

THROWING A BETTER PARTY
Local Mobilizing Institutions
&
the Youth Vote

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A shrinking number of Americans are interested in politics—a trend pronounced among younger citizens. Politicians, academics, civic leaders and others are scrambling to find solutions.

This study was commissioned by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) and focuses on local political parties. Historically, local parties have played an important role in getting people to the polls. Many observers have suggested they are the key cogs of the democratic process.

Political parties seem alive and well in the 21st century—at least at the state and national levels. But are they also vibrant at the local level? Perhaps more important, are local parties doing anything to connect with young voters—anything to bring them into the electoral process in meaningful ways? Also, can some local parties tell us how best to connect with young voters? The goal of this project was to seek answers to these fundamental questions.

Between October 1 and November 10, 2003, our study conducted telephone interviews with 805 local party leaders, randomly selected from across the nation. They were asked a range of questions, many dealing with youth mobilization. A few of the major findings include:

- Local party leaders perceive youth disengagement as a critical problem.
- Local party leaders believe that the root of the problem lies with deficient high school civics programs, negative campaigning, and the poor quality of media reporting of elections. (Surprisingly, the amount of money in the political process was not seen as particularly important.)
- Local party leaders believe their organizations have the potential to turn things around.
- Young voters do not seem to be on the radar for local party leaders, even when the leaders were asked about the “long-term success of their organizations.”
- Most local parties either have no youth mobilization programs or their programs are extremely modest in scope (few are dubbed “fresh” or “innovative”).
- When local party organizations make an effort to mobilize young voters, they perceive their efforts to be effective.
- There are modest differences between the parties, but the broad conclusion that local parties may be dropping the ball with young voters seems to apply to both the Democrats and the Republicans.

Analysis of the data suggests that local parties have the potential to play a major role in rejuvenating political participation in America but that real innovation is needed. That is, local parties will have to develop novel outreach programs and expand their social activities. Simply put, they have to get hip. A sharper focus on Internet-based communications will likely bring more young citizens into party politics and the electoral system as well. There is disturbing news in this report but also grounds for optimism.

BACKGROUND

THE PROBLEM: THE SHRINKING ELECTORATE

America has witnessed a stunning decline in political participation. Shrinking voter turnout is one indicator of the problem, surely the most recognizable, but other modes of political behavior—such as sending letters to elected officials, helping a candidate or a party, wearing a campaign button, talking about politics with family and friends—have declined as well. According to the American National Election Study, the number of Americans “very much interested” in political campaigns has dropped by nearly 40 percent since the 1960s. Nielson Media Research data indicate that the number of Americans watching the presidential debates has shrunk by nearly 50 percent since 1980. The evidence of withdrawal is overwhelming.

The problem is especially pronounced among younger Americans. In 1972, the first election in which 18-year-olds had the right to vote, 50 percent did so. In recent elections this figure has dropped to 29 percent. In the last two midterm congressional elections, this figure fell below 20 percent. A recent study of younger Americans, also commissioned by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), found that while attitudes toward government may have improved in the wake of September 11, 2001, the number of young Americans willing to take part in our political system is shrinking. Only about two-thirds of the 18- to 25-year-olds in the CIRCLE survey had even registered to vote, a decline from two years before, and 49 percent of the overall group (15- to 25-year-olds) said that voting “is a little important or not at all important to them.” Many other indicators in this study, and in numerous other studies, suggest the same: Younger voters are turned off by politics.

The departure of young Americans from the electoral sphere may have profound policy implications. In the November 16, 2001, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, scholar William Galston wrote, “The withdrawal of a cohort of citizens from public affairs disturbs the balance of public deliberation—to the detriment of those who withdraw, but of the rest of us as well.” And of course higher or lower turnout by young voters may shape the outcome of future elections. Perhaps more so than in previous elections, Democratic presidential candidates believe that reversing this trend will increase their chances of taking up residence in the White House.

A PARTY CONNECTION?

