

The Young Vote

Engaging America's Youth in the 2008 Elections and Beyond

Cali Carlin

Summary

Young Americans express great interest in the upcoming presidential elections and are concerned about the future of this country. Adults ages 18 to 30 are nearly one quarter of the eligible voter pool, yet this group is not well defined along party lines; nearly two out of five 18 to 24 year olds identify themselves as “independents.”ⁱ While the lack of party affiliation will prevent a significant number of young voters from voting in the primaries, the large number of independent young voters makes their vote both interesting and unpredictable when played out in general elections.

It is in the best interest of campaigns to engage and leverage the potential of this unpredictable group. Young people offer a significant source of vitality and grass-roots organizing ability, as well as tangible votes. Presidential candidates should carefully consider this younger demographic as they decide how to allocate their time and resources in the months ahead. Also, aside from individual candidates, an investment in young voters provides an opportunity to instill partisan affiliation and devotion; long-term loyalty is largely founded in the early years of voting.

While the 2008 campaign season is still in its early stages, at this point many young people believe the presidential candidates have not tried very hard to engage them. Presidential candidates should address issues of particular concern to younger voters and commit to campaign tactics that will specifically reach them. Issues of key concern for young adults are similar to those of older Americans—including the Iraq



war, education, the economy, and health care—but, generally speaking, younger voters are more optimistic and idealistic.

Engaging younger voters does not stop when the polls close. To truly involve them over the long term, they have to believe that their efforts, their views, and their votes “make a difference.” Some of the tactics that benefit candidates and campaigns also may make sense as an approach to the Presidency itself. Courting younger voters then ignoring their issues will quickly be viewed as a cynical ploy, and young adults will dis-engage, to the great detriment of the nation.

Specifically, presidential candidates and their campaigns—and Presidents—should make concerted efforts to:

- Address the policies and issues of key concern to younger Americans
- Hold events that specifically speak to and target young citizens
- Provide an opportunity for young people to ask candidates and the President questions through websites, in-person forums, and town hall meetings
- Widen the base of young people participating in campaign activities, fundraisers, and events and provide volunteer opportunities for a greater number of youth.
- Continue to involve young adults and seek their opinions in creative ways once in office and
- Leverage the “new media”—the internet, social networking web sites, and mobile phone networks—for all of these efforts.

Context

Nexters, Millennials, Gens Y and X

Boundaries and definitions for the young generation often overlap. Members of Generation X are widely accepted to be those born between 1966 and 1980, Generation Y those born between 1978 and 1996, and Generation Next those born from 1981 to 1988. The term “Millennials” is simply a sleeker name for Generation Y. For the 2008 election campaign, portions of all these groups fall into the “young voter”

category. In this paper, references to young adults or young voters signify the nearly 24 million Americans who are 18 to 30 years old.

Clearly, many individuals in these large categories are near or in their prime adult years. Candidates can engage them in the ways described below, and a President can keep them interested in government by making its relevance to their lives clear and by continuing to seek their views—not as a campaign tactic, but in a sincere effort to be the leader of *all* the American people.

This report is based on national surveys and independent studies of young adults. The author also conducted dozens of interviews over the course of a year and moderated several focus groups on topic in the summer of 2007.

Tap into the Power of Young People

When surveyed, twice as many young people say they are paying attention to the 2008 presidential election, as did for 2004.ⁱⁱ This past summer, nearly 60 percent of young people indicated they were paying a lot or some attention to it. As a journalist, I have spent the last few years interviewing, corresponding with, and reporting on young people all across the country. From first-hand experience, I have observed that young adults sincerely care about the direction of this country and are vitally interested in who is elected President as well as what that person does once in office.

Young adults, especially students, are familiar with working hard for little or no pay and have proved their worth in campaigns. The current generation of young adults is very engaged: nearly a third of 17 to 29-year-olds reports having engaged in politics.ⁱⁱ They bring essential vitality to grassroots organizing. From precinct-walking to phone-banking, young volunteers can help fuel the efforts of a campaign by making direct contact with voters. A visit inside the “war room” at the Arnold Schwarzenegger campaign headquarters revealed the campaign’s core strength: not a single staffer looked over the age of 25. The operation was run by low-paid interns and volunteers impassioned by their work and their candidate.

