

# Ferndale Voter Engagement: How to Increase Turnout

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## Issue

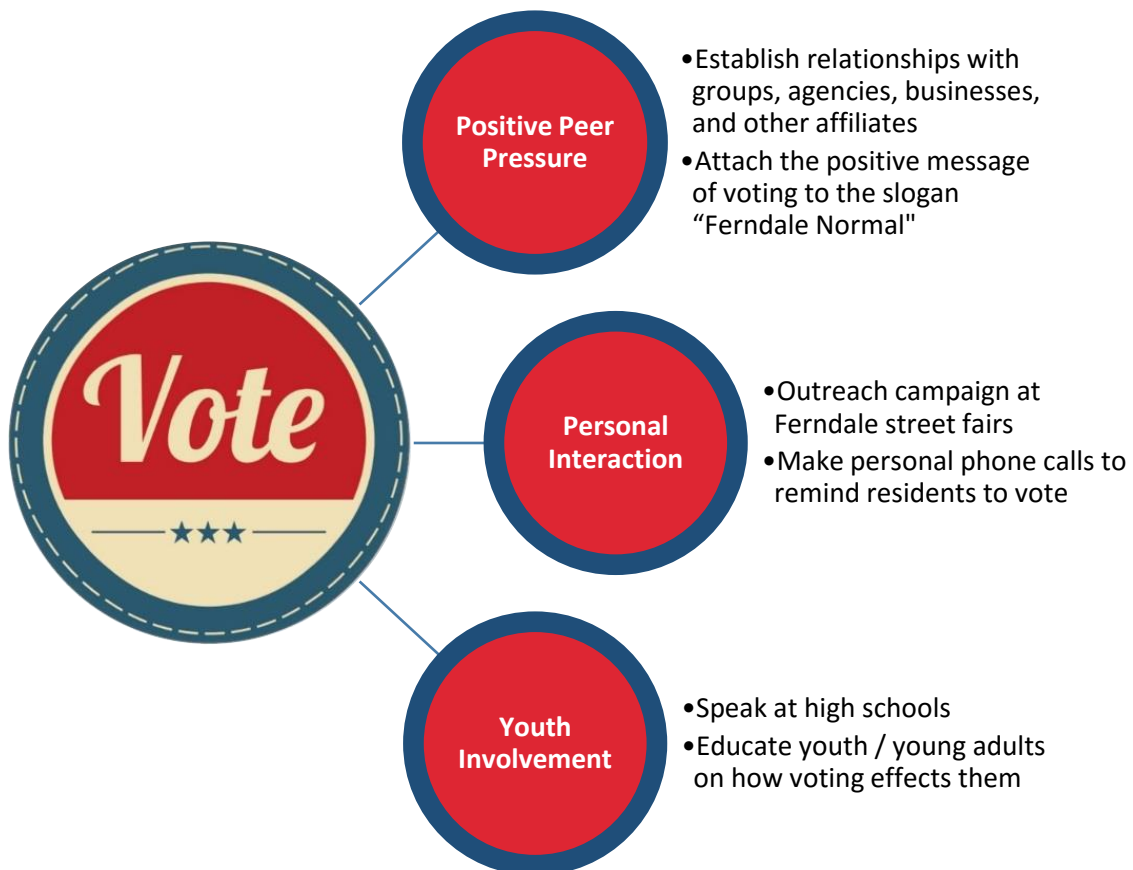
Though residents of Ferndale take pride in their city's sense of community, this is not reflected at the election polls. Voter turnout rates are low, with recent local election turnout rates circling around 20%. General election turnout rates range from 40-64% since 2008. This percentage is unacceptable and Ferndale's City Clerk and her Voter Task Force want to understand why this rate is so low.

## Possible Reasons for Low Turnout

Research shows that typical nonvoters come from a marginalized background, belong to a minority group, have low-income, lack higher educational attainment, and are younger in age. Since the majority of Ferndale residents are white, educated, and moderate to high-income, perhaps the reason citizens of the city do not to vote is because they are young, with almost 1/3 of the voting age population being under the age of 35.

## Engagement Tactics

Based on the following findings, in order to increase voter turnout, it is suggested that the Ferndale Voter Task Force concentrates on using positive peer pressure, personal mobilization tactics, and youth engagement, making sure to project a positive message about voter participation.

