

**Local Party Dynamics in the Twenty-First Century**

**Daniel M. Shea, Director  
The Center for Political Participation  
Allegheny College  
Meadville, PA  
814-332-3344  
[dshea@allegheny.edu](mailto:dshea@allegheny.edu)**

**John C. Green, Director  
The Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics  
University of Akron  
Akron, OH  
330-972-5182  
[green@uakron.edu](mailto:green@uakron.edu)**

**October 5, 2005**

**Prepared for delivery at the State of the Parties Conference, Ray C. Bliss Institute of  
Applied Politics at the University of Akron, October 4-6, 2005**

## Abstract

Political parties seem alive and well in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—at least at the state and national levels. But are they also vibrant at the local level? One way to assess this question is to consider what they are doing to build the next generation of partisans and party activists. That is, what are parties doing to connect with young voters? Are they working to bring them into the electoral process in meaningful ways? Much related, can some local parties tell us how best to connect with young voters?

Between October 1 and November 10, 2003, we conducted interviews with 805 local party leaders, randomly selected from across the nation, over the telephone. They were asked a range of questions, many dealing with youth mobilization. We find that local party leaders perceive youth disengagement as a critical problem, and believe that their organizations have the potential to turn things around. Yet, young voters do not seem to be on the radar for local party leaders--even when the leaders were asked about the “long-term success of their organizations.” When local party organizations make an effort to mobilize young voters, their efforts seem to be effective, however. There are modest differences between the parties, but the broad conclusion that local parties may be dropping the ball with young voters seems to apply to both the Democrats and the Republicans. We argue that local parties have the potential to play a major role in rejuvenating political participation in America, but that real innovation is needed. That is, local parties will have to develop novel outreach programs and expand their social activities.

## **The Problem: The Shrinking Electorate**

America has witnessed a stunning decline in political participation. Shrinking voter turnout is one indicator of the problem, surely the most recognizable, but other modes of political behavior—such as sending letters to elected officials, helping a candidate or a party, wearing a campaign button, talking about politics with family and friends—have declined as well. According to the American National Election Study, the number of Americans “very much interested” in political campaigns has dropped by nearly 40 percent since the 1960s. Nielson Media Research data indicate that the number of Americans watching the presidential debates has shrunk by nearly 50 percent since 1980. The evidence of withdrawal is overwhelming.

The problem is especially pronounced among younger Americans. In 1972, the first election in which 18-year-olds had the right to vote, 50 percent did so. In recent elections this figure has dropped roughly 30 percent. In the last two midterm congressional elections, this figure fell below 20 percent. A recent study of younger Americans, also commissioned by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), found that while attitudes toward government may have improved in the wake of September 11, 2001, the number of young Americans willing to take part in our political system is shrinking. Only about two-thirds of the 18- to 25-year-olds in the CIRCLE survey had even registered to vote, a decline from two years before, and 49 percent of the overall group (15- to 25-year-olds) said that voting “is a little important or not at all important to them.” Many other indicators in this study, and in numerous other studies, suggest the same: younger voters are turned off by politics.

Much to the surprise of scholars, pundits, and older Americans, the decline in youth voting made a dramatic turn-around in 2004. Voter turnout increased among all Americans by about four percent, but the increase was greatest among the youngest voters. Whereas just 36 percent of 18-24 year olds voted in 2000, some 47 percent did so in 2004. This represented a stunning 11 percent increase—double the rate of increase among any other age group. Young voters still vote less than older Americans, but the 2004 election suggested that the disparity among age groups may be narrowing.

The departure of young Americans from the electoral sphere during the past few decades may have profound policy implications. In the November 16, 2001, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, scholar William Galston wrote, “The withdrawal of a cohort of citizens from public affairs disturbs the balance of public deliberation—to the detriment of those who withdraw, but of the rest of us as well.” And of course higher or lower turnout by young voters may shape the outcome of future elections. Perhaps more so than in previous elections, Democratic presidential candidates—especially Howard Dean—believe that reversing this trend will increase their chances of taking up residence in the White House.

### **The Party Connection**

Most efforts to reverse this disturbing trend have centered on the citizen. That is, most observers have assumed that the decline of involvement is due to changes in attitudes, especially among younger Americans, who are often accused of apathy, cynicism, and alienation. The solution, then, is to retool and reinvigorate the citizen. For instance, many high school and college programs have been developed to promote students’ interest and involvement in politics. MTV’s *Rock the Vote*, which emerged in

1992 and has been reenergized for the 2004 presidential contest, is an example of a prominent program of this sort.

