

4-20-2012

Increasing the Youth Vote: Communication Strategies for Nonprofits

Whitney Richards

Trinity University, wrichar1@trinity.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/comm_honors



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Richards, Whitney, "Increasing the Youth Vote: Communication Strategies for Nonprofits" (2012). *Communication Honors Theses*. 4. http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/comm_honors/4

This Thesis open access is brought to you for free and open access by the Communication Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.

Increasing the Youth Vote: Communication Strategies for Nonprofits
Whitney Richards

A DEPARTMENT HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE
DEPARTMENT OF Communication AT TRINITY UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR GRADUATION WITH
DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

DATE April, 20, 2012

THESIS ADVISOR

DEPARTMENT CHAIR

ASSOCIATE VICE PRESIDENT FOR ACADEMIC AFFAIRS,
CURRICULUM AND STUDENT ISSUES

Student Copyright Declaration: the author has selected the following copyright provision (select only one):

This thesis is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which allows some noncommercial copying and distribution of the thesis, given proper attribution. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.

This thesis is protected under the provisions of U.S. Code Title 17. Any copying of this work other than “fair use” (17 USC 107) is prohibited without the copyright holder’s permission.

Other:

Distribution options for digital thesis:

Open Access (full-text discoverable via search engines)

Restricted to campus viewing only (allow access only on the Trinity University campus via digitalcommons.trinity.edu)

**Increasing the Youth Vote:
Communication Strategies for Nonprofits**

Whitney Richards

Introduction

Focus Group Proctor: "Would a campaign similar to Rock the Vote convince you to vote?"

Respondent #1: "I think its weird to be convinced to vote. I feel like you should just do it."

Respondent #2: "Someone saying 'you should vote' isn't going to do anything. They're not saying why or what difference it's going to make."

Respondent #3: "I don't think you can make voting seem cool. It's not like standing in a line to check a box is cool."

The right to vote is a cornerstone of American democracy. United States citizens have the right to vote into office leaders whom they determine will represent them best. Renewal of the voting population is accomplished each year when young adults become eligible to vote at 18 years of age. In a perfect world, every citizen 18 years of age would vote regularly. However, the youth vote (people aged 18-29) has been declining ever since the ratification of the 26th Constitutional Amendment in 1971, which lowered the voting age to 18. In the 2008 presidential election, only 51% of youth voted (CIRCLE, 2010). Specifically, 22 million youth voted in the 2008 presidential election, an increase from 20 million in 2004 (CIRCLE, 2010).

A different picture is presented with the 2010 midterm elections: only 24% of all eligible youth aged 18-29 turned in a ballot (CIRCLE, 2010). The exit polls conducted for the midterm elections are telling as well. According to the 17,504 surveyed voters in the National Exit Poll in 2010, only 12% of respondents were between the ages of 18-29, 6% of those were 18-24, and another 6% of those were 25-29 (CNN.com, 2011). More specifically, the United States Census Bureau reported voting numbers in the 2010 midterm election by region of the United States. In the Northeast, only 20% of those between 18-24 voted, and in the Midwest, just 20% of 18-24 year-olds cast a ballot (United States Census Bureau, 2011). As for the South, 20% of 18-24

year-olds voted in the 2010 midterms, and in the West, 25% of those 18-24 voted (United States Census Bureau, 2011).

Although turnout for midterm elections is often lower than turnout for presidential elections, these numbers are disheartening and potentially worrisome for the upcoming 2012 election. There is a need for young adults to vote to ensure the regeneration of the voting population. There have been efforts by organizations such as the nonprofit group Rock the Vote to increase the youth vote, but these campaigns were unsuccessful due to their inability to sustain the voter turnout of young adults.

In order for nonprofit organizations to reach college-aged youth, an investigation into the media habits of college-aged young adults is needed to determine how this demographic uses media and how to better understand their preferences about how to receive messages. This research consults with college students (a subset of the youth voting population) in order to learn more about their specific media habits in order to construct a list of communication strategies for nonprofits striving to reach college-aged students with messages about voting.

The intended audience for this research is managers and directors of nonprofits. “Traditionally, nonprofit organizations have served as a means for people to channel their goodwill to important causes...” (Aitamurto, 2011, p. 40). However, nonprofits do not always have the budget or the volunteers to make a large difference (Yeon, Choi, & Kiouisis, 2005, p. 63). “Because the public relations personnel of nonprofit organizations generally possess only limited financial means to reach potential publics, the web offers a unique opportunity to interactively reach multiple publics without an immense sum of money” (Yeon, Choi, & Kiouisis, 2005, p. 62). “The web offers nonprofit organizations a unique opportunity to interactively reach

multiple publics, including volunteers, donors, and journalists” (Yeon, Choi, & Kioussis, 2005, p. 64).

Numerous nonprofit groups, including such organizations as Why Tuesday? and Nonprofit VOTE, endeavor to increase voter turnout and provide information about voting. Specifically, Why Tuesday?, founded in 2005, strives to bring awareness to those who are contributing to the low voter turnout (Why Tuesday?, 2011). Nonprofit VOTE, founded in 2005, partners with other nonprofits in an effort to increase voter engagement activities of those nonprofits (Nonprofit VOTE, 2011). Organizations such as these can use this research in their efforts to provide more information about voting to the general public.

The Student Voices initiative at the University of Pennsylvania Annenberg Public Policy Center from 1999 to 2004 researched how different types of media impact students’ engagement with politics and student life (Nirenberg, 2011). The program consisted of a dynamic website full of information about current issues in government and candidates in local elections in addition to lesson plans for teachers, and was included the high-school curriculum where implemented (Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2012). Facilitators tracked participant engagement based upon election activity (Nirenberg, 2011). The results of the study showed that students that were engaged in the program remained engaged throughout the following years and subsequent elections (Nirenberg, 2011). This study illustrates that programs to impact the voting habits of high-school students is possible, however, if a campaign is to be directed at college-aged youth, more information about how to directly reach them is needed.

