

# A Guide to Reaching Young Voters

***Are You  
Talking  
to Me?***

John F. Kennedy  
School of  
Government



HARVARD UNIVERSITY

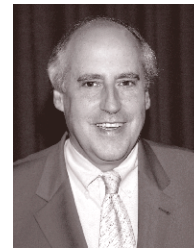
**INSTITUTE OF  
POLITICS**



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Inside photos: Images by Meryl Levin as featured in *Primarily New Hampshire*, a new book that celebrates the work of young people in politics. For more information please visit [www.PrimarilyNewHampshire.com](http://www.PrimarilyNewHampshire.com).



**F**or too long, candidates, political parties and the media have treated young people as irrelevant to the political process. Yes, too many young people stay home on Election Day. However, 18 million voters under the age of 30 did vote in 2000; and even more are expected to vote in the 2004 presidential election.

Through our research, we have learned many of the reasons that young people do not vote and that candidates and campaigns do not seriously court this constituency.

The John F. Kennedy School of Government's Institute of Politics at Harvard University is a living memorial to President John F. Kennedy, a president who inspired a generation to public service. This project stems from that mission.

At the Institute, we are dedicated to engaging young people in politics and public service. Since 2000, we have been conducting frequent surveys of America's college students, learning much about their political views, the role of community and public service in their lives, and their hopes for the future. Our findings may surprise you.

- **Young people are not apathetic.** They care deeply about key political issues and they believe that elections matter. Nearly two-thirds say they will "definitely" vote this November.
- **Young voters are not monolithic; they are highly independent.** Most young voters are neither traditional conservatives nor liberals. They are generally centrists whose votes are up for grabs.

This booklet draws from our research, as well as research conducted by some of the nation's other leading organizations dedicated to promoting youth political and civic engagement. We hope it will provide valuable information for candidates, political parties, and the media.

Dan Glickman  
Director, Institute of Politics

# Why Young Voters Matter

**There are lots of them.** There were **26.8 million** 18 to 24 year-olds in 2000, more than 80% of the size of the senior population, which draws consistent attention from candidates and political parties.

**They do vote.** It is well documented that young Americans have historically voted in lower numbers than older citizens. Forty-two percent of U.S. citizens between the ages of 18 and 24 voted in 2000, while 64% of those aged 25 and older voted. Still, these numbers may be deceptive. Among young voters with some college education, the voting rate was 52%; and, of those who were college graduates, 69% voted.

**They are more concerned and more engaged.** Young people are paying attention. The September 11 attack, the war in Iraq, the weak job market, and the close election in 2000 are all factors driving young people's interest in this year's election. In a recent Institute of Politics survey, 62% of college students said they are "definitely" planning to vote this November, up from 50% in 2000.

**Their votes are up for grabs.** Young voters are highly independent. More than 4 out of 10 young voters decline to identify themselves as a member of either major political party. They also tend to be centrists. More than half do not fit traditional conservative or liberal labels. Consequently, their votes are generally not committed to one candidate or one political party.



**Candidates who ignore young voters lose.** One recent study found that winning candidates are more likely to have a strong understanding of young people's political and social attitudes than losing candidates. Successful candidates were also found to have invested time and energy in reaching out to young voters by visiting more high schools, colleges, sporting events and churches and other places of worship.

**They are often an untapped source of campaign support.** Young people have the energy, optimism, and time to devote to a campaign. They are more receptive and more willing to volunteer when contacted.

**Their long-term political loyalties are often up for grabs.** Reaching out to young voters today will help ensure their political allegiance in future elections. Young people who vote for a particular party in three elections in a row are highly likely to remain loyal to that party for life.

**They are our political future.** Their long-term political engagement and, therefore, the health of our democracy are at stake.

# 26,800,000 strong

## More About America's Young People

**They are more racially and ethnically diverse than at any time in American history.** The percentage of young Americans who are non-white increased from 12 to 35% between 1972 and 2000, with the largest increase among Hispanics.

**They are more educated than ever but many still do not attend college.** Far more young Americans attend college today than ever before and college attendance has increased among all demographics. About nine million are currently enrolled in four-year colleges and universities. Still, 47% of 18 to 24 year-olds have no college experience.

