



The Times

The future is now for young voters

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BY LISA RICH

Before the new Apple iPod cell phone came out, they raved over the flashy technology.

Prior to that, teens and 20-somethings flocked to stores to buy the Nintendo Wii when it was "all the rage."

But over the past few months, a new buzzword has grabbed young people: the 2008 presidential election. Some are questioning whether the hype is real, or will it fizzle out like other fads?

Vying for the nation's top post are Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Barack Obama., D-Ill. The "youth vote" -- a category limited to those ages 18-29 -- has been touted by both Republican and Democrat campaigns as a surging force that could shape the outcome of the Nov. 4 election.

Not all are convinced.

"I don't think (young people) will turn out at the same rate that they did in 2004, partly because George Bush isn't running," said Curtis Gans, director of American University's Center for the Study of the American Electorate. "It's just too early to tell what they'll do."

Four years ago, analysts predicted youth voters would come out in droves, and compared to the 2000 election, they did.

Polls showed that 4.6 million more people under age 29 voted in 2004 than in 2000. But still, the youth vote accounted for just 17 percent of all voters, according to the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.

"Youth voters did come out more, but so did other voters, so the youth vote wasn't as disproportionate as had been expected," said Susan J. Carroll, professor at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. "With this election, it's really unclear. What will really matter is how much young folks turn out in the battleground states."

Assembly Majority Leader Bonnie Watson Coleman, D-Ewing, is confident youth voters will rise to the occasion.

"We're expecting a record high turnout from them," said Coleman, who attended a political rally last week at Seton Hall University. For the past few months, Coleman has been touring college campuses and talking to young people about the importance of voting.

"They're already very excited about participating in the election," said Coleman, who is endorsing Obama.

Leah Geissler, 19, of Haddonfield is one example.

"I feel obligated to vote, as a citizen," said Geissler, a sophomore at The College of New Jersey in Ewing. "Our veterans fought very hard for this, for us to have this right. I feel like I can't not vote."

Ainslee Jacoby, a freshman at Rider University, said just having the opportunity makes voting worthwhile.

"It's good to exercise that right, even if it doesn't guarantee a win on your side," Jacoby said. "It's just having the chance to put your opinion out there, to say, 'I do care.'"

State Sen. Bill Baroni, R-Hamilton, said doubting the potential of young voters could be a fatal mistake for either presidential candidate.

"Anyone who ignores the student vote is going to lose," said Baroni, chairman of McCain's campaign in New Jersey. "I know (youths) are going to be a factor. They're the ones who are going to have difficulties getting a mortgage, who have to get jobs, who have to worry about climate change, about the war in Iraq."

In fact, it's issues such as the emerging economic crisis that sparked an unusual display of involvement by senior James Coan at Princeton University.

For the past two weeks, Coan has been sitting outside the Frist Campus Center teaching economics to other students impersonating McCain. Wearing a "I could be McCain's Econ 101 Teacher," Coan said he's put videos of the skit online.

"The performances humorously highlight the scary thought that the potential next president of the United States knows less and has thought less deeply about economics than undergraduates who have taken a few economics classes," he said.

College Republicans at Rider University yesterday showed their enthusiasm over the election.

Protesting a school-sponsored appearance by Donna Brazile, a Democratic political operative and commentator, the College Republicans said this election season is "highly contested" and that neutral leaders should be heard on a day the university has dubbed "unity day."

Andrew Malcolm, a senior at Princeton University, said it's obvious young people are more engaged now than before.

Their group has focused its energy on getting New Jersey residents registered to vote and helping out-of-state students get absentee ballots to send back home.

"I'm from Florida so I know how important the absentee ballots are," Malcolm said. "And I've also seen high energy in this election. So many students have come up to me saying they never considered themselves a Republican, or were never interested in politics, until now."

While Obama's campaign has focused on change, Malcolm said McCain also represents a shift from the past.

"John McCain's message appeals to a lot of young people as well, and they are also getting involved and excited," he said. "It's not just younger voters. That excitement is also coming from a lot of adults, too."

And if you ask Christian Toatley, a senior at The College of New Jersey, those needing a refresher about the capabilities of young people can refer to history.

"There wouldn't be a civil rights movement if it weren't for young people. It was young adults, kids, who were water-hosed and it was the young adults who participated in the freedom rights," said Toatley, a member of Students for Barack Obama.

"There is so much enthusiasm around this election for many reasons, particularly because there's finally a candidate we can relate to. Obama grew up middle class just like the majority of students on our campus," Toatley said. "I do believe students will follow through with voting, regardless of who they believe in."

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