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## Misspent Youth: An Analysis of the Youth Vote in America

Stacy Pederson

*Western Washington University*

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**Misspent Youth:  
An Analysis of the Youth Vote in America**

**Stacy Pederson**

**12 December 2006  
Department of Political Science  
Dr. Sara Weir, Advisor**

## HONORS THESIS

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## **I. Introduction**

In 1971 the voting franchise in America was extended to cover all citizens aged eighteen and older. Politicians often cite young people as being the future of the nation and an example of what the promise of America has to offer the next generation. Rep. Richard Gephardt once declared that, “The most important thing we have to do is invest in the mental capacity of young people.”<sup>1</sup> However, the stigma surrounding the notion that youth cannot be counted on to cast their votes on Election Day has created an uneasy disconnect between elected officials and the youngest sector of the American populace. The notion that young Americans fail to turnout the vote in elections has been a long standing facet of American politics.

Without an established voting record, a powerful interest group with a large membership to advocate for youth issues and the lack of ability to donate large sums of money to political campaigns, politicians are more apt to turn a blind eye to young voters and the issues that matter to younger Americans. Thus, many young people feel increasingly apathetic towards politics. Those that do show up to the polls often find their efforts discredited. Such was the case in 2004 when the American media falsely reported that voter turnout among 18-35 year olds had not increased since the previous general election.

Political apathy among young Americans is not inherent. With the right message and tools, politicians and political parties can reach out to younger voters and encourage them to take a vested interest in the most basic form of civic engagement. Over the last decade, great strides have been taken by various organizations in the effort to encourage

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<sup>1</sup> Karl, Jonathan. “Twenty-five Years of 18-year-old Voting.” 28 Jun 1996.  
<<http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1996/news/9606/28/18.year.old.voting/index.shtml>>

increased participation in American democracy among young people. Nonpartisan groups, political campaigns and state legislatures are all developing and exploring new and innovative avenues for fostering political participation.

This paper seeks to explore the history of the youth vote, the decline of political participation among young people since the extension of the franchise, recent organizations and campaigns that have proven to be successful in attracting younger voters, and finally, methods that could be utilized in the future by organizations, local governments, campaigns and political parties to engage the youngest sector of the American electorate in civic life.

## **II. Extending the Franchise**

The culmination of the campaign to lower the voting age in America occurred in 1971, but the idea to expand the franchise had been gaining momentum ever since the 1940s. Beginning after World War II, and each subsequent war thereafter, veterans and young people would argue that Americans who were old enough to fight for their country should be able to vote and have their say in political decisions that directly affected them. In 1952, support began to build in Washington when President Eisenhower formally endorsed the idea for a constitutional amendment to lower the voting age. "If a man is old enough to fight," Eisenhower said, "he is hold enough to vote."<sup>2</sup> Eisenhower's comments strengthened the correlation between voting rights and military service.

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<sup>2</sup> Keyssar, Alexander. The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States. Basic Books. New York, NY. 2000. Pg. 278.

There were public figures who disagreed with Eisenhower's assessment. Emanuel Celler, a Democratic Congressman from New York, argued that, "To my mind, the draft age and the voting age are as different as chalk is from cheese."<sup>3</sup> Celler went on to further explain his position by stating:

To say that he that is old enough to fight is old enough to vote is to draw and utterly fallacious parallel. No such parallel exists. The ability to choose, to separate promise from performance, to evaluate on the basis of fact, are the prerequisites to good voting. Eighteen to twenty-one are mainly formative years when the youth is racing toward maturity. His attitudes shift from place to place. These are years of the greatest uncertainties, a fertile ground for the demagogues. Youth attaches itself to promises, rather than to performance. These are rightfully the years of rebellion rather than reflection. We will be doing a grave injustice to democracy if we grant the vote to those under twenty-one.<sup>4</sup>

While many of Celler's colleagues in the House might have thought differently, lowering the voting age was not an issue of high priority on the national agenda. No action was taken by Congress to remedy the discrepancy.

However, the Vietnam War brought young people together in ways politicians never would have imagined. Suddenly, young Americans became a powerful political force, with or without the right to vote. Formal lobbying and youth organizations arose to protest the draft and to oppose the lack of political representation for young people. Organizations such as Let Us Vote (LUV) and the Youth Franchise Coalition worked with the NAACP and United Auto Workers as well as Republicans and liberal Democrats alike.<sup>5</sup> As external pressure from interest groups grew, Congress began to take steps towards extending the power of the vote to young Americans.

When the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was extended in June of 1970, Congress included a provision to lower the age by which citizens were deemed eligible to vote in

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<sup>3</sup> Keysaar, pg 279

<sup>4</sup> Keysaar, pg 279

<sup>5</sup> Keyssar, Pg. 279

all elections at every level of government. The right of Congress to mandate a voting age for both state and federal elections was challenged in the courts. In December of 1970, a divided Supreme Court declared in *Oregon v. Mitchell* that Congress was within its right to extend the franchise, but only in federal elections.

Justice William Douglas, who voted in favor of lowering the voting age, argued that, “It is a reasoned judgment that those who have such a large ‘stake’ in modern elections as 18-year-olds, whether in times of war or peace, should have political equality.”<sup>6</sup> The court was split until Justice Hugo Black tipped the balance by concluding that Congress was given the authority in Article 1 of the Constitution to set the voting age in national elections. The decision would have dynamic repercussions on the fifty states impacted by the court’s ruling.

Suddenly, states that were once opposed to the measure found themselves faced with a difficult dilemma. With a two-tiered age limit, states would be forced to register and track voters separately based on age. Maintaining two voter files and organizing different ballots for different age groups would have serious financial implications for local and state governments.<sup>7</sup> The 1972 general election was also quickly approaching and many states were concerned that such drastic changes in state election procedures could not be implemented in time. These compounding problems forced states that were once adamantly opposed to extending the franchise to reconsider their position.

The ratification of the 26<sup>th</sup> amendment was the quickest constitutional ratification in United States history. The amendment protects the right of citizens of the United States who are eighteen years of age or older to vote and states that such a right shall not be

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<sup>6</sup> Keyssar, Pg 279

<sup>7</sup> Keyssar, Pg 280



denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of age.<sup>8</sup> It only took two weeks for the required thirty-eight states to approve the measure back in 1971 – even though nine states had turned down measures to lower the voting age only two years prior.<sup>9</sup>

When President Richard Nixon certified the 26<sup>th</sup> amendment on 5 July 1971, he invited five hundred newly franchised young people to the White House for the signing ceremony. In his address, he told those in attendance as well as young people across the nation:

The reason I believe that your generation, the 11 million new voters, will do so much for America at home is that you will infuse into this nation some idealism, some courage, some stamina, some high moral purpose, that this country always needs.<sup>10</sup>

Congressman Joe Kennedy (D-MA) was just eighteen when the 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment passed. His father, Robert Kennedy, had worked diligently to lower the voting age ten years prior. “It was a very, very tearing, sort of gut-wrenching issue at the time,” Kennedy said in 1996. “The young people’s movement in America became something that some politicians felt very comfortable with and others felt very threatened by.”<sup>11</sup> This uneasy feeling regarding youth involvement has persisted for close to four decades and still continues to arise in present-day American politics.