**Their family lives and financial responsibilities have changed.** One in four of today's 21 year-olds was raised by a single parent; three-quarters were raised by mothers who worked outside of the home. Seventy percent already hold a full or part-time job, and 93% carry a credit card (with an average debt of \$3000).

**Young people are committed to improving their communities.** Contrary to conventional wisdom, young people are not apathetic. They are volunteering in their communities more than any previous generation; they believe that service—rolling up their sleeves and doing it themselves—is the best way to get things done.

## Most Young Voters Defy Traditional Political Labels

Based on their political ideology and beliefs on key issues, IOP research has found that America's college students fall into one of four distinct political personality profiles.

- Traditional Liberals
- Secular Centrists
- Religious Centrists
- Traditional Conservatives

### **Young voters hold moderate political views.**

Just over 50% of college freshmen consider themselves "middle-of-the-road." Self-identified liberals and those on the far left (27%) slightly outnumber conservatives and those on the far right (22.7%).



# we're up for grabs

## Traditional Liberals

### Basic Facts:

- Make up 32% of college students
- Strongly support Kerry: 79%
- 54% Democrat, 42% Independent, 3% Republican, 1% Other
- Most likely to vote among all groups: 71% will “definitely be voting”
- Strongly oppose having gone to war with Iraq: 80% strongly or somewhat oppose
- Strong support of gay marriage: 86% in favor

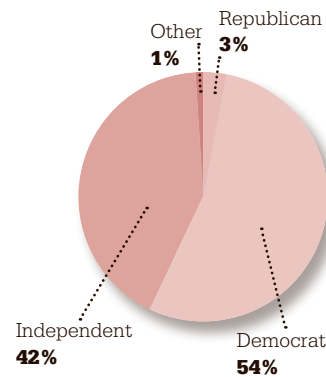
### Ideologically they are driven by:

- Opposition to pre-emptive strikes
- Support of gay rights
- Support of immigration
- Support of affirmative action
- Opposition to tax cuts as an economic policy
- Belief in basic health insurance as a right

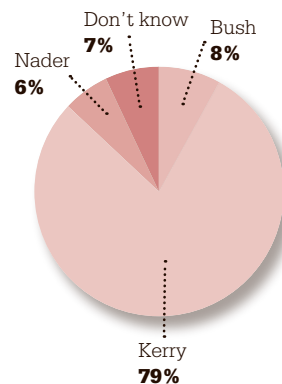
### What's your political personality?

Take the IOP's online Political Personality Test at [www.iop.harvard.edu](http://www.iop.harvard.edu).

### Party ID



### Election 2004



## Traditional Conservatives

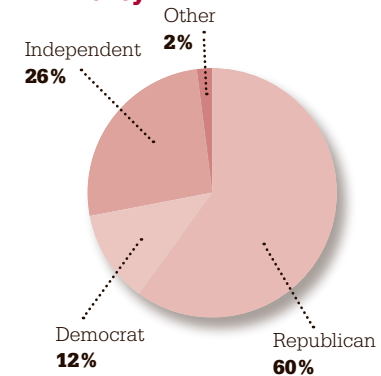
### Basic Facts:

- Make up 16% of the population
- Strongly support Bush for re-election: 72%
- 60% Republican, 26% Independent, 12% Democrat, 2% Other
- Second most likely to vote: 65.6% say they will “definitely be voting”
- Support having gone to war with Iraq: 78% support
- Oppose gay marriage: 75% are against gay marriage

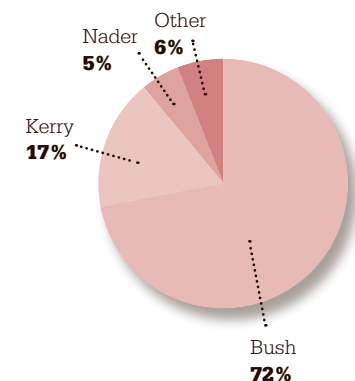
### Ideologically they are driven by:

- Support for pre-emptive strikes
- Belief that gay relationships are “morally wrong”
- Religion should play a more important role in government
- Oppose affirmative action
- Believe in tax cuts to stimulate the economy