When campaigns empower young people, young people in turn empower campaigns. Both the Schwarzenegger and Phil Angelides gubernatorial campaigns in California tapped the power of youth. College students are the quintessential activists, willing to spend time and energy on what they believe in. Students can and will participate in causes that ignite them. Candidates should not discount a school or community because of the generally prevailing stereotype of its “liberal” or “conservative” views. The minority of students who counter the prevailing view can be a rich pool for recruiting committed volunteers.

The campaign tactics young people develop can be both new and fearless. Again in the 2006 California gubernatorial race, a young volunteer discreetly filmed the opposing candidate’s speeches and then posted unflattering clips to the video website YouTube. He was engaged in a classic guerrilla-style campaign activity, updated (and having more impact) for the internet. This generation of young people is independent-minded, technologically savvy, and incredibly resourceful—who would not want them on their campaign team? Who would want to fight against them without the same resources?

Not only does tapping into the power of young people provide inexpensive and plentiful labor, but it also cultivates in young voters a deep sense of loyalty to the candidate and party. This is an opportunity the newly elected President should continue to nurture. Our leaders should reach beyond having a handful of highly committed young staffers on their campaigns and in the West Wing; they should expand their reach to include a broad base of young supporters. Similarly, they should plan fundraising events and public appearances affordable for and targeted towards younger Americans. When campaigns effectively harness the competitive spirit of young people and focus this force on concrete campaign goals, the results can be remarkable, and can evolve into support for the new administration.

Ride and Support the Momentum

Young voter turn-out has been steadily increasing in recent elections: this healthy trend should be both leveraged and sustained. Turn-out for the most recent

presidential elections rose nine points among 18 to 29-year-old voters—from 40 percent in 2000 to 49 percent in 2004. Among voters ages 18 to 24, participation was 11 percent higher in 2004.ⁱⁱⁱ In the 2006 mid-term elections, the number of young voters increased by 2 million voters from the previous mid-terms in 2002. In order to sustain this momentum through 2008 and beyond, parties, candidates, and elected leaders must take an interest in and nourish young citizens.

Generally speaking, young adults do not believe that presidential candidates have as yet shown sufficient interest in their issues. As of June 2007, 65 percent of 17 to 29-year-olds surveyed said they did not believe that candidates have made enough effort to reach them.ⁱⁱ This opinion was largely based on young people's perceptions of campaign activities. If they constantly see media reports of candidates at events, luncheons, and town hall meetings attended by older adults—their parents' and grandparents' generations—but rarely see participants their own age, this view will persist. While Generations X and Y may be the children of cyberspace, they still want some "face time" with candidates. Young voters desire more events, like town hall meetings or rallies, where they have the chance to ask questions on topics of interest to them. To the credit of the campaigns, in recent months there has been a flurry of creative events seemingly geared towards reaching young America; however, they are mainly technology based.

Connect Through Young Americans' Media

Recently, a wide variety of tactics has been employed in an effort to reach the young demographic. These techniques are not only promising campaign tactics, but can be used by the new President to maintain a network for ongoing, cost-effective communication and engagement of young people.

Internet

The internet is literally the ultimate platform for reaching Millennials. The following are tactics that can be effectively and efficiently leveraged:

Candidates' Official Sites

This summer, roughly 31 percent of young adults surveyed reported they had already visited a candidate's official website or a general political website.ⁱⁱ This is a substantial percentage, especially given that the survey was conducted 17 months before the general election. By November 2008, the large majority of young America may have visited a candidate's official pages, making a well crafted site with areas geared towards the young vote essential. This is the venue where candidates can make their case to the individual, clearly and convincingly, without competing voices. Candidate sites are one of the few places young voters say they trust to find factual information on the candidates as well as where they stand on matters of policy.

Blogs

While blogging sites are generally viewed as a biased source of information by Generation Nexters, they still can have a subconscious effect. The young generation is skeptical about online postings, especially blogs. Focus group participants recognized that political blogs are often infiltrated by individuals with agendas and maybe even connections to political organizations and campaigns, so generally trust few of them. Credible media outlets and candidates' official pages are seen as more trustworthy.