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<sup>8</sup> “U.S. Constitution: 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment” <<http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/data/constitution/amendment26/>>

<sup>9</sup> Karl, 1996

<sup>10</sup> Karl, 1996

<sup>11</sup> Karl, 1996

### III. Early Betrayal & Early Apathy

Immediately after the enactment of the 26<sup>th</sup> amendment, large-scale voter registration drives were organized around the country. In several states, these drives were organized by young people themselves as they sought to prove that young Americans would uphold the civic responsibility they had been given. The question on the minds of political observers when 18-20 year olds were given the right to vote is how they would choose to exercise that right in the 1972 presidential election. The majority of those following the politics of the day believed that the millions of newly franchised voters would throw their considerable support behind Democratic challenger George McGovern, a strong opponent of the Vietnam War.

However, on Election Day, it became apparent that young voters had turned the tables on the political pundits for the first, but certainly not the last, time. Incumbent Republican President Richard Nixon sailed to an easy victory by winning 49 states in one of the largest electoral landslides in American history.<sup>12</sup> Youth participation rates have never been higher than they were during the year of Nixon's re-election: 58.1 percent of America's 18-to-20 year olds registered to vote and 48.3 percent of the total 18-to-20 voting-age population cast their first ballots in the 1972 presidential election.<sup>13</sup> Instead of breaking predominantly for McGovern as pundits predicted, only 52 percent of young voters supported the Democratic challenger, while 48 percent supported Nixon.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Karl, 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Cultice, Wendell. Youth's Battle for the Ballot: A History of Voting Age in America. Greenwood Press. Westport, CT. 1992. Pg 220.

<sup>14</sup> Goldberg, Jonah. "Don't Believe the Hype (2004 Remix)." National Review Online. 5 Nov 2004. <<http://www.nationalreview.com/goldberg/goldberg200411051028.asp>>

Even though President Nixon certified the right of young people to have the vote, he also later embroiled the White House in a scandal that tarnished the way many newly enfranchised voters viewed politics. When President Nixon formally resigned the presidency in the face of certain impeachment in August of 1974, many young voters felt disgusted and politically betrayed by the leader they had supported with their very first ballot.<sup>15</sup> With their initial faith in American democracy crushed by the federal scandals following the 1974 election, young people started to become disenchanted with civic engagement.

Thus, only a mere three years after the certification of the 26<sup>th</sup> amendment, young people were already expressing apathy towards politics and voting. Compounding the issue was the fact that young people were incorporated into the franchise during a time when interest in politics and political participation was dwindling across the board. Starting in the early 1970s, voting “was becoming a private political act carried out by only a small majority of the nation’s electorate.”<sup>16</sup> Young people were certainly no exception in this regard.

In the 1974 congressional elections, only 20.8 percent of the 18-to-20 year old population cast a ballot. While participation is usually lower in midterm elections than in presidential election years, the 1976 presidential contest showed a ten percent drop in voter turnout among young people in four years. In 1976, only 38.0 percent of the 18-to-20 year old population turned out to vote for the leader of the free world.

The 1978 congressional elections represented the last federal election of a decade that saw minors incorporated into the voting franchise. However, young Americans

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<sup>15</sup> Cultice, Pg 221.

<sup>16</sup> Cultice, Pg 223.

continued to shun the polls and the numbers reflect their considerable apathy. Less than a quarter (20.1 percent) of those between the ages of 18-to-20 cast a ballot.

The low turnout numbers recorded in the late 1970s would fall still further in the 1980s. Following the 1980 presidential race between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, reports showed that youth voter turnout had declined by three percentage points with roughly only 35 percent of 18-to-20 year olds turning out on Election Day. Congressional midterm elections continued to be races that generated little participation at the ballot box by young Americans. For the first time since the extension of the franchise, youth voter turnout dropped below 20 percent. Only 19.8 of 18-to-20 year olds would vote in the 1982 congressional elections.

After the 1980 general election, the United States Student Association, State Student Associations, and state Public Interest Research Groups worked together to conduct massive organizing conferences, statewide trainings, and direct contact with young voters through field organizing. Voter turnout among 18-to-20 year olds in the 1984 general election rose only 1 percent from the previous presidential election in 1980. However, the partnerships established by groups looking to encouraging young people to get involved for the sake of what was in their best interest began to take shape and would have an impact in later elections.

Another record low for youth turnout was established in the 1986 congressional elections as only 18.6 of young people cast a ballot. When turnout figures for 18-to-20 year olds were compared to the 1986 nationwide turnout figure, the results were all the

more striking. The nationwide figure was three times as high as turnout among the 18 and 19-year-old age groups and twice as high as the 20-year-old age group.<sup>17</sup>

In the last presidential election of the decade, only 33.4 percent of 18-to-20 year olds showed up to the polls. The figures from the 1988 presidential election reflected the lowest turnout among young people in a general election year since the franchise was expanded to include them.

To be sure, as author Wendell Cultice notes, the withdrawal of young people from the political process is not unique. Indeed, during this time political participation was on the decline across the entire age spectrum of the American electorate. However, the turnout figures in the decade immediately following the extension of the franchise shows that what makes young Americans stand out is the staggering degree of apathy towards the most fundamental tenant of civic engagement.

There have been numerous reasons given as possible explanations for apathy among young people in the 1980s. One is the decline of college students majoring in the humanities. In the 1960s, young people who participated in protest marches and fought for the power of the vote were “majoring in the liberal arts and social sciences.”<sup>18</sup> During the period from 1970 to 1994, the number of information services and computer science bachelor degree recipients rose tenfold.<sup>19</sup> Another explanation is the rise of large corporate businesses and the perception that business was on the cutting edge and was the source of idealism and energy – and the government was not.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Cultice, pg 223.

