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In Arizona, an effort to register young people to vote was a success. But will it matter?

Rachel Leingang, Arizona Republic Published 6:00 a.m. MT Oct. 24, 2018 | Updated 8:27 a.m. MT Oct. 24, 2018



(Photo: Rachel Leingang/The Republic)

A young man approached a table offering free doughnuts and voter registration forms at Mesa Community College. He had already registered to vote because he liked the guy who asked him to sign up, he said, but he didn't think he would actually vote — he hates politics.

"We all do," Belen Sisa told him earlier last month. She's the media manager for NextGen America in Arizona, a progressive group that is spending millions trying to register and turn out young voters here this year.

Do you care about the cost of college? That's on the ballot, she told the man. Every issue you care about is affected by who we elect, she said.

He started asking about how to vote and after walking away, Sisa turned to Bailey Price, a NextGen fellow working on the Mesa campus that day.

"I think we changed his mind, Bailey," Sisa said.

"We definitely did," Price responded. "That's one more voter. Woo! Every vote counts."

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The number of [newly registered young voters](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2018/10/17/arizona-voter-registration-surges-ahead-2018-midterm-election/1672458002/) has surged in Arizona this year ([/story/news/politics/elections/2018/10/17/arizona-voter-registration-surges-ahead-2018-midterm-election/1672458002/](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2018/10/17/arizona-voter-registration-surges-ahead-2018-midterm-election/1672458002/)) compared to other age groups and may even outmatch the number seen in 2016, a presidential election year.

NextGen America was one of the groups registering new voters here and brought in registrations from a chunk of young people who could head to the polls in November. They organized on 23 college campuses around the state.

RELATED: [Huge increase in number of voters registered as midterm election nears. \(/story/news/politics/elections/2018/10/17/arizona-voter-registration-surges-ahead-2018-midterm-election/1672458002/\)](https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/elections/2018/10/17/arizona-voter-registration-surges-ahead-2018-midterm-election/1672458002/)

NextGen America, which was founded by California billionaire Tom Steyer, has put up \$3 million in Arizona this year to register young people, specifically those aged 18 to 35, and get them to the polls.

Arizona is one of 11 states the group is targeting, a sign that the state is increasingly seen as a battleground on the national political scene. The other targeted states are like a who's-who of flippability — Iowa, Virginia, Wisconsin, Florida, Nevada.

The group wants to turn Arizona blue and is supporting Democrats in several races, including the governor and U.S. Senate.

The Arizona branch is largely run by people in the same age group. They seek to make the voting process more accessible and inject some fun. They host pool parties and [petting zoos](https://www.facebook.com/events/2275100166043739/) (<https://www.facebook.com/events/2275100166043739/>), hand out paletas and doughnuts, and try to make young people care about elections enough to vote on Nov. 6.

They were aiming to register 15,000 new young voters this year and instead netted more than 21,000.

But history isn't on their side — younger voters have the lowest turnout rates in Arizona. The young man NextGen organizers spoke to is statistically more likely to not vote than he is to cast a ballot.

A [report from the Morrison Institute for Public Policy](https://morrisoninstitute.asu.edu/sites/default/files/content/products/Arizona%27s%20Voter%20Crisis.pdf)

(<https://morrisoninstitute.asu.edu/sites/default/files/content/products/Arizona%27s%20Voter%20Crisis.pdf>) found only 19 percent of votes cast in the 2016 election in Arizona came from Millennials, while 37 percent came from Baby Boomers, despite the fact that there are more Millennials than boomers here.

Only 29 percent of Arizona Millennials voted during the 2016 election, the report said.

How the group registered voters

Despite the pool parties, most of the work of registering people to vote is decidedly not sexy. NextGen puts up tables on college campuses, offering free food and swag like bottle openers.

If students show interest, NextGen organizers ask whether they're registered to vote. If they aren't, they'll be offered a voter registration form. If they are, organizers talk to them about the importance of showing up to vote and ask them to fill out a "pledge to vote" card.

"I will vote in 2018 because I fight for:" the card says, showing a dozen options ranging from climate change to access to abortion to raising the minimum wage. More than 12,000 people filled out the card, which also asks for contact information.

People who filled out the card can receive text messages from NextGen reminding them of voting deadlines and encouraging them to cast a ballot.

Going into college classrooms to talk about voter registration and passing out forms also proved effective and brought in new registrations.

Welcome weeks at the three major universities — Arizona State University, University of Arizona and Northern Arizona University — gave NextGen big boosts in its voter registration numbers. At ASU's downtown Phoenix and Tempe campuses, dorm move-in days netted more than 1,100 registrations, the group said.