A less common approach has been to focus on political elites, arguing that the problem lies with the behavior of public officials and other practitioners of politics. Here the main culprit is “new-style political campaigns,” which focus on negative campaigning, extensive fundraising, and the precise targeting of voters. Media coverage of politics has also been blamed. In that case, the solution is to change the style of campaign and campaign coverage to more effectively engage younger citizens. These efforts are important and may make a difference. Yet, even a cursory look at levels of participation in American history underscores the importance of mobilizing institutions such as local political parties. Simply put, participation in the American political system has been highest when local political parties were vibrant. This is a recurring theme in the parties literature. In 1942, Schattschneider noted, “Once party organizations become active in the electorate, a vast field of extension and intensification of effort is opened up, the extension of the franchise to new social classes, for example” (1942, 47). The authors of the 1950 APSR report, “Toward a More Responsible Two-party System” suggested that “More significant operation of the party system would create greater interest in voting” (1950, 76). And of course this supposition has some empirical teeth as well (see, for example, Frensdries, Gibson and Vertz 1990; Holbrook and McClurg 2005). Surprisingly, however, few studies to date have probed the extent to which local parties promote youth participation.

## **This Study**

We received a grant from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) to conduct an exploration of local party organizations and young voters. A significant component of the study is a telephone survey of local party leaders from across the nation. It was conducted between October 1 and November 10, 2003.<sup>i</sup> Each interview lasted roughly 30 minutes, and the questions dealt with a host of issues related to youth engagement and party politics more generally. The sample, randomly drawn, was based on the population of Democratic and Republican chairs in the 1,000 most populated counties in the United States, which together include 87 percent of the population. In all, 403 Democratic and 402 Republican local county chairs were interviewed. The cooperation rate was about 50 percent.

## **Findings**

### *Perceptions of the Problem*

Before exploring what local party organizations might be doing to combat youth apathy, the survey explored their perceptions of the problem. The leaders were asked if they agree with the statement “The lack of political engagement by young people is a serious problem.” Some 52 percent “strongly agreed” with the statement and 36 “agreed.” Only 60 party leaders (7.5 percent) disagreed with the statement.

Party differences are interesting. Just fewer than 66 percent of the Democratic leaders “strongly agreed” with the statement, compared to 39 percent of GOP leaders. Conversely, just 3 percent of Democrats “disagreed” that it is a serious problem, compared with 12 percent of Republicans. There are a number of plausible explanations for this difference, one of which is strategic calculation: perhaps the Democrats see

youth disengagement as a major problem because they believe it costs them votes.

Overall, it seems clear that those in the political trenches see declining youth participation as a serious problem.

### *Who or What Is to Blame?*

A series of questions probed what party leaders saw as the root of the problem. Table 1, pages 19–20, charts the results. Surprisingly, the amount of money spent in elections was not seen as a significant factor—at least compared to the other possibilities. Only 8 percent of party leaders “strongly agreed” and 30 percent “agreed” that “young voters are turned off to politics because of the amount of money involved.” There are some party differences, but not as much as one might expect: 10 percent of Democrats “strongly agreed,” compared to 6 percent for GOP leaders. Some 57 percent of Democrats and 66 percent of Republicans either had no opinion or disagreed with the statement. It would seem, contrary to popular perception, that money is not the root of the problem—at least not from the perspective of local party officials.

### **Table 1 about here**

The data highlighted three primary causes, according to party leaders, for young Americans’ seeming lack of interest in politics: First, 71 percent of party leaders disagreed with the statement that “high schools do a lot to prepare young people for their role as citizens.” Of this number, 247 (31 percent) “strongly disagreed” with this statement. It would seem that much of the problem might be placed at the doorstep of our schools—at least from the perspectives of local party leaders. This finding is

consistent with a number of recent reports and studies that suggest the decline in civic education is a key part of the problem.<sup>1</sup>

Second, 70 percent of the respondents agree or strongly agree that negative campaigning turns off young voters. This is consistent with a number of scholarly perspectives, including Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar (1997). Third, the media gets its share of the blame: some 65 percent of respondents either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that the “media has done much to turn young people away from politics.”

Party differences on each of these questions were minimal, with the exception that Democratic Party leaders were a bit more likely to blame candidates for ignoring young voters and a bit less likely to blame high school instruction.