<sup>18</sup> Cultice, pg 223

<sup>19</sup> Cultice, pg 223

<sup>20</sup> Mattson, Kevin. “Engaging Youth.” <<http://www.tcf.org/Publications/MediaPolitics/mattson.pdf>>

#### **IV. Politics as Pop Culture: Youth Politics in the 1990's**

As the twentieth century drew to a close, a number of groups were formed in an attempt to mobilize and motivate young voters. In the years leading up to the ratification of the 23<sup>rd</sup> amendment, various groups were formed to pressure Congress to take action. After the amendment was passed, the groups disbanded and apathy began to rise among young people. While the 1980s saw an attempt to formally organize younger voters, it wasn't until the 1990's that a concentrated effort was made to establish organizations to rally young voters again.

The most famous of these modern organizations is Rock the Vote, a non-partisan political advocacy group geared especially towards young Americans. Founded in Los Angeles in 1990 by Virgin Records executive Jeff Ayeroff, the group was originally designed to “respond to a wave of attacks on freedom of speech and artistic expression.”<sup>21</sup> Rock the Vote was known for their organizing efforts known as ‘street teams’ whereby several youth would hit the pavement and register fellow young people on street corners and outside various places such as basketball games, concerts and universities. This particular field technique was first used by unsigned bands to drum up local support for their music, but Rock the Vote soon discovered that it was an effective method for political mobilization.

Arguably the most publicized moment in Rock the Vote history was a 1994 forum held in conjunction with Music Video Television (MTV). During this nationally televised event, United States President Bill Clinton fielded questions from young people in the audience. Towards the end of the segment, a 17-year-old named Laetitia Thompson asked

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<sup>21</sup> “A History of Rock the Vote” <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock\\_the\\_vote](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock_the_vote)>

President Clinton a question that threw the seasoned politician for a loop: “Boxers or briefs?” Visibly surprised, the president paused for a second before he smiled and replied, “Usually briefs.”<sup>22</sup> The exchange was replayed in the national media for weeks following the televised forum.

President Clinton had a way of connecting with Americans of every age, race and walk of life. As the third youngest president in American history, he was quite youthful himself. During the 1992 presidential campaign, Clinton made a surprise appearance on the *Arsenio Hall Show*. Donning dark sunglasses, Clinton played “Heartbreak Hotel” on his saxophone. At the time, Clinton was behind in the polls and some analysts point to that moment as the point where he was able to turn the race around by capturing the imagination and admiration of the American people, especially younger Americans.

In the early 1990s, youth advocates joined forces to conduct a nationwide lobbying effort in order to ensure the passage of the National Voter Registration Act. Known as the ‘Motor Voter’ bill, the measure compelled state and local governments to make the voter registration process easier by providing uniform registration services through drivers' license registration centers, disability centers, schools, libraries, and mail-in registration. Groups that focused on championing specific causes important to the youth demographic, such as education and the environment started organizing voter registration and educational events that focused on their specific issue. The coordinated effort produced marked results in the 1992 general election with the largest increase in youth turnout since the ratification of the 26<sup>th</sup> amendment.<sup>23</sup> A united effort to reach out

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<sup>22</sup> “A History of Rock the Vote” < [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock\\_the\\_vote](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock_the_vote)>

<sup>23</sup> “Out History: Youth Vote Coalition.” Youth Vote Coalition.  
<<http://www.youthvote.org/vpr/history.cfm>>

to young people was proving to be as successful in the 1990s as the process had been only two decades earlier.

The first official Youth Vote Coalition was founded in 1994 as a way for seventeen advocacy groups to collectively work together to achieve desired results. These groups began to work together to share resources, strategies, and develop effective messaging techniques. Nearly thirty organizations would join the 1996 Youth Vote Coalition. Youth Vote '96 encouraged candidates to reach out to younger voters by having a presence at both party's conventions and sponsoring a National Student Voter Registration Day that involved over 280 college campuses.<sup>24</sup> The coalition also staged a press conference on Capitol Hill to commemorate the anniversary of the ratification of the 26<sup>th</sup> amendment and several coalition members produced short public service announcements highlighting reasons why young people should take an active interest in voting.

Collectively, the coalition registered over 1.1 million young Americans.<sup>25</sup> However, the coalition began to notice a disturbing trend that seemed to overshadow any successful strides undertaken by the group members. Candidates were still focusing their attention and resources on older voters, despite the emerging evidence that young voters were a virtually untapped resource for political campaigns. Voter turnout among 18-20 year olds fell by almost 7% in the 1996 presidential election.<sup>26</sup>

An analysis of the 1996 election conducted by The Democracy Project concluded that among young people, there is a troubling and alienated center—about 17% of

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<sup>24</sup> Youth Vote Coalition. <<http://www.youthvote.org/vpr/history.cfm>>

<sup>25</sup> Youth Vote Coalition. <<http://www.youthvote.org/vpr/history.cfm>>

<sup>26</sup> Lopez, Mark Hugo et al. "The Youth Vote 2004 With a Historical Look At Youth Voting Patterns 1972-2004". CIRCLE. <<http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP35CIRCLE.pdf>>



registered young adults said they stayed home on Election Day. In comparison to those who voted or did not register to vote at all, these young people “are angrier, more passionate about the future of the country, and more independent politically”.<sup>27</sup> They are also more dissatisfied with the choices offered by the political system. One in five of this group (18%) would have voted for Ross Perot.<sup>28</sup> Opinionated and knowledgeable, American’s youth had something to say – but no one of influence was listening.

The Democracy Project study provided some interesting insights into the opinions of young Americans regarding politics. Education is the most important issue for young people when deciding their presidential vote with 71 percent rating the issue a 9 or higher on a 1-10 scale.<sup>29</sup> In July of 1996, 34 percent of young people polled by the foundation said they did not want to vote, nor did they care enough to do so.<sup>30</sup> One young man commented that, “I think that maybe part of the reason that no one seems to be listening to young people is that our leaders haven’t been young in a long time.”<sup>31</sup> More than two-thirds of young Americans (61 percent) feel that Congress would pay more attention to their issues if the average age of members was thirty instead of fifty-two.<sup>32</sup> The study also found that the majority of young voters (51 percent) were less inclined to vote because of negative campaign advertising. The conclusion of the study was that:

The path to engagement is not simply electoral reforms that make it easier to register and vote. Rather, it is fostering a more vibrant dialogue between young people and political leadership, a dialogue that make a closer connection between electoral politics and their lives and local neighborhoods.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Heinz Family Foundation < [http://www.hfp.heinz.org/issues/democracy\\_02.html#election](http://www.hfp.heinz.org/issues/democracy_02.html#election) >

<sup>28</sup> Heinz Foundation, 2002.

