

a briefing on young voters in 2004

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RESEARCH ANALYSIS:

Motivating Younger People to Vote

By Anna Greenberg and Bob Carpenter

Based on a set of focus groups conducted in February 2004, this article by Anna Greenberg, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, and Bob Carpenter, American Viewpoint, highlights the challenges of mobilizing young people in the 2004 election.

Young people are at times inspiring and sometimes exasperating. In this research, we explored the world view of young people without a college education. We divided them into two groups: The first group comprises those who are not registered to vote, whom we call "on-the-verge" voters. This group tends to be only marginally connected to the community. The second group comprises those who do vote and are connected to their communities. We call this group the "connectors."

Our aim was to learn what encourages—and what discourages—young people in their participation in politics. In short, what sets politically engaged young people apart? Our goal was to apply these lessons to registration and mobilization efforts.

We found a wide gulf developed between "connectors"

and on-the-verge voters, not only regarding voting, but also in their sense of community and feelings of responsibility as American citizens. The most dramatic difference between on-the-verge voters and connectors is their sense of "civic-ness." On-the-verge voters view voting as optional, a benefit and not a responsibility of citizenship, while connectors feel deeply that voting is an absolute obligation of living in America. This difference in worldview is the crux of the challenge. Convincing on-the-verge voters that voting is a responsibility is difficult in short term, but there are effective ways of communicating about voting that help overcome this challenge. But equally as important, if we will fail to instill a sense of collective community and belonging with young people, we will fail in the long term to engage them in something bigger than themselves.

What Life is Like

Connectors and on-the-verge voters live in the same world, a world dominated by daily concerns such as the demands of school, work and sometimes young children, rather than existential angst. National issues offer

a mixed bag of emotions. The war in Iraq confuses them because they are not sure why we are over there fighting, they do not like the continuing causalities and they wonder why we are spending so much time and resources in Iraq when we have important problems at home. Despite high levels of unemployment, the economy did not emerge in our discussions as much of a concern and in fact, only after prodding did people talk about their wages, their inability to find a job or their concerns about health-care costs.

These young people diverge widely in their connection to community. The worldview of connectors is expansive and inclusive. Connectors volunteer, talk about politics with their parents and are initiators of social life. They are also more religious, both in their expression of faith and their actual institutional participation. On-the-verge voters are socially isolated, living day-by-day fulfilling the obligations of daily living. It is hard for them to identify anything like a community beyond their immediate neighbors or people living on their block.

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—ANNA GREENBERG AND
BOB CARPENTER

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The Graduate School
of Political Management

805 21st Street, NW
Suite 401
Washington, DC 20052

For more information about
this briefing, please call
202-293-6200 x 240

For more information
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202-994-6006 fax
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www.gspm.org

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While on-the-verge voters struggle to find a community, all of our participants carry powerful definitions of America. They recognize that the country has its faults (“world policemen” being the most frequent criticism), but that should not detract from the deep patriotism of both connectors and on-the-verge voter participants. Moreover, they see the most important benefit of being American is freedom. Freedom, in their view, means the ability to do and say whatever they want without restriction. It means freedom to choose their own career path and to determine for themselves how they will live their private lives.

However, connectors and on-the-verge voters quickly part company when we next ask about the responsibilities of being an American. Connectors immediately focus on voting and civic obligation. On-the-verge voters barely mention voting and only have vague notions of what it means to have responsibilities or obligations as an American citizen besides obeying the law and paying taxes. Connectors vote because they believe that along with the privileges of American citizenship, there are

responsibilities and one of those is active participation in our democracy.

Government, Politics and Voting

One of the challenges facing our efforts to engage on-the-verge voters is their view of government. On-the-verge voters do not believe they get much out of government except bills and taxes. They do not see government as a potential ally in achieving their dreams. They regard politics as a corrupt and self-serving exercise whose main beneficiaries are officeholders themselves. Naturally, then, the idea of voting strikes them as a waste of time. The news here generally echoes research in the literature.

On politics and voting, on-the-verge voter participants have a diverse set of complaints. First, they think that politicians say one thing while they are running for office and do another once they are elected. Second, they think that politics is controlled by interests more powerful than themselves, though they do not explicitly identify those interests. Third, they think that the issues that politicians talk about are focused on the politics of older people

(e.g., Social Security and Medicare) and aren’t relevant to young people.

Connectors are hardly above a cynical word about politics and politicians and they also have a realistic expectation of voting and participation among their peers. But the difference is that they do believe that voting is a privilege of American citizenship and that it can make a difference. Notably, for connectors, this perception is not self-serving. They define the “good” that can come out of politics as helping other people much more readily than helping their own situation.