#### *Can Parties Make a Difference?*

Clearly, chairs are optimistic that local parties can make a difference: 39 percent of respondents “strongly agreed” and 54 percent “agreed” (93 percent overall) with the statement that “local parties can make a big difference getting young people involved in politics.” This is consistent with the core premise of the study: local political parties have the potential to play a significant role in reversing the trend of apathy among young voters.

But are local parties viable—able to follow through on that perception that they can make a difference? Several recent studies conducted by Alan Gitelson and John Frensdries and others (1993, 1996, 1999) suggest local parties are alive and well. In their

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, a recent report by the Representative Democracy Project, a federally funded partnership among the national Conference of State Legislatures, the Center for Civic Education, and the Center on Congress at Indiana University; numerous studies commissioned by the Center for Civic Education; and several studies by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Engagement and Learning.



1999 study they note “considerable evidence” indicates that local parties are increasingly active (135). Our data reinforces this finding, as noted in Table 2. For example, some 62 percent of the county committees had headquarters during campaigns, and nearly 40 percent had them year-round. These figures are actually a good bit higher than found by Gitelson and Frensdries. They also found about four percent of the county committees in their study boasted full-time staff, while we find roughly twice that amount. If anything, our data suggests party committees are capable of reaching out to young voters.

**Table 2 about here**

A series of questions were used to measure the range of each local party’s campaign activities, as noted in Table 3. More specifically, to what extent do they still conduct aggressive voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives? Results suggest that mobilization efforts are central, as noted in Table 2, page 21. In fact, even though GOTV efforts occur during just the last few days of the election, about 50 percent of our respondents noted that between 20 and 50 percent of their committee’s efforts were spent on this one activity. The overall average “proportion of effort” for get-out-the-vote drives was 31.7 percent—and there was essentially no difference between the parties. This is significantly larger than for any other activity.

**Table 3 about here**

Additionally, questions asked respondents whether their organization received assistance from state and national party committees to get-out-the-vote. Only 16 percent said they did not receive this sort of help, with most noting that assistance, while not overwhelming, was significant. Our findings therefore suggest, once again, that voter mobilization lies at the heart of local party functions.

### *Are Parties Working to Connect with Young Voters?*

Recognizing the problem and that one's organization has the potential to make a difference in finding a solution is one thing, but actually developing programs to achieve that goal is quite another. Here we discover one of the most significant findings of the study. First, we attempted to measure the extent to which young voters are on the minds of local party leaders—are they on their “radar,” so to speak? Near the beginning of the survey we asked an open-ended question: “Are there demographic groups of voters that are currently important to the long-term success of your local party.” “Young voters” (defined as 18 to 25 years of age) were mentioned by just 8 percent of party leaders, as noted in Table 4. Senior citizens were mentioned nearly three times as often, even though the question addresses the “long-term success of the party.”

#### **Table 4 about here**

Next, respondents were asked to think of another group. Here “young voters” were mentioned by 12 percent of the respondents. Finally, respondents were asked a third time to mention an important demographic group for the long-term success of the party, at which time 18 percent pointed to younger voters. In all, local party leaders were given three opportunities to suggest younger voters are important to the long-term success of their party, but just a tad over one-third did so.

There is some variation by party. Republican leaders were nearly twice as likely to mention young voters on the first question (8 percent compared to 5 percent). But on the next two opportunities, the Democrats were more likely mention young voters. With the three opportunities combined, 129 Democratic leaders (32 percent) and 104 GOP chairs (26 percent) mention young voters.

The survey asked respondents if they have developed specific get-out-the-vote programs for young voters. Here, just 41 percent of party leaders said yes. A follow-up question asked them to describe their program. On closer inspection we find that a vast majority of these programs might be dubbed “modest” and “traditional.” For example, a common response was “Some people in our party have spoken at area schools” or “Our people set up booths at fairs and malls.” Only a handful of party chairs mentioned what we might call significant activities, programs that require a significant amount of time or resources. Roughly one-half seem limited to college programs—such as working with the College Republicans or Young Democrats. “We make contacts with campus College Republicans,” noted one, and another said that “we work with Young Democrats organizations on college campuses.” Moreover, many of the respondents who mentioned that they had programs were unable to provide much specificity. While it is fair to say that these efforts might make a difference, college students are already much more likely to vote than non-college students, and about one-half of this age group does not attend college.<sup>2</sup>

Why would so many party chairs suggest youth engagement is a serious problem and that their efforts have the potential to make a difference, but at the same time be unable to outline significant, specific programs for young voters? Clearly, a local party might consider numerous groups to be of critical importance to their efforts. Minority voters, union members, and women, for example, were frequently mentioned by Democratic leaders, and blue-collar workers and middle-class citizens were often noted by Republic leaders—just to mention a few. Given that census estimates are that younger

---

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the “college connection” and voting rates, see CIRCLE information at [http://www.civicyouth.org/quick/non\\_college.htm](http://www.civicyouth.org/quick/non_college.htm)

voters make up only 14 percent of the electorate, we might expect political operatives to pay a limited amount of attention to this group. Indeed, perhaps they are giving this group enough attention.