<sup>29</sup> Heinz Foundation, 1996

<sup>30</sup> Heinz Foundation, 1996

<sup>31</sup> Heinz Foundation, 1996

<sup>32</sup> Heinz Foundation, 1996

<sup>33</sup> Heinz Foundation, 1996

Localized political dialogue is important for democracy and should be further encouraged for every age group, but it is especially relevant to the youngest American voters who clearly express hesitancy about voting when they feel they do not have enough information to make an informed decision.<sup>34</sup>

At the turn of the new century, the coalition came together again as Youth Vote 2000 with two aims: organize young activists in the field and demand accountability from politicians.<sup>35</sup> Youth Vote 2000 hired over twenty full-time grassroots organizers around the country to work with local communities and local organizations already engaged in voter mobilization. Youth Vote also petitioned for a Youth Presidential Debate, but was ultimately unsuccessful in this regard.

Youth voter turnout in 2000 was less than 2% higher than turnout in the 1996 presidential election. Only 42 percent of Americans aged 18-24 voted compared to 70 percent of those 25 and older.<sup>36</sup> Members of Youth Vote 2000 began to “realize that addressing the complex issue of young people’s disconnect from politics is a daunting task; beyond the capacity of any one organization.”<sup>37</sup> Organizations had begun to mobilize large numbers of young voters, but politicians had yet to give these motivated young Americans a reason for showing up on their behalf on Election Day.

As America entered the new millennium, young people were simply waiting for a candidate to give them a reason to become active within the political system by speaking to their issues and proposing ways for them to use their talents and passions to enrich American democracy.

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<sup>34</sup> Heinz Foundation, 1996

<sup>35</sup> Youth Vote Coalition: Our History. <<http://youthvote.org>>.

<sup>36</sup> Botelho, Greg. “Youth vote an Election Day wildcard.” 21 Oct 2004.  
< <http://www.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/10/21/youth.vote/>>

<sup>37</sup> Botelho, 2004

## **V. Election 2004: The Internet Revolution**

At the turn of the twentieth century, the world was becoming increasingly interconnected via the World Wide Web. Consumers in Oregon could order clothes from Florida with a click of the mouse and have their purchased items delivered to their doorsteps. A professor could teach a lecture in a classroom in California and answer questions electronically from students in Australia and Prague who were watching the lesson online. Teenagers used instant messaging services to write virtual notes to each other through cyberspace. E-mail allowed friends, family and those with similar interests to share information and keep in touch, no matter how many miles were between their respected keyboards.

The internet was also fast becoming a popular way for young people to find journal articles and data for research papers, which local theatres were playing the latest theatrical release, what fashions were in style at the moment and how their favorite sports teams were doing on the road. Often, young Americans were more internet savvy than their parents, teaching the rest of their family how to check their e-mail and set up personal webpages.

However, while mainstream media outlets, consumers, businesses, educators, and even young people had discovered the benefits of operating online, the political arena appeared to lag behind in harnessing the potential of the information superhighway. Many legislators would send e-mail updates to constituents who signed up on their websites, but few had thought to use the internet as a way of raising money or mobilizing supporters. In short, no candidate had ever run an internet-based campaign.

The 2004 election forever altered the political landscape. The power of grassroots organizing fused together with the potential of the internet for the first time during the insurgency campaign of Democratic presidential contender Governor Howard Dean. While Dean ultimately did not secure his party's nomination to run against President George W. Bush in the 2004 general election, the Dean Campaign fundamentally redefined the parameters for running a successful campaign by making the internet an integral part of their operation. With so many young people becoming increasingly internet savvy, the Dean Campaign was also successful in attracting scores of young volunteers and staffers – many of whom had never before been involved politically.

Howard Dean was a former five-term governor of Vermont and a practicing physician who was known for balancing budgets and providing health care to virtually every child in Vermont under the age of eighteen. He also had a propensity for speaking his mind. At the Democratic National Committee's winter meeting in February of 2003, Dean, still a relatively unknown presidential candidate, gave a passionate critique of Democratic Party leaders who wouldn't speak out against President Bush's unilateral war in Iraq, tax cuts, and unfunded education mandates. "If you want young people to vote in this country and if you want the 50 percent of adults over 30 to vote in this country that currently don't vote, then we had better stand for something because that's why they're not voting."<sup>38</sup> Dean's now famous 'I Want to Know' speech received a standing ovation from party leaders.

One month later the individual who gave Dean the idea for the speech became the manager of the emerging campaign. The first action Joe Trippi took as campaign

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<sup>38</sup> Dean, Howard. Address at the 2003 Democratic National Committee Winter Meeting. Washington, DC. 21 Feb 2003. Transcript. < <http://www.gwu.edu/~action/2004/dnc0203/dean022103spt.html>>

manager was order that the campaign's website have a link to Meetup.com – an online community where people of similar interests are matched and given a public place to meet in their hometowns. At first there were only 432 Dean supporters on Meetup.com, but soon the number had grown to 2,700 and would eventually reach 190,000 during the peak of the campaign.<sup>39</sup>

Trippi knew that the only way the campaign would have a chance at the nomination would be to decentralize its operation by using the internet to essentially empower individual campaign managers in every community across America. As soon as the campaign went online, young people started showing up at the doorstep of the Dean campaign headquarters in Burlington, Vermont. One 19-year-old heard Dean on radio, researched him on the internet and then drove from Alabama to Vermont to help out.<sup>40</sup>

Trippi recalled what brought young people drifting into the campaign's headquarters:

They were undoubtedly drawn to Howard Dean and his call for a new kind of politics. But they were also drawn to the Dean campaign because someone was finally taking the time to reach out them where they lived. Studies had just begun to show that young people were spending as much as much if not more time online than in front of the TV... Unlike generations of dulled and deadened TV watchers, these young people wanted to be involved politically. They were out there asking questions, organizing and just waiting for someone who could speak their language back to them, the language of the Net.<sup>41</sup>

Of course, not all young Dean supporters made the pilgrimage to Vermont. Students for Dean groups began springing up on college campuses around the country and by June there were 180 such groups nationwide. In the fall of 2003, Michael Whitney, a college student from Washington, D.C. founded Generation Dean – an organization that became

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<sup>39</sup> Trippi, Joe. The Revolution Will Not Be Televised. HarperCollins. New York, NY. 2004. pg. 89.

<sup>40</sup> Trippi, pg 87

<sup>41</sup> Trippi, pg. 89.

the official youth and student division of the campaign with an independent website and blog geared specifically towards young voters.

