

# THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

## Issue Brief

### YOUTH VOTE 2008

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#### INTRODUCTION

Election 2008 has the potential to be momentous for the youth vote. Young voters have turned out in consistently higher numbers for the past two election cycles, and speculation says that this trend will continue with a possible push even higher. Studies point out that voting is habit forming, with the odds increasing significantly that, once a person has voted, he or she will vote again, indicating long-term impacts on parties and politics.<sup>1</sup> Although young adults are still behind older counterparts when it comes to voter turnout, recent reports describe a young generation that is increasingly engaged in the electoral process and one that is planning on sticking around.

Campaigns finally are standing up to help bring young voters into the fold. Eyeing the tight primary races and the anticipated general election, strategists are turning to the youngest generation to secure as many new votes as possible. For the 2008 presidential cycle, the public is experiencing an almost entirely new level of political campaigning as candidates delve into technology, frequently with the purpose of finding and attracting young adults.

In this brief, we explore the evolution of the youth vote and its potential impact on the 2008 election and beyond. Within that context, we also will look at how campaigns and other organizations are appealing to attract young voters and how they are working to actualize the potential impact of young voters by capitalizing on new tools and reexamining old methods.

#### HISTORY OF THE YOUTH VOTE

Eighteen- to twenty-year olds received the right to vote in 1971. In the first major election following that achievement, 52 percent of young voters between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four exercised that right.<sup>2</sup> In the election years that followed, young voter turnout dropped precipitously and has remained low ever since.

The pattern of poor turnout following the inception of the right to vote for young people became a vicious circle. Politicians failed to address issues that concerned youth and consistently neglected to target them in their campaigns, which then led to young adults concluding that politicians did not recognize or care about their issues and they dismissed the importance of participating in elections.

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But this dynamic may be starting to change. Soon after the lowest turnout point in the late 1990s, youth turnout began to rebound. The past two election cycles have reflected a clear trend of increased voter participation among young adults. And the increase seen in young adult participation is greater than increases in any other age category, both for presidential and midterm elections. In presidential elections, the percentage of young Americans who voted in 2004 jumped eleven percentage points, from 36 percent in 2000 to 47 percent in 2004.<sup>3</sup> The midterm elections saw an increase as well, though a less dramatic one. Young voter turnout increased three percentage points in 2006, up to 25.5 percent from 22.5 percent in the 2002 election.<sup>4</sup>

## IMPORTANCE OF THE YOUTH VOTE

### *Good for Democracy: Greater Representation of Population*

As a matter of enfranchisement, the youth vote is important. While the rate is rising, the truth is that while 47 percent of young people voted in the 2004 presidential election, 73 percent of people in their fifties and sixties did so.<sup>5</sup> As a result, young adults are being “represented” by politicians who are more likely to heed the voices of an older generation because not enough of the young are making themselves heard. Democracy is not functioning at its full power when such a significant subset of the population is being disregarded. By encouraging and drawing young adults into the electoral process, our democracy becomes more representative of its population.

Increasing young voter turnout is also important for the future of democracy and public faith in democratic systems and institutions. Several studies have shown that voting becomes habitual and that once someone votes for the first time, he or she is much more likely to vote in the future. For example, one survey showed that among voters who voted in 1968 and 1972 only 3 percent failed to vote in 1974 and 1976. At the same time, of the respondents who missed voting in the earlier elections, more than two-thirds did not vote in the following election.<sup>6</sup> In a much more recent study of 25,000 voters in New Haven, Connecticut, conducted after voters were targeted with canvassing and direct mail interventions to raise turnout in 1998, research found that those voters who did vote in that 1998 election were much more likely to vote in the 1999 election. As the authors say, “Casting a ballot in one election profoundly increases one’s propensity to vote in the next election.” Even after controlling for other factors that might cause higher turnout, the researchers find that registered voters who did not vote in 1998 had a 16.6 percent chance of voting in 1999, as compared to 63.3 percent among those who voted in 1998.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the act of voting itself has an impact on perceptions of government. Some political scientists have found that the act of voting gives people a greater sense of trust in politics and political institutions.<sup>8</sup> If more young voters can be engaged right away, we will be building for a much more secure democracy for the years to come.

