

College Student Voters are Few

Students cite registration hold-ups, lack of time and interest as main reasons

By Peter Strella
Assistant Layout Editor

The turnout for college-aged voters has dwindled since the 26th Amendment lowered the voting age to 18, according to the Youth Vote Coalition. Forty-five percent of Americans ages 18 to 24 were registered to vote in 2000, and, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 32 percent of them voted on Election Day.

The average turnout of college-age students for presidential elections was 17 percent less than the rest of the voting population from 1972 to 1996, according to the book *Democracy and College Student Voting*.

So why is the turnout for college students so low and how can it be increased? *The Capital Times* performed a survey of college student voting habits. Twenty-five out of the 33 students surveyed were registered to vote, but only 11 of the students in the survey voted in the 2002 Pennsylvania gubernatorial election.

The students gave reasons as to why they did or did not vote. Most of those who did vote said it was their patriotic duty to participate in elections and that their vote makes a difference.

Of those who did not vote, some said it was because they were not registered or were registered in a precinct away from campus. A few of the students said that they did not agree with any of the candidates.

Others said they could not find the time. "I was either in class or at work all day during the voting hours," said a student majoring in psychology.

Some said that their vote is irrelevant. "One person is inconsequential among millions and choosing the least corrupt just seems silly," said a student majoring in computer science.

Other responses were that students didn't

care, felt they were uninformed, or were fed up with government and the election process.

"I think the whole procedure is such a crock," said a student majoring in communications. "After weeks and months of mudslinging, at the end I can't stand either of them. For people who want to get us out of debt, they spend an awful lot of money, especially on advertising."

Low turnouts for the 18 to 24-year-old age bracket are nothing new. "The young and college students as a group, tend to turn out at low rates normally," said Dr. Steven Peterson, director of the School of Public Affairs.

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"Some studies, including a couple things I've done, show that if you own a home, you're more likely to vote," said Peterson. "If you own a home, you have something at stake. There are property taxes. All sorts of decisions by local government and state government can affect the value of your property. If you're a student, you normally don't own your own home, so you have less at stake."

Peterson said that college students still have things at stake even though typically less than older voters. "If you're looking at Pennsylvania, your tuition went up 13 percent this year because of state cutbacks on its contributions to Penn State. That may be a sensible budget decision (for the state govern-

ment), but the reality is it's affecting (students) very directly."

Peterson said that the draft for the Vietnam War is an example of how politics can directly affect college students. "The draft was not this vague, abstract issue, it was what are the odds you're going to Vietnam. So all of a sudden, politics has real meaning."

The best way to increase student voter turnout is through student clubs and organizations, said Peterson. Provost and Dean Madlyn Haynes agreed with Peterson. "The best impact could be made through student groups," said Haynes. "Students encouraging students."

SGA President Parul Luthra said she definitely agreed with Peterson and Haynes. "If we as student leaders promote the idea that we have the power to get officials elected, it could get infectious," said Luthra. The SGA brought in the League of Women's Voters to the campus to register students to vote. Luthra said the turnout was low because they did not promote the event much. Time constraints and poor communication with the organization were factors.

Registration tables are one way to increase student voter turnout, but some teachers assume a more active role in the classroom. Humanities Professor Dr. Cheri Ross offered extra credit to her students if they voted. "I know how busy they are and how many obligations they have," says Ross. "The extra credit is my way of encouraging them to exercise one of the most basic freedoms America offers."

Ross said she has always encouraged students to vote, but started only started offering extra credit two or three elections ago. "I'd ask who voted and only two or three would out of all my classes. So I felt I needed to do more," said Ross.

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