At the peak of the campaign in spring of 2003, Generation Dean had 1,133 chapters around the nation and 24,479 young members.<sup>42</sup> During this same time period, the presumptive nominee, Sen. John Kerry, had only 222 campus Students for Kerry chapters listed on the Kerry campaign's website.<sup>43</sup> Generation Dean recruited individuals in all fifty states who became responsible for organizing young people in their respected state. State Coordinators stayed in touch with each other via conference calls and an e-mail listserv where they received e-mails from the campaign headquarters in Vermont, brainstormed ideas for voter mobilization and discussed what they were doing locally in their individual states amongst each other. While Generation Dean utilized mass e-mail and a blog, the focus remained on face-to-face organizing and supporter identification on the local level nationwide.

During an interview, founder Michael Whitney described how the campaign gave Generation Dean full authority over all its actions, independent from supervision.<sup>44</sup> Not only was the Dean campaign speaking to student issues, but his campaign was empowering dozens of student leaders by placing unprecedented trust in their ability to effectively organize fellow young people. Dean also spoke directly to young people about issues that mattered to them: unemployment, federal financial aid for higher education and health care. At a rally at Arizona State University, Dean told 3,500 young people in attendance, "A lot of politicians like to stand up in front of young people and talk about

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<sup>42</sup> Kamenetz, Anya. "Deanie Babies Grow Up." *The Nation*. 16 Mar 2004.

< <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20040329/kamenetz>>.

<sup>43</sup> Kamenetz, 2004

<sup>44</sup> Kamenetz, 2004

how young people are the ‘foot soldiers’ of their campaigns. You’re not the foot soldiers of my campaign. You’re driving my campaign.”<sup>45</sup>

Not only were young people driving the campaign on the ground with shoe leather as local organizers, but they were also contributing financially to the campaign. An astounding one-fourth of the Dean campaign’s 300,000 individual donors were under the age of thirty.<sup>46</sup> When Dean finished a weak third in the Iowa Caucuses after conventional wisdom had him leading handedly, pundits turned to young people as the possible reason for the lackluster result. However, the 2004 caucus saw a fourfold increase in youth participation since 2000. Young people represented 17 percent of caucus participants in 2004, versus only 9 percent in 2000.<sup>47</sup> Only 21 percent of all caucus goers supported Dean, but 25 percent of young people gave Dean their support.<sup>48</sup> Still, Iowa was the beginning of the end for the Dean campaign. Although Dean didn’t secure the nomination, the legacy of the Dean campaign lived on in the young people the campaign inspired and empowered.

In November of 2003, the Center for Democracy and Leadership published a study showing that 62 percent of young Americans thought they could make “little or no difference” in the direction of the country.<sup>49</sup> The Dean campaign gave young people a new and innovative way to get actively involved in politics. In the spring of 2003, Joe Trippi began telling people that the lasting accomplishment of the Dean campaign would not be felt until twenty years from now: “I’m convinced that there will be twenty-five or

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<sup>45</sup> Wang, Jessica. “Student group rallies around Howard Dean”. The Stanford Daily. 16 Oct 2003  
<[http://www.stanforddaily.com/tempo?page=content&id=11936&repository=0001\\_article](http://www.stanforddaily.com/tempo?page=content&id=11936&repository=0001_article)>

<sup>46</sup> Kamenetz, 2004.

<sup>47</sup> Fleischer, Michael. “Young Voter Turnout Quadrupled in Iowa Caucuses.” CIRCLE. 20 Jan 2004.  
<[http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/Iowa\\_release.pdf](http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/Iowa_release.pdf)>

<sup>48</sup> Fleischer, 2004.

<sup>49</sup> Trippi, pg 105.

thirty members of Congress who cut their political teeth on the Dean campaign, who will look back to the spring and summer of 2003 as the moment they realized they had the power to make a difference.”<sup>50</sup>

Other organizations also sought to bring young people into the process during this presidential election year. The Youth Vote Coalition was back in action, along with groups like Rock the Vote, New Voter Project and Declare Yourself, which was meant to appeal to the independent streaks seemingly inherent in young adults.

Some of the new groups established in 2004 were quite eclectic and eccentric. A student from Harvard founded an online dating network called DemDates where young single liberals could meet other politically likeminded singles. Rapper Sean ‘P. Diddy’ Combs promoted his own get-out-the-vote campaign with the slogan ‘Vote or Die’. Another political outreach organization attempted to appeal to college students who had never voted before with a humorous ‘Voter Virgin’ campaign. No matter how outrageous the slogan, all youth-centered organizations spent months hitting bars, coffee shops, and libraries with voter registration forms and information on the issues and candidates.

One organization that had great success in 2004 was the Oregon Bus Project. Founded by lawyer Jefferson Smith in 2002, the aim of the Bus Project was to show that a small group of young and dedicated grassroots volunteers could make a significant difference. In 2003, the group drove a bus across the entire state of Oregon while knocking on over 70,000 doors, leading Governor Barbara Ryan to declare that the Bus Project, “was the most exciting thing in Oregon politics for the last twenty years.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Trippi, pg 106

<sup>51</sup> “The Bus Project: History”. < <http://www.busproject.org/about/history>>



In 2004, the Bus Project organized the largest single canvass in Oregon history. Known as ‘Trick-or-Vote’, 800 costumed volunteers knocked on thousands of doors on Halloween night and garnered national press attention.<sup>52</sup> The Bus Project also sponsored two ‘Candidates Gone Wild’ debates – unconventional yet entertaining candidate forums that attracted 2,000 audience members. The results were undeniable: all five of the Oregon state senate candidates who received full support from the Bus Project in 2004 won their respective races.<sup>53</sup>

College campuses were also working to increase voter awareness. A survey conducted by Harvard’s Institute of Politics found that more than 80 percent of schools had hosted political speakers in the months leading up to the fall of 2004 and more than 70 percent had held voter registration drives on campus.<sup>54</sup> The Vanishing Voter Project reported that half of those aged 18-24 had reported having an election-related conversation in the past day, twice the rate at the same point in the campaign season in 2000.<sup>55</sup>

In a September 2004 survey sponsored by MTV and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), 81 percent of young registered voters said they were paying attention to the election and 80 percent responded that they were planning on voting come November.<sup>56</sup> Additional polls suggested a high level of interest among young people with regards to the issues of the state of the economy, federal funding for financial aid, the war in Iraq and terrorism.<sup>57</sup> However, the

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<sup>52</sup> “Trick or Vote” < <http://www.trickorvote.com/>>

<sup>53</sup> ‘The Bus Project: History’ < <http://www.busproject.org/about/history>>

<sup>54</sup> Botelho, Greg. “Youth vote an Election Day wildcard.” 21 Oct 2004.  
< <http://www.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/10/21/youth.vote/>>.