### Party ID



### Election 2004



# we're the political future

## Religious Centrists

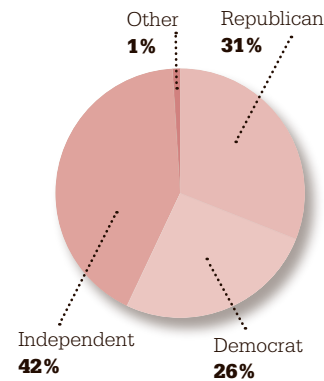
### Basic Facts:

- Make up 23% of college students
- Highest concentration of blacks and Latinos
- Support Bush for re-election over Kerry: 51%
- Third most likely group to vote: 57.6% will “definitely be voting”
- Split party identification: 26% Democrat, 31% Republican, 42% Independent
- Support the war with Iraq: 60% in favor
- Against gay marriage

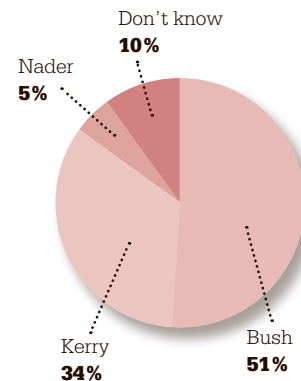
### Ideologically they are driven by:

- Support affirmative action
- Support the environment
- Believe gay marriage is morally wrong
- Believe religion should play a more important role in government

### Party ID



### Election 2004



## Secular Centrists

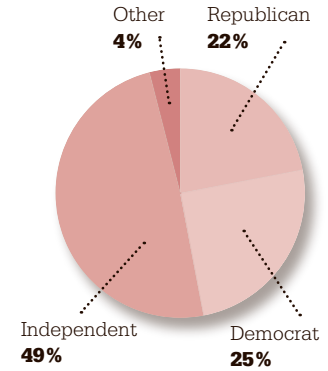
### Basic Facts:

- Make up 29% of the population
- Evenly divided Bush-Kerry: 42% Bush—41% Kerry
- As of now, least likely group to vote: 54.8% will definitely be voting
- Split party ID: 25% Democrat, 22% Republican, 49% Independent, 4% Other
- Support war in Iraq: 58% strongly or somewhat support
- Believe gay marriage should be recognized as valid

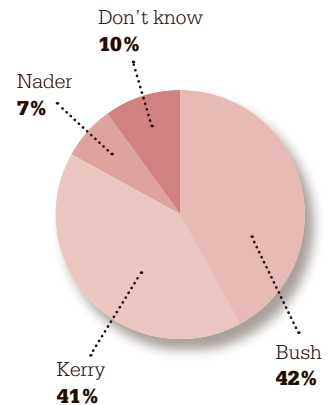
### Ideologically they are driven by:

- Strongly support gay rights
- Believe strongly in separation of church and state
- Less supportive of affirmative action
- Less supportive of the environment
- Less likely to believe in basic health insurance as a right