### *Politically Important for Parties*

For politicians and political parties, the youth vote is a gold mine not only for the current campaign, but also for the future. A report by Young Voter Strategies outlines data indicating that “party identification develops in early adulthood,” after which point, a person’s party identification generally remains consistent for the rest of his or her life. The report asserts that people under the age of thirty generally are still forming their political beliefs, which leaves them more open to outreach by political parties than their older counterparts. The degree of stability in party loyalty was drawn from studies done that questioned voters on which party they supported in their first presidential election and which party they supported at the time of the interview for the study. The report states that “of those who can remember their vote for President two-thirds still identify with

the same party they first voted for.” Furthermore, over half (56 percent) of these presidential voters had never crossed party lines.<sup>9</sup>

In 1986, Norman Ornstein wrote that the party that secures the youth vote is the party in power in the next generation. Republicans had a strong hold on the youth vote in the 1980s, when Ornstein was writing, and by the 1990s the Republicans held power in Congress, a grip that has only recently begun to loosen.<sup>10</sup> According to a recent NYT/CBS/MTV poll, current young voters are leaning Democratic with over half of respondents between the ages of seventeen and twenty-nine years old saying that they plan to vote for the Democratic candidate in the 2008 election. The appeal of voting Democratic in 2008 goes beyond particularly engaging candidates and seems to reflect a genuine shift in what young voters are looking for in their leadership. Young voters tend to favor policy proposals considered liberal, such as universal healthcare, and are more open on issues of immigration and homosexuality than the population at large. Fifty-two percent of respondents seventeen to twenty-nine years old described the Democratic Party as coming closer to sharing their moral values.<sup>11</sup> Following Ornstein, all of this bodes well for the Democratic Party’s leadership aspirations. In addition to providing an extra nudge in the polls of the upcoming 2008 election, current young voter support is also likely to translate into continued support in the future. Today’s young voters will mature into civically active adults and, according to Ornstein’s projections, most will support the political party with which they initially became engaged.

#### *Campaign-specific Advantage of the Youth Vote*

In addition to making our representative government more reflective of its constituency and boosting the future influence of political parties, courting the youth vote also makes financial sense for individual campaigns. Young Voter Strategies found that when engaged, young people are eager to volunteer their time and energy to campaigns for little or no monetary compensation. Once trained, they can be mobilized to work phone banks or canvass door-to-door, providing the personal contacts with their peers that are essential for engaging more young people in the elections. Young Voter Strategies points out this financial advantage in targeting young voters but emphasizes the importance of committing the necessary time and resources required to ensure that young volunteers are trained to be as effective as possible in the field or on the phone.

### **POTENTIAL IMPACT: YOUTH VOTE 2008**

Before young voters have a chance to impact the outcome of the 2008 presidential election, they will help determine which candidates make it to the general election. Forty-two percent of respondents in Harvard’s March 2007 poll said that they “would definitely be voting in a primary or caucus.”<sup>12</sup> The earliest primaries in 2008 are going to be Iowa (January 14), Nevada (January 19) and New Hampshire (January 22); South Carolina Republicans also joined the pack recently by moving their primary to January 19. But a rush of frontloading has resulted in nearly two dozen other states hosting their primaries as early as February 5.

And young voters are prepared to participate. According to the Kennedy School of Government’s Institute of Politics March 2007 survey, 71 percent of non-college young adults are registered to vote; and 85 percent of college students are registered to vote. Combined, a total of 75 percent of young adults are registered to vote.<sup>13</sup> In June 2007, pollsters Greenberg, Quinlan, Rosner Research found that 92 percent of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year olds said that they are “almost certain” they will vote in 2008, which is only one percentage point shy of the 93 percent of “all ages” who said they are “almost certain” they will vote in 2008.<sup>14</sup> Sixty-one percent said that they would definitely

vote in the general elections.<sup>15</sup> And another 18 percent said that they would probably vote. Only 4 percent said that they were definitely not going to vote in the general elections.