<sup>55</sup> Botelho, 2004

<sup>56</sup> Botelho, 2004

<sup>57</sup> Botelho, 2004

impact of young voters in any given election is seen as being difficult to predict because of uncertain political affiliation and the volatile nature of voting patterns among young Americans. Still, youth organizations were hoping for an increase in voter turnout among young people of around 5 percent in 2004.

As exit polls began rolling in on November 2, 2004, the media began reporting that young voters had once again neglected to cast their ballots. By the end of the evening, the Associated Press had written off young voters and final exit polls showed that 18-29 year olds made up only 17 percent of the vote share – the same as the 2000 election.<sup>58</sup> Journalist Hunter S. Thompson told the Aspen Daily News, “We rocked the vote all right. Those little bastards betrayed us again.”<sup>59</sup> ‘Vote, Die or Whatever’ was the sarcastic headline used by The Drudge Report. The common perception in the immediate aftermath of the 2004 election was that young voters had snubbed the polls as expected.

Youth advocacy groups were left scratching their heads until it became apparent that the media had their figures wrong. Exit polls didn’t tell the entire story of what happened with the youth vote on Election Day. A study conducted by CIRCLE found that at least 20.9 million 18-29 year olds voted in 2004, compared to only 16 million in 2000. Exit polls failed to register this large increase in young voters because exit polls show the percentage of young voters out of all voters. Since every age bracket voted in higher numbers in 2004, the exit polls showed nearly equal vote shares in 2000 and 2004 for young voters. An analysis of the rate of youth turnout shows an increase of 5.8 percent in 2004. In other words, youth voter advocates met their goal for Election 2004.

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<sup>58</sup> Childress, Sarah. “Not Slackers After All?” Newsweek. 12 Nov 2004.  
< [http://www.youthvote.org/voter/recent\\_articles.cfm](http://www.youthvote.org/voter/recent_articles.cfm) >

<sup>59</sup> Childless, 2004

The common perception going into Election Day was that if young people did show up to the polls they would vote overwhelmingly for Kerry. “Days out, there was the assumption that Kerry would win and that the youth vote would be part of that victory,” said Ivan Frishberg, Communications Director for the New Voter Project.<sup>60</sup> When Kerry lost the election, the media immediately pointed to young people as possible culprits. Young voters did break for Kerry at 54 percent as opposed to only 45 percent for Bush, but it wasn’t the landslide of support many had anticipated due to the fact that most of the effort to entice young voters had come from progressive organizations.<sup>61</sup> However, young voters were the only age bracket to give their support to Kerry.

Many advocates worry that the initial perception that young voters failed to turnout will hurt efforts in future elections. As the new turnout figures began to be reported by the press, youth advocacy groups stressed that they would zealously continue to register and mobilize young Americans. The hope is always that when someone from the youngest generation casts their first ballot, they will remain actively engaged in politics for a number of national and local elections to come. What might detract them from doing so is when the stereotype that young people do not show up to vote is reinforced – correctly or incorrectly – in the media.

## **VI. Looking Ahead: The Future of the Youth Vote**

The question still remains as to how youth advocacy groups, candidates, political parties and local organizations can not only register young people to vote, but convince them to also turn out to cast a ballot on a regular basis. Voting is not the only form of

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<sup>60</sup> Yinger, Nicole. “Are Young Voters Has-Beens?” CBS News. 20 Nov 2004.  
<<http://www.youthvote.org/news/newsdetail.cfm?newsid=539>>

<sup>61</sup> Yinger, 2004.

traditional civic engagement with low rates of youth involvement. Over eighty percent of those between the ages of 15 and 25 have never contacted an elected official, never written to a newspaper or magazine, nor have they participated in protest, march or demonstration.<sup>62</sup> Only 6.6 percent of young Americans have ever gone door-to-door on behalf of a candidate or social organization.<sup>63</sup> However, voting still remains the most fundamental tenet of civic participation and in order to engage young Americans, one must first understand what issues are important to young people and how they express their political beliefs.

Americans, especially younger Americans, are also more inclined to support a cause through their actions as opposed to actively complaining about an issue. A majority of young people (52 percent) have not bought something because of the conditions under which it had been made and 44 percent of young people have bought something because they liked the values of the company that produced the item.<sup>64</sup> Over 40 percent of young Americans have done some form of physical activity on behalf of a charitable cause such as Relay for Life or Race for a Cure. When it comes to raising money for a charitable cause, over half of all young Americans have been involved in fundraising efforts.<sup>65</sup>

One of the obstacles to voting for all age sectors is the process of simply registering to vote. Studies show that voter registration reform can have a significant impact on the turnout of young Americans and the way political parties target young voters. Two types of reforms have proven to be effective in terms of increased participation among young voters: all-mail-ballot elections and Election Day registration.

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<sup>62</sup> CIRCLE Fact Sheet. "How Youth Express Political Views." 2003.

< [http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS\\_How\\_Young\\_Express\\_Views.pdf](http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_How_Young_Express_Views.pdf)>

<sup>63</sup> CIRCLE. 2003.

<sup>64</sup> CIRCLE, 2003.

<sup>65</sup> CIRCLE, 2003.

At the moment, Oregon is the only state in the union with all-mail-ballot elections at the federal level whereby all registered citizens automatically receive a ballot in the mail which can be completed and mailed back in or dropped off to the auditor by Election Day. As a result, turnout among young Oregonians has increased by an estimated 40 percent in presidential elections.<sup>66</sup>

Currently only seven states allow citizens to register to vote on Election Day. The United States Census Bureau estimates that one-third to as many as one-half of young Americans are not registered to vote.<sup>67</sup> Allowing young people to register on the actual day of the election has proven to have a substantial impact on turnout. Notably, the analysis shows that Election Day registration boosts youth voting activity in presidential elections by an estimated 14 percentage points, and by an estimated 4 percentage points in midterm congressional elections.<sup>68</sup>

Alternative voting methods also show an increase in the likelihood that a young person will be contacted by a political candidate. Young Americans are 11 percentage points more likely to be contacted by a political party in states with Election Day registration in presidential elections.<sup>69</sup> On the whole, alternative voting methods and statewide voter registration reforms are proving to be promising approaches towards increasing youth turnout.