Most efforts to reverse this disturbing trend have centered on the citizen. That is, most observers have assumed that the decline of involvement is due to changes in attitudes, especially among younger Americans, who are often accused of apathy, cynicism, and alienation. The solution, then, is to retool and reinvigorate the citizen. For instance, many high school and college programs have been developed to promote students’ interest and involvement in politics. MTV’s *Rock the Vote*, which emerged in 1992 and has been reenergized for the 2004 presidential contest, is an example of a prominent program of this sort.

A less common approach has been to focus on political elites, arguing that the problem lies with the behavior of public officials and other practitioners of politics. Here the main culprit is “new-style political campaigns,” which focus on negative campaigning, extensive fundraising, and the precise targeting of

voters. Media coverage of politics has also been blamed. In that case, the solution is to change the style of campaign and campaign coverage to more effectively engage younger citizens.

These efforts are important and may make a difference. Yet, even a cursory look at levels of participation in American history underscores the importance of mobilizing institutions such as local political parties. Simply put, participation in the American political system has been highest when local political parties were vibrant. Are these organizations still active in electoral politics? If so, what are they doing to mobilize voters and, more specifically, are they doing anything to better engage young voters?

At least at the national and state levels, political parties have more resources and can provide greater campaign services than at any point in American history. There has been a dramatic resurgence from the candidate-centered days of the 1970s. But has this revitalization extended to local parties? Moreover, local party leaders are on the frontline of electoral politics. They discuss candidates, tactics, trends, strategies, and voter perceptions day in and day out. Yet no study to date has probed this group of political activists regarding declining youth participation. Finally, we might assume that some local party committees are connecting to young voters. What can we learn from these organizations, and can other parties copy these programs?

SURVEY RESULTS

THIS STUDY: “THROWING A BETTER PARTY”

The Center for Political Participation at Allegheny College, under the direction of Professor Daniel M. Shea, received a grant from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) to conduct an exploration of local party organizations and young voters. Working with Shea on the project is John C. Green, director of the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron.

A significant component of the study is a telephone survey of local party leaders from across the nation. It was conducted between October 1 and November 10, 2003. The University of Akron Center for Policy Studies was contracted to conduct the poll. Each interview lasted roughly 30 minutes, and the questions dealt with a host of issues related to youth engagement and party politics more generally. The sample, randomly drawn, was based on the population of Democratic and Republican chairs in the 1,000 most populated counties in the United States, which together include 87 percent of the population. In all, 403 Democratic and 402 Republican local county chairs were interviewed. The cooperation rate was about 50 percent.

After the survey was complete, interviews were also held with leaders at the Democratic National Committee and the Republican National Committee to gather their insights about the survey data and to collect information regarding national party efforts to engage young Americans. At the Democratic National Committee, we interviewed Stephanie H. Sanchez, executive director of the College Democrats of America and advisor to the chairman on youth outreach; at the Republican National Committee, we spoke to Drew Ryan, director of grass roots and youth mobilization.

FINDINGS

Perceptions of the Problem

Before exploring what local party organizations might be doing to combat youth apathy, the survey explored their perceptions of the problem. The leaders were asked if they agree with the statement “The lack of political engagement by young people is a serious problem.” Some 52 percent “strongly agreed” with the statement and 36 percent “agreed.” Only 60 party leaders (7.5 percent) disagreed with the statement.

Party differences are interesting. Just fewer than 66 percent of the Democratic leaders “strongly agreed” with the statement, compared to 39 percent of GOP leaders. Conversely, just 3 percent of Democrats “disagreed” that it is a serious problem, compared with 12 percent of Republicans. There are a number of plausible explanations for this difference, one of which is strategic calculation: Perhaps the Democrats see youth disengagement as a major problem because they believe it costs them votes. Overall, it seems clear that those in the political trenches see declining youth participation as a serious problem.

Who or What Is to Blame?

