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Internet Has Limited Appeal – and Some Real Traps – As Tool For Bringing Young People Into Politics

Survey Reveals Top Issue Priorities for Youth and Decline in Trust

The Internet still lags behind other methods as an effective way for political campaigns to reach young people, but it can be a powerful tool for involving engaged youth, according to a new survey released today. While it has limited potential for attracting disaffected and disinterested youth, the Internet shows real promise for mobilizing partisan, ideological, and interested young people.

The most effective Internet-based political-organizing tools are online chat rooms, e-mails on issues, weblogs geared to youth, and candidate events like those organized by Meetup.org. Those are especially popular among young people who are liberal, college educated, and concerned about Iraq, as well as religious youth. Young people react negatively to Internet banner ads, e-mails encouraging voter turnout, weekly e-mailed campaign updates, and especially text messages on handheld devices.

The survey of 15-25 year olds, the so-called “DotNet Generation,” was sponsored by the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at The Council for Excellence in Government and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). It was conducted by Democratic pollsters Lake Snell Perry & Associates and Republican pollsters The Tarrance Group.

“Our survey shows the Internet can be an important tool for getting young people politically engaged, but it’s not a silver bullet,” according to former Congressman David Skaggs, the Executive Director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship. “Some political uses of the Internet work well with this age group, but some are a turn-off. This voting block is up for grabs, and smart candidates and political organizations will want to know the cyber techniques that actually can work to reach it.”

Young people prefer Internet communications they can choose to receive, not unsolicited messages. The percentages who said they would be more likely to pay attention to campaigns if they used these techniques are:

- Online chat rooms 60 %
- E-mails on issues 54 %
- Weblogs with issues 50 %

But young people said some other Internet techniques would be a turn-off or make them less likely to pay attention to campaigns. The most negatively viewed techniques were:

- Weekly text messages 69 %
- Internet banner ads 53 %
- E-mails urging voting 50 %

“The good news for campaigns is that the Internet can be a very cost-effective way to reach young people, and it has the potential to be the primary tool for reaching engaged youth,” said pollster Ed Goetas. “And campaigns can use the same tools and same issues to reach and target younger voters as they’re using for older voters.”

By a wide margin, young people think Internet information on politics and public affairs is as accurate as newspapers and TV reports, with 57 percent saying its accuracy is about the same and 13 percent saying it’s more accurate, while 22 percent viewing it as less so.

Like older Americans, young people still rely on traditional means to help them decide their vote. The sources used most to decide who to support or vote for are newspapers and magazines (42 percent), TV news programs (39 percent), friends and family members (38 percent), candidate debates (33 percent), and the Internet (26 percent).

“We know we need to do a better job of talking to young people if we’re going to engage them in the political process,” said pollster Celinda Lake. “This survey confirms that we have a long way to go for some, but it also tells candidates that there are good tools for reaching others and we should start using them. The Internet is one of those tools, but not a cure all.”

Drop in Trust in Government and Volunteering

The survey also revealed a sharp drop in trust, as only 50 percent said they trust the government to do what is right, a 12-point drop from two years earlier. And only 35 percent say most people can be trusted, down from 41 percent in 2002.

Not many young people are participating in community service – just 26 percent have done so in the past year – and volunteering drops off quickly after high school. While 40 percent of 15-17 year olds have volunteered in the last year, only about half of those ages 18-25 did so.

“Although we saw a dramatic drop in trust levels over the last year, young people generally trust government more than older people, while they trust other people less,” said Peter Levine, CIRCLE’s Deputy Director. “Far too many young people remain disengaged from the political process, even in a year that featured war and other issues of concern to them. The future of our democracy requires that we find creative ways to address this disaffection.”

The Issues – The Economy, College Costs, and Iraq

The survey also provided the latest information on young people’s attitudes on national issues, with one in five saying “jobs and the economy” is the number one problem facing the country, almost double the 11 percent who called the war in Iraq as the top problem.

When asked to rate on a scale from 0-10 the issues that are most important in deciding how they might vote, the respondents’ top five choices were:

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| 1. Creation of good paying jobs | 9.0 (mean) |
| 2. Access to affordable college | 8.7 |
| 3. The war in Iraq | 8.2 |
| Access to affordable health care | 8.2 |
| 5. Safety from terrorism | 8.0 |

With the exception of the cost of college, these are similar to the issue priorities of older voters.

For candidates, young adults are basically a group that is up for grabs – evenly split between identifying themselves as Democrats (32 percent), Republicans (28 percent), Independents (25 percent), and not knowing (15 percent). Also, far fewer of this age group are strong partisans.

The survey of 1,000 people between the ages of 15 and 25 was conducted November 17-24, 2003, and has a margin of error of +/- 3.1 percent. It was supported by CIRCLE, The Pew Charitable Trusts, Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Gill Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and the W.T. Grant Foundation.

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The Council for Excellence in Government is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to improve the performance of government and to enhance American citizens' understanding of and participation in their democracy. Visit the Campaign for Young Voters Toolkit at www.campaignyoungvoters.org.

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