Also noteworthy is the number of young American paying attention to the elections. At this point in the elections in 2004, only 35 percent of Americans under the age of thirty were paying attention; today, that number is 65 percent.<sup>16</sup>

In 2004, both Iowa and New Hampshire experienced increases in the number of young voters who participated in their primaries over the 2000 election. According to Thomas Patterson in *Young Voters and the 2004 Election*, “More than 120,000 Iowa Democrats participated, twice the level of 2000. Among young adults, participation was four times higher than it was in 2000.<sup>17</sup> Turnout in New Hampshire’s Democratic primary also rose sharply—60,000 more ballots were cast than in 2000. Unlike Iowa, however, the turnout increase among young adults was almost identical to that of older adults. Turnout in South Carolina’s Democratic primary was a record high.”<sup>18</sup>

Youth turnout was up between 2000 and 2004 in the three earliest 2008 primary states (Iowa, Nevada and New Hampshire). Within those states, the youth share of the electorate fluctuates between 17 and 22 percent. Nevada and New Hampshire also both experienced increases in young voter turnout in the midterm election in 2002 over 1998.

Nationally, after a long trend of declining turnout among young voters, the turnout of eighteen- to twenty-four-year olds jumped 11 percent from 2000 to 2004—more than any other age range. In 2004, eighteen- to twenty-four-year olds made up 20.9 percent of the electorate.<sup>19</sup>

**TABLE 1. JANUARY 2008 PRIMARIES**

State	Estimated Population, 18-29 Year Olds	Percent of Population, 18-29 Year Olds	Percentage Turnout of 18-29 Year Olds, 2000	Percentage Turnout of 18-29 Year Olds, 2004	Change, 2000 to 2004		Date of 2008 Primary
Iowa	480,361	22.2	50.9	59.5%	+8.6	Caucuses	1/14/08
Nevada	326,718	21.0	32.3	42.6%	+10.3	Caucuses	1/19/08
New Hampshire	172,453	17.8	46.4	58.1%	+11.7	Primary	1/22/08
Florida	2,235,676	18.6	40.2	48.8	+8.6	Primary	1/29/08
South Carolina	652,816	20.9	42.3	46.4	+4.0	Democratic Primary	1/29/08
						GOP Primary	1/19/08

*Source:* Tabulations by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Engagement from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey, March Supplement, 2006 (citizens only).

**TABLE 2. FEBRUARY 5, 2008 PRIMARIES**

State	Estimated Population, 18-29 Year Olds	Percent of Population, 18-29 Year Olds	Percentage Turnout of 18-29 Year Olds, 2000	Percentage Turnout of 18-29 Year Olds, 2004	Change, 2000 to 2004
Alabama	691,940	20.8	44.9	47.2	+2.3
Alaska	106,646	23.8	**	**	**
Arkansas	418,505	20.6	40.7	40.5	-.02
California	4,572,114	21.8	40.3	46.1	+5.8
Colorado	636,985	20.2	37.2	49.5	+12.3
Connecticut	417,496	17.4	44.8	43.7	-1.0
Delaware	120,493	20.1	**	**	**
Georgia	1,425,571	23.3	40.1	48.6	+8.5
Illinois	1,864,957	21.8	44.7	50.0	+5.3
Minnesota	779,189	21.3	50.6	71.2	+20.6
Missouri	920,722	21.6	38.6	52.0	+13.3
New Jersey	1,060,575	18.8	41.4	51.2	+9.8
New Mexico	277,431	21.2	31.9	47.3	+15.3
New York	2,628,394	20.8	39.3	48.5	+9.2
North Dakota	104,430	22.0	**	**	**
Oklahoma	557,376	21.9	37.2	45.2	+8.1
Tennessee	853,272	19.9	30.0	39.6	+9.6
Utah	533,789	33.4	39.7	55.9	+16.2

*Source:* Tabulations by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Engagement from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, March Supplement, 2006 (citizens only).