Bringing it Together

It is clear from this qualitative research that simply calling on on-the-verge voters to do their civic duty and vote is insufficient. They reject this argument outright, which is not surprising given that they see voting as an option not a responsibility and they are so cynical about politicians. But we found that it may be possible to draw upon important moments when it seemed to matter to young people that they are citizens of this country. For most young people, 9/11 was a defining moment and influenced

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young voters in 2004

“The thing is, it does matter. Voting does matter. You may not win, but at least your opinion will be accounted for.”

—CONNECTOR FROM
ALBUQUERQUE, NM

“I don’t understand it (politics) at all. I don’t understand Republicans. I don’t understand Democrats. I don’t know the difference to be completely honest with you. I have never cared to learn.”

—ON-THE-VERGE VOTER
FROM MILWAUKEE, WI

“Connectors immediately focus on voting and civic obligation. On-the-verge voters barely mention voting and only have vague notions of what it means to have responsibilities or obligations as an American citizen besides obeying the law and paying taxes....”

ELECTION RESULTS:

Youth Voting in the 2004 Democratic Primaries

After a big turnout surge in the Iowa caucuses, the number of young voters who turned out to vote in the Democratic primaries varied from state to state. The following chart provides data about youth turnout in various states from both the 2000 and 2004 Democratic primaries. These two years are not comparable in all respects given differences in candidates, dates and primary order as well as the presence of a contested Republican primary in 2000.

NOTE: Republican primary information is not included because without a contested primary in 2004, turnout was dramatically lower than in 2000.

18 to 29-Year-Old Voter Turnout in the 2000 and 2004 Primaries

STATE	2000 ESTIMATE OF YOUTH VOTES CAST	2004 ESTIMATE OF YOUTH VOTES CAST	YOUNG VOTER TURNOUT
California	393,000	286,000	Decreased by 27%
Connecticut	9,000	6,000	Decreased by 33%
Delaware	650	3,000	Increased by 362%
Georgia*	34,000	66,000	Increased by 94%
Iowa	5,500	21,000	Increased by 282%
Maryland	30,000	35,000	Increased by 17%
Massachusetts*	46,000	54,000	Increased by 17%
Missouri*	24,000	37,000	Increased by 54%
New York	88,000	52,000	Decreased by 41%
New Hampshire*	20,000	31,000	Increased by 55%
Ohio*	78,000	105,000	Increased by 35%
Oklahoma	7,000	18,000	Increased by 157%
Rhode Island	4,000	3,000	Decreased by 25%
Tennessee*	15,000	25,000	Increased by 67%
Vermont*	4,000	7,000	Increased by 75%

Source: Total number of votes cast is provided by Secretaries of State in each state. No exit polls were conducted for the Democratic Primaries in AZ, VA, SC, or WI in 2000 so no data is available for comparison in these states.

*Note that these states had open primaries where voters can vote in any primary regardless of party affiliation. Any inferences made about open primary states should take this into account. Making exact comparisons between 2000 and 2004 results is not advised in open primary states.

Data provided by The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) which provides impartial, nonpartisan and comprehensive data, research and analysis on the civic engagement of young people. CIRCLE is funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and Carnegie Corporation of New York and housed at the University of Maryland's School of Public Affairs. For more information, please visit www.civicyouth.org.

Washington, DC 20052
Suite 401
805 21st Street, NW



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their view of community and what it means to be American. It brought home the notion that these atomized souls are part of something bigger than themselves—America.

The vividness of 9/11 as a defining event points to the larger issue that young people need to feel part of something bigger than their daily struggles. This does not mean that young people ignore issues, but rather that they need to connect to a larger reason for getting out to vote. Outreach to on-the-verge voters should raise issues—especially education and jobs. Young people are

struggling economically, but they do not feel particularly aggrieved or depressed. Moreover, they are not convinced that anyone in government can deliver for them, even if they vote for them. So the discussion of issues needs to be framed as making sure that politicians are responsive to their collective power as voters rather than any sort of guarantee they will get something from government.

Finally it is important that on-the-verge voters understand that voting is easy. Despite the fact that many states do not make it easy to vote, young people need

to know how easy it actually is to participate in politics so that they can make time in their busy and complicated lives to vote.

To obtain a full copy of the report, please visit www.newvotersproject.org.

1. Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research and American Viewpoint conducted six focus groups, four in Albuquerque, New Mexico (among Hispanics and Anglos) and two in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (among Anglos) on February 18, 19 and 23. The groups were further divided among "connectors" (likely voters and peer leaders) and "on the verge" voters (politically aware, but not likely voters) voters. The focus groups were limited to participants ages 18–25 and excluded full-time students at four-year universities.

A BRIEFING ON YOUNG VOTERS IN 2004

Editor:
Ron Faucheux

Contributing Editors:

Bob Carpenter, Vice President,
American Viewpoint

Ivan Frishberg, Outreach and
Communications Coordinator,
New Voters Project

Ed Goeas, President and CEO,
The Tarrance Group

Anna Greenberg, Vice
President, Greenberg, Quinlan,
Rosner Research

Celinda Lake, President, Lake,
Snell, Perry & Associates