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Strategists Hope to Inject Young Blood Into '06 Vote

By [Michael Roberts](#) | 1:03 PM; Apr. 06, 2006 | [Email This Article](#)

The nation's youngest voters — those age 18 to 24 — have for years participated in elections at much lower rates than those for the general public. And since political strategists develop their campaign plans to go where the votes are, they have generally put little emphasis on getting young people to the polls.

But those truisms of American politics may be changing. With both parties giving a modest boost to their efforts to attract the 18-24 crowd, young voters' participation in the 2004 election showed an 11 percentage-point increase over the 2000 election — their largest four-year increase since the voting age was lowered to 18 from 21 in 1971.

Polling done after the November 2005 elections for governor of New Jersey and Virginia showed youth turnout jumping in certain student-dense precincts too.

Now, with the 2006 midterm congressional campaigns gearing up, various political consultants are pinpointing young voters as major targets.

Led by George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management in Washington, D.C., a non-profit organization named Young Voters Strategies is working with dozens of groups, including political campaigns, with the goal of increasing young voter turnout at the polls.

Funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, Young Voters Strategies is not basing its efforts on political partisanship — as have groups such as the liberal Moveon.org, which puts much of its effort into engaging younger voters.

Instead, the group is providing political strategists regardless of affiliation with tools and facts, such as a poll that shows individuals age 18 to 29 identify themselves as one-third Democrats, one-third Republicans and one-third independents.

"In long terms, young people are divided and up for grabs," said Kathleen Barr, national media coordinator for Young Voters Strategies. "Because of the huge increase, parties and campaigns are going back to the field."

Barr said the group's main midterm election goal is to attract younger voters not necessarily by their age, but by demographic criteria such as ethnicity and income — similar to how other age groups are targeted by candidates.

"A lot of research is showing that they think highly of public service," she added. "It is worth a candidate's time to take a few simple steps to talk to them. They generally care about the same issues."

The dozens of targeting groups hope to register voters through innovative methods. For example, Mobile Voter and Music for America are using creative text messaging and Internet technology, with tactics that include concerts and celebrity outreach. Another group, known as Building Blocks, Building Voters, is recruiting apartment and block captains in Oregon neighborhoods that are densely populated and have large numbers of young adults.

Peter Levine, director of the University of Maryland's Center for Information and Research Learning and Engagement, or CIRCLE, said 2004 could signal an enduring increase in youth participation, "because the Millennium Generation is paying more attention to politics and are more informed."

Yet activists concede that they have no tool they can use to determine whether the 2004 uptick

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was a fluke or to forecast youth turnout in this year's elections.

Some politics watchers contend that the increase in 2004 can be attributed to the hotly contested presidential election, which generated unusually strong emotions both for and against the incumbent, President Bush. Partisan swing states such as Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin saw the biggest increases among young voters in 2004.

"I think all of these potential ways to attract voters will have some success," said David Cannon, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin. "But I don't think it will have as much pull as the 2004 election did."

Cannon added that Wisconsin also has one advantage that very few states have: a law that allows voters to register when they go to the polls on Election Day.

"If you wanted to increase youth turnout, one of the most effective ways is same-day registration," he added. "It's better than text messaging, and would have more of an impact than anything else does."

Besides Wisconsin, the states of Idaho, Minnesota, Maine, New Hampshire and Wyoming allow voters to register on the same day as an election. North Dakota has no registration requirement.

Most of those states saw double-digit voting participation increases among 18-to-24-year-olds in 2004.

Meanwhile, other skeptics say campaigns have yet to propose a plausible idea for boosting youth turnout in states that tend to be uncompetitive in presidential politics, such as Democratic-leaning Illinois and strongly Republican Texas.

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As an ex-Texican, I'd think the strategy in presidentially uncompetitive states would be a youth GOTV campaign around the slogan, "Wanna scare the old folks? Show up at the polls. They won't know what hit 'em."

Posted by slangwhanger-in-chief at 11:07 PM; Apr. 08, 2006

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