A series of questions probed what party leaders saw as the root of the problem. Table 1, pages 11–12, charts the results. Surprisingly, the amount of money spent in elections was not seen as a significant factor—at least compared to the other possibilities. Only 8 percent of party leaders “strongly agreed” and 30 percent “agreed” that “young voters are turned off to politics because of the amount of money involved.” There are some party differences, but not as much as one might expect: 10 percent of Democrats “strongly agreed,” compared to 6 percent for GOP leaders. Some 57 percent of Democrats and 66 percent of Republicans either had no opinion or disagreed with the statement. It would seem, contrary to popular perception, that money is not the root of the problem—at least not from the perspective of local party officials.

The data highlighted three primary causes, according to party leaders, for young Americans’ seeming lack of interest in politics: First, 71 percent of party leaders disagreed with the statement that “high schools do a lot to prepare young people for their role as citizens.” Of this number, 247 (31 percent) “strongly disagreed” with this statement. It would seem that much of the problem might be placed at the doorstep of our schools—at least from the perspectives of local party leaders. This finding is consistent with a number of recent reports and studies that suggest the decline in civic education is a key part of the problem.¹

Second, 70 percent of the respondents agree or strongly agree that negative campaigning turns off young voters. This is consistent with a number of scholarly perspectives, including a book titled *Going Negative*, written by Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar in 1997. Third, the media gets its share of the blame: Some 65 percent of respondents either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that the “media has done much to turn young people away from politics.”

Party differences on each of these questions were minimal, with the exception that Democratic party leaders were a bit more likely to blame candidates for ignoring young voters and a bit less likely to blame high school instruction.

¹ See, for example, a recent report by the Representative Democracy Project, a federally funded partnership among the national Conference of State Legislatures, the Center for Civic Education, and the Center on Congress at Indiana University; numerous studies commissioned by the Center for Civic Education; and several studies by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Engagement and Learning.

Can Parties Make a Difference?

Clearly, chairs are optimistic that local parties can make a difference: 39 percent of respondents “strongly agreed” and 54 percent “agreed” (93 percent overall) with the statement that “local parties can make a big difference getting young people involved in politics.” This is consistent with the core premise of the study: Local political parties have the potential to play a significant role in reversing the trend of apathy among young voters.

A series of questions were used to measure the range of each local party’s campaign activities. More specifically, to what extent do they still conduct aggressive voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives? Results suggest that mobilization efforts are central, as noted in Table 2, page 12. In fact, even though GOTV efforts occur during just the last few days of the election, about 50 percent of our respondents noted that between 20 and 50 percent of their committee’s efforts were spent on this one activity. The overall average “proportion of effort” for get-out-the-vote drives was 31.7 percent—and there was essentially no difference between the parties. This is significantly larger than for any other activity.

Additionally, questions asked respondents whether their organization received assistance from state and national party committees to get-out-the-vote. Only 16 percent said they did not receive this sort of help, with most noting that assistance, while not overwhelming, was significant. Our findings therefore suggest, once again, that voter mobilization lies at the heart of local party functions.

Are the Parties Working to Connect with Young Voters?

Recognizing the problem and that one’s organization has the potential to make a difference in finding a solution is one thing, but actually developing programs to achieve that goal is quite another. Here we discover one of the most significant findings of the study. First, we attempted to measure the extent to which young voters are on the minds of local party leaders—are they on their “radar,” so to speak? Near the beginning of the survey we asked an open-ended question: “Are there demographic groups of voters that are currently important to the long-term success of your local party.” “Young voters” (defined as 18 to 25 years of age) were mentioned by just 8 percent of party leaders. Senior citizens were mentioned nearly three times as often, even though the question addresses the “long-term success of the party.” (See Table 3, page 13.)

Next, respondents were asked to think of another group. Here “young voters” were mentioned by 12 percent of the respondents. Finally, respondents were asked a third time to mention an important demographic group for the long-term success of the party, at which time 18 percent pointed to younger voters. In all, local party leaders were given three opportunities to suggest younger voters are important to the long-term success of their party, but just a tad over one-third did so.

There is some variation by party. Republican leaders were nearly twice as likely to mention young voters on the first question (8 percent compared to 5 percent). But on the next two opportunities, the Democrats were more likely to mention young voters. With the three opportunities combined, 129 Democratic leaders (32 percent) and 104 GOP chairs (26 percent) mention young voters.