MORE: [Tom Steyer's clean-energy group targets Brnovich, Republican lawmakers. \(/story/news/politics/elections/2018/10/13/clean-energy-healthy-arizona-targets-brnovich-state-lawmakers/1606611002/\)](https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/elections/2018/10/13/clean-energy-healthy-arizona-targets-brnovich-state-lawmakers/1606611002/)

The more young people are talked to about the civic process, the more likely they are to vote, said Jalakoi Solomon, NextGen's state director for Arizona.

"We are doing something unprecedented. People do not spend this type of money and time and energy on young people, and that really is to their detriment," Solomon said.

Zoe Stein, the 23-year-old organizing director for NextGen in Arizona, took a leave of absence from graduate school at ASU to focus on getting young people to vote. Her degree is in sustainability science, and she wants to see action on climate change. Her basic pitch: You should care about voting because it affects you.

"If you care about literally anything, you're welcome here, and you're a little late to the party, and we're still excited to have you," Stein said.

On National Voter Registration Day on Sept. 25, NextGen set up a bean bag toss game and handed out popsicles at Mesa Community College. One student called his parents to get his Social Security number so he could register. Another student, clutching a Mickey Mouse backpack, said it was hard to vote because they didn't know the candidates or what they stood for.

Charlie Kemp, a sophomore at Mesa Community College, registered to vote right before the August primary. He decided to register because he saw it as a civic duty, an opportunity that wasn't available to a lot of people, like undocumented immigrants. Issues like the cost of college, immigration, gun control, equal pay and abortion inform his vote.

"For one, I feel like tuition should be lowered. Schooling should not be this expensive. It's hard for me to pay for my schooling every day to day," he said.



Tom Steyer, the California billionaire founder of NextGen America, speaks to young people at an event in Tempe on Aug. 17. (Photo: Rachel Leingang/The Republic)

When Steyer came to town

When the group's founder and funder, Tom Steyer, came to town, he didn't receive a hero's welcome. In fact, some students chanted insults at him.

But his detractors' opposition doesn't just stem from his efforts to increase youth voting through NextGen, which he started in 2013 to fight climate change and has since expanded into other arenas, like immigration and health care.

Steyer has spent millions on a [clean energy ballot measure](#) ([/story/money/business/energy/2018/08/30/arizona-election-renewable-energy-ballot-measure-go-voters/1145226002/](#)) in Arizona that would require the state to increase renewable energy use. That effort has seen fierce opposition from the state's largest utility, Arizona Public Service, and personal attacks against Steyer.

When he came to town in August for a NextGen event at the Original ChopShop in Tempe, he was greeted by a couple dozen young protesters chanting "Steyer stinks."

The protesters, arranged by the Arizona Republican Party, shouted while Steyer spoke about the importance of voting. They booed and told him to leave Arizona. Their signs said things like "He doesn't even live here" and "Say no to Steyer." One sign simply said, "No!"

MORE: [Clean-energy ballot measure Prop. 127 trailing, Arizona Republic poll finds \(/story/news/politics/elections/2018/10/04/arizona-republic-poll-proposition-127-renewable-energy-measure-trailing/1500067002/\)](#)

Protesters refused to talk to reporters, instead telling them to talk to the AZGOP spokeswoman.

The chants of about Steyer didn't deter him. To be affected by something like that would be weak, he said. Plus, he's on the right side of the battle in Arizona, and he's trying to push power back to the people through NextGen's grassroots organizing, he said.

If a broad group of people turns out in November, Arizona can turn blue, he said.

"It doesn't mean it will, but it can. It depends on who shows up," Steyer said.

And beyond November, and beyond NextGen, the group has now trained dozens of young people on community organizing and helped grow a "progressive army" in Arizona, Solomon said. They know who to call to work on future campaigns or for future candidates, she said.

The Arizona Republican Party did not return requests to speak about their voter registration efforts or their reaction to NextGen's work.

Why don't students vote?

Nancy Thomas, director of the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education at Tufts University, said young voters lag other age groups because of technical and motivational barriers.

Technical barriers include the difficulty of registering to vote and the required paperwork, while motivational barriers are things like not knowing the issues and candidates not representing them.

Thomas' research on campuses with unusually high voting rates found one way to encourage turnout was through creating a buzz and making elections celebratory and fun, and NextGen's work is consistent with that finding, she said. The No. 1 indicator, though, was high levels of political discussion on campus.

But the 21,000 new registrants in Arizona and their potential turnout aren't just important in deciding close races, Thomas said. Young people voting puts them onto candidates' and parties' voter lists and means their views won't be ignored, she said.

