



Addressing the Lack of Preparation for and Accessibility to Civic Engagement

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SUMMARY: Civic engagement consists of bringing communities together through participation in publicly desired movements. This varies from town hall meetings to voting during elections. In coming together, we hope to better our communities and bridge disconnects across cultural and political backgrounds. Civic engagement is measurable through community advancements led by constituents of that community. Ideally then our communities

would elect and become represented by individuals whose values best align with our own at a local, state, and national level.

In Oklahoma we have been failing to fulfill our duty as residents in the civic engagement sector. As a Latina constituent from Oklahoma County there is a lack of preparation and accessibility to participate. Our education system does not focus on **prioritizing education for civic engagement**. This is a barrier specifically for first or second generation students across the state. The narrative of civic engagement across the state is problematic. It frames that only a select few Oklahomans are able to participate, because of their expertise. This excludes those who are willing to participate and those who are willing to learn.

BACKGROUND: While civic engagement is not in its entirety categorized by voter turnout, voter turnout does account for how many Latinos are going out to the polls and participating in the election process. In the 2018 midterm elections, 29 million Latinos were eligible to vote*. This accounted for 12.8% of all eligible voters, breaking record numbers. This number is expected to increase within the years to come. Moreover, by 2023 Latinos will represent nearly 30% of all students enrolled in U.S. schools†. Although not all Latinos are eligible to vote because of immigration status, this has in no way stopped Latinos from being motivated to participate. According to one study‡ undocumented status amongst Latinos appeared as a particularly salient driver of engagement. Also that rather than being “instrumentally and individually motivated Latino immigrant-origin young adults were primarily motivated to be civically engaged by social responsibility as well as by social (in)justices.” It is estimated that first and second generation Latinos make up the largest growing group of young adults in the nation (Rumbaut & Komai.)

* Pew Research Center; <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/11/09/how-latinos-voted-in-2018-midterms/>

† UnidosUS; <https://www.unidosus.org/issues/education/>

‡ “The Civic Engagement and Social Responsibility of Latino Immigrant-Origin Young Adults” (Suarez-Orozco, et al. 2015)

As the U.S. Representative for a district with over 75,000 Latinos living this should be a call to action. Overall, Oklahoma has failed to show up and vote given that in this last year's midterm elections, less than 30 percent of eligible voters made it to the polls to cast their ballot for Governor and other offices*. While these are some of the lowest voter turnout rates in the nation, Oklahoma has not always ranked the lowest. In the decades before 2004, we were reporting above or close to national average†

RECOMMENDATIONS: This proposal is a call for U.S. Representative Kendra Horn to uphold her promise of bettering Oklahoma's education system by promoting civic engagement. It is imperative to focus on the communities needs and wants before taking action. My suggestions are the following.

1. **At the federal level we should support the Dream and Promise Act of 2019 that enables our community members to proceed towards a legal and legitimate path towards citizenship.** The Dream and Promise Act provides real solutions to families who may be in immigration limbo as well as provides a pathway to citizenship for DREAMers. This bill would permit a permanent legal protection for Temporary Protection Status recipients. This bill while well overdue, dismantles the cruel and unusual immigration laws in place with solutions.
2. **Following this we should support H.R. 1 "For the People"** Oklahoma would benefit from this because the bill supports online voter registrations. Registering to vote in Oklahoma is not the simplest task. Complex voter registration can further disenfranchise people of color, people from low income communities and other marginalized groups. Consequently, the bill also bans the power to redistrict counties making it an equitable approach to positive reinforcements. Oklahomans must stick together and support progressive movements that will mobilize our community to participate. In supporting H.R. 1 "For the People," we are making voter registration accessible to all eligible voters.
3. **Support a voter education/civic engagement being required as a High School Graduation class.** Primarily we have to understand that Oklahoma may not be well equipped to educate first generation and second generation students on Civic Engagement. Because this is the case, we must be willing to support and expand a voter education/civic engagement course that is mandatory before graduating high school for all students. This may require adopting a program such as the High School Democracy Project‡ which equips educators to teach Latina and Latino students the fundamental values of civic engagement.

* OKPolicy Institute, 2019

† ibid

‡ UnidosUS High School Democracy Project; <https://www.unidosus.org/issues/voting/democracy-curriculum>