

Will the Youth Vote Deliver for Obama?

By Ryan Reeh 5/29/08

Like many politicians, Sen. Barack Obama takes great care courting young voters, saying that they will "make the difference" in the nation's future. But what will it take for young voters to make a significant impact in November-for Obama or any other candidate?

The youth vote is like the Holy Grail-and just as elusive. In 2004, campaigns like Rock The Vote, Choose or Lose and Vote or Die went after young people in a big way. The final turnout, though, came to about 19 percent of the total vote-nowhere near the pre-Election Day hype.

At least one political consultant believes that that number may jump as high as 60 percent in November. "High turnout will depend on informing and persuading young people to turnout, which is what makes this year different ... candidates are finally ready to forcibly push young people into the process," says Paul Wilson, a Republican consultant who specializes in voting behavior.

But what is the best way to reach that lofty turnout goal?

"The best way to get out the youth vote in 2008 will be a strategy that focuses on phone calls, registration drives, campus canvassing and online appeals," says Democratic strategist Joe Binnis, a veteran of former president Bill Clinton's 1992 bid. "And to guarantee their votes in November, you have to keep their interest and follow up on the get out the vote drives with 'knock-and-drag' tactics on Election Day."

Binnis adds that candidates who master the Internet have a huge leg up in courting young people. Republican strategist Nino Saviano agrees, pointing to how Obama and Ron Paul used Facebook and MySpace to gain traction with the under-30 set.

Saviano says he's also noticing increased participation in groups like the College Democrats and College Republicans.

"Obama's job [to get the youth vote] will be a lot easier because he has energized young people into politics," Saviano says.

For McCain to compensate for Obama's natural youth appeal, strategists say he should take a page from Ron Paul's book and get young Republicans to reach out on his behalf. "Ron Paul was seen as an alternative to typical Republican politics, which is what young Republicans want," says Republican consultant Marty Youssefiani, who has worked on several grassroots political campaigns. "If the opposition is lining up behind a transformational figure like Obama, a committed young Republican needs to see McCain as a different brand of Republican."

There are some early signs that the much-hyped youth demographic is more interested in voting than in previous years. Youth primary turnout this year was up 9 percent in Iowa and Florida, 10 percent in Ohio and 25 percent in New Hampshire.

"State by state, we are seeing higher youth turnout, which bodes well for our campaigns and our democratic process," says Chrissy Faessen, communications director for Rock The Vote. "All this talk of young people not caring about politics is going to seem silly by November."

And as presidential races are increasingly determined by razor-thin margins, every vote is worth fighting for, especially in swing states. In November, Ohio and Pennsylvania will have a combined 5.1 million youth votes up for grabs-more than enough to help break McCain's current 4-point lead in Ohio or Obama's 6-point lead in Pennsylvania.

"Grabbing a few percentage points from young voters in any swing state will be essential," says Brian Franklin, a Florida-based Democratic consultant. "Florida will be important for the margin of victory, as it has been, but there are enough young people registered in swing states like Ohio and Pennsylvania to make a difference." Republican consultant Paul Wilson says candidates need to leverage campaign tactics aimed specifically at young voters.

"The main thing campaigns should be doing is making their messages highly viral and making these politicians 'hip and cool,'" he says, citing the presidential candidates' appearances on shows like "The Colbert Report" and "Saturday Night Live." "Strategists have to go after where young people get their information on the candidates."

Translating this youthful momentum into votes in the general election may be the tipping point for Democrats or Republicans. However, there hasn't been a guaranteed way to get high youth turnout in 22 years, says political consultant Tom Nolan. "The only way I've seen to get this demographic is to have a nucleus of politically interested younger people reaching out to other young people."

The candidates have yet to exploit this method, but other groups have been doing it on their behalf. Rock The Vote has a text messaging program that has young people sending texts to their friends to encourage registration. Brown University has a "Campus Vote" initiative that asks other institutions to encourage young voters to participate in democracy.

And while the Democratic National Committee has already started working on a "neighbor to neighbor" program that gets neighbors canvassing neighbors, there hasn't yet been a college campus equivalent. Though it doesn't mean young voters will not be interested in such programs, or in the November election.

"Young people will want change and this slogan of change is the thing that will resonate most with them," says Nolan.