

Youth Attitudes Toward Voting

“Are you a republican or a democrat?” “Liberal or conservative?” “Who are you going to vote for in the next election?” Although Miss Manners would say never to discuss religion or politics, discussing political philosophy seems nearly unavoidable.

Merely walking near the tower at the University of Texas at Austin, a student can come across 10 campus organizations dedicated to politics. In addition to the University Democrats and College Republicans at Texas, there are the Libertarian Longhorns, Conservative Liberal Union and the Feminist Action group. Yet despite the vast array of clubs available, many students will parallel the larger youth population and avoid the polls come Election Day.

Although voter turnout for ages 18 to 24 had a significant increase from 47 percent in the 2004 presidential election to 49 percent in 2008, that is considerably less than the 70 percent for those citizens 65 and older, according to a report by the U.S. Census Bureau.

But why such low numbers?

Of those that were registered but did not end up voting, the most common reason was being too busy or having a conflicting work or school schedule. Other widespread excuses included being ill or having a family emergency or simply feeling their vote would not make a difference.

And many were just not concerned. “I have never been interested in politics and have a difficult time keeping up with elections, so I didn’t participate. I just hate politics,” says psychology student Lauren Crawford.

Crawford is representative of the 42 percent of Americans ages 18 to 24 who did not register to vote in the 2008 presidential election because they were not interested or involved in politics, according to the census report. The next highest reason, comprising 21 percent of those respondents, says they did not meet registration deadlines.

Stewart Snider, who is president of the League of Women Voters, Austin Area, can understand this detachment from government. “My take is that it's not so compelling to hear about the effects of public policy in a classroom setting. When one's life is structured mostly by the demands of school and family, it's not easy to recognize how much of what surrounds us is determined by politics. Voting and other forms of political involvement don't strike an emotional chord until one's personal life is changed by public policy.”

Efforts to involve students and youth continue despite these setbacks. Because Travis County in Austin is special in that it houses over 75,000 students, the government explains that it aims to help ensure their involvement in politics. “The Travis County Clerk is committed to providing a supportive environment for busy students who want to participate in the democratic process of voting,” according to the county’s website.

They have their work cut out for them as only 33 percent of voters between the ages of 18 and 24 participate in Texas elections. On their website it states that Travis County is continuously working to develop new relationships and collaborate with student organizations to inform students about the process and ease of voting.

UT is not leaving these efforts solely to government officials. Prior to the 2008 presidential election and each year since, a rally called Hook the Vote occurs. Hook the Vote is a non-partisan coalition of UT political organizations, the Daily Texan, and Student Government to help raise awareness of elections and register as many students as possible.

One organization that participates in the rally is UT Votes, whose goal is to educate and register new voters through activities like debate watching parties and roundtable discussions. "We know we're doing a good job. In 2009, UT Votes, in coordination with Hook the Vote, helped to register almost 6,000 students in one day," says Ashlyn Gentry, graduate coordinator for UT Votes. They plan to surpass that number in the 2012 election rally.

But even those who are engaged in politics remain cynical of the political system.

"I don't think that the youth in general are involved enough in government due to the fact that the two-party status quo really makes politics very dull and at times corrupt," says Jose Nino, president of Libertarian Longhorns. "Voting is pointless in a monopolized two-party system, especially at the national level."

In his youth, Snider used to be like Nino in his pessimistic outlook toward the political arena. "In the post-Watergate era, I heard a phrase that resonated in my 22-year-old mind. It said, "Don't vote -- it only encourages them." This was soon after Gerald Ford issued a full pardon for Richard Nixon's unsavory actions while in office. I sat out the 1976 Presidential Election because I was so cynical, and that silly phrase made me feel justified and even superior for my ability to find fault in the system. Since then, I've obviously done a complete about-face on the importance of voting, but it took a political change that I saw as a threat (namely, Ronald Reagan's anti-environmental agenda) before I became politically active."

Although it may take a certain issue to spark political activism, many are still opting to stress the importance of participating in government and elections.

The Hook the Vote rally that will take place in March 2012 will consist of many politically engaged students trying to inform the student population of the significance of voting. In October 2010 dozens of volunteers drained their cell phone battery as they called registered students off of a contact list of 14,000 who had not voted, according to a Daily Texan article.

Although political infiltration has increased as information is being received through newer media, Travis County has seen a decrease in election participation. In 1988, 73.5 percent of the voting age population took part in the presidential election. That number dropped to 66 percent for the 2008 election. However, this is still considerably larger than the mere 40 percent who voted in the 2010 gubernatorial election.

Yet Nino understands that elections like those are probably more consequential to citizens. “It’s more important that the youth get involved at the local level and create political apparatuses that will supplant the current system by grassroots means. The youth have stronger leverage in local and state elections and can really create momentum when it comes to political change.”

The nation’s youth can be seen as having leverage in determining policy based purely on their size. Generation Y, commonly referred to as Millennials, are 45 million strong, according to the Young Democrats of America. They estimate that these citizens, who are ages 18 to 29, will make up one-third of the electorate in 2015.

So why should they vote?

At the forefront of current debates surrounding the 2012 presidential election is job creation and healthcare, matters that the youth will be immediately affected by. “Students and young people will be dealing with many of the issues being decided and debated currently. We deserve to have a seat at the table in that conversation,” says Natalie Butler, UT Student Government president. “And the best way to do that is vote.”

An organization whose mission is to educate the Millennials on current issues and the importance of them is the national non-profit Rock the Vote. Created in 1990, they aim to build political power for young people in America by registering voters and forcing candidates to listen and campaign to them. The group has seen success in their efforts that use popular culture to reach the voting population between 18 and 29. Pop icons like Madonna, Aerosmith and Queen Latifah have all been a part of Rock the Vote in some way. The organization has even used public service announcements as outreach, like one featuring Eddie Vedder of Pearl Jam that was broadcast on MTV, VH-1 and BET.

With 20 years of experience under their belt, Rock the Vote takes pride in that they have registered more young people to vote than any other organization or campaign. It is because of this that they feel confident in explaining how to mobilize the youth vote.

They argue that conducting voter registrations, keeping young voters on call and walk lists, and talking about issues in ways that are relevant to young adults will create the most success.

It thus appears that education is key. “When we learn about issues, we impact people in ways we may never know,” says Snider.

Lara Grant

On an individual level, talking may be the best route. “Peer-to-peer discussion and promotion of engagement is an effective way to go. It is up to students who care about these issues to help other young people learn more,” says Butler.

In a state that attempts to provide options for students by allowing them to vote either in the county their parents live or where they attend college, it is up to the youth to decide if and when they want to make that decision. Although voter campaigns and outreach efforts are in abundance, many of the youth that make up Generation Y will still ask themselves: Is there a point?

“If there was more choice in the political system, you would see a much more politically awake youth,” says Nino. “There’s a reason why Baskin Robbins has more than one flavor.”