### Party ID



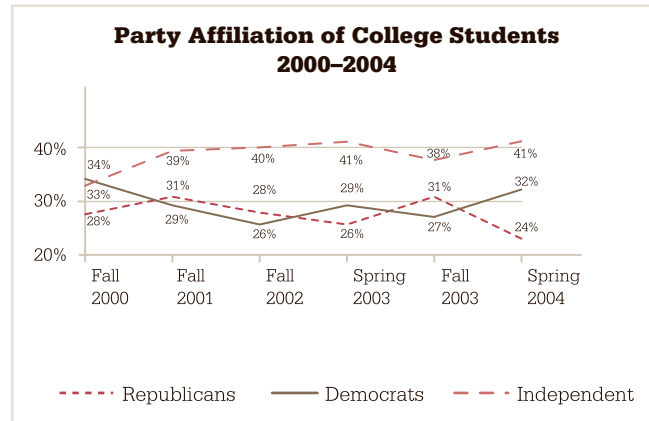
### Election 2004



# most are centrists

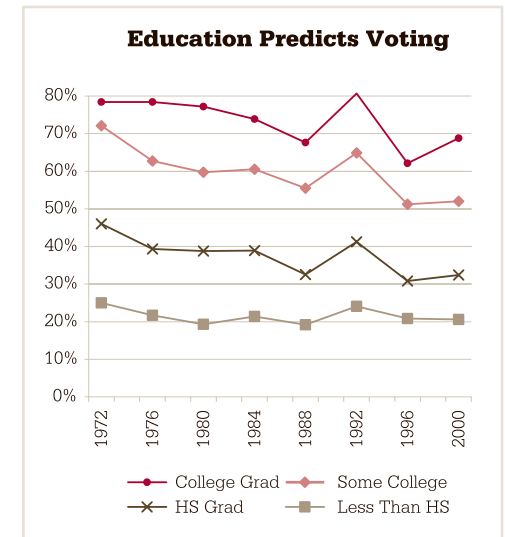
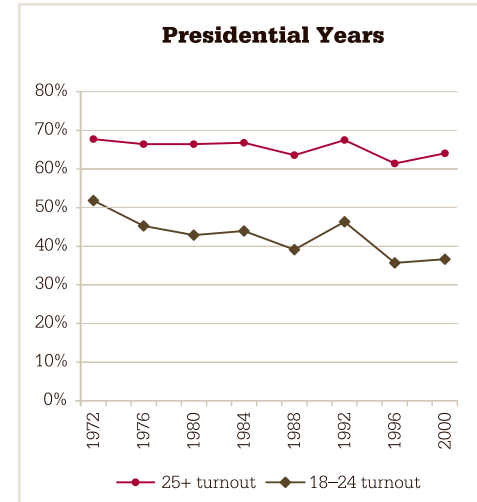
# The Politics of Today's Young Voters

**They are highly independent.** Four in ten young voters identify themselves as Independents; fewer consider themselves Democrats or Republicans. More young people are turning away from the two-party system. A 2000 *Newsweek* poll found that 64% of young people believed the country needs a viable third party.



**Republicans, in the minority on many college campuses, are often more politically active.** Campus progressive and Democratic organizations often have large numbers of student members, but they tend to be less organized than conservatives and lack funding. Given a perceived liberal bias on some campuses, conservative students tend to be more active than their more liberal peers.

# Do Young People Vote?



Source: Census (calculated using CIRCLE method)

In 2000, 36.1% of eligible 18 to 24 year-olds voted. Since 1972, when 18 year-olds first gained the right to vote, turnout for voters between the ages of 18 to 24 in presidential election years has declined by 13%, with a slight spike in 1992. Young women were slightly more likely to be registered and to vote in the 2000 election than young men. Young people with at least some college experience are almost twice as likely to vote as those who have never attended college. Sixty-nine percent of those under 24 who graduated from college voted in 2000.

# college students vote

# Obstacles to Voting for Young People

**There has been a decline in parental role modeling for voting behavior.** According to the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS), the single most important factor in determining whether or not a young person votes is **if his or her parents vote**. As turnout by their parents has declined, so has youth voting. Nearly half of the young people surveyed by NASS (46%) said that they never or almost never talk to their parents about politics, government or current events.

**Civics education is disappearing from our schools.** Fewer and fewer schools are teaching civics education, a tool that can help empower young people to vote. NASS also found that the majority of young people, 55%, believe that schools are failing to give young people the basic skills and information that they need to vote.



**The process of voting is difficult to navigate.**

Most states require registration in advance, a distraction for young people who often decide to participate late in the campaign. For young people away at school, submitting an absentee ballot can be confusing and difficult. Who, what, where, when and how? Each state has its own set of requirements and deadlines and there are limited resources out there to help young voters find their way. Nearly one-third of college students say they do not know how to request an absentee ballot and how to vote absentee—and 92% believe more of their peers would vote “if the process of registering and voting by absentee ballot were made easier.”

**Some young people have decided to turn their backs on the electoral process.** Some do not see voting as a way to bring about change in their communities. They may even view politics as not simply ineffective, but also corrupt.

