

# Election FOCUS 2004

March 31, 2004

U.S. Department of State

ISSUE 1 • NO 7

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## FAST FACTS:

- ✓ **Asking** a young person (aged 18-25) to vote raises the likelihood they will vote by 8-12 percentage points.

— Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE)

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## Youth Voters Concerned about the Economy; National Security



April Spruell, right, a junior at Allen University in Columbia, S.C., participates in a voter registration drive. (AP Photo/Lou Krasky)

### Polls show younger and older voters agree on issues

Although much of the public perceives political activism among youth as centered on social issues, public polls and other research conducted during the 2004 election season demonstrate that young voters are concerned with many of the same issues as their adult counterparts. According to a Newsweek.com and Genext poll of 18-to-29 year olds in February 2004, youth voters are most concerned about unemployment, the economy and national security issues.

The environment — a traditional rallying point for young activists — is considered the most important issue facing the United States by only six percent of young voters according to the poll.

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## Youth Voting and the 2004 Election: An Interview with Mark Lopez

Mark Hugo Lopez, Research Director at the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), and a Professor of Economics at the University of Maryland, spoke to Washington File staff writer Alexandra Abboud about Youth Voting and the 2004 Presidential Election.

### Q: How Important is the youth vote in the United States today?

**LOPEZ:** Young voters represent about 18-20 million votes, depending on what age group we're looking at, and that's a tremendous number of votes. In 1992, about 20 million young people between the ages of 18 and 29 turned out to vote. And in the 2000 election, about 18 million young voters participated in the election.

That represents a swing of about two million people. Youth voter mobiliza-

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Contrast that with young voters' concern about the economy — the poll showed 25 percent of young voters ranking it the most important issue — and it appears that concerns of young voters are almost identical to that of older voters.

David Skaggs, Executive Director of the Center for Democracy & Citizenship Program at the Council for Excellence in Government and former U.S. Congressman (D-CO-2nd), is not surprised that young voters are concerned with the same issues as older voters.

According to former Congressman Skaggs, research from his organization, which includes the Campaign for Young Voters, a Web-based campaign to help Congressional candidates win over voters ages 18-25, "reconfirmed the proposition that the top three or four issues for younger people at any time are going to

look a lot like the top three or four issues for older people."

The difference however, will be in the way the candidates frame the debate on these issues with younger candidates, he said. "You might deal with social security with an older audience in terms of protecting it and making sure that benefits are there," said Congressman Skaggs. "Its relevance to younger audiences will have to do with the fact that they're going to be footing the bill...because it's coming out of their taxes for the next forty years."

When addressing the economy — an issue that is of great importance to young voters according to recent polls — Congressman Skaggs noted that while for younger voters the concern might be lack of new jobs, older voters fear losing their current job. It is essentially the same overall issue, but with different focus points, and candidates will need to

understand and address these differences if they hope to connect to younger voters, he said.

Congressman Skaggs was quick to point out, however, that addressing a similar issue in a different way does not mean that candidates should adjust their overall behavior for a younger audience. "Candidates think they have to behave differently for a younger audience," he said. "That's exactly the wrong thing to do as younger audiences are even more insistent on authenticity and being yourself than are older audiences."

And how can candidates insure that young voters feel their issues are being addressed? "The main thing candidates need to do is ask," said Congressman Skaggs. "As with any potential voter, young voters like to be taken seriously and they like to be asked for their opinion and support." ■

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tion campaigns such as Rock the Vote and the World Wrestling Entertainment Group's Smackdown Your Vote! campaign, are all pushing to get another two million young people to vote in the 2004 election over the 2000 election. That number would equal the number of youths that voted in 1992 and could also be enough votes to swing an election.

And so you will probably hear a lot of organizations talking about the impact, or the potential impact that young people could have, because they do represent a large group. They can swing elections if they're mobilized and therefore, a lot of organizations are trying to mobilize young people to get involved.

### **Q: The voting age in the United States was lowered**

**from 21 years of age to 18 years of age with the ratification of the 26th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1971. Have young voters been taking advantage of this right to vote since then?**

**LOPEZ:** Youth voter turnout among 18 to 25 year olds since 1972 — the first presidential election where young people between 18 and 20 could vote



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

The U.S. Department of State is pleased to present its election coverage newsletter, **Election Focus 2004**. The newsletter will provide non-partisan coverage of the U.S. election process, featuring articles, interviews, public opinion polls, and other information on the presidential primaries, debates, conventions and campaign activities of the major presidential candidates.