### *Impact of Primary Rules on Youth Turnout*

The party specificity of primaries and caucuses sets them apart from the general election in their exclusivity. Most primaries and caucuses require that individuals be registered with the party in order to participate, although that varies by party and state. Caucuses are also very locally oriented and cannot be participated in by absentee ballot. Both of these characteristics pose challenges for some young voters. Almost one-third of young voters are registered as independents, excluding them from participation in primaries or caucuses.<sup>20</sup>

In the recent Institute of Politics survey of young adults, 35 percent of all respondents identified themselves as Democrats, but only 16 percent of those identified themselves as “strong Democrats.” Twenty-five percent identified themselves as Republicans, of which 11 percent described themselves as “strong Republicans.” A full 40 percent of respondents identified themselves as independent/unaffiliated. Of those 40 percent, 13 percent leaned left, 5 percent leaned right, and 22 percent did not lean one way or the other.<sup>21</sup>

Since states and parties set their own caucus and primary rules, they vary across the country, affecting young people in different ways. Almost half of the states permit independents to participate in Democratic primaries, including some big ones like California, Texas, Ohio, Michigan, and Illinois. Together, those states alone constitute 56 percent of America's population. Nineteen states, representing 39 percent of the population, let anyone vote in either primary, even if they are registered in the opposite party.

In Iowa and Nevada, the first two states in the caucus line-up, the Democratic caucuses are closed to independent voters. Both states, however, permit voters to choose or change a party affiliation up to and on the day of elections and then participate in the chosen party's caucus.<sup>22</sup>

New Hampshire has a modified primary, which allows unaffiliated parties to vote in either party's primary. Unaffiliated voters must choose a party affiliation the day of the primary and can then vote in that party's primary. At the same time as registering for that affiliation, the voter can choose to have his registration return to “unaffiliated” immediately following the election. However, if a voter is already affiliated with a party and wants to participate in the other party's primary, that voter must change affiliations by the first Wednesday in June before the primary. He may change his affiliation the day of the primary, but cannot then participate in either party's primary. Individuals who move to a new town in New Hampshire can register for either party that they want, regardless of previous affiliation, and participate in the primary election.<sup>23</sup>

### **NEW WAYS OF TARGETING YOUTH IN THE 2008 CAMPAIGN**

In 2004, Howard Dean's in-roads to youth participation via the Internet were huge news. Since then, the Internet has become progressively prolific in daily lives and its use in political campaigning subsequently commonplace. One reflection of how quickly technology is advancing and being accepted is the fact that, from 2005 to 2007, the number of households with Internet that had wireless networks grew 156 percent.<sup>24</sup> Other facets of technology, online and off, that have become increasingly present in daily lives are text messaging with cell phones, online video use, and social networking Web sites.

Campaigns and organizations alike are capitalizing on these new technologies to target young voters. But, as Joe Trippi pointed out at a recent conference on the future of political communications, new

technology has also created a shift in the power structure of information, taking it out of the hands of the elite and placing it directly into the hands of the masses.<sup>25</sup> Subsequently, campaigns and organizations can “target” young people by putting information where it will be found by them—but they cannot control whether young adults see, hear, or read it, nor how those young adults will then use that information.

The use of these new forms of communication can be risky, as some of the candidates have already discovered. Hillary Clinton’s campaign had to deal with negative press that accompanied an anti-Hillary advertisement posted on YouTube by a Barack Obama supporter. The ad, a spoof of an Apple commercial, has been dubbed “1984” and frames Clinton as a “Big Sister,” using her own speech against her. Obama’s campaign then had to field questions about its role and opinions on the negative advertisement, which contradicted the “clean” stance it had diligently promoted. The rapid advancements in technology and the eagerness of candidates not to be left behind leaves open the risk of many “YouTube moments” in which candidates can stumble. Joe Trippi, current media team member and strategic adviser for John Edwards, has pointed out that technology is advancing so quickly that whatever is done for the 2008 election cycle will be outdated by the next presidential election cycle in 2012.<sup>26</sup>

The leading Democratic presidential candidates made Web announcements stating their intentions to form exploratory committees to run for president, only later followed by news conferences for their official announcements. Senator Clinton’s campaign took it one step further and chose to announce her official intention to run for president as a Web video on her campaign site. Since entering the race, Clinton’s campaign has continued to be intentional about its use of the internet in its campaigning. One example that received press was initiating a “choose the campaign’s song” contest, the winner of which they then announced via an online video that was a spoof of the television show *The Sopranos*’ final episode.