# like father, like son



# How to Talk to Young Voters

**Keep it simple.** Young people are not stupid. There is no need to dumb down the candidate's stump speech. Nevertheless, this may be the first time that they are paying close attention to what you have to say and you do not want to alienate them with insider jargon, acronyms, or obscure historical references. Focus on your policy goals and the broad steps necessary to achieve them, not the wonky details involved. What will the world, the nation, and your community look like with your candidate in office?

**Keep it positive.** Candidates should steer clear of character attacks against their opponents. Research indicates that candidates who make personal attacks lose young voters' support. Since many young voters have turned their backs on partisanship, candidates should make clear that they are prepared to compromise and work across ideological and party lines to get things done. Seventy percent of college students say they prefer a leader who can bring people together in an effort to get things done rather than one who takes action regardless of public opinion.

**Keep it relevant.** Talk about issues in ways that are relevant to the lives of 18 to 24 year-olds. For example, young people are less likely than any other age group to have health insurance. So talk about access to affordable health insurance instead of the high cost of prescription drugs for seniors. Instead of highlighting your plan for school choice for secondary school kids, address the fact that today's college students graduate with an average of \$18,900 in student loan debt. Do not invent issues that are specifically designed to appeal to young voters, but help young people see how they would benefit from your existing policy positions and proposals.

Young people are not cynical. Reaching out to them requires a change in tone, terminology, and technology, but not a change in overall message. Candidates do not need to change what they talk about when they communicate with young voters. Polls show that young people care about the same issues as other voters. The difference should be in how candidates speak to young people. Be simple, positive, relevant, and real.

**Keep it real.** Be authentic and genuine. Young people can easily detect when someone is trying to manipulate or market to them, whether the product is a pair of sneakers or a candidate for office. Don't provide a detailed oral resume, but tell young voters about the important experiences in your life. Feel free to admit that you do not have all the answers and, yes, that you have weaknesses. Be human!

**Leave the script at home.** Give young people the opportunity to talk back and to ask questions. The best way to engage young voters is to allow them to be heard and to participate.

**Hold on to your values.** Young voters are looking for someone to respect and admire. They want leaders who are honest and who are willing to stand up for their personal beliefs. If the candidate can successfully convey these qualities to young voters, their stands on specific policy issues will be less of a factor in a young voter's decision to support them on Election Day.

**Ask young people to participate.** Young people do not need to be shamed into voting. They do not need to hear that it is their civic duty. Remind them that things will never change unless they get involved and make change themselves by participating. Tell them how important young people are to the campaign; they are volunteers and, in many instances, key staff members. Give young staffers public roles in the campaign's efforts to reach out to young voters.



# keep it real & relevant

# How to Reach Young Voters

## Grassroots Outreach

- Campaigns must actively reach out to young people to win their support and get them to vote. College students are far more likely to vote and easier to find than those not in college. While it often proves difficult to reach young voters, once contacted, they are actually more easily mobilized and more willing to volunteer than the general population.



Grassroots Tactic	Increase in Turnout	Explanation
Door to door	8–10%	Speaking to voters face to face is the most personal tactic and the most effective.
Volunteer phone banks	3–5%	Calls from a committed volunteer are more personal than calls that come from paid callers and are also more effective.
Professional phone banks	0%	If the campaign works with professional callers to increase the personal, conversational tone and the length of their calls, the likelihood of an increase in turnout could improve.
Leaflets	1%	Leaflets are more effective for partisan efforts versus those used for nonpartisan voter mobilization.
Unsolicited email	0%	Emails that are sent to young people who have opted in to receive them could be more effective. But no one likes spam.

- The most effective outreach tactics are those with a personal touch. Research by Yale's Donald Green, Alan Gerber and David Nickerson finds that **door-to-door** outreach can result in an 8 to 10% increase in young voter turnout. This is the most personal and effective grassroots tactic, especially when it is peer-to-peer. Calls from a committed volunteer are more personal than calls that come from paid callers and are also more effective, increasing turnout 3% to 5%. Calls made during the week before Election Day are more effective than calls made earlier in the campaign cycle. Other widespread grassroots tactics—leafleting and sending unsolicited emails—have virtually no impact on voter turnout.

