

Parties, nonprofits turn to young voters

Increasing participation raises hopes of attracting more 18- to 30-year-olds

By Josh Richman, STAFF WRITER
The Oakland Tribune/Inside Bay Area, July 24, 2006

Political parties and nonprofits are hustling to awaken the sleeping giant of the youth vote, nationally and here in California.

They see a bloc of potential voters ages 18 to 30 who are thirsty for reliable electoral information and eager to be engaged politically but who've been largely ignored for years. Skewing slightly Democratic yet more likely than any other age group to self-identify as independent, these voters could be either party's victory margin in races from school boards to Congress.

Today's young voters are "different from the Gen-Xers of 10 or 15 years ago," said Kathleen Barr, spokeswoman for Young Voter Strategies, a nonprofit, nonpartisan project at George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management. That earlier generation was tagged as "unengaged, flannel-wearing ... and voting in really low numbers," she said.

But polling shows "Gen Y" is more inclined to political activity. It flexed its electoral muscle in 2004's presidential race, as turnout among 18-to-24-year-olds rose by 11 percent over 2000 — three times the increase in overall turnout and a striking reversal of a 30-year downward trend.

In California, that age group's turnout rose 8percent from 2000 to 2004.

California now has more than 6 million 18- to 29-year-olds. And though not within that range, the average age of newly registered California voters has fallen almost every year since 2000, according to data from the Secretary of State's office; it was 40.41 then, and so far in 2006 it's 37.75.

Young Voter Strategies — funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts to provide parties, candidates and consultants with data and advice on reaching this electorate — now bankrolls about a dozen nonpartisan programs to register 350,000 young voters for Nov. 7's elections. Some have California elements:

- The state Public Interest Research Groups' New Voters Project recruits and trains student volunteers to register young voters on campuses nationwide, including the University of California at Berkeley, Los Angeles and Davis.
- The American Association of State Colleges and Universities also targets potential college voters here.
- The National Council of La Raza is having its community-based providers, including many in the Bay Area and Los Angeles, integrate voter registration into their social services.
- Voto Latino is reaching out to young Latino voters with celebrity media pitches, text messaging, MySpace.com postings and other means in California, Florida and New York.
- San Francisco-based Mobile Voter last week launched TxtVoter, a free, publicly available text-

messaging service that lets callers order voter registration forms via cell phones.

"Mobility, affinity and immediacy are a way of life for this age group," said Mobile Voter co-executive director Grace Stanat. "By reflecting this lifestyle, TxtVoter aims to sustain the 2004 increase in young voters and get even more to turn out in 2006."

Barr said young voters care about the same issues as older voters but "want to be talked to about these issues in ways that are relevant to their lives." The Democratic and Republican parties, at the national, state and local levels, are starting to pick up on that.

"We're seeing an actual, substantive interest in young voters from the parties that we didn't see even two years ago," she said.

The national, progressive League of Young Voters will host campus organizers and others in Los Angeles next month for a week of "street-level, nuts-and-bolts training on electoral field work," said California director Natasha Marsh. Those organizers then will be deployed to five California State University campuses — including San Francisco State University — where more than half the students are of color.

The League also has Bay Area high school students filling out pledges to vote when they turn 18; the League mails them voter-registration forms on their birthdays.

College students and other young voters were "passionate" about defeating 2005's special-election ballot measures, Marsh said, particularly that which would've required minors to notify parents before obtaining abortions. She believes those voters and more will stand against Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's re-election this year.

"The public perception, particularly among young people, is that he tried to do all these crazy things last fall and has made cuts to financial aid and student services," she said, though that's not a strong endorsement of Democratic contender Phil Angelides, either.

"Locally, we have candidates were really excited about. ... Our statewide candidates are not as exciting," Marsh said. "Generally, California voters have been shown to vote against things right now. ... People will turn out to vote 'no' on things, and it's much harder to get people to turn out to vote 'yes' on progressive things."

But California Young Republicans President Catherine Brinkman of Foster City said she can't imagine a better gubernatorial matchup: "Everyone is so jazzed. ... When you put the two of them together, its an obvious choice for Schwarzenegger, and youth is definitely behind that."

Her group plans an August mail campaign to mobilize young people for gubernatorial campaign fieldwork. And Saturday saw the fourth annual "Rising Tide," an Atherton gathering founded by the California Young Republicans of Silicon Valley for activists, voters and key party figures. Speakers included California Secretary of State Bruce McPherson; attorney general candidate and state Sen. Chuck Poochigian, R-Fresno; and insurance commissioner candidate Steve Poizner.

The California Young Democrats are similarly engaged. They went to the punk-rock Vans Warped Tour's seven California stops to hand out stickers and have people sign pledges to vote in November. The pledge included a check-off box for the issue in which that person is most interested, so the group can send them information on those issues later on.

Television ads and direct mail are fine, said the group's president, Crystal Strait of Sacramento, but to engage and mobilize young voters, there's no substitute for "having young people from a community talk to young people of that community about why it's important to vote and what's at stake."

Voting and party membership are learned habits, and Strait said the general wisdom is that "if you get a young person to vote in three elections, you have them for life."