

KEY FACTS

Fall 2004

Media, Youth, and Civic Engagement

Ever since 18 year-olds first became eligible to vote in 1972, voter turnout among young Americans has steadily declined. Current statistics show at least 40 percent of 18-25 year-olds are not registered to vote, and 2 out of 3 who are registered tend not to vote.¹ Experts are concerned that the current trend reflects “an ingrained generational characteristic rather than a stage in the life cycle that will remedy itself with time,” and if it persists, civic engagement will continue to decline as this generation ages.² Media have been singled out as one of the reasons for Gen Y’s (born after 1976) disconnect to public life, while at the same time cited as one of the ways to motivate them to become engaged citizens. There is evidence that the new media environment may play an integral role in fostering active and informed engagement among e-savvy youth who are increasingly turning away from mainstream media in favor of Web, wireless, and other alternative information sources.

The Role of Media in Youth Civic Engagement

Several studies indicate that most young Americans do not keep particularly well-informed about current events and politics. When they use media for news on elections and other current events, they tend to rely on a variety of sources, with the Internet and comedy TV shows of increasing importance.

- According to a study commissioned by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE), both Democratic and Republican leaders perceive youth civic disengagement as a critical problem and think that media are among the primary causes of their lack of participation. Two thirds (65%) of the party leaders surveyed think “media has done much to turn young people away from politics.”³
- On the other hand, data from the IEA Civic Education Study (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) indicate that media play a significant role in developing high school students’ civic knowledge and engagement skills. The more time adolescents spend watching

TV news or reading newspapers, the higher their civic knowledge as indicated by scores on the Civic Education Knowledge test.⁴

- According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press in association with the Pew Internet & American Life Project, young people of voting age under 30 pay much less attention and are much less aware of major campaign events and less knowledgeable about the candidates than people over 50. Close to two-thirds (64%) of 18-29 year-olds say that they were “not too” or “not at all” interested in campaign news.⁵
- A survey of young Americans’ political interest and news habits found that as few as 3 out of 10 young Americans regularly read newspapers (30%), watch TV news (38%), or listen to news on the radio (33%) at least 5 out of 7 days a week, or read a news magazine (37%) at least once a week; just 1 in 6 (16%) regularly go online for news.⁶ Another survey found that approximately 4 in 10 young people say they rely on TV news (39%) or newspapers and magazines (42%) for campaign information, and one-quarter (26%) use the Internet to make political decisions.⁷
- The Pew study found that young people rely most on TV news but are increasingly turning to alternative and innovative media sources for political information. With the exception of cable TV news, which has remained a main source of campaign information for the 2004 election among more than one-third of young people (38% in 2000 vs. 37% in 2004), there have been dramatic declines in local news (from 42% to 29%), network news (from 39% to 23%), and daily newspapers (from 32% to 23%). At the same time TV news magazines (up from 18% to 26%), comedy TV shows (up from 9% to 21%), and the Internet (up from 13% to 20%) have become increasingly important political news sources among young people.⁸

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Gen Y's Top 10 Media for Campaign News*			
2004 vs. 2000			
	2004	2000	% Change
Cable News	37%	38%	-1
Local News	29%	42%	-13
TV News Magazines	26%	18%	+8
Network News	23%	39%	-16
Daily Newspapers	23%	32%	-9
Comedy TV Shows	21%	9%	+12
Internet	20%	13%	-16
Morning TV Shows	18%	16%	+2
Cable Political Talk	17%	15%	+2
Talk Radio	16%	16%	0

*Percentages are based on 18-29 year-olds who "regularly learn something about the presidential campaign or candidates" from this source.
Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Pew Internet & American Life Project, "Cable and Internet Loom Large in Fragmented Political News Universe," January 11, 2004