On the other hand, the question speaks to the long-term success of the local party. Given the importance of political socialization—that is, early-in-life connections to a party and the election process—party operatives’ lack of attention to young voters seems puzzling. One of the criticisms leveled against contemporary parties is that they are increasingly short-sighted; winning the election at hand has become more important than developing a long-term, broad-based following. Writing in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Don Peck says, “In recent decades parties have moved away from grassroots mobilization efforts, which reach out to nonvoters, to focus on ‘switching’ independents who have a strong history of voting.”<sup>3</sup> Our survey asked which of the following should be given priority by local political parties, “helping candidates win elections or helping voters develop attachments to the parties.” A sizable majority—some 63 percent—suggested helping candidates is more important than building loyal supporters. This was true for 59 percent of the Democrats and 62 percent of the Republicans. Moreover, we asked the chairs how much effort they put into non-electoral activities—that is, programs that occur during off-election periods. A full 70 percent of respondents report that their county committees spend less than 10 percent of their time on such activities.

## **Discussion**

One reason why young voters might not spring to mind as an important group for local parties may be the difficulty of reaching out to them. Local party chairs were asked, “In your experience, how difficult has it been to mobilize young voters, 18 to 25 years of

---

<sup>3</sup> Don Peck, “The Shrinking Electorate,” *Atlantic Monthly*, November 2002, p. 48.

age?” Some 46 percent noted that it has been “very difficult,” and 45 percent said it was “difficult.” There is some variation by party: 56 percent of the Democrats and 37 percent of the Republicans said youth mobilization was “very difficult.” Conversely, only 5 percent of Democrats and 13 percent of GOP chairs said it was “not at all difficult.”

It would seem, however, that the perceptions of the difficulty of connecting with young voters might be at variance with the reality. Of those chairs that noted their committees have viable youth GOTV programs, 37 percent said that those programs have been a “very difficult” endeavor. This compares to 58 percent for those who do not have youth mobilization programs. The number of chairs who suggested getting young voters to participate was “not at all difficult” was twice as high for those who actually had programs than for those without them. Perhaps many of the local parties no longer have such programs because they did not prove to be worth the effort.

As to why young flocked to the polls in 2004, there are a number of possible explanations. For one, the decline in youth participation was so startling that many organizations and programs were initiated to bring them back to the polls, such as MTV’s Rock the Vote and Choose or Lose; Justvotenow.org; New Voters Project; Smack Down Your Vote!; and Youth Vote Coalition, to name only a few. Given how close the presidential election appeared, it seems that operatives on both sides sought out new groups of supporters, and young voters were a prime group. That is to say, young voters were targeted by both campaigns in 2004. Several new election-centered organizations set their sights on bring voters to the polls, such as American Coming Together and MoveOn.org. It seems entirely possible that young Americans were pulled into the electoral process due to the intensity of the campaign and the weight of the issues. The

war in Iraq, gay marriage, the future of Social Security, stem cell research and much else captivated our attention and drew young voters into the political process.

But did local parties play a role in the rejuvenation? The answer is unclear. The local party leaders interviewed for this research are correct: mobilizing young voters is a difficult chore—likely to become even harder in the years ahead. Yet, astute political operatives will look at this group of potential voters with a keen eye—especially if they are interested in the long-term success of their party. Young voters, it would seem, are increasingly up for grabs. Perhaps the necessity to mobilize young voters in order to win elections will also lead to a more healthy democracy. Local parties can make a difference in youth participation, but they may also be the link to a more vibrant political process overall.

We believe that the problem that many local party committees confront in effectively reaching out to young voters seems to stem from a lack of innovation. Simply put, traditional approaches to getting-out-the-vote are ineffective with the new generation. It does not appear to be enough simply to “hand out voter registration cards at the high schools” or to “make calls before election day,” as suggested by two of our respondents.