When it comes to mobilizing young voters, no technique is more effective than one young person telling another young person to vote. A study after the 2004 election revealed that 62 percent of college students had encouraged or helped someone else to

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<sup>66</sup> Fitzgerald, Mary. "Easier Voting Methods Boost Youth Turnout." CIRCLE. 2003.  
<<http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP01Fitzgerald.pdf>>

<sup>67</sup> Fitzgerald, 2003.

<sup>68</sup> Fitzgerald, 2003

<sup>69</sup> Fitzgerald, 2003.

vote. When this happens, youth voter turnout improves by up to 5 percent.<sup>70</sup> When political parties and nonpartisan organizations have young people knock on the doors of other young people, turnout rates have been shown to increase by 8 to 12 percent.<sup>71</sup>

While young Americans may be lagging behind the rest of the nation in terms of political participation they are especially active in volunteering in their communities. Young people have shunned conventional politics in favor of community service. One solution to increase youth involvement in politics may be to develop more models that allow students the opportunity to engage in politics on behalf of issues for which they have a personal interest. Young people are feeding the homeless, but not entering the political arena to find solutions to societal problems such as homelessness.<sup>72</sup> Creating a way for young people to incorporate community service with civic engagement through both partisan and non-partisan politics would allow young Americans to see the effect that politics can have on one's daily life.

There is a common theme emerging among young people who are both engaged in community service and disconnected from politics: they had not received any form of civic education in politics.<sup>73</sup> Information on service organizations and opportunities to get involved in community service projects are abundant and easily accessible. However, many young Americans do not know who their local representatives are, how to get involved in a campaign or how to simply register to vote.

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<sup>70</sup> "Youth Voter GOTV." Campaign for Young Voters. 2003.

<<http://campaignyoungvoters.org/toolkit/turnout/gotv/index.html>>

<sup>71</sup> Campaign for Young Voters, 2003.

<sup>72</sup> Beem, Christopher. "From the Horse's Mouth: A Dialogue Between Politicians and Young People."

CIRCLE. 2004. <<http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP27Beem.pdf>>

<sup>73</sup> Beem, 2004.

Many young people fail to receive an adequate civic education as part of their high school curriculum. Most students in the United States go through a one-semester course in government, usually taken during their senior year of high school, and successful completion of this course is typically not a prerequisite for graduation. Oftentimes, civic education courses fail to adequately prepare young Americans for their future role as young voters. The National Youth Leadership Initiative (YLI), an innovative program created by the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia, combines several teaching elements including mock elections, legislative simulations, and exposure to elected officials. Students who participated in the YLI program had higher levels of political knowledge than those who did not participate.<sup>74</sup>

Measures are being undertaken by various states to improve citizenship education. The North Carolina Civic Education Consortium recently released a “civic index”—the first ever statewide assessment of civic education and engagement. The Illinois legislature established a program that will allow students to vote in a simulated election taking place at an actual polling place during the general election. Lastly, Delaware lawmakers authorized \$100,000 to fund civics education for teachers in order to ensure students were taught effectively about their rights and responsibilities as citizens.<sup>75</sup> Young people cannot be expected to make informed choices on Election Day if they do not have a basic knowledge of the electoral process.

While young people tend to self-identify as Democrats (39 percent) rather than Republicans (32 percent), nearly a quarter (22 percent) of 18-24 self-identified as

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<sup>74</sup> Stroupe, Kenneth. “Politics: The Missing Link of Responsible Civic Education.” CIRCLE. < <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP18Stroupe.pdf> >

<sup>75</sup> Pickeral, Terry. “Research to Assess Citizenship Education at the National, District and School Level.” CIRCLE. < [http://www.civicyouth.org/grants/past/hs\\_civic.htm#4](http://www.civicyouth.org/grants/past/hs_civic.htm#4) >

Independents in 2004.<sup>76</sup> Young people are growing increasingly dissatisfied with the two main political parties in America. In general, politicians are viewed by young Americans in a negative light and are seen to be remote, untrustworthy, self-interested and unrepresentative of young people.<sup>77</sup> A majority of young people (56 percent) view politicians as being beholden to a variety of special interests including the rich and wealthy, big business and campaign contributors.<sup>78</sup> Negative campaigning also turns young people off to political parties and electoral politics in general. Young people also tend to receive their news through entertainment-news programs, which reinforces the sense of cynicism about politics as scandals tend to make the news more often than budget proposals and important legislation.

Political parties, especially at the state and national level, still appear to be alive and well in America. Historically, local party organizations were instrumental in turning out community members in elections. In 2003, CIRCLE interviewed over 800 local party leaders and concluded that local parties have the potential to play an instrumental role in renewing political participation among all citizens, especially young voters. The majority of local party leaders surveyed agreed that youth disengagement in politics was a critical issue and that their organizations have the potential to turn the situation around.<sup>79</sup> However, most local parties either have no program for youth mobilization or are quite modest at best. Local political organizations will have to develop innovative social

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<sup>76</sup> "The 2004 Youth Vote." CIRCLE. 2004.

<[http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/2004\\_votereport\\_final.pdf](http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/2004_votereport_final.pdf)>

<sup>77</sup> "Political interest and engagement among young people." Joseph Rowntree Foundation. 2005.

<<http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/520.asp>>

<sup>78</sup> Heinz Foundation, 1996.

<sup>79</sup> Shea, Daniel. "Throwing a Better Party: Local Mobilizing." CIRCLE. 2003.

<<http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP13shea.pdf>>



activities and more sophisticated internet based communications in order to foster participation locally among young people.

When local party leaders were asked to identify a demographic group of voters that are currently important to the long-term success of their local party, only 8 percent of leaders mentioned young voters while senior citizens were mentioned nearly three times as often.<sup>80</sup> However, with 63 percent of leaders also suggesting that helping candidates win elected office is more important than building loyal supporters, perhaps it is not surprising that senior citizens still remain the primary demographic focus for both of the main political parties since they are perceived as being faithful voters.

The national parties have attempted to reach out to younger Americans by holding events at nightclubs and expanding their college campus organizations by providing greater resources and helping to bring guest speakers to campuses around the nation.<sup>81</sup> Stephanie Sanchez, a youth organizer with the Democratic National Committee told CIRCLE, “We have to be more social, more entertaining, and more hip.”<sup>82</sup> Her counterpart at the Republican National Committee, Drew Ryan, agreed: “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 will help.”<sup>83</sup> National party organizations appear to be making strides in the right direction. However, it will take a concerted effort among both partisan and nonpartisan organizations at both the national and local level to bring a greater number of young Americans into the electoral process.

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<sup>80</sup> Shea, 2004

<sup>81</sup> Shea, 2004

<sup>82</sup> Shea, 2004

<sup>83</sup> Shea, 2004.

