

Building on Momentum to Increase Youth Participation

FACT: Today, only 32 percent of college freshmen believe that keeping up with politics is important, compared to 60 percent in 1966, according to the Higher Education Research Institute.¹

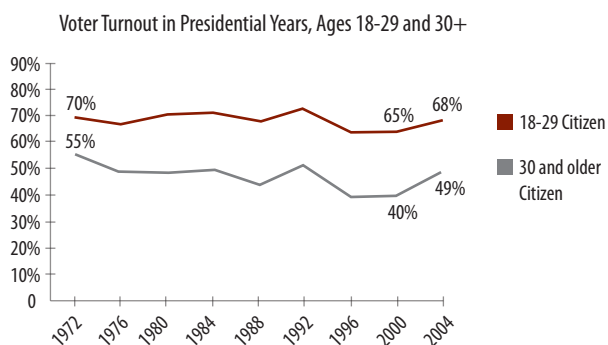
THE PROBLEM

Presidential campaigns have been aggressively pursuing youth, reaching new levels in 2008 using innovative outreach methods and coupling the Internet with intense grassroots mobilization. Youth turnout in the 2008 caucuses and primaries was up to 17 percent from 9 percent of eligible voters under the age of 30 in 2000.² Such efforts, however, tend to surge with presidential elections and dwindle when the election is over.

Focusing on youth political participation is critical because it is the best predictor of whether people engage with politics for the rest of their lives. In recent years, young people have drawn a sharp distinction between serving people directly and resolving problems through the political process, with the majority of people saying they volunteer to help other people rather than to address a broader social or political issue.³ Likewise, a Harvard University Institute of Politics survey showed that 51 percent of respondents were involved in community service volunteering, but only 19 percent were involved in government, politics or advocacy for issues of interest.⁴

THE OPPORTUNITY

- **Include youth issues in your philanthropic portfolio and develop the capacity of organizations targeting issues that affect youth directly.** Research shows it is more effective to engage youth around issues or ideology than political participation generically. Issues in which they have a stake include employment, education and the cost of college, and student loan and credit card debt.



Source: Current Population Survey, November Voting and Registration Supplements, 1972 to 2004.

1. Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey, Higher Education Research Institute, 2007.
2. Emily Hoban Kirby, et al., "The Youth Vote in the 2008 Primaries and Caucuses," Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), June 2008, http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_08_primary_summary.pdf.
3. Mark Hugo Lopez, et al., "The 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Detailed Look at How Youth Participate in Politics and Communities," Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), October 2006, http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/2006_CPHS_Report_update.pdf.
4. The 11th Biannual Youth Survey on Politics and Public Service, Harvard University Institute of Politics, Fall 2006, <http://www.iop.harvard.edu/Research-Publications/Polling/Fall-2006-Youth-Survey>.

WHY NOW?

With voting by young Americans expected to spike in 2008, attention is shifting to how to build on this surge to encourage lasting participation in social movements and organizations focused on public policy.

- **Include youth in making decisions and implementing programs designed to reach them.** Youth best understand the issues that affect them. Invite their perspectives on ways of conducting outreach and collecting data for program use. Donors can support avenues for involving youth through advisory councils and funding youth chapters of interest groups.
- **Build on the innovative methods that have been successful in mobilizing a new generation.** The Internet has reduced the cost and increased the speed of organizing, brought together groups across disparate locations and facilitated creative ways of sharing information. Vehicles like social networking sites, blogs, YouTube and text messaging have been successful in mobilizing youth to vote. Donors can provide support using the same channels to engage youth around other issues.
- **Provide youth with the knowledge and skills to influence policy.** Evidence shows that youth lack basic knowledge regarding how to vote, let alone how to create policy change. When asked how to improve civic education, youth said they wanted practical knowledge on how to get involved and real-life examples of how young people can make a difference politically.

Additional Resources

- **The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Education (CIRCLE)** is a nonpartisan research center that focuses on the civic and political engagement of youth between the ages of 18 and 25 (<http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/CSSTP.pdf>).
- **The Surdna Foundation's Program on Effective Citizenry** focuses on youth organizing, media, governance and advocacy. The foundation provides examples on how to invest in this area and provides related resources (http://www.surdna.org/programs/programs_list.htm?attrib_id=12039).
- **The Harvard University Institute of Politics** surveys youth biannually and provides information on political motivations and behavior and ways to reach youth (http://www.iop.harvard.edu/var/ezp_site/storage/fckeditor/file/pdfs/Research-Publications/IOP_Voters_Guide.pdf).