Voter Motivations

Most voting motivations are personal: “...voters have strong psychological orientations toward the major parties. These orientations serve as powerful baselines for voting decisions”

(Ladd, 2010, p. 570). The information people seek in order to form an opinion about candidates or campaign issues is also a personal choice, often reflecting the person's political views. But what influences people to vote? Where do people get the motivation to vote?

According to researchers, interpersonal communication and friend networks play a large part in influencing and motivating young people to vote (Pinkleton, 1999; Glynn et al., 2009). Young people are more likely to find out about where they can vote and discuss why they should vote in a group setting with relatives or close friends, because "...research suggests that interpersonal communication represents a significant source of political information and voter influence" (Pinkleton, 1999, p. 70). Family and friends also maintain a "strong influence" upon a young voter (Glynn et al., 2009, p. 60). Additionally, these interpersonal groups of family and friends serve as a forum for discussion of candidates and election issues. "It appears as if interpersonal communication is a natural outgrowth of citizens' increased political interest as they actively seek to understand and evaluate election information" (Pinkleton, 1999, p. 76).

With this increased communication comes the possibility for American youth to engage in and learn about politics, specifically voting. In his book *The Internet Generation: Engaged Citizens or Political Dropouts*, Henry Milner (2010) argues that political socialization of youth occurs through five channels: the school, the family, peer groups, voluntary organizations, and the media (p. 42).

Wattenberg argues that when deciding whether or not to vote, people will often weigh the costs and benefits of voting, and if the benefits outweigh the costs, then the person will most likely vote (2002, p. 59). The fact that all people rationalize differently must be taken into consideration, resulting in varying reasons for or against voting (Wattenberg, 2002, p. 60). Wattenberg lists several costs that may influence people to avoid voting including a lack of

information, the physical process of going to the polls and voting, and the fact that people may not have the time to go to the polls on Election Day (2002, p. 60).

In an attempt to map out what motivates people to vote, Fisher and Fisher developed the Information, Motivation, and Behavioral Skills model (IMB) which states that information and motivation work together to influence behavior (Glasford, 2008, p. 2650). “The model conceptualizes the psychological determinants needed to promote behavior and provides a general framework for how to increase the specific behavior in targeted populations” (Glasford, 2008, p. 2652). Essentially, the IMB model uses personal determinants in order to map out what motivates young people to vote.

The IMB model shows that information and social motivations are significant predictors of voting behavior, meaning that the more information one possesses and the more that person is encouraged to believe voting is a socially acceptable, the more likely that person will vote (Glasford, 2008, p. 2666). According to the IMB model, if a person is going to vote, this person will need information.

Additionally, early voting among those who are of age increases the likelihood that a young adult will vote in the future (Glasford, 2008, p. 2649). Providing college-aged students with adequate information, encouraging them to vote through discussion and debate, and informing them as to how and when they can cast a vote may increase the likelihood of them casting a vote in the future.

Another issue that arises when dealing with voter motivations is whether media coverage of politics influence voters. Zukin et.al. conclude that youth hold a complicated, sometimes negative view of politics “...dominated by negative images of partisan bickering, corruption, lying, and a sense that politics is boring, confusing, and a realm that is for people (such as the

rich and powerful) other than themselves” (2006, p. 190). Pinkleton (1999) found that political commentary tends to alienate people, saying “Broadcast media, in particular, attract criticism for superficial campaign coverage that emphasizes candidates’ positions in the polls and made-for-television images over substantive, issue-based coverage” (p. 65). Ladd also supports this idea of voters being alienated by the mainstream media, arguing, “Another alternative explanation for these results is that negative media attitudes induce partisan voting, not by causing resistance to the messages people receive, but by changing those individuals’ patterns of media exposure” (Ladd, 2010, p. 579). In other words, those who distrust media may seek out more partisan news sources or consume less media overall (Ladd, 2010, p. 579).

Valenzuela argues that “priming research has demonstrated that the media can have a decisive impact on the outcome of elections by altering the criteria used by citizens to evaluate candidates and political parties” (2009, p. 756). Taking this idea into consideration, it is possible that media can have an influence upon political thoughts by selecting which politicians to follow and which political stories to report. According to Valenzuela, those with minimal political knowledge are less susceptible to political media priming due to their difficulty in making sense of the information (2009, p. 767). On the other hand, those with more political knowledge are susceptible to political media priming due to their ability to make sense of the information (Valenzuela, 2009, p. 767). However, the true effect on voters cannot be fully determined. This sentiment is also supported by Ladd, who argues that “...while new information can change a voter’s party identification, the effect is small unless the message is very dramatic or long lasting” (2010, p. 570).

Youth Civic Engagement

College-aged youth often refrain from voting for numerous reasons. College students may find themselves torn between which place to vote: their hometown or their college town? This decision can be made strategically or by which offers the least resistance (Niemi & Hanmer, 2010, p. 305). Students who vote strategically often choose to vote where they believe their vote can make a difference (Niemi & Hanmer, 2010, p. 305). For example, students who attend school in a battleground state may choose to vote there because their vote can help determine which candidate wins the state.

Additionally, students may face restrictions or limitations when registering or voting. Some states close voter registration anywhere from 10-30 days before the election, and those who may decide to vote only a few days before the election are not able to vote (Angeli, 2007, p. 5). Additionally, there may be a residency requirement in order to vote; some states require that voters have been a resident anywhere from 0-30 days (Angeli, 2007, p. 5).