All of the leading presidential candidates’ campaigns in both major parties have joined popular social networking sites to attract interest in their campaigns and spread their names around cyberspace. With the exception of Rudy Giuliani, who has not yet created an official Facebook page, all of the candidates have created easily accessed MySpace and FaceBook pages. On these pages, the candidates outline their likes and dislikes; favorite books; the most recent photographs from the campaign trail; and information on upcoming events. And, of course, each page has its own link to where viewers can “make a difference” by donating money or signing up to participate in the campaign. Most of the campaigns also have primary campaign blogs as well as satellite blogs for the individual state campaigns that they are currently focusing on. Many also have links to their pages on other popular Web sites such as YouTube and Flickr.

Another new technology being tapped by campaigns is the pervasive use of cell phones and text messaging by the young generation. Clinton’s campaign was one of the first to actively utilize it, but other campaigns have already joined in, eager to capitalize on the 89 percent of young adults who describe their cell phones as their primary phone service.<sup>27</sup>

#### *Good Investment? Will Internet Campaigns Pay Out in Young Voter Turnout?*

As campaigns hire “new media” staff to apply technological advances to campaign strategies, the question continues to arise as to whether this is a good investment of time and resources. Many people, inside and outside of the current political campaigns, express skepticism that the efforts will boost young voter turnout. Campaigns are making the effort to attract and inspire the young voters

whose lives are so inseparable from these mediums—but young people do have a bad reputation of not actually showing up at the polls come Election Day.

A recent Harvard poll indicates that the candidates' entrees into technology to woo young voters may not be in vain—at the very least, their target audience is probably getting the message. According to virtually all of the respondents of the poll, who were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four, the best way to contact them was via the Internet. E-mail was the number one means of access, with 84 percent saying that was the best way to reach them; Facebook came in second for those enrolled in four-year colleges (44 percent); and MySpace was second best for those not in a four-year college (34 percent).<sup>28</sup>

Originally a social networking site exclusively for students and faculties at universities, Facebook opened up access to its accounts to the general population in September 2006. Following this expansion, the number of users grew exponentially, with an 89 percent increase from May 2006 to May 2007. The age group that saw the greatest increase was twenty-five- to thirty-four-year olds, but the two age groups that are the widest users of Facebook are eighteen- to twenty-four-year olds and thirty-five-year olds and over.<sup>29</sup> Of Facebook users between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine, 34 percent have used it to promote a political candidate, event or idea. Sixteen percent of MySpace users have used it the promotion of a political candidate, event, or idea.<sup>30</sup>

YouTube, though a popular medium, had a significantly smaller number of respondents claim to use it for political purposes. Only 9 percent said that they had “forwarded on a video” to promote a political candidate, event, or idea.<sup>31</sup> Despite this, YouTube has demonstrated potential in impacting campaigns. In the 2006 campaign cycle, Senator George Allen’s candidacy was decimated when a video of him calling a volunteer “macaca” appeared on YouTube.