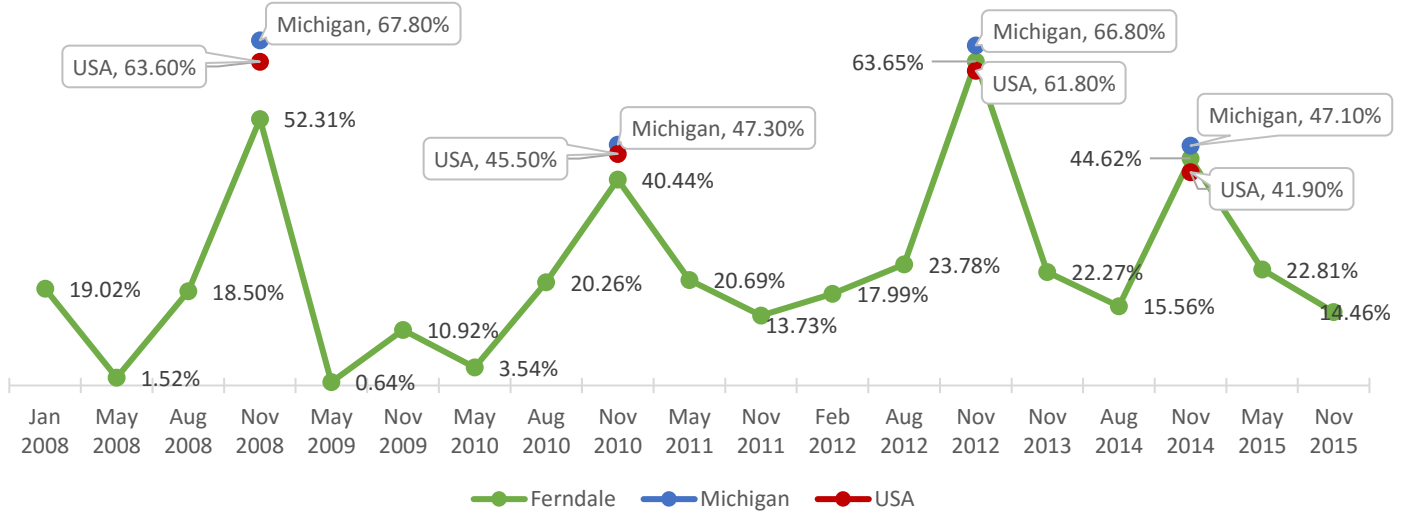


# Characteristics of Ferndale Voters

## Ferndale Voter Turnout Rates

Figure 1 shows Ferndale voter turnout rates from 2008 to present. Ferndale voter turnout rates are similar to statewide and national rates for gubernatorial and presidential elections. However, this does not mean the rates are at a desirable level. Even more alarming is the fact that the highest turnout rate for local elections in the past eight years is less than 25% and the lowest rate is less than one percent.

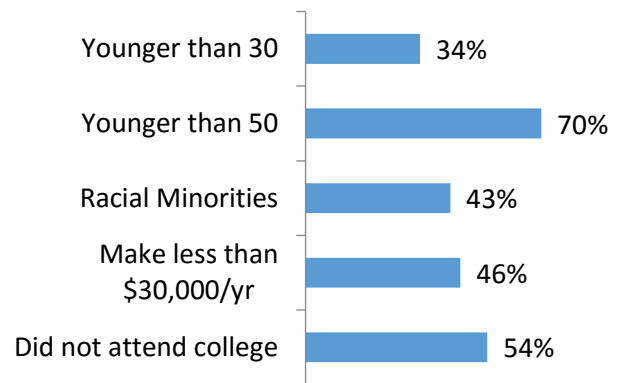
Figure 1 Voter Turnout 2008-2015<sup>1</sup>



## Typical Characteristics of Nonvoters

There has been immense amounts of research on why people do not vote. Some of these studies performed on a national level have shown that there are distinct characteristics of those who likely do not vote. As shown in Figure 2, the typical nonvoter comes from a marginalized background: being a minority, low-income, and uneducated, as well as those who are young. As some think that voting is an expression of hope, this could show the lack of hope in these populations.<sup>3</sup> Another perspective is that these groups of Americans do not see voting as an essential part of their lives.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 2 Non Voters<sup>2</sup>



<sup>2</sup>Fullwood, S, 2015

## Characteristics of Ferndale Residents

The characteristics of Ferndale residents must be studied and compared to the national characteristics of nonvoters. Table 1 shows Ferndale with a younger population, which correlates with the previously mentioned characteristics of typical nonvoters. However the other typical nonvoter characteristics do not align with the Ferndale population. There is a

low percentage of minorities and most residents are educated with a moderate to high level of income. Looking at why Ferndale residents do not vote, the demographic information points to a young age of its citizens. Since the majority of Ferndale residents are white, educated, and moderate to high-income, perhaps the reason citizens of the city do not to vote is because they are young.