According to Zukin et.al., claims that youth are apathetic and disengaged from civic life are false; youth are involved in civics in other areas (2006, p. 188). This sentiment is reinforced by Dalton, who argues, “The engaged citizen is more likely to participate in boycotts, ‘buycotts,’ demonstrations, and other forms of contentious action” (2008, p. 72). Zukin et.al. argue that the sentiment that recent generations are less engaged is true as far as “traditional politics” are concerned (2006, p. 189). But, Dalton explains that youth are in fact engaged in politics, but in unique ways (2008, p. 72). Although a college-aged youth may not vote in a presidential election, he or she may participate in politics by organizing fundraisers for social causes or signing petitions to boycott certain products or services. Although youth may not participate in regular voting, this does not mean that they are completely disengaged from civic action.

Finally, Zukin et.al. argue that even though the opinions of youth may vary, they are still important and need to be heard (2006, p. 190). College-aged youth come from all walks of life and have a large number of differing opinions on current issues. Often, these opinions are shared through social media, a powerful tool for today's youth.

Youth Media Use

If nonprofits are to communicate with college-aged students, then a working knowledge of how college-aged students use media is crucial. "The web and all other online applications are heavily used by younger people" (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011, p. 453). New technologies that inform, aid, and entertain are becoming the norm. Specifically, college-aged students have adopted and become avid users of smartphones, tablets, and mobile networks; American youth have the possibility to remain connected everywhere they go (Roberts & Foehr, 2008, p. 12).

This phenomenon is not limited to technology, but also includes technological applications such as social networking. "Fully 72% of online 18-29 year olds use social networking websites..." (Lenhart et.al., 2010, p. 3). In addition, the amount of time spent on social networking sites is rapidly increasing; in the U.S., each visitor to social networking sites spends on average 5.2 hours a day engaging in social media (comscore Data Mine, June 7, 2011). Not only is the time spent on social media sites increasing, but the technology used to do so is rapidly changing. "81% of adults between the ages on 18 and 29 are wireless internet users" (Lenhart et.al., 2010, p. 4). Among those young adults who use wireless Internet, 55% of them have accessed the Internet wirelessly on a laptop and 55% of them have accessed the Internet wirelessly on a cell phone" (Lenhart et.al., 2010, p. 4).

According to Smith, connections with family members and friends are the main reason for adoption of social media (2011, p. 2). “Roughly two-thirds of social media users say that staying in touch with current friends and family members is a major reason they use these sites...” (Smith, 2011, p. 2). Other motivations for using social media include connecting with others who share an interest (14% of users), making new friends (9% of users), and reading comments by public figures (5% of users) (Smith, 2011, p. 2). The sheer popularity of social networking indicates that this is the way communication technology is changing; we need to understand how American youth are learning about voting if we are to enact ways in which we encourage them to do so.

Political Communication

The way in which presidential candidates communicate with the public is also rapidly changing. The shift in communication from a broadcast media orientation to a social media orientation has transformed the way political candidates communicate to the public (Jenkins, 2006, p. 208). As early as the 2004 Presidential election, constituents and politicians utilized emerging forms of social media, such as public blogs, which emphasized access, participation, reciprocity, and peer-to-peer contact in order to more effectively communicate with others, and therefore, reach a larger number of people (Jenkins, 2006, p. 208). For example, in 2004, during his campaign for president, Howard Dean’s staff started a blog that allowed Dean to foster a “real-time” relationship with his supporters; his campaign staff and its supporters were better able to communicate and coordinate (Jenkins, 2006, p. 210).

These online communities are the new way in which people participate in politics. They “provide the means for their participants to express their distrust of the news media and their

discontent with politics as usual” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 216). These new forums for discussion also provide a place for constituents and candidates to share opinions. Auer argues that “values and opinions are shaped and shared...because digital posts spawn commentary, sway views, and spur action” (2011, p. 711). “None of these portals were specifically designed for collecting or disseminating information on politics or public affairs. Much of the Internet’s present-day functions go well beyond the purposes it was originally designed for...” (Auer, 2011, p. 712).

With these new media channels, candidates are able to create an image and then have that image replicated around the globe. This replication is a part of the blurring of the distinction between politics and public relations. “Both campaigns [Obama’s and McCain’s] showed how traditional public relations, advertising and virtually all forms of communication are merging” (Spaeth, 2009, p. 439). Media such as Facebook and YouTube are communication tools that allow for politicians to communicate with the public, but they are also channels through which non-profit organizations distribute materials in an attempt to influence the public.

...the candidates’ speeches and appearances were videotaped and posted in multiple ways; there was always fresh content to be downloaded and shared; there were countless e-mail newsletters tailored to the recipient’s interests; the various new media like YouTube...and Facebook were fully utilized and exploited (Spaeth, 2010, p. 439).

Social media are rapidly becoming, if not already so, the choice of politicians. “Whether policymakers who use social media are young or old, decisions they make about the uses of social media have consequences for power, wealth, respect, and other value outcomes” (Auer, 2011, p. 715). Political candidates and their staff are now using social media to communicate with voters on a more personal level, tailoring messages to certain publics and providing a constant, 24-hour news feed. This medium also has the potential to reach more people than

traditional methods of campaigning. Social media are also used extensively in campaigns for social movements, including increase-the-vote campaigns.