The survey asked respondents if they have developed specific get-out-the-vote programs for young voters. Here, just 41 percent of party leaders said yes. A follow-up question asked them to describe their pro-

gram. On closer inspection we find that a vast majority of these programs might be dubbed “modest” and “traditional.” For example, a common response was “Some people in our party have spoken at area schools” or “Our people set up booths at fairs and malls.” Only a handful of party chairs mentioned what we might call significant activities, programs that require a significant amount of time or resources. Roughly one-half seem limited to college programs—such as working with the College Republicans or Young Democrats. “We make contacts with campus College Republicans,” noted one, and another said that “we work with Young Democrats organizations on college campuses.” Moreover, many of the respondents who mentioned that they had programs were unable to provide much specificity. While it is fair to say that these efforts might make a difference, college students are already much more likely to vote than noncollege students, and about one-half of this age group does not attend college.¹

Why would so many party chairs suggest youth engagement is a serious problem and that their efforts have the potential to make a difference, but at the same time be unable to outline significant, specific programs for young voters? Clearly, a local party might consider numerous groups to be of critical importance to their efforts. Minority voters, union members, and women, for example, were frequently mentioned by Democratic leaders, and blue-collar workers and middle-class citizens were often noted by Republic leaders—just to mention a few. Given that census estimates are that younger voters make up only 14 percent of the electorate, we might expect political operatives to pay a limited amount of attention to this group. Indeed, perhaps they are giving this group enough attention.

On the other hand, the question speaks to the long-term success of the local party. Given the importance of political socialization—that is, early-in-life connections to a party and the election process—party operatives’ lack of attention to young voters seems puzzling. One of the criticisms leveled against contemporary parties is that they are increasingly short-sighted; winning the election at hand has become more important than developing a long-term, broad-based following. Writing in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Don Peck says, “In recent decades parties have moved away from grassroots mobilization efforts, which reach out to nonvoters, to focus on ‘switching’ independents who have a strong history of voting.”² Our survey asked which of the following should be given priority by local political parties, “helping candidates win elections or helping voters develop attachments to the parties.” A sizable majority—some 63 percent—suggested helping candidates is more important than building loyal supporters. This was true for 59 percent of the Democrats and 62 percent of the Republicans. Moreover, we asked the chairs how much effort they put into nonelectoral activities—that is, programs that occur during off-election periods. A full 70 percent of respondents report that their county committees spend less than 10 percent of their time on such activities.

¹ For a discussion of the “college connection” and voting rates, see CIRCLE information at http://www.civicyouth.org/quick/non_college.htm

² Don Peck, “The Shrinking Electorate,” *Atlantic Monthly*, November 2002, p. 48.

A Cost-Benefit Analysis?

Another reason why young voters might not spring to mind as an important group for local parties may be the difficulty of reaching out to them. Local party chairs were asked, “In your experience, how difficult has it been to mobilize young voters, 18 to 25 years of age?” Some 46 percent noted that it has been “very difficult,” and 45 percent said it was “difficult.” There is some variation by party: 56 percent of the Democrats and 37 percent of the Republicans said youth mobilization was “very difficult.” Conversely, only 5 percent of Democrats and 13 percent of GOP chairs said it was “not at all difficult.”

It would seem, however, that the perceptions of the difficulty of connecting with young voters might be at variance with the reality. Of those chairs that noted their committees have viable youth GOTV programs, 37 percent said that those programs have been a “very difficult” endeavor. This compares to 58 percent for those who do not have youth mobilization programs. The number of chairs who suggested getting young voters to participate was “not at all difficult” was twice as high for those who actually had programs than for those without them. Perhaps many of the local parties no longer have such programs because they did not prove to be worth the effort.