**Table 1 Population Characteristics, 2010 Census <sup>5</sup>**

Age	Ferndale	Michigan	USA	Education	Ferndale	Michigan	USA
Total Population	19,900	9,883,640	308,745,538	Graduate / Professional	13.2%	8.4%	8.9%
18-24	8.2%	13.9%	9.9%	Bachelor's	21.6%	14.5%	16.5%
25-34	24.1%	11.8%	13.3%	Some College or Associate's	30.4%	33.5%	30.0%
35-59	38.0%	35.1%	34.2%	High School Graduate	25.2%	31.2%	29.3%
60+	13.2%	19.5%	18.5%	Did Not Graduate High School	9.6%	12.4%	15.2%
Total Voting Age	83.5%	80.2%	75.9%	Graduate / Professional	13.2%	8.4%	8.9%
Median Age	35.6	38.9	37.2	Bachelor's	21.6%	14.5%	16.5%
Race / Ethnicity				Income			
White	82.8%	78.9%	72.4%	Median HH Income	\$50,273	\$48,432	\$51,914
Black	9.4%	14.2%	12.6%	Mean HH Income	\$58,172	\$63,692	\$70,883
Asian	1.3%	2.4%	4.8%	Per Capita Income	\$28,860	\$25,135	\$27,334
Multi-Racial	3.1%	2.3%	2.9%	Living in Poverty	10.9%	14.8%	13.8%
Hispanic	2.8%	4.4%	16.3%				

**Typical Age of Ferndale Voters**

Using data from Election Reports provided by Ferndale’s City Clerk, it is again maintained that young citizens are less likely to vote. The majority of voters are usually people in their 30s up to people in their 60s. This information, in addition to the above factors, have determined that resident age is a key factor in voter turnout.

**Research on Voter Turnout**

**Reasons Young People Do Not Vote**

There are numerous reasons individuals generally and young individuals specifically do not vote. Understanding this information is crucial to addressing the issue of low voter turnout.

Reasons registered voters do not vote:<sup>6</sup>

- Too busy/have conflicting schedule (27.3%)
- Are ill or have a disability (12.4%)
- Are not interested in the election (11.5%)

Societal reasons young Americans do not vote:

- Have lower stability in their lives
- Are still developing in many ways – socially, educationally, economically, politically<sup>7</sup>

- May be focused on looking for a mate or finding employment instead<sup>8</sup>
- Typically have higher mobility rates which may result in less ties to their community<sup>9</sup>

As young people marry, have children, and cultivate relationships within their community, their frequency of voting increases.<sup>10</sup>

Political reasons young Americans do not vote:

- Believe leaders don’t support their interests<sup>11</sup>
- Are less interested in politics in general
- Have less understanding of political process
- Pay less attention to the news
- Participate less in community organizations that address public issues.<sup>12</sup>

RESEARCH SUGGESTS THAT LACK OF PARTICIPATION AMONG YOUNG VOTERS MAY NOT BE DUE TO DISINTEREST, BUT INSTEAD DUE TO SKEPTICISM TOWARDS POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND OFFICIALS.<sup>13</sup>

### *Psychology of Voting Campaigns*

Most voting campaigns use emotions to persuade citizens to attend elections. The attitude of the message, whether positive or negative, can have an effect on how voters respond.

**Injunctive norms are what people believe society think they should do.**

**Descriptive norms are what people believe that members of society actually do.<sup>14</sup>**

In terms of voting, this relates to a person voting because they believe society wants them to vote or a person not voting because they believe no one else is voting.

Research shows descriptive norms affect a person's behavior more than the person's belief of what

society wants them to do.<sup>15</sup> Low voter turnout is the typical message of media and politicians yet there is no evidence that this approach is effective.<sup>16</sup> By showing citizens that the social norm is to not vote, this reinforces the habit of individuals not voting. However if an expected high turnout rate was emphasized, this could increase the likelihood of an individual deciding to vote.