The 2008 U.S. presidential election was the first social media election, with social networking taking center stage during campaign season (Carty, 2011, p. 74). Specifically, Barack Obama's campaign succeeded largely due to heavy emphasis on social media. "Obama's campaign was centered around grassroots political mobilization run through social media and the Internet" (Carty, 2011, p. 77). As for John McCain, his social media use paled in comparison to Obama's. On election day in 2008, Obama had 2,397,253 Facebook friends, while McCain only had 622,860 friends (Carty, 2011, p. 78). In addition, since the 2008 election, the number of Obama's Facebook friends has increased, while McCain's has decreased (Carty, 2011, p. 78). As for Twitter, in the days leading up to the election, Obama had 125,639 followers compared to McCain's 5,319 (Carty, 2011, p. 78). Finally, the number of Obama campaign-made videos posted to YouTube was 1,822, while the number of McCain campaign-made videos numbered 330 (Carty, 2011, p. 78).

Not only did the Obama campaign use social media to its advantage, but it also had a purpose behind this social media use. "The goal on all of the social networking sites was to use each supporter's profile page as a communications hub within that supporter's own social circle, building up volunteers and donors friend-to-friend" (Carty, 2011, p. 81). This way, by interacting with one person through social media, the Obama campaign could reach exponentially more people.

Political communication in the form of television shows is also popular among voters. These shows not only provide entertainment, but also have the potential to communicate messages about politics to the public. "According to a Rasmussen poll, almost 21 percent of

respondents said that the Comedy Central shows ‘The Colbert Report’ and ‘The Daily Show’ were at least somewhat influential in shaping their political opinions, and one in three respondents believe that these shows were taking the place of traditional news outlets” (Auer, 2011, p. 720). Needless to say, shows such as those mentioned and their hosts are becoming pop culture icons and political players. For example, “... in the fall of 2011, Comedy Central personality Stephen Colbert ranked ninety-fourth among Twitter accounts with the largest number of followers, with more than 2.1 million” (Auer, 2011, p. 720).

Public Information Campaigns

“An information campaign...is a form of social intervention prompted by a determination that some situation represents a social problem meriting social action” (Salmon, 1989, p. 20). For nonprofits such as Why Tuesday? and Nonprofit VOTE, youth voting participation is a social issue, and they are attempting to remedy low voter turnout with the production and distribution of information. The creation and distribution of information for voters has been attempted by numerous organizations in the past.

One of the first campaigns to try and influence youth to vote was *Kids Voting*. Started in Phoenix in 1988, *Kids Voting* grew into a national campaign by 1992 and now has programs in 30 states (Meirick & Wackman, 2004, p. 1162). The program is comprised of K-12 lesson plans, designed to increase political knowledge, so that teachers can teach about the importance of voting (Meirick & Wackman, 2004, p. 1162). Special polling places are also set up so that younger participants can “vote” with their parents (Meirick & Wackman, 2004, p. 1162). *Kids Voting* did in fact increase the political knowledge of the participants through increased

campaign interest and increased attention to campaign news (Meirick & Wackman, 2004, p. 1162).

Project Vote Smart, founded by former Presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford, is an organization that provides objective and accurate information about candidates and public issues to citizens (Steel et al., 2000, p. 117). In northern California, the organization aimed to redesign campaign materials and services for at-risk groups, mainly low-income families and racial minorities, hoping to encourage voter registration, increase appreciation of the government system, increase interest in the electoral process, and provide basic information about the candidates (Steel et al., 2000, p. 121). The *Project Vote Smart* initiative was successful, but only to a certain extent. Those who received campaign materials found them useful and informative, resulting in increased political knowledge (Steel et al., 2000, p. 130). However, the materials did not result in an increased interest in voting in general and did not increase the likelihood of voting (Steel et al., 2000, p. 130).

By far, the most well-known voting campaign is *Rock the Vote*. Conceived in 1990, *Rock the Vote* aimed to empower youth through entertainment. In this campaign, concerts, celebrity events on college campuses, and “community street teams” were employed to engage youth (Orr & Hoover, 2005, p. 11). Not only did the campaign attempt to increase interest in voting, but it also provided voter registration services through mail-in, online, and telephone projects (Orr & Hoover, 2005, p. 13).

Initially, the number of youth who registered and voted increased in 1992 at least in part because of *Rock the Vote* (Orr & Hoover, 2005, p. 13). However, in the next election year, 1996, the youth vote decreased, and researchers wondered if the 1992 increase was due to *Rock the Vote* or to Bill Clinton’s charismatic candidacy (Orr & Hoover, 2005, p. 13). In the following

election years, the number of youth voters continued to decrease, and “fewer 18-24 year olds voted in 2000 than had done so in 1988 before [*Rock the Vote*’s] existence” (Orr & Hoover, 2005, p. 14).

The failure of *Rock the Vote* to maintain its audience and keep young voters interested may be due to several factors. First, *Rock the Vote* inflated their registration numbers because they included youth who would have registered to vote anyway (Orr & Hoover, 2005, p. 11). Second, at the time, 64% of 18-29 year olds “never/hardly ever” watched MTV, the television channel that sponsored and helped produce *Rock the Vote* (Orr & Hoover, 2005, p. 16). If young people were not watching MTV, how were they accessing campaign materials and information? Third, the style in which *Rock the Vote* was carried out was economically inefficient (Orr & Hoover, 2005, p. 17). *Rock the Vote* was spending much more money than other campaigns and getting half the result. Lastly, *Rock the Vote* did not provide the appropriate information for the youth who followed the campaign (Orr & Hoover, 2005, p. 18).

Rock the Vote’s lack of attention to substantive political education is surprising is given that 60% of 18-24 year-olds in a 2000 Kaiser Foundation/MTV survey cited lack of information (meaning information about candidates and issues) as the principle reason for not casting ballots (Orr & Hoover, 2005, p. 18).