ANALYSIS

THE REACTIONS OF NATIONAL PARTY OPERATIVES

Our study also included conversations with national party operatives: Ms. Stephanie H. Sanchez at the DNC and Mr. Drew Ryan at the RNC. Perhaps not surprisingly, both agreed that the decline in youth participation is disturbing and that changes are needed. “Young people are involved,” said Sanchez, “but not in politics. It’s a threat to our democracy.” “Young voters no longer have a sense of ownership in the nation, a sense of empowerment,” said Ryan. And both agreed that the trend has numerous causes.

Moreover, both Sanchez and Ryan expressed disappointment with the apparent lack of focus by local parties on younger voters. When presented with our finding that only 8 percent of respondents cited young voters as important for the long-term success of the party the first time the question was asked, and less than one-third of respondents noted young voters as a critical group with three prompts, both Sanchez and Ryan seemed taken aback. Sanchez asked, “Those are the numbers even when you mentioned the long-term success of the party? Well, that’s really disappointing. The ‘long-term’ issue is upsetting, given that young voters are critical to the party’s future.” Ryan said, “That’s disappointing, but not atypical. It’s an ignored demographic.”

While both noted that reaching young voters has been difficult, they also acknowledged that it will be a critical move for their parties. Ryan noted that the GOP is very serious about youth outreach. “Young voters are a critical demographic, and when they do turn out to vote everyone will pay attention,” he said.

But what, specifically, are the national party organizations doing to reach out to young voters? The RNC is working to expand their college campus organizations, pumping resources into the effort, and helping provide prominent guest speakers. They are also planning numerous social events for the coming year.

As for the DNC, Sanchez made special mention of a recent success: Calling it an “innovative and aggressive initiative,” the Democrats held “Something New” in October 2003. The event, held at a nightclub in Washington, D.C., attracted some 4,500 participants and contributors. In the coming months the Democrats intend to hold similar programs in cities across the nation. Sanchez also mentioned “democrat.meetup.com,” a new DNC web page initiative, clearly designed after Howard Dean’s success with Meetup.Org. In short, both Sanchez and Ryan said their organizations are moving ahead with numerous new programs, all designed to tap into an important group of potential voters.

CONCLUSION: LOCAL PARTIES NEED TO GET HIP

The Need for Innovation

The problem that many local party committees confront in effectively reaching out to young voters seems to stem from a lack of innovation. Simply put, traditional approaches to getting-out-the-vote are ineffective with the new generation. It does not appear to be enough simply to “hand out voter registration cards at the high schools” or to “make calls before election day,” as suggested by two of our respondents. The national parties seem to have gotten the message: In order to truly connect with young voters, the parties must develop novel approaches. It is time for local parties to step outside the box.

Getting Hip

Moreover, it would seem that ongoing social activities might be effective in connecting with young voters as well. “We have to be more inviting to young voters,” says Sanchez. “We have to be more social, more entertaining and, yes, more hip.” Ryan echoed this comment: “Innovation will be critical. Right now there is a generational gap on how to reach young voters. We’ll need to bridge that gap, and of course ongoing programs that capture their interest, programs that are entertaining, will help.” Indeed, we suspect that somewhere along the line young voters have come to believe that politics is uncool or boring. Political parties can do much to change this misconception.

Getting Connected

Can Internet-centered activities save the day? Probably not, but perhaps reaching young voters through the Web will be increasingly effective—as Howard Dean’s campaign seems to suggest. Sanchez, in particular, noted that reaching young voters through new technologies will be increasingly important. Perhaps illustrative of the generational gap noted by Ryan, when our survey asked how many local party committees had their own Web pages, nearly one-half of our respondents said they did not. At a minimum, a Web page would seem an appropriate place to list upcoming programs and social events.

The local party leaders interviewed for this research are correct: Mobilizing young voters is a difficult chore—likely to become even harder in the years ahead. Yet, astute political operatives will look at this group of potential voters with a keen eye—especially if they are interested in the long-term success of their party. Young voters, it would seem, are increasingly up for grabs. Perhaps the necessity to mobilize young voters in order to win elections will also lead to a more healthy democracy. Local parties can make a difference in youth participation, but they may also be the link to a more vibrant political process overall. We hope they will seize the moment.

