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Colleges Should Foster Growth in Young-Voter Turnout

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Abstract
In Virginia's recent tight race for governor, the three candidates could not agree on much of anything, yet all found a common cause that brought them together at least momentarily. They all participated in a forum at Virginia Commonwealth University on how to court young voters across the state — a signal that politicians are recognizing young people as a new and important audience in Virginia politics. Ultimately, all three candidates promised to make up the state's $340-million budget shortfall for higher education.

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Colleges Should Foster Growth in Young-Voter Turnout

Michael X. Delli Carpini
Ivan Frishberg

In Virginia's recent tight race for governor, the three candidates could not agree on much of anything, yet all found a common cause that brought them together at least momentarily. They all participated in a forum at Virginia Commonwealth University on how to court young voters across the state — a signal that politicians are recognizing young people as a new and important audience in Virginia politics. Ultimately, all three candidates promised to make up the state's $340-million budget shortfall for higher education.

Indeed, politicians across the country are recognizing the power 18- to 24-year-olds wield at the ballot box. This fall not only brought us close gubernatorial, mayoral, and county-commissioner races, but both political parties are already gearing up for the midterm elections in 2006. It is clear that those campaigns will be looking to young people to continue the momentum of the 2004 presidential election, when the nationwide youth turnout was up significantly compared to past elections.

But parties and candidates are not the only ones who should focus on young voters. College leaders bear a responsibility for treating those voters as the politically active participants they have proved themselves to be.

As we saw during the heated privatization debate this year, Republican National Committee Chairman Kenneth B. Mehlman didn't talk about Social Security without talking about how it can bring young voters into the party. The Democratic Party also hit the road to speak at colleges about the same topic. The interest of major politicians in wooing college students has implications for many other public-policy issues as well. A week before unveiling his 2006 budget, the president announced he would be pumping $19-billion into the Pell Grant program over the next 10 years. The program provides support for students attending college (although the proposal is far from being honored on Capitol Hill).

Both parties know that they will have to work hard to keep this bloc of newly engaged voters on their side, and that they stand to gain a lot for their efforts. In 2004 young people proved themselves a viable constituency in much the same way as the other interest groups who are traditionally courted by politicians and parties. According to an analysis of exit polls conducted by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, as many as 48 percent of 18- to 24-year-old Americans voted, nearly an 11-percentage-point increase over the turnout in 2000. To put that into context, imagine how you would feel if your mutual fund went from $37 to $48 a share.

Iowa presents an interesting case study of youth turnout. In 2004, as part of a larger statewide nonpartisan effort, the New Voters Project worked in four counties and registered 39,000 voters under the age of 25. Organizers then made 89,000 get-out-the-vote contacts in the final weeks of the campaign. An analysis by the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* of turnout in those four counties showed that registration of voters under 25 increased by 36 percent over 2000, and that the number of votes cast by young people increased from 31,852 in 2000 to 56,196. Finding an extra 24,344 votes in just four counties in a battleground state is big news in the campaign world.

The numbers were equally significant in 10 other highly contested states, where an average of 53 percent of 18- to 24-year-old voters went to the polls — an increase in turnout of 17 percentage points over the 2000 election, according to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. In many of those states, as many young people voted as those from older demographic groups.

Clearly, November 2, 2004, illustrated to both parties that they have much to win — and lose — if they wait until the next election cycle to engage this broad and independent-minded demographic group. Polls following that election suggest that young people intend to remain involved in political issues, leading Republican pollster Frank I. Luntz to argue that "never again will the parties or candidates be able to take that segment of the population for granted."

Nor should colleges ignore students' important civic role in the electoral process. They should help ensure that the youth-vote movement continues to gain momentum in several ways.

First, colleges must allocate resources and staff time for mobilization efforts. Administrators should make voter registration — including absentee applications — a part of fall orientations, move-in events, and class registration. At Oregon State University, the deadline to register to vote was just days after the beginning of classes, and the vast majority of new registrations came through a highly organized move-in program. At community colleges in northern Wisconsin, such registrations came through the class-registration process, which is still done in person.

When students are away at college, most are unable to head home to vote at their assigned polling location. In some states, like Wisconsin and Maine, colleges have worked with local election officials to establish systems so that a student-identification card can be accepted as a universal ID even if it doesn't have a specific street address. The result: more student participation at the polls.

Even better, polling stations could be placed directly on campuses. Drake University and Iowa State University have already done that, and turnout among students at both institutions was outstanding. In fact, both of those early-voting stations ran out of ballots before every student had the chance to vote. Students need administrators to join as advocates for student voting rights in dealings with local election officials.

Colleges should also organize service-learning programs through which college students could encourage local high-school students to think about registering to vote when they graduate and to learn about the election process.

It is important that such steps be a part of local and statewide elections and not just a focus in presidential election years. Elections come on a regular cycle, but it is the time in between that is filled with policy discussions, advocacy, and public debate. Higher-education institutions, which have a tradition of being the town square of ideas and whose mission is to create leaders of our society, should support efforts to involve students at all stages of the process. Colleges must help replace the cycle of mutual neglect that once existed between politics and young people with one of mutual awareness and respect.