A 2006 campaign related to voting is the Federal Voting Assistance Program’s (FVAP) campaign with the Ad Council, titled *Pay Attention and Vote* (Anderson & Brewer, 2008, p. 3). Utilizing video and radio advertisements (primarily placed on the Internet, including YouTube), the campaign aimed to increase midterm election participation among young voters (Anderson & Brewer, 2008, p. 3). Not only did the FVAP use humor to generate interest in the movement, but they also provided in depth information about how to register and nonpartisan information about the election (Anderson & Brewer, 2008, p. 3). The campaign’s persuasive strategy was based

around the ideas that one vote can have a large influence and that it is a young person's duty to vote (Anderson & Brewer, 2008, p. 23). However, young adults did not favor these persuasive tactics and the points did not register with the target demographic. "Thirty-one percent of those surveyed [in a 99 person sample] who did not vote in 2006 avoided the election because they did not care about it, or they were too busy and forgot" (Anderson & Brewer, 2008, p. 22).

Methods

These are the results found for research concerning college-aged youth media use. The primary method of research was four focus groups conducted over a week and was comprised of university students

"Focus groups are a 'discussion group with a purpose' – a special kind of group interview or variant of quota sampling techniques" (Devereaux-Ferguson, 2000, p. 200). Not only is data collection fast, but the flexible format allows for participants to discuss and debate issues and ideas (Devereaux-Ferguson, 2000, p. 216). Through the use of focus groups, college students discussed their media use and determined how to reach college-aged young adults more effectively to ensure that the youth vote increases in the future.

A total of 32 people participated in the focus groups: 16 people who had voted in a presidential election and 16 who had not. The sample consisted of 20 females and 12 males, all students at a small, Southwestern, liberal arts university, ranging in age from 18 to 25.

The first round of focus group participants were recruited through a pre-test survey, asking participants to indicate whether or not they were registered to vote and whether or not they had voted in a past presidential election. Students were asked to indicate their interest in participating in a focus group concerning student voting. Participants for the second round of

focus groups were invited through two separate Facebook messages, one for those who had voted and one for those who had not. Participants invited through Facebook were also able to invite friends to participate resulting in a snowball sample.

There were four separate focus group sessions: two sessions included participants who had voted in a presidential election and the other two included participants who had not voted in a presidential election. Each session contained only participants who had either voted or had not. Each session lasted approximately 30 minutes, and questions concerned media use. The questions covered four areas of discussion: social media, television use, Internet use, and general questions about voting. Social media questions asked what social networking sites students were using, why they were using these media, and how long they participated in these media. These questions were meant to discern what social media college-aged youth use and how often they engage in social networking. Television use questions asked if participants watched television in real time or whether participants watched shows online at a later time. Participants were also asked if they watched political broadcasting and, if so, how often. These questions were meant to discern the television use of college-aged youth and the amount of time spent watching television. Internet use questions asked why participants used the Internet and the amount of time they spent online. These questions were meant to discern participants' media patterns and time commitments. General questions about voting asked where participants received information about voting and what voting information they felt was lacking. These questions were meant to discern if and where participants get information and what information they thought they needed to be well-informed voters. Determining the media activities of college-aged youth and the time spent engaged in media resulted in a better understanding of how to reach this demographic.

Key Findings

After reviewing the information gathered in the focus group sessions, there were seven key findings that emerged: (1) social media are used mainly for entertainment and interpersonal communication, (2) all who participated in the focus groups maintain a Facebook account, (3) Twitter is not a popular social networking site among college-aged youth, (4) YouTube is primarily an entertainment source, (5) college-aged youth do not watch television in real time, (6) college-aged youth spend a large amount of time online, and (7) college-aged youth do not think that there is enough information about voting available to them.

1. Social media are used mainly for entertainment and interpersonal communication.

All 32 participants used social media for interpersonal communication and entertainment. Participants spent a different amount of time on each social media site mentioned. Participants reported that the average amount of time spent on Facebook was one to two hours every day, the average amount of time spent on Twitter was five to ten minutes about four times a week, and the amount of time spent on YouTube ranged from thirty minutes to one hour every few days. Facebook and YouTube were the most popular social media websites, with about three-fourths of participants admitting to regular use. Activities on social media websites included posting photographs, chatting with friends, watching videos, reading what people posted, and learning about news. The least popular social networking website was LinkedIn. Only six participants used LinkedIn, primarily to connect with other people in a professional field of the participant's interest. The amount of time spent on LinkedIn ranged from ten to fifteen minutes about three times a week.

2. All participants in the focus groups maintained a Facebook account.

Participants reported that they use Facebook for posting videos, looking at photos, posting links to websites or articles, sending messages to friends, and learning about news from friends. For example, one participant stated, “ I found out that Whitney Houston died through Facebook.” Facebook was also used to learn about new music or films. About one-fourth of participants stated that they play games on Facebook, and three-fourths learned about events through messages or invitations sent directly to them.

The average amount of time participants spend on Facebook every day varies from thirty minutes to two hours, with multiple sessions throughout the day each lasting just a few minutes. One participant even stated that Facebook remains open on their computer throughout most of the day. Content often determines the length of a Facebook session. For instance, participants emphasized that a session would be longer if they were looking at photographs than if they were simply checking for friends’ status updates.

3. Twitter is not a popular social networking site among college-aged youth.

About half of the participants had a Twitter account. When asked why an account was created, all participants who had created a Twitter account stated that the accounts had been a requirement for an academic class. When asked if they were still active users of Twitter, half of those who identified themselves as having an account stated that they no longer used it. Twitter was used to learn about news, celebrities, athletics, and professional postings. Three participants stated that Twitter was also used to make professional connections. The average amount of time participants spent on Twitter was two to four times a week from 30 minutes to one hour during each session.