## VII. Conclusion

Young people make up a sizable portion of the American populace. There are 40.7 million 18-29 year-old citizens in the United States, over twice the number of 66-77 year-olds (20 million).<sup>84</sup> Yet, young Americans continue to be ignored by politicians and political parties. There is a perpetual cycle of neglect in American politics whereby young citizens do not vote because they feel that politicians do not address their issues and politicians do not place youth issues on the national and local agendas because young people do not vote.

Countless studies have shown young Americans to be anything but apathetic when it comes to the future of the nation in which they live. While they may not always be active in political parties or electoral politics, young people have made a demonstrated commitment to volunteer service in their communities and charitable causes. America's youngest generation believes that individual and personal activism at the local level makes the greatest difference and, therefore, the most effective and persuasive political messages are those that are framed in local terms.<sup>85</sup>

According to Josh Green, "There's a tradition in politics of asking young people for their votes and time without asking people for their opinions and ideas."<sup>86</sup> Instead of treating young people who do want to get involved politically as nothing more than unpaid campaign laborers, candidates and campaigns should take an active interest in youth issues and empower America's youngest citizens as leaders themselves. Thousands

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<sup>84</sup> CIRCLE, 2003

<sup>85</sup> Heinz Foundation, 1996

<sup>86</sup> ThinkExist Quotations. <<http://en.thinkexist.com/search/searchquotation.asp?young+people+voting>>

of young people inspired by the campaign of Howard Dean remain actively engaged in electoral politics. Many are now in turn running for office as candidates, managing political campaigns, writing their own blogs, or working with grassroots organizations to encourage fellow young people to get active and stay involved in politics. Young people will respond to candidates who make the sincere and honest effort to reach out to their demographic.

Political parties at all levels can increase contact with young Americans by developing websites and using the internet to communicate with younger supporters. Campaigns and youth-based organizations have become much more sophisticated since the 1970s when young people were first given the opportunity to vote. In the information age, internet based communications will become vital to building support among all demographics, but especially among the youngest sector of Americans.

The youth vote is not a lost cause. The potential is there to increase civic participation among young Americans through voting. Walter J. Hudd once remarked that, "People often say that, in a democracy, decisions are made by a majority of the people. Of course, that is not true. Decisions are made by a majority of those who make themselves heard and who vote - a very different thing."<sup>87</sup> Ultimately, decisions are made by those who show up to the polls. If young people truly care about the issues facing American society, they should express their views by casting a ballot for candidates who will address those problems and concerns. But civic engagement is a two-way street. Ultimately, candidates and political parties need to be more responsive to the issues that are important to younger voters. Only then will young Americans feel compelled to exercise the right the vote.

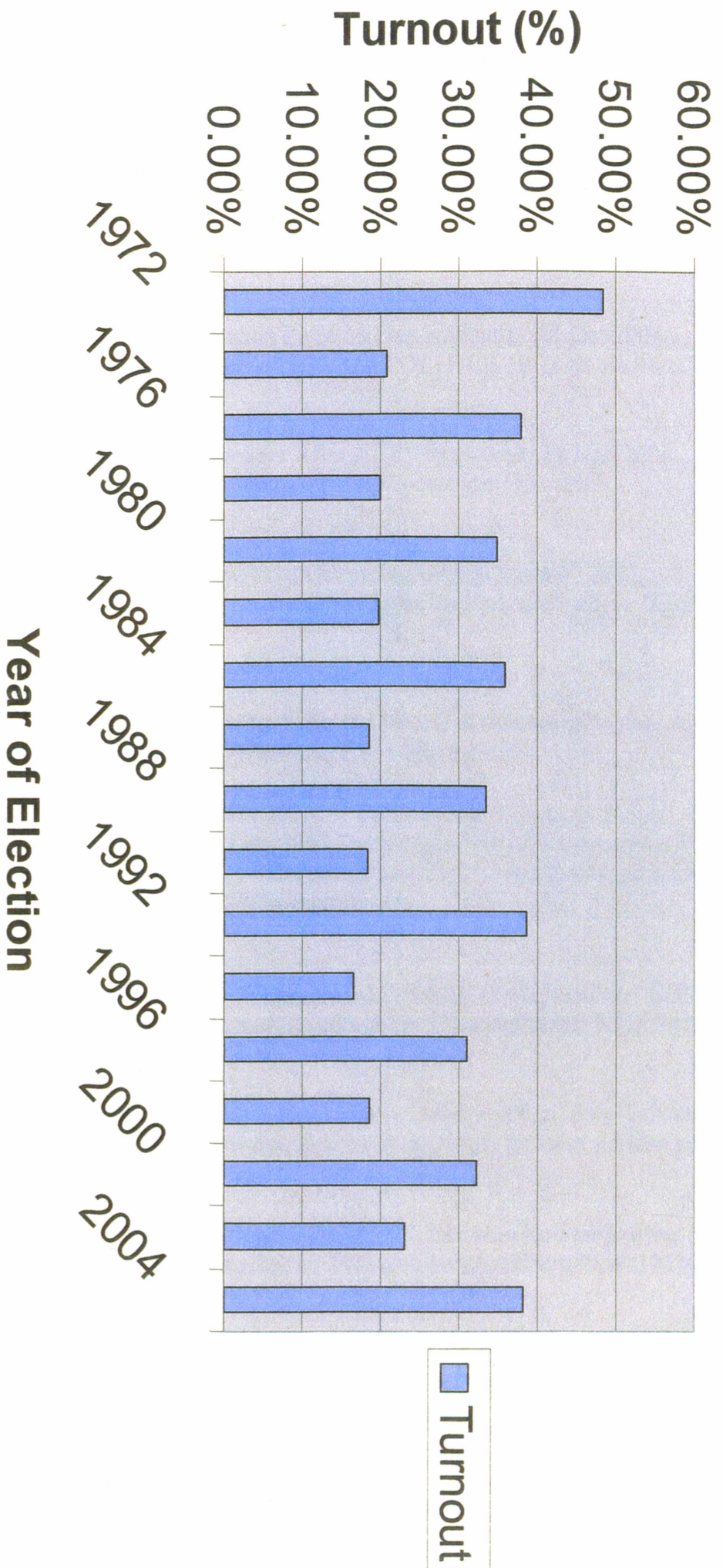
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<sup>87</sup> ThinkExist Quotations. <<http://thinkexist.com/search/searchquotation.asp?search=voting&page=2>>

**Appendix A:**

(Source: United States Election Assistance Commission | <http://eac.gov>)

# Voter Turnout Among Young People (Aged 18-20)



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