- Of the media sources where young people get their political news, comedy TV is the one that has increased the most in popularity since the 2000 election. More than twice as many teens and 20-somethings report regularly learning something from comedy TV shows about the candidates and the campaign in 2004 than they did in 2000 (21% vs. 9%). One out of every two young people (50%) say they at least "sometimes" learn about the election from shows such as NBC's *Saturday Night Live* and Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*. When late night TV shows such as Jay Leno and David Letterman are considered as well, 6 in 10 (61%) viewers between 18 and 30 say they sometimes learn about the campaign from comedy or late night shows.⁹ In fact, during the weeks of the Iowa caucus, New Hampshire primary, and State of the Union address, *The Daily Show* reportedly reached a ratings milestone with more 18-34 year-old male viewers than any of the network evening news shows.¹⁰ The Pew study, however, also found that those who regularly rely on comedy news for their information were also the least well-informed.¹¹
- While talk radio ranked last in the Pew study as a source of campaign news for young people, many have speculated about the possible impact of radio hosts such as Don Imus or Howard Stern on their listeners. In 2004, Stern in particular has made a determined effort to turn out his audience in the presidential campaign.¹²

Using Media to Get Out the Youth Vote

Several nonpartisan efforts have launched voter registration drives using Web and wireless media as forums to discuss issues, post news updates, and plan local meetings, along with media campaigns featuring musicians, actors, and other celebrities to motivate youth to vote. In the 2004 presidential campaign, Bruce Springsteen is headlining a series of October concerts designed to motivate audience members to turn out the vote. Here is a short list of media-based efforts to stimulate the youth vote:

- *Rock the Vote* (www.rockthevote.com), established by music industry leaders to connect the entertainment community and the youth culture, coordinates media campaigns and activities that empower young people with projects such as Community Street Team, Human Relations Campaign, Rap the Vote, RTV Latino, and Rock the Native Vote. Online voter information and registration forms, weekly text messaging via cell phones about election news updates, reminders to vote and information about polling locations, even advertising partnerships with clothing manufacturers, are part of its effort to get out the youth vote.
- *Choose or Lose 2004* (www.mtv.com/chooseorlose), a partnership of MTV and a diverse coalition of youth organizations, including *Rock the Vote*, *Hip-Hop Team*, *WWE's Smackdown Your Vote!*, *New Voter's Project*, *Declare Yourself*, and *the Youth Vote Coalition*, focuses on the shared goal of registering 20 million youth to vote in the presidential election. The "20 Million Loud" movement merges on-air, online and offline media in a number of high-profile events that include MTV news specials, concerts, and grassroots events, as well as a *Pre-Lecture* for 18-30 year-old registered voters to cast their ballot in a simulated, secure cyberspace election during the weeks before the election.
- *Declare Yourself* (www.declareyourself.com), a project of the Declaration of Independence Road Trip, rallied young people to vote with a multimedia education and empowerment campaign that featured voter registration forms on its website. Billboards in Times Square, which also appeared as ads in magazines aimed at youth readers, sent the message "Only you can silence yourself" using visuals of Christina Aguilera and Andre 3000 with their mouths sewn shut. PSAs on *Comedy Central* and streaming online versions featured an array of celebrities who parodied makeup and pet food commercials that depicted the stars' mouth sealed, bolted or muzzled. Televised concerts and nationwide live spoken word and music tours were also used to get out the youth vote.

- *Hip-Hop Summit Action Network* (www.hsan.org) merges a musical genre with political action to engage disenfranchised urban youth in community-building dialogue and leadership development activities. *Hip-Hop Team Vote*, its voter registration drive, joined with *WWE's Smackdown Your Vote!* in the "Two Million More in 2004" initiative to register two million fans 18-30 for the 2004 election and *Choose or Lose: 20 Million Loud*, and also partnered with *Rock the Vote* and Rocawear to manufacture an election cap with their three logos, including limited signed editions of the cap by Roc-A-Fella Records recording artists auctioned online as part of the campaign.