Participants shared mixed feelings about Twitter. One-third of participants lauded Twitter for providing instantaneous news and information. Two-thirds of participants argued that Twitter was more suited to business professionals and celebrities, and the site was overused by some organizations, becoming a nuisance rather than a tool. As one participant explained, “We [students] don’t necessarily know how to use it [Twitter] to our advantage quite yet.” Another stated, “It’s hard to get followers when you’re a normal person.”

4. YouTube is primarily an entertainment source.

All 32 participants used YouTube to watch funny videos, music videos, vlogs, and watch clips from television shows. They also used YouTube to listen to music and receive news updates. One-third identified YouTube as an information source. However, participants who had not voted in a presidential election would go on YouTube to find out how to fix a computer problem or how to fix technological problems with other devices, but not for political or voting information.

Participants stated the time spent on YouTube varies from session to session. The average amount of time spent on YouTube was thirty minutes to one hour, but the consensus among all participants was that the amount of time spent on the site was determined by the videos selected. There was agreement that once one video was watched, others were watched, and students became consumed by the website, watching video after video. About five students confessed to having spent hours looking at videos on YouTube due to procrastination and boredom, but not in search of news or information.

5. College-aged youth do not watch television in real time.

Three-fourths of participants agreed that television programs were watched online during a convenient time or shows were recorded with a digital video recorder (DVR) to watch later. Students often visited websites such as Hulu, Netflix, sites that stream shows, and network websites to catch up on television shows. When asked why shows are watched at a later time, participants stated that they do not have the time to watch television in real time.

As for television programs, participants indicated that political shows such as *Meet the Press* and political channels such as C-SPAN are not popular, with only two people stating that they watch *Meet the Press* every Sunday. However, political humor shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* were extremely popular among the participants, with half of them indicating that they regularly watch the shows for entertainment.

As for presidential debates, only three participants stated they regularly watch debates at all. Those who do not watch debates in real time, however, would look for highlights or transcripts at a later time. Those aged 21 and 22 looked up debates for highlights and information while those aged 18 to 20 looked up debates only if there was humorous content. One participant even stated, "I don't really go out of my way to find out what happened."

6. College-aged youth spend a large amount of time online.

On average, all 32 participants stated that they spend ten hours each week, one or two hours per day, watching entertainment online. This activity ranges from Netflix to videos posted on Facebook. Additionally, participants stated that they spend, on average, three to four hours online doing homework each night. All participants stated that their news sources are Internet-based. These websites include, but are not limited to, BBC, NPR, *Huffington Post*, *New York Times* online, MSNBC.com, CNBC.com, CNN.com, Yahoo.com, *People.com*, and Reddit.com.

Only three participants, all aged 22, stated that they participated in political discussion online, usually through Facebook. These participants also stated that these discussions, lasting only one or two days, only occur when someone posts something that is thought provoking or something with which the participant disagrees.

As for other Internet-based applications such as RSS feeds and QR codes, only two people indicated their use. None of the participants use RSS feeds, and only two people stated that they scan QR codes. In addition, those who scan QR codes only do so once every few months. All other participants agreed that QR codes required “too much effort” or that students do not have the required technology (a smartphone).

7. College-aged youth do not think that there is enough information about voting available to them.

Three-fourth of participants aged 21 and 22 stated that the reason they have not voted in another election since 2008 is due to the lack of information about elections. One participant stated, “I feel like I never know where it [the polling place] is or when it is.” Participants also agree that there is a lack of information about how to register and where to vote. Another reason for the participant lack of participation in voting was disinterest in the issues discussed by candidates. Participants stated they have not voted because the issues discussed did not directly relate to or interest them.

Surprisingly, students indicated parents were the main source for voting information. Other sources mentioned were school organizations, websites, and a teller at the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), where one can register to vote when renewing a license. One-third of participants stated that they did not receive information about voting at all, and, either, their

parents registered them or they simply did not vote. When asked how they learn about politics, participants cited friends, parents, news, and classes as sources of information.

Discussion

In light of the information gained through the focus groups, three main recommendations can be derived from the responses given by participants: (1) college-aged youth are constantly using media, so messages need to be sent electronically and frequently, (2) information needs to be simple and easily accessible, and (3) it all depends on how an organization is using social media.

1. Messages need to be sent electronically and frequently.

In the focus groups, participants stated that they were using all kinds of media for about 10 hours each week. From watching entertainment online to researching for a project, college-aged youth spend a majority of their time engaging with media and are available to receive an electronic message. If organizations are to reach this demographic, messages will have to be transmitted electronically.

Additionally, messages need to be sent about once every two days. Several participants stated that if they do not receive constant reminders, they will not do something or look at something. One participant stated, "I also think pushing that information over and over again...we need to be reminded." Reminders sent every few days encourage participation and may increase the likelihood of the completion of an action.

As for short-term goals, nonprofits can create electronic messages that appear on popular websites often used by college-aged students. For example, a nonprofit could place a banner with

a link to a website with voting information across the top of a website such as Hulu. Since college-aged youth rarely watch television in real-time, the demographic is more likely to go to a website like Hulu to watch television shows. Although nonprofits will have to buy the space on a website for the message, placing this link at the top of the page will increase the likelihood that the information will reach the appropriate audience.

As for long-term goals, nonprofits can create public service announcements (PSAs) that could be shown on websites that college-aged youth frequent. Public service announcements are messages created in radio or video form that convey information to the public and often direct them to a source of information. One participant stated that messages would be more convincing if a local government official delivered them or a person who directly represents people in a certain area. Taking this into consideration, the PSA could feature congressional representatives and senators, as well as a local politician such as the mayor of a town. As for the placing of this message, the PSA needs to be in a location where college-aged youth can find it. Therefore, placing the PSA on websites frequented by college-aged students would be useful. Not only would the non-profit be getting the message out there for the target demographic, but it would also be in a place where college-aged youth frequently visit resulting in repetitive messaging.