Social Networking

While they can be tricky terrain, social networking websites can offer a candidate fertile ground in which to grow support among young voters. To date, social networking pages have been underutilized. As of June 2007, only 10 percent of 18 to 29-year-olds reported visiting a candidate's social networking page,ⁱⁱ yet 97 percent of college students report having visited the social networking site Facebook in the previous month.^{iv}

To use social networking sites more effectively, campaigns must be creative, using young "influencers" to make information about their candidate more widely available. One way to do this is through applications like virtual campaign buttons. For example, a Massachusetts high school student put a virtual "I support Obama" button on his Facebook page, and within 24 hours, 400 other students had followed suit. This is not

surprising, considering that Barack Obama has more than a quarter-million virtual friends on social networking sites. Other candidates also should pursue “internet friends,” recruit campaign volunteers, and leverage the “influentials” through this medium.

Focus groups reveal it is far more meaningful if candidates personally seek out and request someone to become a virtual friend than if the individual has to seek them out. Candidates can do this by using young volunteers, interns, and college groups to recommend people who would likely support their campaigns. Staffers can then find the recommended people on social networking sites and ask whether they want be added to the candidate’s friends list.

Once elected, this network of virtual friends would afford a prime opportunity for the new President to build on a base of interested young people. These are individuals to stay in touch with, to query regarding issues of concern, and to help reach other young Americans. On their issues, especially, they are a prime audience in efforts to create support for administration policies.

Online Innovation

The internet is constantly being utilized in different and unpredictable ways by campaigns and media outlets—from the CNN-YouTube debate to the Yahoo News Candidate Mash-up to the MySpace/MTV Dialogues. Buzz about the CNN-YouTube debate was overwhelmingly positive, with a definite “Wow, you’re talking to me and really you do care about us!” response from Millennials. These sort of events and outreach efforts are on the right track. They speak specifically to young people and portray the candidates as modern and savvy communicators.

Events

Young people also have a desire for old-fashioned, direct contact with their candidates and leaders. Events like the MySpace/MTV dialogues do a great job of merging technology with physical tangibility. These events are hosted on college campuses and streamed on MTV.com and MySpace, allowing viewers to ask questions in real time, via

instant messaging. Our next administration should continue use of these types of platforms to keep young adults informed and involved in policy matters.

Cell Phones

Mobile communication is an exceptionally effective and efficient medium for mobilizing young voters and is likely to be one of the most revolutionary tactics in 2008. A study by Princeton University and University of Michigan students shows voter turnout in 2006 increased 4 percent when people received voting reminders via text messages.^v Simple, to-the-point messages yielded a 5 percent increase. Even more impressive is the cost-effectiveness of this approach. Using phone banks also yields a 4 to 5 percent increase in turnout, but is much more expensive (\$20 per vote generated versus \$1.56 per vote).

Further, more than half of 18 to 24-year-olds do not even have a land-line phone, so are unreachable by a phone bank, yet 89 percent own a cell phone.^l Sixty-three percent of young people with a cell phone regularly use text messaging (compared to only 15 percent of Baby Boomers), which makes mobile reminders potentially pivotal in mobilizing young voters. However, the messages should be carefully constructed and selectively sent. While 59 percent of the 4,000 participants in the study said the text messages were helpful, nearly a quarter found them annoying.^v Young people may appreciate a text reminder near voting day if they have requested it, but resent a barrage of them. So far, only a few campaigns have developed communications strategies involving mobile phones or are registering participants for messages and notifications.

Connect with Young Americans' Concerns

Several topics are of primary concern among young Americans. Similar to older voters, they are most interested in policy on Iraq, the environment, the economy, health care, and immigration, but tend to be a little more optimistic and idealistic on these issues. Young people are more concerned about the present state of education than are older Americans and less concerned about the future of Social Security. Young people are

also somewhat more open on social issues, like gay marriage. Candidates should explain their ideas and positions on these issues when targeting young adults, and the next President should take young people's views and priorities into account in developing—and explaining—new administration policies.

KEY FACTS

- Twice as many young people say they are paying attention to the 2008 election as were doing so prior to the 2004 election. ⁱⁱ
- Young voters largely identify as independent, at 40 percent. ⁱ
- The overwhelming majority of young adults, 85 percent, say they are interested in following national affairs—up 14 points from 1999 and close to the interest reported by adults of all ages. ^{vi}
- Young voter turnout increased significantly in recent elections. Among 18 to 24-year-olds, it jumped 11 points, from 36 percent in 2000 to 47 percent in 2004. Among 18 to 29-year-olds, turnout increased from 40 percent in 2000, to 49 percent in 2004. ⁱⁱⁱ
- Iraq, education, health care, and the environment rank as the most critical concerns for young Americans.

