Younger Voters and National Elections

Why are younger Americans so apathetic toward participating in elections? Do other countries encounter the same apathy from their younger citizens? While history has shown a slow, but steady, decline of voting participation among all eligible United States voters, the habits of eligible younger voters has been given special attention in recent years. With the United States’ presidential election just around the corner, a grassroots effort has been underway to attract younger Americans (ages 18-24) to register to vote. Many of these organizations are encouraging younger voters to not only register but also vote on November 2. In attempting to determine if the attitudes expressed by young Americans are global or an anomaly, the voting tendencies of young adults in Hong Kong, Poland, and the United States have been analyzed.

Before voter turnout can be improved, researchers needed to discover the reasons why 18-24 year olds stay away from the ballot box. According to Anna Greenberg in *The American Prospect*, “neither major party has done much” to attract the youth vote.
Democrats target seniors by focusing on “issues such as retirement security and prescription drugs” (A5). While the Republican’s position concerning “gay rights and the environment” are viewed negatively by the younger set. Greenberg points out that younger voters are concerned about “job security and wages [...] paying off student loans, rising tuition, cuts in state budgets for higher education [...] and environmental issues” (A5).

In a study by Priscilla Lewis Southwell from the University of Oregon, *The Social Science Journal* reported that younger voter’s lower turnout rate “is nondeliberate in nature” and can be attributed to the “transitory nature of their lifestyles” (101). Many are “preoccupied with their education, first jobs, [and] new marriages” and take less interest in politics at this stage of their life (Southwell 101). Southwell also points out that not voting or voting for a third-party candidate can be viewed as a “form of protest”—a way for voters to “express their disenchantment” with the candidates presented by the two principal parties (99-100). As Traci E. Carpenter, winner of a *Newsweek* essay contest, points out “no matter how I vote, there will still be war, crime and poverty” (38).

Organizations like “Music for America,” “Rock the Vote,” and “MTV’s Choose or Lose” are committed to reaching out to younger voters and igniting interest in the upcoming elections. Reaching out to youth voters in venues they frequent increases the visibility of the election process. While music acts are performing, activists are soliciting attendees to register to vote. Dissatisfaction regarding the war in Iraq,
reaction to the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington, and concern about the economy are driving forces within the movement. According to College Republican National Committee chairman, Eric Hoplin, “the current crop of young voters [...] are different from earlier generations in their approach to civic involvement. They are more likely to have participated in community service, and see politics as local” (Kantrowitz 37). Candidates need to utilize unconventional tactics such as Internet forums to reach out to this new generation of voter’s.

A small, informal survey of Saginaw Valley State University students on campus during the summer semester was conducted. Of the students who are United States citizens, all are registered to vote, believe voting is important, gather information about candidates and issues from the news (CNN) and Internet, are influenced by family and friends, have not encountered any obstacles to voting, and all but one planned to vote in the November elections. Even though the sample size was too small from which to draw any conclusions, when comparing the local responses to national numbers (see Fig. 1), one can see that the majority will not actually take the time to vote. In addition, when analyzing the information gathered, caution must be given to any data collected in a face-to-face interview as “surveys of voting behavior produce inflated turnout.
estimates” (Levine and Lopez 2). In other words, people tend to respond in such a way that they appear to be involved citizens and also the way they believe the researcher wants them to answer.

Low voter participation among younger voters is not inherently an American issue; Hong Kong hovers around 50% turnout of registered 18-24-year-old voters (Legislative Council). At first glance, the percentage is considerably higher than in the United States; however, one must look beyond to discover that only 48% of the younger voters who are eligible to vote are actually registered (Hong Kong). When examining the complete picture, the turnout rate in Hong Kong is comparable to the United States. Not an encouraging fact when the ability for 18-year-olds to vote in Hong Kong was granted in 1995 compared to 1971 in the United States. Elections in Hong Kong are conducted on a Sunday with the polls open from 7:30 a.m.-10:30 p.m. Most polling sites are set up in schools and post offices ensuring adequate public transportation. Voters are assigned a polling site near their residence and reminder letters are issued 10 days prior to the election (Electoral Affairs). However, in a survey of students from Hong Kong, many did not vote and the reasons sound very similar: “Not interested. Do not care about the society.” “No time. Too busy studying or working.” “Do not know/trust the candidates.” “Don’t think the election is fair” (Hong Kong Federation).

When examining Poland, overall voter turnout is low with the “more privileged organized strata of society” being the highest percentage of actual voters (Czesnik 5).
Mikolaj Czesnik reports that citizens do not vote because the “democratic regime functions properly, it is not menaced, as neither are individual rights and liberties” (6). In this former communist country the act of not voting is viewed as a way “to manifest their disapproval of the system” (15). In an attempt to capitalize on the younger voters lack of exposure to the communist system and to improve youth participation, Poland modified the law in March 2004 to allow “students to vote in the place they are studying” and enacted “special arrangements for people who reach voting age on referendum weekend to go and vote” (Osser). While the United States has primarily four political parties, Poland has approximately eighteen different parties citizens may choose from (CIA).

If all three nations experience difficulty motivating voters, especially young adults, to participate in national elections, what should be done? In an article in *The Nation* by Kristin Jones, “Directly asking young people to vote is the single most effective proven way to get them to do it” (14). As simple as this appears, peer pressure is one way to improve turnout. Making it easier to vote while attending school would also help. By allowing for “same-day registration,” Wisconsin was able to increase the participation of younger voters (Pauken A22). Pauken explains how polling sites on campuses were established which allowed students to vote by showing “photo ID and a piece of mail” (A22).

Motivating the youth vote is not inherently an American issue. Other countries struggle with apathy and search for strategies to engage the younger generations.
Changes need to occur on two levels: governmental policies and candidate interaction. Governments need to ease the regulations which hinder participation such as establishing polling places on college campuses and allowing students to vote outside of their home district while attending college. Candidates need to reach out to younger voters by using the Internet via forums and discussion groups, sending out newsletters by e-mail, and visiting college campuses, a strategy that has been very successful for Wisconsin Congresswoman Tammy Baldwin (Pauken A23). As Carpenter so eloquently writes, “I do know that I am 48 million strong. And if someone would just reach out to me—not just during election years, but every day—I would show them overwhelming support at the polls” (38). Her point is more important in an election year where the swing voter may make all the difference and “the side that successfully speaks to this generation may well be the side that wins” (Greenberg A5).
Lorentz, Hang, Strobel 7

Works Cited


Central Intelligence Agency. CIA World Fact Book. 11 May 2004. 2 Aug. 2004


Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups. “Young People Attitudes Towards the 95 Legco Elections.” 1995. 10 Aug. 2004

Jones, Kristin V. “Who Let the Punks out? The young and the angry most the vote for the November election.” The Nation 7 June 2004: 14.


Levine, Peter and Mark Hugo Lopez. Youth Voter Turnout has Declined, by Any Measure. 2002. 30 July 2004