"College students need to understand that it's more than just casting a vote for a party or candidate, it is being visible to the elected officials so they care about your views," Thomas said.

And while some young people are apathetic about politics, most aren't, Thomas said. Instead, the lack of representation is misinterpreted as not caring, she said.

MORE: [Gubernatorial hopeful David Garcia holds fundraiser at Tom Steyer's home \(/story/news/politics/arizona/2018/06/27/david-garcia-holds-fundraiser-home-san-francisco-billionaire-tom-steyer/738920002/\)](#)

"The system is not built for young people's viewpoints, and if you feel like what you say isn't being heard, you're likely to stop saying it," she said.

At Mesa Community College on Sept. 25, one young voter said he wasn't sure if he'd make it to the polls, despite his interest in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program.

Ryan Garcia, an 18-year-old student, registered before the primary.

"I kind of just like thought it was about time, like a rite of passage. Obviously, I'm really into equality and free rights for everyone," Garcia said.

But there's still a hurdle that makes him question whether he'll turn out.

"I don't know. I just get lazy," he said.



NextGen America, a progressive activism group, spent millions in Arizona to increase young voter registration and turnout. Members of the group hand out swag like frisbees and hats to people at an event in Tempe on August 17. (Photo: Rachel Leingang/The Republic)

What they see for the future

In Arizona, NextGen will spend about \$500,000 on [digital ads](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsWKxUScG-w) that encourage young people to vote in the leadup to Election Day.

The group wants to see Democratic candidates elected in Congressional Districts 1, 2 and 9, and in the U.S. Senate and governor's races.

In the coming weeks, their events on college campuses include "votes and goats," a petting zoo, and "pumpkins and politics," a pumpkin-picking hangout.

MORE: ['Glam Up the Midterms' event encourages young people to vote](https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/tempe/2018/10/13/glam-up-midterms-event-tempe-encourages-young-people-vote/1634874002/)

But the events and organizing face an uphill climb to actually change the state, as Republicans have dominated state politics for decades, with few exceptions.

Of the newly registered voters aged 18-24, about 37,000 registered as Democrats and 23,000 as Republicans. The biggest share was unaffiliated, at about 48,000.

In total, Democrats have a big edge over Republicans for 18- to 34-year-olds, though unaffiliated voters are still the biggest share. Still, other age groups balance out younger voters, and Republicans have a voter registration advantage over Democrats here.

Can they flip the state?

For pessimists who take a dim view of young voters' potential, proponents point to one recent example: Virginia.

In Virginia, [increased turnout from young voters](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/historic-turnout-of-young-voters-in-virginia-election-hints-at-national-problem-for-republicans/2017/11/24/8e90d978-cf03-11e7-9d3a-bcbe2af58c3a_story.html?utm_term=.8138703d9e7a) helped Ralph Northam, a Democrat, win the governor's race in 2017. NextGen's Virginia branch spent more than \$3 million on registration and turnout on the race.

In Florida this year, NextGen boasted of more than 50,000 newly registered voters. Michigan and Pennsylvania's groups both had nearly 40,000. Overall, [NextGen counted more than 250,000 new registrations](https://nextgenamerica.org/insider/) in 11 states.

But, while the group registered more than 21,000 new young voters in Arizona, historically, less than half of those could end up voting, said Paul Bentz, senior vice president for research and strategy at Republican consulting firm HighGround.

Bentz said he usually doesn't encourage campaigns to focus on voter registration drives because they don't reap results. Encouraging new voters to go to the polls involves a lot of education and direct contact, and campaigns have scarce resources, he said.

MORE: [Students take voter registration training ahead of midterm elections. \(/story/news/politics/elections/2018/09/22/power-vote-valley-students-take-voter-registration-training/1396924002/\)](https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/elections/2018/09/22/power-vote-valley-students-take-voter-registration-training/1396924002/)

There so far has not been a tried and true method to turn out young people, he said.

Several groups, including young people and Latinos, are the sleeping giants of the Arizona electorate — if they turned out, they could determine elections, he said. But so far, they haven't done so in large numbers.

"It's always a worthwhile endeavor to try to get more people to vote. ... I still have yet to see someone successfully and cost effectively do it," Bentz said.

There may be higher turnout among younger people, Latinos and Democrats this year, but it will likely be marginal increases, not a massive wave, Bentz predicted.

"Never say never, of course, but voter registration to change turnout is a very difficult and tall order," he said.

But if you ask any of NextGen's organizers, they'll tell you Arizona is "absolutely" turning blue in 2018.

"We really have been hearing not young people reluctantly signing up to vote, but enthusiastically saying yes," Solomon said.

Reporter Lily Altavena contributed to this story.

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