

## TAPPING INTO THE POTENTIAL OF THE WEB TO REACH YOUNG VOTERS

**I**ncreasingly, politicians are turning to the internet as another way to attract and inform voters. Young people represent a prime Web demographic; one-in-five young people, more than any other age group, reported using the internet to get news about the 2004 election.<sup>1</sup> A recent CIRCLE study by W. Lance Bennett and Mike Xenos suggests there is much more that both campaigns and non-partisan youth organizations can do to help young people locate information about politics and the voting process. The full report, "CIRCLE Working Paper 20: Young Voters and the Web of Politics" as well as an online Best Practices Guide can be found at [www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org).

The authors examined 2002 election campaign sites (for candidates for the House of Representatives, U.S. Senate, and Governor) and youth civic engagement sites such as Rock the Vote and YouthVote to determine how these sites appeal to young people on various issues. Additionally, they provide an updated analysis of the youth civic engagement sites through July 2004 with recommendations on how sites can work together more effectively to create a virtual network. This network would allow young

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people to move more easily through the Web to match information about issues they are interested in with candidates who best represent these interests.

## 2002 Candidate Sites Provide Few Direct Appeals to Young Voters

The research clearly shows that in the 2002 elections, candidates were much more likely to appeal to older rather than younger voters through the internet. For example, appeals to seniors were found in close to 40 percent of candidate statements on social security while only 23 percent of candidate sites appealed directly to young people on the issue of education. On other issues that have been shown to resonate with young people, such as health care and the economy, candidates made almost no direct appeals to young voters.

<sup>1</sup> Fox, Susannah (2004). "Older Americans and the Internet." Pew Internet and American Life Project. [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Seniors\\_Online\\_2004.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Seniors_Online_2004.pdf)

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According to the authors, "Despite indications that young voters are the group most likely to go online to seek political information, particularly in contrast to senior citizens, we found that in 2002 the candidates rarely phrased or framed issues in ways that directly addressed young people." Moreover, no candidate sites studied had Web links to youth engagement sites. The authors note that in not linking to youth sites, candidates miss opportunities to help young people connect voting to the issues they care about.

## Creating a Network of Web Sites

Beyond making direct appeals to young voters on issues, candidate and youth sites can also assist young people by building a "virtual network" of sites—so that a young person can start at any number of Web sites and easily navigate between sites to get the political information they need for an upcoming election. This type of virtual network relies on two types of links: (1) links between youth-oriented political sites themselves and (2) links between these youth sites and election sites (in both directions). Analysis from 2002 to 2004 revealed that the network among youth sites had grown stronger over time but could be enhanced by a few relatively simple changes.

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According to Bennett and Xenos, one easy change that youth-oriented sites could make is to increase the number and prominence of organizational links they provide. The authors maintain that a strong network could be built with very little effort if one or two youth organizations agreed to serve as a hub for the network. Serving as a hub would mean "aggressively seeking out and maintaining co-links to other youth organizations." Co-links are reciprocal links where one organization links to another organization and that organization then links back.

**CIRCLE** (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) promotes research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25. Although CIRCLE conducts and funds research, not practice, the projects that we support have practical implications for those who work to increase young people's engagement in politics and civic life. CIRCLE is also a clearinghouse for relevant information and scholarship. CIRCLE was founded in 2001 with a generous grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts and is now also funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York. It is based in the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy.

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Another suggested improvement involves reciprocal links between youth and candidate sites. Analysis done in 2002 revealed that it was difficult for a young person to go between these two types of Web sites. While youth sites did provide some links to election sites, these links were most often to voter registration sites or generic search engines that only provided general lists of campaigns and candidates by geographic region. "Given the self-serve nature of sites typically linked to in these instances (League of Women Voters, Project Vote Smart) such a finding suggests that though they are directed to the electoral sphere by the sites such

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as Rock the Vote, young voters must expend considerable energy, once there, in identifying information directly relevant to their interests and preferences." The authors suggest youth sites should link to actual candidate sites that are covering the issues young people care about.

Candidates can also make simple improvements to their Web sites. The study did not find any candidate Web sites which had links to youth sites. The authors suggest that candidates "are missing opportunities to connect voting to surrounding political experiences in society." Additionally, candidates can make their sites more appealing to young people by adding more interactive, Web-exclusive features such as online chat rooms, blogs, and login/password customization. A CIRCLE survey conducted in 2004 suggests that young people prefer internet communications they can choose to receive, over unsolicited messages. ★

## YOUNG VOTERS FAVOR KERRY BUT FIND BUSH MORE LIKEABLE

### *Jobs & the Economy Top Issue Influencing Youth Vote Survey Shows*

A recent MTV/CIRCLE survey shows that a strong majority of 18-29 year-olds intends to vote and more than twice as many young registered voters are paying "a lot" of attention to the campaign this year compared to 2000. Young voters are paying about as much attention to the campaign as they were in 1992 – when youth turnout spiked.

The poll conducted in September, found that 46% of young voters said that they would vote for John Kerry with 40% saying they would vote for George W. Bush. Ralph Nader was chosen by 4%. However, as many as 20% of committed registered voters say they could change their minds by Election Day. In addition, young voters are slightly more likely to think they would like Bush as a person than they are Kerry.

Jobs and the economy rank as the top issue influencing the way young people vote, chosen by 35% of registered voters, 67% of whom see their job opportunities as only fair or poor. This issue exceeds terrorism and national security chosen by 22%, and the war in Iraq chosen by 15%. The economy is a particularly important issue to young voters who are not sure how they will vote. Among this group, 44% cite the economy as the most important issue, followed by terrorism & security at 15%, and education at 14%.

### Other key findings include:

- ≡ 49% of young people disapprove of Bush's performance as president and 44% approve.
- ≡ 82% of registered 18-29 year olds say they will definitely vote on November 2nd.
- ≡ 74% of all young people say that this will be one of the most important elections, if not the most important election, of their lifetime.
- ≡ 58% think that the country has gone seriously off track (compared to 52% of Americans of all ages).
- ≡ 49% think we did the right thing in taking action against Iraq, while 45% believe we should have stayed out.
- ≡ 54% of registered voters say President Bush does not share their priorities compared to 40% for Kerry.
- ≡ 41% of all young people say they would like to hang out with Bush for a day; 28% would like to hang out with Kerry.