Iraq

Similar to the rest of the adult population, the war in Iraq is the chief issue of concern among young Americans: 32 percent say it is the most important problem facing the country. ⁱⁱ Another survey shows 50 percent believing either “Iraq” the “War” the “War on Terror” or “Domestic Security” is the most pressing issue. ⁱ This young generation is closely connected to the troops serving in the Middle East, who are their are peers, friends, and immediate family members.

The young generation is moderately more hopeful than older Americans about the potential for success in Iraq. Of the 17 to 29-year-olds surveyed, 51 percent said it is likely or somewhat likely that the United States will succeed in Iraq, compared to only 45 percent of all Americans. ⁱⁱ

As far as what actions they would like to see taken, opinions are extremely varied and generally follow established lines. Some would like to see an immediate end to the war, because of its many costs, and others worry that a too-abrupt end will translate into future problems in the region that they may have to grapple with. Iraq is not a conflict young Americans want to see continue through their adult life, yet they are well aware that it could. What young adults do agree on is the desire to see a comprehensive plan. They say they want their next commander-in-chief to have a plan they describe as “intelligent,” “well thought out,” and “flexible.” While they admit they don’t have the answer to Iraq, they want a President who does.

Education

The overwhelming majority of young adults say issues surrounding education are important to them, and, since many of them are students or recent graduates, this is not surprising. On average, college students carry \$20,000 in debt on graduation day, which makes federal policies on student aid particularly important to them.^{vii}

Beyond the financial burden of higher education, young people express concern about the nation’s primary and secondary schools. One worry is that U.S. students are not globally competitive. Lack of foreign language instruction is a particular problem. They believe it should begin earlier and be offered in a broader range of languages. A focus group also revealed frustration over tenure, which participants believed forces out favorite young, enthusiastic teachers, while preserving jobs for teachers perceived as “apathetic and cynical.” While these are very specific examples and opinions, they illustrate the depth of the ideas and concern from young adults regarding our education system, as well as a desire for our next President to propose specific solutions.

Economy

Because of bills racked up in college, being new to the workforce, and having higher rates of unemployment, young Americans are very interested in the well-being of the U.S. economy. One of the challenges for this generation is that, while overall they are more educated than their parents’ generation, their college degrees were more

expensive to attain and do not portend as great an increase in earning potential. Higher education is still important, however, because the gap in earning is even greater for those without it. On top of the relative drop in earnings, unemployment rates are two to three times greater among young adults today, and their bankruptcy rates and credit card debt are both high.

Given their uncertain financial future, young adults are extremely interested in what the next President will do for our economy. The most basic desire is for good employment and career advancement opportunities. A huge majority—88 percent—say job training and opportunities for younger workers are important. Unemployment rates and weak benefits also play into the younger generation's views regarding their next major area of concern—health care.

Health Care

About a third of young adults lack health insurance.^{ix} As a result, they are more in favor of a comprehensive national health care system than are adult as a whole. About 62 percent of young adults support a national plan, compared to only 47 percent of the population at large.ⁱⁱⁱ Uninsured youth support a national health care plan at the rate of 75 percent. Young adults admit to not understanding the nuances of the health reform plans proposed—a communications challenge for every candidate and administration—but they do understand that health care is something they need.

Environment

An overwhelming majority of young people feel Americans should do whatever it takes to protect the environment. Overall, they are more concerned about the environment than are their parents and grandparents. Some 90 percent of 17 to 29-year-olds say government policies that promote reduced oil and gas use are important,ⁱⁱ and Gen Nexters are similar to Baby Boomers when it comes to a willingness to pay higher prices to protect the environment. A new President who wanted to take dramatic action on environmental issues would be able to build on this strong support.

Immigration

Young Americans generally have a more positive and open-minded attitude toward immigration issues than do older adults. When surveyed, 67 percent of Nexters say they believe today's immigrants strengthen the country with their hard work and talents, while only 30 percent of adults over 61 share this view. Similarly, only 30 percent of younger adults say immigrants are a burden, compared to 50 percent of older adults.^x Young people do worry about potential strain on government programs and resources, like education. Still, they are much more likely to believe the number of people allowed to immigrate to the United States should be increased or kept the same, while older Americans are more likely to want a decrease.