## Young People Are Turning Away From Traditional Media

- Television news viewing is on the decline among young people. Thirty-nine percent of 18 to 29 year-olds relied on network news for campaign information during the 2000 campaign; only 23% do so now, according to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. Still, television news remains their primary source of news and information. Comedy programs are rapidly gaining ground.
- Young people spend an average of five hours per week listening to the radio—more for those who drive their cars often—but very few view it as a resource for campaign news. This may be an opportunity for campaigns.

# door to door, face to face

- Generally, the number of young people who view daily newspapers as a resource for campaign news is also on the decline. However, commuter papers are gaining popularity with young people in larger markets and college newspapers are valuable because they target the most likely young voters.

Young People and Campaign News (Age 18–29)			
Regularly learn something from:	2000	2004	Change
Cable News	38	37	-1
Local News	42	29	-13
<b>TV news magazines</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>26</b>	+8
Network news	39	23	-16
Daily newspaper	32	23	-9
<b>Comedy TV shows</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>21</b>	+12
<b>Internet</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>20</b>	+7
Morning TV shows	16	18	+2
Cable political talk	15	17	+2
Talk radio	16	16	0
Late night TV shows	13	13	0
C-SPAN	12	11	-1
National Public Radio	12	11	-1
News magazines	15	9	-6
Public TV shows	11	7	-4
Religious radio	5	3	-2

Source: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

## Using the Media

**Be creative and have a sense of humor.** Being 21 in 2004 means that you are exposed to 3,000 marketing messages per day, 23 million since birth. Consequently, young people are more resistant to commercial messages. If your campaign manages to develop an ad that is particularly fun or creative, young people will tell their friends about it and, if it is online, pass it along.

**Generate free media in youth-targeted outlets.** Pitch stories regarding your candidate's commitment to young people, relevant policy proposals, young people working behind the scenes, local efforts by young supporters, and youth-specific events.

**Take advantage of the Internet.** Young people are drawn to the Internet for entertainment and information. The Internet also provides young people with a sense of community and with the ability to interact and control their experience. According to the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet, while young people between the ages of 18 and 34 comprise 24% of the U.S. population, they are 36% of the “online political citizenry.”

**Cell phones are an important new medium for young people.** Young people between the ages of 10 and 24 are the fastest growing market for cell phones. More than half own their own cell phone; three-quarter use a cell phone regularly. Beyond talking on the phone, young people use cell phones for text messaging, Internet access and games. According to Howard Rheingold, author of Smart Mobs, cell phones are “the medium of choice for the younger generation.” Collecting cell phone numbers from young supporters may prove the most effective way to reach and mobilize them.

### Not All Online Strategies Are Created Equal

Online chat rooms, issue-specific emails, blogs and meet-up events are viewed favorably by young voters. Get-out-the-vote emails, banner ads, weekly email updates and weekly text messages get the thumbs down. Clearly, young people prefer online strategies that give them the chance to opt-in rather than those that are imposed on them. Strategies that allow for participation are also favored by young people.

College students and graduates, liberals and conservatives (versus moderates), and churchgoers are more receptive to online campaigning than other young people.

# wired and mobile

## Conclusion

Young voters make up a sizable chunk of the electorate—18 million young people under the age of 30 went to the polls in 2000. They also tend to be highly independent and centrist. They are more receptive and more willing to volunteer once contacted, and they are the trendsetters of the nation. And once they vote for you, they tend to stay with your party.

Young people are paying attention. The current political climate of global terrorist attacks, a war that is being fought largely by 18–30 year-olds, a difficult job market, and the close election in 2000 all underscore the importance of every vote, making young Americans more concerned and engaged.

We suggest that when approaching young people, *politicians should change how they frame issues, not the issues themselves.*

Young people care about the same issues as their parents and grandparents, but they prefer straightforward, authentic, and inclusive discussion of the issues.

The bottom line is that young people are not apathetic, and reaching out to them—for this election cycle and the next—requires a change in tone, terminology, and technology, but not a change in overall message. Candidates and campaigns should note that there is much to be gained by attracting young voters and much to be lost by ignoring them, particularly in what promises to be a close election.



