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Contact: Kevin Bonderud/Michael Fleischer
202-667-0901

YOUNG VOTERS ARE LOW PRIORITY FOR POLITICAL PARTIES

Party Chairs Blame Schools, Negative Campaigning and the Media

MEADVILLE, Pa. – April 1, 2004 – Local political party chairs are not paying attention to young people, even though an overwhelming majority agree that the political disengagement by young people is a serious problem and that parties can make a big difference involving this group, according to a groundbreaking study released today. The Republican and Democratic party chairs say the main causes of the problem of youth participation lies in deficient high school preparation, negative campaigning, and the media.

These are among the findings of a new study—*Throwing a Better Party: Local Mobilizing Institutions and the Youth Vote*—which was conducted by the Allegheny College Center for Political Participation and the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron. The report commissioned by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). The 805 party chairs surveyed for the study represent counties containing 87 percent of the nation’s population.

Roughly nine-in-ten (88 percent) party leaders say youth political engagement is a serious problem. A similar portion (93 percent) feel local parties can make a big difference in getting young people involved in politics. But very few are doing anything significant to attract young voters

“There is both disturbing and optimistic news in this report,” said Dr. Daniel M. Shea, Director of the Allegheny College Center for Political Participation. “They have the potential to play a major role in rejuvenating participation in America. But many local parties find youth mobilization difficult, so they are ignoring this group. Traditional party activities aren’t working for young people, but the party organizations that are trying novel programs, such as unique social activities, interactive web sites, and peer-to-peer outreach, are having much better success.”

Where do party leaders place the blame for the disengagement of young people?

- 71 percent do not think high schools do a lot to prepare young people for citizenship,
- 70 percent think negative campaigning turns off young voters, and
- 65 percent think that the media has done much to turn young people away from politics.

The results were similar for Democrats and Republicans, with the exception that Democratic Party leaders were a bit more likely to blame candidates, and a bit less likely to blame high school instruction. The high cost of campaigns was not seen as a significant cause of youth disengagement.

“A key indicator of how far off the radar screen young people are is that few party chairs see them as an important demographic for the ‘long-term success of their party,’” said Dr. John C. Green, Director of the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron. “By comparison, senior citizens were mentioned nearly three times as often as the most important group over the long term. Winning the current election is clearly overwhelming any focus on developing a long-term, broad-based following.”

(More)

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Only 8 percent of the party chairs identified young people as the most important demographic for the “long-term success of their party,” compared to 21 percent who named senior citizens. Only 12 percent listed young people second, and 18 percent listed them third.

Among the 41 percent of party leaders that claim to have developed specific get-out-the-vote programs for young voters, the vast majority of programs they cited as examples might be dubbed “modest” and “traditional.” A common example of a response given was “some people in our party have spoken at area schools.” Only a handful mentioned programs that might be considered significant.

“The political parties clearly must play a bigger role if we’re going to reverse the trend of increasing youth disengagement in the electoral process,” said William A. Galston, the Director of CIRCLE. “The good news is that party leaders on the front lines recognize that this is a major problem and that they can do something about it. The bad news is they aren’t making the effort for young people and the future of our democracy.”

This unique telephone survey covered a random sample of 805 Democratic and Republican county party chairs from the 1,000 most populous counties—together accounting for 87 percent of the adult population. Doctors Shea and Green conducted the research in October 2003 to investigate the vibrancy of local political parties. Specifically, this study sought to determine how local parties are connecting with young voters—what is working, and what is not working. The University of Akron Center for Policy Studies was contracted to conduct the poll. The report is available online at www.allegheny.edu/mobilizing.pdf and www.civicyouth.org.

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NOTE: Dr. Shea is pleased to comment and to provide insight and background information about this project. He is experienced in talking with media and will provide responses and explanations that will appeal to listeners and readers alike. To schedule an interview, please contact Barb Steadman in the Office of Public Affairs, at (814) 332-6755 or barbara.steadman@allegheny.edu.

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