Some of YouTube’s political potential may actualize in its ability to partner with television, which is still the most widely used medium for news consumption by young adults.<sup>32</sup> Its most prominent foray into television so far has been the Democratic debate it cohosted in July 2007 with CNN. The platform of the debate directed questions submitted by YouTube users in the form of videos to the presidential candidates. The debate was widely acclaimed for changing the staid format of decades past and allowing a more direct interaction between constituents and candidates. Most importantly, however, it was the debate that was most widely watched by young adults so far in this election cycle.<sup>33</sup>

## **EFFORTS BY ORGANIZATIONS TO INCREASE YOUTH TURNOUT**

Independent organizations have become vocal and visible in their efforts both to engage young adults in the electoral process and to prompt candidates to pay more attention to young voters. Most have undertaken expansive, nonpartisan, registration campaigns—focusing largely on college campuses. But some have ventured off of campuses and sent their volunteers to concerts, coffee shops, transportation hubs, and more unconventional events such as wrestling matches. Still others have dedicated resources to researching the youth voter and supplying campaigns and organizations with the best tactics for turning them out. Some organizations have become clearinghouses for information on the impact that these efforts are making on young voter turnout, tracking turnout results and providing updated snapshots of where the young electorate stands.

In 1990, Rock the Vote (RTV; <http://www.rockthevote.com/home.php>) entered the scene, raging against attacks on free speech and spreading its message through ties with the music industry. RTV



developed into a well-oiled machine impressing on young adults the importance of being involved in the electoral process to have their voices heard and heeded. Since 1990, it has sponsored public service announcements; paired with lobbyists to promote voter-friendly policies; worked with celebrities from the music and film industries to generate buzz around elections; and registered thousands upon thousands of young voters. In terms of registration, RTV has been on the cutting edge. In 1996 alone, RTV implemented the first program to register voters by phone; and then paired with MCI to also develop the first Web site to offer online registration. Although a forerunner in engaging the youth vote for years, RTV did not have a strong presence in the 2006 election. [It does plan to reenter the scene in 2008, though, recently announcing that it had joined forces with Young Voter Strategies. Together, the two organizations plan to launch a massive voter registration drive in 2008.](#)<sup>34</sup>

Young Voter Strategies (YVS; [www.youngvoterstrategies.org](http://www.youngvoterstrategies.org)) has become one of the most prominent organizations concentrated on bolstering young voter turnout and tracking trends that effect young voters. In 2006 it helped coordinate a massive registration and Get Out the Vote (GOTV) campaign with fourteen other organizations that had a huge impact on young voter turnout in most of their targeted precincts around the country. With the efforts of all fifteen team members, they registered more than 500,000 eighteen- to thirty-year olds and contributed to the 24 percent turnout increase in the 2006 election. YVS is gearing up to have an even greater impact in the 2008 election, pointing to recent upward trends in young voter turnout as a promising base. In addition to its field work with young voters, YVS is encouraging political campaigns to take young adults as serious constituents and to engage them in the electoral process. To facilitate this shift for political campaigns, YVS has published multiple reports and leaflets on the advantages of targeting young adults and best practices for how to capitalize on the strengths of young adults in campaign work and getting them to the polls in greater numbers.

A key element to draw in new young voters is building on those already engaged in the process, as studies have shown that young adults respond best to such advances by their peers. The Student PIRGs, which is the student-run branch of the Public Interest Research Group, has developed the New Voters Project (<http://www.newvotersproject.org/>), which focuses exclusively on young voter turnout. In the 2006 mid-term election the Student PIRGs' New Voters Project operated an extensive mobilization campaign in twenty-five states around the country. It focused on voter registration drives and then GOTV efforts on Election Day. Although the "visibility" methods to encourage students to vote around the country varied state to state and campus to campus, all included the traditional methods of door knocking and/or phone calls reminding students to vote. The results of their efforts were significant increases in young voter turnout in the targeted precincts. At Colorado's University of Boulder (Precinct 118), for example, the increase in young voter turnout in 2006 over 2002 was 449 percent. Although particularly high, the University of Boulder's increase was not an exception. Almost every targeted precinct across the project witnessed increases, with the average increase in young voter turnout being 157 percent.<sup>35</sup>

Although many organizations stuck with the tried and true campaign method of canvassing to get youth to the polls, some did make forays into technology in the past election cycle. Mobile Voter (<http://www.mobilevoter.org>), who was part of a 2006 young voter registration drive of fifteen partner organizations, ran a registration campaign that primarily used text messaging as a tool to register young people to vote. By Election Day 2006, 70,000 people had used their tools and services.