2. Information needs to be basic and easily accessible.

More than 50% of the participants stated that a lack of information about how and where to register to vote prevented them from participating. One student commented, “Why go out and vote when I have honestly not a good sense of what’s going on?” Another shared a similar opinion: “I want to vote, but I know I need to get more information before I do.” Organizations need to provide more information to college-aged youth if they are going to participate. Basic

information about where one can register to vote, how the process works, and where the voter can go on Election Day are essential. This way, college-aged youth would be provided with the essential information to participate.

The information provided to college-aged voters also needs to be easily accessible. About 50% of the participants said they would not readily search for information about voting. As one participant said: "People are lazy, and they don't seek out that information." Another participant stated: "I guess I want it right in front of my face." And yet another participant shared this sentiment: "If someone tells you, oh, go to Google and do this thing, I'm probably not going to do it." Information about voting needs to be accessible and students need to be able to connect to useful information quickly.

Another area in which information was missing involved the candidates and their views on issues. Reasons for not voting in a midterm election centered around lack of information about the candidates and the major issues of the election. Without this information, college-aged youth may be less likely to vote because they do not realize how these issues affect them, as reflected by this statement from a participant: "That's why I'm not interested, because I don't see the effect on me."

For nonprofits, circulating information efficiently requires creativity concerning the locales of information. The short-term goal for nonprofits could be to place links around the Internet to information pages. We know that college-aged youth frequent social networking websites, so one might place a link to a website with basic information about voting directly on the log-in page for sites such as Facebook and Twitter. A long-term goal could be to establish a website containing basic information about elections and then placing it in places online for college-aged youth to access. This website would contain basic information such as who the

candidates are, the main talking points of the election, how to register, and how to vote on Election Day.

3. It All Depends on How You Use Social Media

College-aged youth are using Facebook for about one to two hours each day, Twitter is used five to ten minutes around four times a week, and YouTube is used around thirty minutes to one hour every few days. Their presence on these social networking sites means that these would be prime areas in which to communicate messages to college-aged youth. However, it is not enough for a nonprofit to create a profile on a social networking site and expect people to actively search for it. There needs to be clear direction to the profile. Again, students are not likely to actively seek out information, so it needs to be pushed towards them. To simply encourage people to “like” a Facebook page to gain access to information is not enough; an organization needs to take an active role in its social networking profiles to make them interactive and cater to the needs of college-aged youth.

The short-term goals for nonprofits could be to create a dynamic social media profile. Creating a profile with links to useful information, messages from local or state government officials, or even videos detailing how to register to vote and how to vote would be extremely useful. All of the information college-aged students say they need would be right there; they would not have to go searching for it.

Creating a dynamic profile is still not enough; the main issue is to get college-aged youth to view the profile, to entice them to take a few minutes to explore the profile. A long-term goal for nonprofits would be to gain exposure and popularity by positioning themselves in popular social media hubs such as Facebook and YouTube. College-aged youth are probably not likely to

look at the profile of an organization that is unfamiliar to them. Therefore, gaining exposure, especially during election years, is critical. Then, when messages or links are placed in front of college-aged youth, they may be more likely to look at the information. In order to do this, spreading information about non-profits through the use of social media would be ideal. Having people update Facebook statuses or Tweet updates that mention nonprofits like Nonprofit VOTE and Why Tuesday? would only increase their visibility.

Another point to consider is the increasing popularity of social media in the form of QR codes. Although practical, QR codes should be avoided due to the fact that not all college-aged youth possess smartphones with the capability to scan a code. One participant stated: "I have never one tried it." Just because QR codes are easy for a practitioner does not mean that they are easy for college-aged youth.

Conclusion

The youth vote in America is critical because the regeneration of the population ensures that all people are represented and that voices across the nation are heard. From mayoral elections to national presidential elections, voting affects all citizens' lives. However, college-aged youth have not been voting in recent years or choosing to vote only in the presidential election. If this pattern continues, who will vote in midterms and local elections in the future? It is crucial that college-aged youth start voting now to ensure the voting population renews itself.

In order to reach youth aged 18-24, information about how to directly reach them is vital. Previous campaigns failed because they did not reach youth with enough information. Through focus groups, research has shown that college-aged youth think that there is not enough information out there for them about voting. Students are at a loss for information about where to

register to vote and how to vote. Not only that, but they also are lacking information about candidates and issues and lacking the motivation vote.

In order to help solve this problem in communication between nonprofits and college-aged youth, three guidelines need to be followed: (1) messages need to be sent electronically and frequently, (2) information needs to be basic and in obvious places for easy access, and (3) it all depends on how an organization is using social media. By following these guidelines, nonprofits can place information at the fingertips of the new voting population. College-aged youth are not likely to search for information about voting directly, so practitioners must constantly place it in front of them.

In order for nonprofits such as Why Tuesday? and Nonprofit Vote to be truly effective in disseminating information about voting, lobbying of the government is needed. Instead of relying on people to seek out voter information on their own, nonprofits could lobby the government to provide more information to the public, especially college-aged youth, about voting. Nonprofits could also sponsor the creation of a government organization that is responsible for the dissemination of voter information for all.

Due to the small sample size of this research and the fact that all participants attended a small, private, Southwestern university, the probability that an extrapolation of the data and information would be representative of all college-aged youth is low. However, the participants were representative of the demographic attempting to be reached and they provided insight into the activities of this demographic.

