and knowledge related to the election, and align with the interview findings about the limited time for and availability of voter education opportunities around the school board election. As one Youth Organizer shared about their peers, "In the beginning, people didn't really want to vote because they had no realization of how important it was...When you realize what the school board actually does for you, I think students are going to vote."



Recommendations

1. Improve Accessibility through Policy Change

Stakeholders offered multiple recommendations that directly address the voting accessibility challenges faced by young people. These recommendations, described in the table below, align with best practices for making voting more widely accessible to all voters, including young people.

Policy Recommendation	Explanation	Quote from Stakeholder
Expand use of provisional ballots to different polling places.	Provisional ballots are not provided to New Jersey voters who go to the wrong polling place. Expanding use of this policy to alternative polling places would allow students to vote where it is most convenient. Implementation could be straightforward, given that Newark's school board seats are all at-large and thus all ballots are the same across the city.	"Some students who may work near a poll site and attempted to vote there as a provisional voter, do a provisional ballot, were turned away...If you want to do a provisional ballot here [at school], you could do it before you leave, just to not create any barriers." — Principal
Vote at the school you attend.	A more robust change to polling places would allow students to vote at the school they attend, which could be implemented using an approach like California's vote center model . To ensure accessibility, implementation should be done without closing existing polling places.	"A lot of the school sites are voting locations...What would need to happen for students to be able to vote at the school they actually attend?" — Principal
Expand use of vote-by-mail.	Vote-by-mail (VBM) was available but not used by 16- and 17-year-olds. VBM can be requested at time of registration. Otherwise, requests for mail-in ballots must be mailed to the Essex County Clerk or presented in person, which is cumbersome. Accessibility and awareness of this option could be greatly expanded.	"We can do something to where every young person gets a mail-in ballot and fills it out at school." — Youth Organizer
Expand early voting.	According to city ordinances , early voting for school board elections in Newark is an option but not a mandate, and so the Newark City Council could choose to implement early voting.	"There's also no early voting in the school board elections...we do have that for primary or general elections, I think even some municipal elections, they have the ability to have school early voting...That is something that many of the people I spoke to said could have helped." — Community Organizer
Create an election holiday.	In New Jersey , Election Day is a state holiday. Newark could make school board Election Day a holiday or move school board elections from spring to fall to coincide with the existing state holiday. This option may not fully address access, as some populations still work on holidays.	"I really think that if the students and the teachers had off that day, that would have probably possibly doubled the poll numbers." — Principal

2. Strengthen Civic Education

To address the limited emphasis on voter education, stakeholders called for more attention to voter education and civic education more broadly. Strengthening civic education practices could increase student motivation and preparedness to vote.

Specific recommendations included:

Teach Young People How to Vote.

Stakeholders stressed the need to demystify the registration and voting process for young people. A Teacher acknowledged that implementing this basic voter education instruction is “kind of hard because it’s not part of our curriculum in social studies classes.” This Teacher explained that local issues are inherently tied to civic curricula because “act local is the number one part of civics.” This Teacher also shared, “It’s important to teach how to fill out a ballot.” Their goal was “to get a sample voting machine sent to the school, and teachers can take their kids down and say, ‘This is the machine. This is how it works.’ These are ideas that never even crossed my mind until Election Day.”

Start Conversations about Voting Earlier.

By introducing students to election processes and local governing bodies in late middle school or early high school, students can build more foundational civic knowledge before reaching voting age. A Teacher said, “I think really 8th graders should be having this conversation in Newark now...within two years, three years, some of you are going to be able to vote, and what does that mean for you?” A Principal similarly said, “I don’t think we should wait till senior year for studying civics...It really should occur at 14-, 15-years-old at the very least.” Stakeholders stressed that voter education should go beyond the mechanics and logistics of voting to also focus on why voting matters.

Deepen Civic Education.

Stakeholders noted the importance of going beyond just voter education to deepen civic learning opportunities inside and outside of classrooms. A Youth Organizer advocated for a required civics course in high school because “you need to realize the history before voting and...all the movements that allowed us, like us minorities, to vote...We’re gonna be forced to be more knowledgeable. I know people are gonna be pushing for civic education.” An Election Administrator echoed this need for broader civic education, saying, “If you don’t really understand civics, then just, you know, it adds to the apathy. You don’t teach it, you don’t understand it.”

3. Build a Cohesive and Unified Coalition

Newark is moving forward with more time and knowledge about how to fully incorporate 16- and 17-year-olds into school board elections. Stakeholders agreed that future efforts should involve more cohesive and unified efforts across various institutions and sectors. A Youth Organizer emphasized the importance of laying a foundation for “strong community partnership between the district, the individual schools, and you know, the community partners that are willing to work with the young people.” Newark had notable strengths in coalition building as well as challenges to coordination, especially on the tight timeline. The quote below from a Youth Organizer emphasizes the importance of bringing everyone to the table, even those who may be resistant to the policy.

“Make sure you're unified in your implementation. Don't leave anybody out, even the people who disagree...Bring them to the table, right? You got to be able to take it on the chin, and you got to be able to listen to the criticisms and address them, right? Not just silence them, but listen to it, see what they're actually saying. Because someone who's saying, 'Well, they're not ready.' All they're saying is, 'I think my kids should be prepared for something like this, because I don't want them to be controlled. I don't want them to be manipulated.' So what does that mean? That's something we can solve, right?”

— Youth Organizer

A Community Organizer called for identifying strong community leaders “to continue to push this” and “recruit and bring others into the work we’re trying to do.” Others emphasized that young people should be at the forefront of the education and implementation efforts. For example, an Election Administrator stressed that for the success of future implementation efforts, adults need to “engage the youth, you know, to join forces.”



Photo Credit: New Jersey Institute of Social Justice

Conclusion

Newark has a lot to celebrate as a result of their first implementation of a lower voting age for the 2025 school board election.

Registration efforts were a notable success. Strong examples of coalition building were evident across schools, city officials, and community organizations.

Many stakeholders are invested in Newark's efforts to enfranchise 16- and 17-year-olds and support their democratic participation.



Photo Credit: Photography by Fresco via New Jersey Institute for Social Justice

Stakeholders clearly diagnosed Newark's challenges to implementation and offered corresponding recommendations. These recommendations provide a roadmap for Newark to move forward even more collaboratively to make voting more accessible and civic education stronger for Newark's young people.

Other cities can learn from Newark's case in terms of their successes as well as their recommendations to overcome challenges. At the broadest level, other cities aiming to implement a lower voting age should:

- **Create an implementation plan.** Organizing, planning, and coalition building should not stop once a lower voting age is passed. A comprehensive implementation plan can help cities prepare to meet the moment and make sure young people have every opportunity to exercise their right.
- **Build a unified coalition inclusive of many stakeholders.** Coordinated efforts are needed across schools, city officials, election administrators, community organizations, and young people to ensure that young people can fully exercise their right to vote.
- **Strengthen voter and civic education.** Communities at any point on the path to lowering the voting age can integrate voter education curricula in schools and implement best practices for high-quality civic education in schools and youth-serving community organizations.