Additional studies on voting social norms include individuals' affiliations with groups and organizations.<sup>17</sup> An individual's voting behavior is strongly tied to the groups' voting behavior. This can include religion, ethnicity, employment, and many others. If the group has a strong voter participation rate, the individual is more likely to vote.

### *Mobilization Tactics*

There have been several studies that show personal mobilization tactics as being the most effective way to get people to vote.<sup>18</sup> In fact, as face-to-face and over-the-phone campaigning has decreased, so has voter turnout.<sup>19</sup> This may be due to the level of "social connectedness" a voter feels, or their sense of belonging at the polls.<sup>20</sup> This can be a challenge for young citizens who frequently interact on social media and less face-to-face.

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## **Engagement Strategies**

In order to increase voter turnout it is suggested that the Ferndale Voter Task Force concentrate on using positive peer pressure, personal mobilization tactics, and youth engagement, making sure to project a positive message about voter participation.

### *Positive Peer Pressure*

It is important to have a positive message when talking about voter turnout. If you stress a message of how many are going to show up to vote, then most people are going to think they should also vote.

### **Group Participation**

One way this can be accomplished is by establishing positive relationships with groups, organizations, businesses, and other affiliations in Ferndale. Group leaders will be asked to support and encourage voting among their members. This is a solid example of

emphasizing positive descriptive norms to encourage a behavior. If the leaders of the group say voting is important and that as a group they will all be participating in the voting process, it will likely lead to more participation from its members.

### **Ferndale Normal**

Another way to spread this positive social norm is to attach the positive message of voting to the slogan "Ferndale Normal". The voting message can attach to this slogan by saying "Ferndale Normal – Ferndale Votes". By incorporating this already positive attitude to voting, residents will associate voting with a positive part of community engagement - something that Ferndale takes pride in. If the residents care about their community, they should care enough to vote.

## Personal Interactions

Just like any other association, the stronger and more positive a relationship, the more it will be nurtured by all parties. If Ferndale puts friendly faces to the voting campaign, it will increase turnout.

### Foster Friendly Relationships

When previous surveys were conducted regarding voter satisfaction of their voting experience, the overwhelming majority said the most positive part of their experience was how friendly the poll workers were.<sup>21</sup> This friendly relationship needs to be extended out to the general public, and especially including nonvoters and young adults.

This can be done by participating at the numerous Ferndale street festivals that occur during the warm months. The Task Force can either have a booth at these events or can have people walking around the events. The members of the Task Force could distribute bracelets that say “#FerndaleNormal #FerndaleVotes”. There should also be raffle tickets given to people. When individuals write their name and phone number on the ticket, they are agreeing to let the Voter Task Force call them regarding upcoming voter events and elections. The winner of the raffle will receive a gift.

### Personal Phone Calls

The raffle ticket information can then be used for the second part of the personal mobilization tactic. The phone numbers collected will be used for a phone bank. The phone bank will be utilized to give reminder calls to go out and vote. The calls will also be sure to include everything that will be on the

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- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> Carpini, M. X. D. (2000). Gen.com: Youth, civic engagement, and the new information

ballot. The goal is to make people aware of the upcoming election as well as what is being voted on. This turns into a continuing conversation that was started at the street fair.

## Youth Involvement

### High School Engagement

Another way to outreach to this cohort is to speak at the high schools in Ferndale. A speaker should have a conversation with students during social studies classes for juniors and seniors. This program will aim to show the students just what the local government does and how it effects them on a daily basis. This is very important because people with more information are more likely to vote.<sup>22</sup>

### Citizen Ferndale

There is also substantial literature stating that if young people don't start to vote, it will have a negative impact on their future.<sup>23</sup> This attitude is more about what could happen to them in the future if the younger generation doesn't start to participate in democracy. However, it ignores all the issues that affect young people while they are still young.<sup>24</sup> This is unfortunate because if young people became engaged in issues that mattered to them, they would most likely continue to be engaged as they grow older. In addition, if a young person does not develop a habit of voting while they are young, it is less likely they will develop the habit when they are older.<sup>25</sup> A model such as Citizen Detroit could be used for this process. Young adults could be invited to dinner to discuss a particular aspect or issue of local government and the participants will be asked to develop their strategy or plan.

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