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GROUND LEVEL COVERAGE OF CAMPAIGN '08

Obama's Youth Movement

Twenty-year-old Tobin Van Ostern finished his sophomore year last spring at George Washington University, but this fall he's enrolled in the Barack Obama campaign as a full-time organizer. The Richmond, Virginia, native started Students for Obama on his campus last year as a Facebook group. It now has chapters on 800 campuses, Van Ostern said, and the campaign has recruited thousands of college students and recent graduates to work as both paid staffers and unpaid volunteers through the November election.

Democratic Party strategists believe that in key swing states, a dramatic increase in turnout among young voters--and African-Americans--can be the key to victory for both Obama and the party's candidates for Congress. Campus activists, meanwhile, view the Obama campaign as a means to catalyze a new progressive youth movement among the Millennial (18- to 29-year-old) generation that they hope, unlike the political crusades of the 1960s youth rebellion, will be part of a broader, multigenerational coalition.

Ever since 18-year-olds won the right to vote in 1971, their elders have been disappointed by their level of voter turnout, which has typically been about half the rate of other voters. But after steady declines in turnout since 1972, young voters reversed the trend in the 2004 presidential and 2006 mid-term elections. This year, however, is likely to see a particularly significant increase in voting among Millennials.

Some of the Students for Obama have been involved in the burgeoning campus activism of the past decade, but most have never been involved in politics before. It was Obama who inspired them, and it was students like Van Ostern who figured out how to engage them.

"The excitement is definitely there," explained Van Ostern. "The question is how we translate that into feet on the ground."

"There's a young-voter revolution underfoot," said Alexandra Acker, executive director of Young Democrats of America, one of dozens of partisan and nonpartisan groups working to expand political involvement among the under-30 cohort.

With 44 million eligible voters, the Millennials comprise almost one-quarter of the potential electorate; by 2015, they will make up one-third of potential voters. But will they vote? The uptick in Millennial political participation has been going on for four years. The 2004 election marked the largest increase in 18-to-29-year-old turnout since 1972. Forty-nine percent of eligible Millennial voters went to the polls, a 9 point increase over 2000, although still far below the turnout rate of voters over 30. In the ten most competitive battleground states in 2004, however, where campaigns targeted young voters, Millennial turnout was even higher--64 percent.

Studies confirm that direct contact by peers increases the likelihood that young people will vote. Yale political scientists Don Green and Alan Gerber found that peer-to-peer contact raised youth turnout by eight to twelve points among registered voters. The spike in youth turnout in 2004 and 2006 was no fluke. It was the result of a significant increase in voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives by political campaigns, party groups and nonpartisan organizations.

These outreach efforts are utilizing YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, text messaging and cell phones to reach young voters. That's because 89 percent of 18-to-24-year-olds own a cell phone, and 86 percent of college students and 57 percent of non-college youth have access to FaceBook, which organizers use to raise awareness and expand social networks on the Internet and then bring young people together in person. WireTap is an online magazine for youth activists. (Because so many young people rely on cell phones, they are undercounted in public opinion polls, which mainly survey people using home phone numbers. As a result, polls may be under-estimating overall support for Obama).

An increase in youth turnout will surely help the Democrats. In 2000, 18-to-29-year-old voters split their votes almost evenly between Gore and Bush. In 2004, Kerry received 54 percent of the youth vote to Bush's 45. In the 2006 Congressional elections, 18-to-29-year-old voters supported Democratic candidates with 58 percent of their votes--six points higher than the overall voting age population. A study by Harvard's Institute of Politics credits young voters, especially increased turnouts in college towns, with Jim Webb's Senate victory in Virginia and Jon Tester's Senate win in Montana (as well as that state's new election-day voter registration law) in addition to the election of several freshman Democrats in House races.

Even by the standard of these recent trends, though, the spike in youth voting this year has been extraordinary. In Democratic primaries and caucuses, the number of young voters increased from 1.1 million to 4.9 million. (In contrast, Republican primaries attracted only 1.8 million youth voters.) A Harvard study found that compared to the 2004 primaries, the youth vote quadrupled in the Tennessee primary and almost tripled in Iowa, Georgia, Missouri, Mississippi, Oklahoma and Texas. Within the Democratic primaries, youth voters increased from 9.4 percent of all voters in 2004 to 14.3 percent this year.

The Obama campaign has put together a sophisticated recruitment and mobilization effort to target young voters on and off

college campuses, including hiring activists from recent campus protest movements, student government leaders and political neophytes. During the summer, the campaign recruited thousands of college students for a six-week crash course in politics and community organizing in key swing states. Many of them have stayed on with the campaign. Indeed, for many college students and post-college 20-somethings, the Obama crusade has reached a drop-out-of-school or quit-my-job level of excitement.

Swing Semester provides a clearinghouse for college students to link up with candidate and issue campaigns in swing states and receive college credit. Occidental College is offering Campaign Semester. Instead of studying abroad, nineteen students are getting a full semester of course credit by spending ten weeks working full-time with a Senate or presidential campaign in eight battleground states and then, after election day, returning to the Los Angeles campus for a five-week reading and research seminar. Most of them signed up to work for Obama.

In addition, the Young Democrats of America is gearing up for a massive outreach effort among non-college youth and college graduates. As well, many nonpartisan student and youth activist groups have been laying the groundwork for campaigns to dramatically increase voter registration and turnout among under-30s. These groups represent a potentially powerful, somewhat overlapping, crazy quilt of organizations.