As technology has become an integral part of campaigns in the 2008 election cycle, so too has it come to be a part of organizations' strategies in outreach. One of the new comers entering the scene is Generation Engage (GenGage; <http://www.generationengage.org/index.html>), which has embraced the potential of Web videoconferencing in its endeavors. One of its cofounders, Justin Rockefeller, averred that "Young people do not suffer from a lack of interest. They suffer from a lack of access."<sup>36</sup> In an effort to combat this lack of access, GenGage arranges both face-to-face forums between young adults and civic leaders, as well as iChats through Apple technology. These live iChats allow young adults to connect with high-level political leaders (Nancy Pelosi and Newt Gingrich among them) in real-time conversations. Afterward, the conversations are archived on GenGage's Web site and accessible by anyone. Recognizing the abundance of attention paid to young adults in college, GenGage is targeting its efforts to the 49 percent of young adults who have never attended college.<sup>37</sup>

## **BEST METHODS FOR TURNING OUT YOUNG VOTERS**

Canvassing has the single greatest impact on turning out the vote, and the youth vote is no exception, according to data compiled by Young Voter Strategies. Yale Professor Don Green and his colleague Alan Gerber found an average increase of 8.5 percentage points for voters contacted face-to-face and a 5 percentage point increase for voters contacted by volunteer phone banks. For young voters, having a peer approach them about becoming engaged in the electoral process had a greater impact than being approached by a non-peer.<sup>38</sup> Green and Gerber's study also found that "the more personal the connection, the better."<sup>39</sup> The importance of having a peer approach young voters emphasizes the importance of recruiting young voters to become part of the campaigning process.

Amazingly enough, even though the single best method for turning out young voters is as simple as talking to them, campaigns fail to do it. According to a follow-up survey to the field experiment done by Green and Gerber, an average of 80 percent of young adults had not been contacted by either political party prior to Election Day 2000.<sup>40</sup> In order to connect with young voters, campaigns have to make a point to include them on their walk and call lists. For the highest contact rates with targeted young voters, campaigns should identify precincts with high percentages of young people.

Once campaigns find young voters, they need to understand the importance of contact quality over quantity. The number of actual voters per contact is higher when the contacts are more personalized and interactive. Studies also show that young voters respond more openly to canvassers who are their peers.<sup>41</sup> This comfort level extends beyond merely age. Ethnic and immigrant youth are great targets for campaigning because they can then spread the information to other people in their community, increasing its credibility by coming from a trusted voice and in a familiar language. Evidence indicates that the message—positive, negative, or partisan—actually has far less of an impact on voters than how it is delivered: in-person and delivered by a peer are best.<sup>42</sup>

Green and Gerber's field study focused on university campuses and the residences immediately surrounding them. As part of their experiment, Green and Gerber utilized both purchased phone lists as well as those generated by students. They found that purchased phone lists had a significantly larger number of incorrect phone numbers than those compiled by students. They also discovered that in GOTV efforts second phone contacts were a waste of resources because they did not impact voter turnout, concluding that resources would be better spent maximizing the number of first phone contacts.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to quality contacts and targeting young voters, campaigns should concentrate on ensuring that young voters know the basics about voting. Young Voter Strategies found that explaining straightforward facts about voting—such as where polling places are and how to use voting machines—can have a considerable impact on young voter turnout.

## **ISSUES CANDIDATES NEED TO ADDRESS IN ORDER TO APPEAL TO YOUNG VOTERS**

Candidates pursuing the youth vote need to keep in mind the issues that resonate with young adults. As recent polls have demonstrated, most central issues concerning young voters do not differ drastically from the concerns of older voters. The issues of top concern, according to young adults: Iraq, the economy, education, the environment, and health care.<sup>44</sup> The key for candidates is to frame those issues in a manner that is relevant to young voters' lives.<sup>45</sup> Considering the left-leaning tilt of many young voters, this task may be more challenging for Republicans than Democrats.