**Table 1. Who or What Is to Blame for Declining Youth Participation in Politics?**

**Young Voters Will Respond to the Right Candidates and Issues**

<i>Party</i>	<i>Chairpersons</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>No Opinion</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
Dem	401	133	228	11	28	1
		33.2%	56.9%	2.7%	7.0%	.2%
Rep	400	118	222	17	41	2
		29.5%	55.5%	4.3%	10.3%	.5%
TOTAL	801	251	450	28	69	3
		31.3%	56.2%	3.5%	8.6%	.4%

**Candidates Ignore the Youth Vote**

<i>Party</i>	<i>Chairpersons</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>No Opinion</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
Dem	401	54	205	32	102	8
		13.5%	51.1%	8.0%	25.4%	2.0%
Rep	395	44	169	30	139	13
		11.1%	42.8%	7.6%	35.2%	3.3%
TOTAL	796	98	374	62	241	21
		12.3%	47.0%	7.8%	30.3%	2.6%

**Young People Are Turned Off by the Negativity of Campaigns**

<i>Party</i>	<i>Chairpersons</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>No Opinion</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
Dem	401	99	200	27	68	7
		24.7%	49.9%	6.7%	17.0	1.7%
Rep	391	77	177	35	92	10
		19.7%	45.3%	9.0%	23.5%	2.6%
TOTAL	792	176	377	62	160	17
		22.2%	47.6%	7.8%	20.2%	2.1%

**Media Has Done Much to Turn Young People Away from Politics**

<i>Party</i>	<i>Chairpersons</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>No Opinion</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
Dem	399	96	136	28	129	10
		24.1%	34.1%	7.0%	32.3	2.5%
Rep	398	143	146	22	80	7
		35.9%	36.7%	5.5%	20.1%	1.8%
TOTAL	797	239	282	50	209	17
		30.0%	35.4%	6.3%	26.2%	2.1%

**Young Voters Are Turned Off to Politics Because of the Amount of Money Involved**

<i>Party</i>	<i>Chairpersons</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>No Opinion</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
Dem	399	41	132	42	164	20
		10.3%	33.1%	10.5%	41.1%	5.0%
Rep	397	23	110	28	207	29
		5.8%	27.7%	7.1%	52.1%	7.3%
TOTAL	796	64	242	70	371	49
		8.0%	30.4%	8.8%	46.6%	6.2%

**High Schools Do a Lot to Prepare Young People for Their Role as Citizens**

<i>Party</i>	<i>Chairpersons</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>No Opinion</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
Dem	399	17	105	11	165	101
		4.3%	26.3%	2.8%	41.4%	25.3%
Rep	397	9	76	12	154	146
		2.3%	19.1%	3.0%	38.8%	36.8%
TOTAL	796	26	181	23	319	247
		3.3%	22.7%	2.9%	40.1%	31.0%



Table 2 Local Party Resources

	<b>Democrats</b>	<b>Republicans</b>	<b>All</b>
% of Local committee filled	66.0	69.0	67.5
% Headquarters during campaigns	63.1	60.8	61.9
% With Website	57.6	64.3	61.0
% Year round headquarters	34.8	41.4	38.0
% Full time staff	6.5	8.6	7.6

N=804

*Source: Survey by Authors*

Table 3. Local Parties Activities: Mean Percent of Local Party Effort

Party		GOTV	Campaign Events	Campaign services	Voter Registration	Non-campaign events
Democrats	Mean	<b>31.6</b>	<b>18.0</b>	<b>17.9</b>	<b>17.7</b>	<b>11.0</b>
	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	19.5	15.1	14.8	15.4	11.9
Republicans	Mean	<b>31.4</b>	<b>19.8</b>	<b>20.5</b>	<b>16.2</b>	<b>11.1</b>
	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	18.8	14.9	16.4	14.8	11.5
All	Mean	<b>31.5</b>	<b>18.9</b>	<b>19.2</b>	<b>16.9</b>	<b>11.1</b>
	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	19.1	15.0	15.7	15.1	11.7

N=804

*Source: Survey by Authors*

**Table 4. Groups Important for the Long-Term Success of the Local Party: Priority of Young Voters versus Senior Voters**

**PRIORITIES**

Youth Most Important Group	8%	Seniors Most Important Group	21%
Youth Second Important Group	12%	Seniors Second Important Group	19%
Youth Mentioned as Important	18%	Seniors Mentioned as Important	10%
Total Priority to Youth	38%	Total Priority to Seniors	49%

\* This was an open-ended question. Respondents were asked to note the most important demographic group for the “long-term success of their party.” They were then asked a second time, and finally they were asked to list any other groups they considered important.

---