These opinions likely reflect the current generation's remarkable diversity. Many of them have grown up in a multiracial, multicultural society. (According to a Gallup Poll, 95 percent of 18 to 29-year-olds approve of dating between blacks and whites, while only about 30 percent of their grandparents share that view.^{xi}) Young people perceive current immigration policy as pointless, since it is not enforced, and would like to see comprehensive immigration reform. As part of this, they would like to see the corollary issues of employment, education, and security addressed. Again, the next administration may find support for immigration reform among younger Americans.

Social Issues

Stances on social issues follow a very similar pattern. Millennials are more progressive than the generations which preceded them, especially on the issue of gay marriage. The under-30 population is the only age group with a relatively favorable view on gay marriage, and their views are largely shaped by personal experience, not so much by whether they are liberal or conservative or even religious. (Young adults are religious for the most part—seven out of 10 college students say religion is somewhat or very important in their lives.) Americans who know personally someone who is gay are about twice as likely to favor gay marriage, and young people more often have gay acquaintances.

Most young Americans value free agency and would like the government to avoid interfering in personal choices whenever possible. Millennials' stance on social issues underscores the fact that this group is largely independent and does not necessarily correspond to traditional labels.

Social Security

Young people are quite apathetic and uninformed when it comes to the topic of Social Security. Many have written off Social Security as a lost cause and figure there is no chance of any money being left in the pot for them upon retirement. This widespread ignorance seems irrational, since the issue *will* directly affect them, but young people believe they have many more pressing issues to worry about. In fact 60 percent of 18 to 24-year-olds surveyed said they haven't heard *anything* about a plan to privatize Social Security.^x For the minority of Nexters who were even *slightly* aware of the idea, 74 percent are in favor, possibly again reflecting their independent streak. By contrast, only 48 percent of adults 41 and over support privatization. Still, the large majority of young adults see the issues of Social Security as vague, distant, and not directly applicable to their current or future lives.

Concluding Observations

Forty percent of young adults currently identify themselves as politically independent,ⁱ which could mean one of two things: they remain unaffiliated with a particular party but could be lured either way, or they feel utterly dissatisfied with both the Republican and Democratic parties and have no interest in joining either. Both possibilities should pique the interest of candidates, political parties, and the next President.

Democrats have been the frontrunners in reaching the younger demographic. In the mid-term elections of 2006, the Democrats' largest marginal win was with the youth, who voted 60 to 38 percent in favor of Democratic congressional candidates.ⁱⁱⁱ This 22-point margin made the crucial difference in several close Senate races and contributed to the Democrats' current majority in both houses. Similarly, the young vote could give

Democrats the winning edge in the 2008 presidential elections, if the party continues to explore ways to cultivate it. Clearly, Republicans should seriously reconsider current lackluster efforts to target younger participation. Not only could this make a critical difference in 2008, but it could also prove vital to the party's future growth and viability.

Parties and individual candidates should invest in youth, not just to win particular elections, but because partisan loyalty is largely formed in the younger years. Utilizing young people as organizers, interns, and volunteers will be beneficial for both young people and the campaigns that engage them. With fresh minds, ample energy, and technological sophistication, younger voters can be a significant force in driving a candidate towards victory.

Encouraging young voter participation creates new responsibilities for candidates, campaigns, and our entire political system. Young Americans cannot be entirely accessed or engaged through the traditional tactics of phone banks, leaflets, television advertisements, and newspaper editorials. Social networking, text messaging, internet postings, and other "new media" must be deployed to bring young Americans to the political table.

Most of all, engaging young people in campaigns places added responsibilities for those elected, especially our new President. Engaging young America in the democratic process—and in governance—is in the interest of everyone in this country.

Investments that our political leaders can make now in engaging this large segment of our citizenry will inevitably provide this country with a more intelligent, more connected, and more thoughtful government for years to come.

About the Author and the Project

Cali Carlin

Cali Carlin currently works for CBS News in New York. Previously she was working for Channel One, a news program shown daily to middle and high school classrooms across the country, reaching 7 million students. She has volunteered with organizations directed at helping youth.

Opportunity 08 aims to help 2008 presidential candidates and the public focus on critical issues facing the nation, presenting policy ideas on a wide array of domestic and foreign policy questions. The project is committed to providing both independent policy solutions and background material on issues of concern to voters.

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