Iraq, which 32 percent of young adults cited as the most important issue facing the country, is probably the largest obstacle for Republicans connecting with young voters on issues.<sup>46</sup> When asked what should be done in Iraq, over half (58 percent) of respondents to the Institute of Politics survey said that the United States should either remove all troops from Iraq or reduce the number of troops currently in Iraq.<sup>47</sup> All of the Democratic candidates have adopted positions that reflect this desire to pull troops out of Iraq to some degree. In contrast, leading Republican candidates have spoken out in support of President Bush's increase in troop levels in Iraq.

Young voters were evenly split over what the second most important issue is facing the United States. Non-college student respondents placed more weight on health care and college students placed more on the economy.<sup>48</sup> In terms of health care, Democratic candidates have found a policy position that can resonate with young voters: universal coverage. Young adults between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine years old are in the highest uninsured age group in the country.<sup>49</sup> And perhaps unsurprisingly, 61 percent of young adults agree that basic health care is a right for all people and that the government should provide it for those that cannot afford it.<sup>50</sup>

But where health care and Iraq may seem skewed in favor of Democratic policies, the economy is up for grabs. Young adults polled were evenly split between how best to stimulate economic growth and create jobs. About a third (32 percent) agreed with the statement that "the best way to increase economic growth and create jobs is to cut taxes"; another third disagreed (29 percent); and the largest portion (39 percent) neither agreed nor disagreed with the benefits of cutting taxes. And, despite the evident concern young adults have over Iraq, those polled said that when looking at candidates the number one issue they consider is the economy (23 percent), followed then by Iraq (20 percent).

Recognizing that in elections past candidates have failed to address the concerns of students and young adults, the Student PIRGs have started an initiative called What's Your Plan? The mission of the initiative is to pin down policy positions from all of the 2008 presidential candidates on four issues they determined important to young voters: financial security, health care, college affordability, and global warming.<sup>51</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Although the gap between young voter potential and young voter participation remains wide as we enter the 2008 elections, optimism is high. This optimism is largely due to the success of efforts in recent elections and the current efforts being put forth by both young people and campaigns to close that gap. These efforts have had a tremendous impact in recent years, but they have not been enough to achieve the full potential of the youth vote.

Campaigns are beginning to reach out to the young electorate, but they are still light years away from establishing a solid rapport with it. This is, in part, because they continue to ignore the importance of young voters in the success of their campaigns. The political world has realized that technology is a valuable and economical means to reach young voters—and the current presidential candidates are all utilizing it to differing degrees. What campaigns have not yet been willing to do is dedicate the time and resources to reach young people offline.

In 2004 and 2006, young voters turned out in stunning numbers where they were specifically targeted—but those efforts were largely organized by nonprofit organizations or young people themselves. In both election cycles, with some exceptions, campaigns took a passive role in turning out young voters. Election 2008 presents the opportunity for campaigns to be active players in bringing young voters to the polls.

Campaigns also need to engage young voters actively in matters that they care about. The weakest part of every candidate's campaign so far is a consistent negligence in addressing issues in terms of how they impact young adults. In order to maintain and increase youth participation in the electoral process, young adults need to see that the candidates they are offered to choose between and vote for care about and are committed to addressing issues relevant to their lives.

Engaging young voters clearly can work to the advantage of those candidates who pursue it, but the importance of the youth vote rises above the mere outcome of the 2008 election. By encouraging a trend of youth participation in elections, political parties, and America's democracy alike will benefit for years to come.

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SEPTEMBER 4, 2007

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THE CENTURY FOUNDATION IS PUBLISHING THE ISSUE BRIEF SERIES TO HELP EXPLAIN AND CALL ATTENTION TO PUBLIC POLICY IDEAS THAT ARE WORTHY OF DISCUSSION AND DEBATE. THE VIEWS EXPRESSED IN THIS SERIES ARE SOLELY THOSE OF THE AUTHORS OF EACH ARTICLE.

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