How TV and Movies Depict Politics and Government

In the 2004 election, politically based but widely released documentaries such as *Fahrenheit 911* sparked public debate and commentary from the pundits; but their actual impact on voting has yet to be determined. Over the years, many popular fictional TV shows and movies have portrayed politicians and government agencies, and may also help shape young people's views of the political process – for better or worse. Movies like *Wag the Dog*, *Primary Colors* or *Bulworth* may feed into audience cynicism, while those like *The American President* or *Air Force One* paint a different picture, with a focus on heroism or romance. Many TV shows focused around government agencies have come and gone, but others have come and stayed: *The West Wing* may have done more to enhance the notion of public service among young viewers than a year of civics classes in high school, while *24* may be encouraging others to believe the CIA really *would* be behind a plot to blow up Los Angeles with a nuclear bomb. The impact of such portrayals on viewers' perceptions of government and public service has not been studied in a systematic way, but as the number of such shows proliferates the time for such research may be right.

Going Online for Citizenship

*Speed, cost, accessibility, and interactivity are casting the Internet as a formidable tool for engaging youth in civic and political discussion and action, especially among those who prefer communications they can select to "opt in" rather than formats without the interactivity to choose what interests them.*¹³

- A comprehensive analysis of online civic content by the Center for Social Media at American University concludes that the Internet has paved the way for a "youth civic culture" which potentially could change the way the younger generation engages in civic and political activities and, ultimately, participates in democracy. Currently, there are hundreds of websites that constitute an online civic sector inhabited by young "e-citizens" – from voting, volunteering and political activism to alternative journalism. Many of the sites are created and managed by youth themselves. A virtual tour that maps Internet-based youth civic and political engagement sites is available at <http://centerforsocialmedia.org/ecitizens/index.htm>.¹⁴
- There are several websites specifically designed to increase civic literacy and introduce under-voting-age-kids to the civic and political culture. An example is Kids Voting USA (KVUSA), a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, which combines classroom and community activities to teach students in grades K-12 and their families the "knowledge, skills and confidence to be active citizens." Students learn about civic rights and responsibilities and the importance of political participation, even casting a ballot on election day to have the experience of voting.¹⁵
- A variety of e-strategies have emerged that deliver campaign information to young people online: e-mail appeals for voter registration and campaign contributions, campaign-sponsored chat rooms, weblogs expressing the candidate or campaign viewpoint, freelance bloggers injecting their own viewpoint to influence the political debate, as well as text messaging by cell phone and other handheld devices.¹⁶ The latest cyberspace innovation is the select-a-candidate site that provides bite-size interactive information about the issues and allows voters to rank or grade candidates on how well they conform to a voter's needs or views.¹⁷
- According to a survey conducted for CIRCLE and the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, certain online strategies may be potentially more effective than others in cultivating cyber-citizenship. Gen Y tends to *react positively* to opt-in services, such as sites they can choose to visit or e-mail they can decide to open or not, and online communications that are interactive and personalized. Most popular are chat rooms where visitors can ask questions (60% more likely to pay attention vs. 32% turned off), followed by e-mails about issues important to their generation (54% more likely to pay attention

vs. 37% turned off), candidate-sponsored weblogs (50% more likely to pay attention vs. 40% turned off), and local campaign events organized by Meetup.org (47% more likely to pay attention vs. 38% turned off).¹⁸

- Online political communication that tends to *turn off* young people involve “viral” campaigns that are less personalized and less interactive: most unwelcome are weekly text messages with campaign updates via cell phone or other handheld device (69% turned off vs. 23% more likely to pay attention), followed by Internet banner ads (53% turned off vs. 36% more likely to pay attention), e-mails encouraging voter turnout (50% turned off vs. 41% more likely to pay attention), and weekly e-mail updates about campaign endorsements and events (49% turned off vs. 42% more likely).¹⁹
- A joint study of the Pew Research Center for People & the Press and the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that more people of all ages are going online for election information primarily for convenience. Among young voters ages 18-29 who get election news from the Internet, 3 out of 5 (61%) say they go online because it is more convenient. Half (50%) of 18-29 year-old Internet news consumers say their voting decisions are influenced by what they learn online.²⁰

Endnotes

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¹⁶ Pew, “Cable and Internet Loom Large.”

¹⁷ Tony Perry, “Political Websites Try to Click with Younger Generation of Voters,” *Los Angeles Times*, 31 March 2004, <<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/politics/la-na-cyberpolitics31mar31,1,4544247.story?coll=la-news-politics-national>> (20 Aug 2004).

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