**Election Focus 2004** is produced by the Democracy and Human Rights team in the Bureau of International Information Programs.

— was at about 50-55 percent. Since then, it's steadily dropped by 13 percentage points. The only exception was the 1992 presidential election where there was a huge spike in voter turnout among young people. In 1992, the youth voter turnout almost matched that of 1972.

### Q: What was the reason for the spike in youth voting in the 1992 election?

**LOPEZ:** There are several possible reasons for the upward spike in 1992. Perhaps the two most obvious reasons are first, the election was a contested election and second, because there were three candidates running — Ross Perot, Bill Clinton, and George Bush — young voters felt like they had a diverse choice in candidates.

A lot of pollsters that I've talked to have suggested that having an independent candidate actually tends to bring out young people more.

And this is important, because we know that about a third of all young people are independents.

### Q: Are there any indications that the decline in youth voter turnout is reversing?

**LOPEZ:** We were hoping to see some indication that youth voter turnout was rising this year in early Democratic primaries; however, there is mixed evidence that youth voter turnout will be up this year. While more young people participated in the Democratic primaries this year than they did in 2000, this year there was no contested Republican primary. So, overall, in 2000, more people voted in both the Democratic and Republican primaries

than have voted in just the Democratic primaries this year.

Therefore, it's misleading to say that voter turnout is up, just because the Democratic numbers are up. This is particularly a problem in states where Independents can vote in either the democratic or republican primary or both.

### Q: You've mentioned organizations such as Rock the Vote that have programs to register young voters and engage them in the political process. Are these programs effective?

**LOPEZ:** I think that it is difficult to measure the success of these groups. However, they tend to register a lot of young people for the first time, and they also tend to register young people in places where young people are clustered, such as colleges.

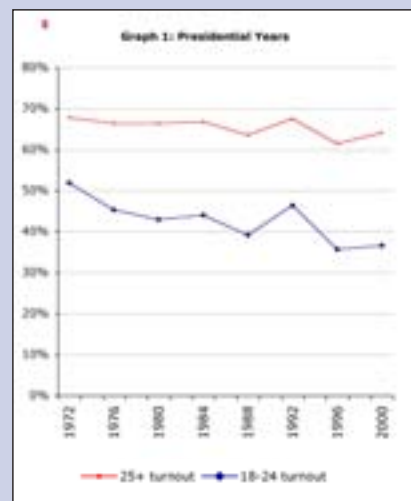
I don't think we have enough research to tell how effective they are, but my sense is that they can be.

### Q: For those young people who do vote, what influenced them to vote and what influences who they vote for?

**LOPEZ:** Most of the young people who vote tend to be college educated, and they tend to come from families where the parents discussed politics with them, and they tend to come from places which generally had stronger civic education programs. Also, young voters are more likely to be white or black, and less likely to be Hispanic. And in recent elections,

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Graph courtesy of the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement from *Youth Voter Turnout has Declined, by Any Measure*, by Peter Levine and Mark Hugo Lopez.



## Campaign★Highlight

### The Mobilization of Young Voters: The Role of NGO's and Other Groups

It is estimated that the youth vote in the United States includes 30 million 18-to-30-year-olds throughout the country. However, despite their large numbers, young voters accounted for less than 4 percent of the entire voting population in the 2000 elections.

Mindful of the untapped potential of young voters, a number of non-governmental organizations and political groups are working actively to encourage their civic participation.

Many of these organizations define themselves as non-partisan, that is, not belonging to or supporting any political party. Others, however, may promote a particular political agenda. Following is a sample of the more prominent organizations that seek to mobilize young voters.



<http://www.declareyourself.com/>

Declare Yourself is a national non-partisan, non-profit campaign to mobilize young voters to participate in the 2004 presidential election. Declare Yourself is sponsoring a live spoken word and music tour of college campuses; a nationwide voter education initiative for high school seniors; a comprehensive election information Web site; an extensive online awareness campaign; a massive voter registration drive; a televised "get out the vote" concert; and public service announcements.