TABLE 1
Who or What Is to Blame for Declining Youth Participation in Politics?

YOUNG VOTERS WILL RESPOND TO THE RIGHT CANDIDATES AND ISSUES

<i>Party</i>	<i>Chairpersons</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>No Opinion</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
Dem	401	133	228	11	28	1
		33.2%	56.9%	2.7%	7.0%	.2%
Rep	400	118	222	17	41	2
		29.5%	55.5%	4.3%	10.3%	.5%
TOTAL	801	251	450	28	69	3
		31.3%	56.2%	3.5%	8.6%	.4%

CANDIDATES IGNORE THE YOUTH VOTE

<i>Party</i>	<i>Chairpersons</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>No Opinion</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
Dem	401	54	205	32	102	8
		13.5%	51.1%	8.0%	25.4%	2.0%
Rep	395	44	169	30	139	13
		11.1%	42.8%	7.6%	35.2%	3.3%
TOTAL	796	98	374	62	241	21
		12.3%	47.0%	7.8%	30.3%	2.6%

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE TURNED OFF BY THE NEGATIVITY OF CAMPAIGNS

<i>Party</i>	<i>Chairpersons</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>No Opinion</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
Dem	401	99	200	27	68	7
		24.7%	49.9%	6.7%	17.0	1.7%
Rep	391	77	177	35	92	10
		19.7%	45.3%	9.0%	23.5%	2.6%
TOTAL	792	176	377	62	160	17
		22.2%	47.6%	7.8%	20.2%	2.1%

MEDIA HAS DONE MUCH TO TURN YOUNG PEOPLE AWAY FROM POLITICS

<i>Party</i>	<i>Chairpersons</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>No Opinion</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
Dem	399	96	136	28	129	10
		24.1%	34.1%	7.0%	32.3	2.5%
Rep	398	143	146	22	80	7
		35.9%	36.7%	5.5%	20.1%	1.8%
TOTAL	797	239	282	50	209	17
		30.0%	35.4%	6.3%	26.2%	2.1%

TABLE 1 – continued

YOUNG VOTERS ARE TURNED OFF TO POLITICS BECAUSE OF THE AMOUNT OF MONEY INVOLVED

<i>Party</i>	<i>Chairpersons</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>No Opinion</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
Dem	399	41 10.3%	132 33.1%	42 10.5%	164 41.1%	20 5.0%
Rep	397	23 5.8%	110 27.7%	28 7.1%	207 52.1%	29 7.3%
TOTAL	796	64 8.0%	242 30.4%	70 8.8%	371 46.6%	49 6.2%

HIGH SCHOOLS DO A LOT TO PREPARE YOUNG PEOPLE FOR THEIR ROLE AS CITIZENS

<i>Party</i>	<i>Chairpersons</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>No Opinion</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
Dem	399	17 4.3%	105 26.3%	11 2.8%	165 41.4%	101 25.3%
Rep	397	9 2.3%	76 19.1%	12 3.0%	154 38.8%	146 36.8%
TOTAL	796	26 3.3%	181 22.7%	23 2.9%	319 40.1%	247 31.0%

TABLE 2

Political Activities as a Proportion of Total Party Effort*

MEAN PERCENT OF EFFORT

Get Out the Vote Programs	32%
Campaign Services	20%
Campaign Events	19%
Voter Registration	17%
Non-Campaign Events	12%

* Respondents were asked what proportion of their local party's overall effort was spent on the activities listed above.

TABLE 3
Groups Important for the Long-Term Success of the Local Party:
Priority of Young Voters versus Senior Voters*

PRIORITIES

Youth Most Important Group	8%	Seniors Most Important Group	21%
Youth Second Important Group	12%	Seniors Second Important Group	19%
Youth Mentioned as Important	18%	Seniors Mentioned as Important	10%
Total Priority to Youth	38%	Total Priority to Seniors	49%

* This was an open-ended question. Respondents were asked to note the most important demographic group for the “long-term success of their party.” They were then asked a second time, and finally they were asked to list any other groups they considered important.