## Voting Organizations

### Harvard University's Institute of Politics

The Institute was established in 1966 with an endowment from the John F. Kennedy Library to inspire undergraduate students to enter careers in politics and public service, and to promote greater understanding and cooperation between the academic community and the political world. The Institute sponsors national speakers and seminars, hosts resident fellows, holds training sessions for new members of Congress and new mayors, and conducts research and frequent polling on politics and public service. In 2003, the Institute established the National Campaign for Political and Civic Engagement to focus on youth political participation at colleges and universities around the country. Working with a consortium of schools, the National Campaign identifies problems and promotes solutions for better engagement between college students and the world of politics. The National Campaign emphasizes three areas of engagement: elective politics, civic education, and careers in public service. Website: [www.iop.harvard.edu](http://www.iop.harvard.edu)

### Rock the Vote

A non-profit, non-partisan organization that engages youth in the political process by incorporating the entertainment community and youth culture into its activities. Rock the Vote mobilizes young people to create positive social and political change in their lives and communities. The goal of Rock the Vote's media campaigns and street team activities is to increase youth voter turnout. Rock the Vote coordinates voter registration drives, get-out-the-vote events, and voter education efforts, all with the intention of ensuring that young people take advantage of their right to vote.

Website: [www.rockthevote.com](http://www.rockthevote.com)

# we're paying attention

### **New Voters Project**

The New Voters Project is a non-partisan grassroots mobilization of young voters (18 to 24), combining grassroots registration with door-to-door, phone, and neighborhood GOTV operations. The New Voters Project is a project of The State PIRGs and George Washington University Graduate School of Political Management, and will involve paid staff and volunteers in a GOTV campaign based on the political outreach research of Yale University and the grassroots experience of the State PIRGs. The project is supported by the Pew Charitable Trusts. Website: [www.newvotersproject.org](http://www.newvotersproject.org)

### **Declare Yourself**

Declare Yourself is a non-partisan, non-profit campaign to energize and empower a new movement of young adults to participate in the 2004 election. By creatively fusing technology, education, entertainment, and information, the Declare Yourself campaign includes a massive voter registration drive, a live spoken word and music tour, a nationwide voter education initiative for high school seniors, extensive online initiatives, and PSAs. Website: [www.declareyourself.com](http://www.declareyourself.com)

### **WWE Smackdown Your Vote**

World Wrestling Entertainment works in partnership with the League of Women Voters, Youth Vote Coalition, the National Association of Secretaries of State, MTV, Rock the Vote and other organizations to engage young people. Its website uses a series of links to promote the understanding of American politics, a national "Voter Issues Paper" for 18–30 year-olds, as well as a link to the League of Women Voters website that provides information on how to register to vote. Website: [www.smackdownyourvote.com](http://www.smackdownyourvote.com)

### **Youth Vote Coalition**

The Youth Vote Coalition is a national, nonpartisan coalition of diverse organizations dedicated to increasing political and civic participation among young people; building an inclusive, accountable, and responsive government; and increasing public awareness about the value of participation in democracy through the electoral process. The Coalition has over 100 national members. Website: [www.youthvote.org](http://www.youthvote.org)

### **MTV's "Choose or Lose" Campaign**

Launched in 1992, "Choose or Lose" is MTV's comprehensive, pro-social campaign to inform young adults about the political process, voice their most urgent political concerns, compel leading Presidential candidates to address those concerns, and mobilize massive numbers of young adults aged 18–30 to register and vote. In 2004, MTV's "Choose or Lose" on-air and off-air programming will include regular news segments, issue-based specials, candidate interviews, primary and convention coverage and grass-roots events, and will culminate with an election night wrap-up. Website: [www.mtv.com/chooseorlose](http://www.mtv.com/chooseorlose)

### **Campaign for Young Voters**

CYV, a project funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, is a partner with the New Voters Project at the George Washington School of Political Management. It uses a research-based on-line *Toolkit for Candidates* to provide practical advice to candidates, parties and consultants on how to understand, communicate with and turn-out younger (18–24) voters. CYV also conducts candidate workshops. Website: [www.campaignyoungvoters.org](http://www.campaignyoungvoters.org)



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**Every vote counts!**

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