<http://www.newvotersproject.org/>

The New Voters Project is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to increasing voter turnout among citizens age 18-24 on Election Day 2004. The Project's goal is to register more than 265,000 voters on college campuses and other youth venues. It is concentrating its efforts on six U.S. states — Colorado, Iowa, Oregon, Wisconsin, New Mexico, and Nevada — states that have high concentrations of young voters in small geographic areas.



<http://www.crnc.org/default1.asp>

The College Republican National Committee is the nationwide coordinating organization for the Republican youth movement. With over 120,000 members on 1,148 college campuses, the Committee works for the election of Republican candidates and the communication of a conservative message to college students.



<http://www.yda.org/>

The Young Democrats of America is the official youth arm of the Democratic Party and is open to anyone under the age of 36 who affiliates themselves with the Democratic Party. The 43,000 members of the association include high school students, college students, young workers, professionals and families.



[www.smackdownyourvote.com](http://www.smackdownyourvote.com)

Founded in July 2000, Smackdown Your Vote! is a non-partisan effort to involve young people in the political process and to promote youth voter registration. Smackdown Your Vote! is a collaboration between World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc. (formerly the World Wrestling Federation) and several non-profit, non-partisan organizations that seek to mobilize 18-to-30-year-old voters.

<http://www.campaignyoungvoters.org/>

Campaign for Young Voters is a non-partisan, non-profit effort to engage young voters by working with political candidates and campaign staff, political party officials, political consultants, and grassroots organizations on how to understand, communicate with and turn out younger voters on Election Day.



<http://www.youthvote.org/indexcf.cfm>

The Youth Vote Coalition is a national, non-partisan coalition 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. ■

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they're more likely to be female than male.

However, there's a sizeable chunk of young people who just are not engaged, and many are non-college educated. And today, those non-college youth don't have the paths to engagement they used to have such as labor union membership, which was a traditional path towards engagement among non-college youth.

In contrast, college students are concentrated in one place, usually on campus, and these organizations that we were just talking about go to the colleges. The non-college youth are dispersed with no central place to go.

In terms of influences on those young people who do vote, we know that they tend to vote a lot like their parents. College students will generally tend to be more liberal and non-college students will generally tend to be more conservative.

**Q: The Internet has played an important role in the election thus far. How important is the Internet in engaging young voters?**

**LOPEZ:** We've found in our own surveys here at CIRCLE that campaigns can try to reach out to young people with different technologies. There are many more technologies available today than there were in 2000. The Internet plays a large part in that. But we have found that young people oftentimes are turned off by a lot of these technologies, some of which include things like text messaging on your cell phone or receiving email updates.

We found young people were very turned off, for example, by receiving a text message from a candidate with an update on the campaign. They also do not like Spam mail from candidates. However, anything that they can opt into, like receiving weekly e-mail updates from a candidate, they tend to like.

CIRCLE has funded a research project, which looks at whether or not sending a non-partisan e-mail to encourage young people to register, and encouraging them to vote would actually impact the voter turnout and voter registration rates of young people in colleges. A lot of students just threw it away and didn't even read it. For those who did read it, it doesn't appear to have had any impact on their propensity to vote, or their propensity to register to vote. So, I think the Internet is a mixed story. I think it's another medium, it has a lot of potential, but candidates have to be careful about how they use it, because they could end up turning off potential voters.

**Q: Both Republicans and Democrats are reaching out to Latino voters with Spanish Language campaign ads and by other methods. Are the political parties reaching Latino youth?**

**MR. LOPEZ:** No, Latino youth are actually, among all youth, more likely to say things like "Candidates don't come to my community, candidates don't talk to people like me, candidates would rather talk to wealthier, older voters than me." They're more likely to say that than their young white or black counterparts. And generally speaking, a large minority of young people feel like candidates don't pay attention to them.

Young Latino voters are the ones who are most likely to feel that the political candidates don't pay attention to their concerns, or to their issues. So, it's quite interesting that, yes, the parties are reaching out to Latinos, but I think they're reaching out to the older Latino voter than the younger Latino voter.

**READ MORE ABOUT IT:**

Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE)

CIRCLE promotes research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25. It is based in the University of Maryland's School of Public Affairs.

<http://www.civicyouth.org>