"We want the voter mobilization to increase voter turnout among youth," explained David Rosenfeld of Student PIRG, one of the oldest and largest student groups, "but we also want to build the infrastructure for after the election, to get more students involved in issues they care about, like the environment, the war and the cost of tuition."

Here is a roadmap to the groups seeking to mobilize young people this year:

Rock the Vote began in 1992 by enlisting popular entertainers to provide public service announcements on TV and radio to encourage young people to register to vote. In 2000 it partnered with Russell Simmons and the Southwest Voters Project to recruit young voters in black and Latino communities. Two years ago, Rock the Vote, along with fifteen other nonpartisan organizations registered over 500,000 young people. It primarily reaches young people at concerts and through its website, then making the new voter lists available to nonpartisan groups to follow up.

Several nonpartisan groups have developed a good track record of registering college students to vote and getting them to the polls on election day. During the 006 mid-term elections, the Student PIRGs' New Voters Project sponsored a major registration and GOTV effort in twenty-five states. In the targeted precincts, youth turnout increased by an average of 157 percent between 2002 and 2006. The New Voters Project hopes to register about 100,000 college students before November, focusing its efforts on 150 campuses in nineteen states.

With its existing presence on more than 300 campus with 4 million students, the US Student Association--the official arm of campus student government organizations--expects to register and turnout "several hundred thousand" college students this year, said Bill Shiebler, the group's national field director.

This fall, Campus Compact, a consortium of more than a thousand colleges and universities that focuses on getting students involved in community service, launched a Campus Vote Initiative, and the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities is sponsoring a Your Vote/Your Voice initiative to help institutions encourage students to register and vote.

The Energy Action Coalition is an umbrella group of forty-eight environmental organizations on campuses across the country. Its Power Vote project expects to mobilize young voters in November and then push for environmental legislation after the election. Its goal is to get a million young people to sign a pledge to work for "green" candidates and elevate climate and energy issues in the election.

The Bus Federation is an innovative coalition of youth groups in five Western states. It started in 2002 with the Oregon Bus Project, which mobilized a caravan of buses filled with student volunteers to knock on thousands of doors registering voters in swing races. The initial effort helped shift the partisan balance in the Oregon state legislature and inspired activists in four other states--Montana, Colorado, New Mexico and Washington--to adopt the same approach. Like other youth-oriented groups, the federation recruits volunteers at bars, concerts, colleges and even high school campuses.

Only one-quarter of Millennials are full-time college students, so a number of youth-oriented groups are targeting people who aren't in college. The Hip Hop Caucus focuses on inner-city youth in twelve states, utilizing community canvasses, cell phone blasts, rallies and public service announcements.

The League of Young Voters, founded in 2005, has campaigns to reach working class non-college youth in cities in nine states. It has also helped build local groups that work on local issues, such as gun control, green jobs, voting rights and loitering laws.

Several progressive youth groups, including USSA, League of Young Voters, Wellstone Action and others, have formed Generation Vote to train young leaders around electoral and issue campaigns.

The Center for Community Change--a well-respected training center for community organizers--has launched its Generation Change project. It paid seventy college interns last summer and this fall to work on registering, educating and turning out half a million low-income voters through community-based organizations. ACORN, the national community organizing group, is running a Facebook ad and contacting student activists to recruit and train several hundred young people to join its field campaign in fourteen states, with the goal of enlisting 1.3 million new voters, mostly in low-income urban areas, explained Kimberly Olsen, the group's director of voter registration.

The Young Democrats of America broke off from the Democratic National Committee in 2003 and formed its own independent ("527") organization. YDA expects to register and turn out more than 500,000 young voters--mostly non-college students. Although YDA is focusing on eight to ten swing states, it also plans to target Georgia, Tennessee and other states where an increase in the youth and African-American vote could propel Democrats into office.

The McCain campaign is understandably less focused on mobilizing young voters. It, too, is using Facebook and MySpace to reach potential voters, according to Joe Pounder, a campaign spokesperson, but it is focusing on "young professionals," and

will direct youth recruitment efforts at country music concerts and state fairs. But the campaign has no youth or student group or website. The College Republicans, which gave many key future political operatives like Karl Rove their start in politics, is no longer as vibrant a training ground for budding politicians. (The banner across its website reads "Help Fight Liberalism on Campus").

McCain is the best candidate the GOP could have nominated to stem Republican losses among youth, observed Mike Connery, author of *Youth to Power*, whose blogsite, Future Majority focuses on youth voting. McCain's frequent appearances on *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart and his appearance on *Saturday Night Live* may "help him maintain that maverick image," Connery said.

Ironically, starting in the 1970s, conservatives, Republicans and right-wing foundations did a much better job than their liberal counterparts of cultivating college students and other young people. They funded dozens of right-wing student publications and subsidized student organizations and conferences, and internships with conservative groups and public officials.

Now the political climate is shifting, but only in the past few years have liberal funders begun paying attention to grooming the next generation, catalyzing such groups as Campus Progress, an offshoot of the Center for American Progress. As a result, between election cycles the various independent youth groups still operate on shoestring budgets. Even now, several months before the November election, many of the youth groups are unsure of how much funding they will have.

"The progressive funders have high expectations, but provide little support," said one leader of a major youth organization. All the progressive youth groups, however, view 2008 as a potential major turning point in American politics and, just maybe, the beginning of a new wave of youth activism.

This post appeared originally at The Nation.

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