As for the future, additional research could be conducted with a larger sample size. With more funding and resources, additional research could provide a more in-depth profile of college-aged youth media use. Additionally, research in this field should be conducted annually

to account for changing media habits that emerge with the development of new technologies and the likely shift in orientation of the youth population. This research and the suggestions derived from it have the potential to transform how voter information is circulated and could potentially alter the way the youth population learns about voting for years to come.

Reference List

- Aitamurto, T. (2011). The new role of nonprofit organizations: From middleman to a platform organization. *National Civic Review*, 100(1), 40-41.
- Anderson, K. A. and Brewer, A. (2008). Beyond 'Rock the Vote': A Mixed Methods Approach to Understanding the Young Nonvoter. *Conference Papers – National Communication Association*, 1.
- Angeli, M. (2007). Institutional Limitations Upon Registration and Voter Turnout in the United States. *Conference Papers -- Western Political Science Association*, 1.
- Annenberg Public Policy Center. (2012). Annenberg public policy center. In *Annenberg Public Policy Center*. Retrieved from <http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/ProjectDetails.aspx?myId=3>.
- Auer, M.R. (2011). The policy sciences of social media. *Policy Sciences Journal*, 39(4), 709-736.
- Bakker, T. & de Vreese, C. (2011). Good news for the future? Young people, internet use, and political participation. *Communication Research*, 38(4), 451-470.
- Carty, V. (2011). *Wired and Mobilizing: Social Movements, New Technology, and Electoral Politics* (pp. 74-89). New York: Routledge.
- Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). (2010). Retrieved from <http://www.civicyouth.org/>.
- CNN.com. (2011). Senate, house, governor races – election center 2010 – elections & politics from CNN.com. In *CNN.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2010/results/polls/#USH00p1>.

- comscore Data Mine. (2011, June 7). Average time spent on social networking sites across geographies. In *comscore Data Mine*. Retrieved from <http://www.comscoredatamine.com/2011/06/average-time-spent-on-social-networking-sites-across-geographies/>.
- Dalton, R. (2008). *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation is Reshaping American Politics* (pp. 53-79). Washington D.C.: CQ Press.
- Devereaux-Ferguson, S. (2000). *Researching the Public Opinion Environment: Theories and Methods* (pp. 199-222). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Glasford, D. (2008). Predicting voting behavior of young adults: the importance of information, motivation, and behavioral skills. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 38*(11), 2648-2672.
- Glynn, C., Huge, M., & Lunney, C. (2009). The influence of perceived social norms on college students' intention to vote. *Political Communication, 26*(1), 48-64.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (pp. 206-239). New York: New York University Press.
- Ladd, J. (2010). The role of media distrust in partisan voting. *Political Behavior, 32*(4), 567-585.
- Lenhart, A., Purcell, K., Smith, A., & Zickuhr, K. (2010, February 3). Social media & mobile internet use among teens and young adults. *Pew Internet & American Life Project*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Social-Media-and-Young-Adults.aspx>.
- Meirick, P., & Wackman, D. (2004). Kids voting and political knowledge: narrowing gaps, informing votes. *Social Science Quarterly, 85*(5), 1161-1177.

- Milner, H. (2010). *The Internet Generation: Engaged Citizens or Political Dropouts*. Medford, MA: Tufts University Press.
- Niemi, R., & Hanmer, M. (2010). Voter turnout among college students: new data and a rethinking of traditional theories. *Social Science Quarterly*, 91(2), 301-323.
- Nonprofit VOTE. (2011). *Nonprofit VOTE*. Retrieved from <http://www.nonprofitvote.org/>.
- R. Nirenberg, personal communication, September 21, 2011.
- Orr, S., & Hoover, M. (Eds.). (2005). Youth political engagement: why rock the vote hits the wrong note. Proceedings from *American Political Science Association 2005 Annual Meeting*. Washington DC.
- Pinkleton, B. (1999). Individual motivations and information source relevance in political decision making. *Mass Communication & Society*, 2(1/2), 65-80.
- Roberts, D. & Foehr, U. (2008). Trends in media use. *Future of Children*, 18(1), 11-37.
- Salmon, C. (1989). *Information Campaigns: Balancing Social Values and Social Change* (pp. 19-53). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Smith, A. (2011, November 14). Why Americans use social media. *Pew Internet & American Life Project*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Why-Americans-Use-Social-Media.aspx?src=prc-headline>.
- Spaeth, M. (2009). Presidential politics and public relations in 2008: Marshall McLuhan 2.0. *Journalism Studies*, 10(3), 438-443.
- Steel, B., Pierce, J., & Lovrich, N. (1998). Public information campaigns and 'at-risk' voters. *Political Communication*, 15(1), 117-133.

- United States Census Bureau. (2011, November 2). Voting and registration in the elections of November 2010 – tables – census bureau. In *Census.gov*. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/p20/2010/tables.html>.
- Valenzuela, S. (2009). Variations in media priming: The moderating role of knowledge, interest, news attention, and discussion. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 86(4), 756-774.
- Wattenberg, M.P. (2002). Types of individuals who vote. *Where Have All the Voters Gone?* (pp. 58-81). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Why Tuesday? (2011). *Why Tuesday?* Retrieved from <http://www.whytuesday.org/>.
- Yeon, H.M., Choi, Y., & Kioussis, S. (2005). Interactive communication features on nonprofit organizations' webpages for the practice of excellence in public relations. *Journal of Website Promotion*, 1(4), 61-83.
- Zukin, C., Keeter, S., Andolina, M., Jenkins, K., & Delli Carpini, M.X. (2006). *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen* (pp. 189-210). New York: Oxford University Press.