



YOUNG VOTERS: UNTAPPED POTENTIAL FOR CANDIDATES

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With the primary season underway, candidates are reaching out to the voters they think will most likely show up at the polls. Young voters, often not high on this list, have been an untapped resource for years.

It has been 32 years since 18-year-olds were granted the right to vote by President Richard Nixon who signed a law that lowered the voting age from 21 to 18. During the Vietnam War, when many 18-year-olds were being sent to fight, people argued that a citizen old enough to serve in the military should be able to elect their own president.

However, since that first election in 1972, the voting rate for the 18-to-24-year-olds has declined by 15 percent, according to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. Overall voting declined 4 percent during the same time period.

Cycle of neglect

Experts have attributed this decline to several factors. One of which is a "cycle of mutual neglect," according to Ivan Frishberg at the New Voters Project, a grassroots youth voter mobilization campaign. Candidates don't speak directly to young people, and as a result young people don't think their vote matters.

A study recently concluded at the Harvard Institute of Politics supports Frishberg's claim. Out of the nearly 1,200 students surveyed, two-thirds said they were likely to participate in a political rally if asked by a friend, and half said they would volunteer if asked. The study suggested that there is a potential for 9 million campaign volunteers and voters to become politically engaged, if targeted.

Inspired young people

What does this mean for candidates who want to appeal to young voters? Former Gov. Howard Dean has targeted younger voters, who have in turn responded with a campaign known as Generation Dean.

Michael Whitney, a 19-year-old college student, founded the organization after listening to Dean speak.

"Many young people don't vote, because in the past they have felt as though politicians don't speak to them," Whitney said. "But Howard Dean offers young people a chance to get involved."

Howard Dean is not the only candidate reaching out to young voters. Students have joined other candidates' campaigns, despite their busy schedules.

"My life is hectic between volunteering for a campaign, doing karate and studying for mid-terms. But when you believe in a candidate as much as I do, regardless of age, it is important to do your absolute best to get his message to as many people as possible. That is why I am a youth involved in politics," explained 17-year-old Katie Bickert, a volunteer for Rep. Dennis Kucinich, D-Ohio, and a student at Concord High School in New Hampshire.

Another student at Concord High School shares her peer's devotion and enthusiasm for the election -- just for a different candidate -- Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry.

"It's incredible what we can do when everyone works together. This experience has made me more aware of what is going on in the country and our world, as well as inspiring me to want to become more involved in the political process," Kerry volunteer and Concord High School senior Emily Gilbert said.

"Who knows, maybe one day you'll see yard signs and bumper stickers reading 'Emily Gilbert for President.'"

Back to the basics of voting

Another reason for low voter participation could be that many students do not understand the voting process, according to Elizabeth Addonzio, who is conducting research at Yale University.

"This is an official process and can be very intimidating and just like anything that we do and you're not exposed to something and you may feel apprehensive or nervous about it," Addonzio said.

To test this theory, Addonzio went to high school senior classrooms to explain the process. She brought a voting machine, explained how to use it, showed how to register to vote and explained why voting is important, using the last presidential election as an example of a close race.

Addonzio found that 25 percent of the students she spoke to about voting turned out to vote, while only 11 percent of a similar control group that she didn't speak to turned out to vote.

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