

OPEN FORUM**Winning over young voters**

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This month marks the 35th anniversary of 18-to-20-year-olds winning the right to vote. While the presidential election of 2004 saw more than 20 million under-30 voters flooding the polls -- a 9 percentage point increase over 2000 -- the term "politically engaged" is seldom used to describe Generations X and Y. However, that may be about to change, as more and more 18-to-34-year-olds are realizing there's a big difference between the right to vote and a reason to vote. Though surely it was unintended, our policy-makers have provided this generation with a big reason to vote: economic insecurity.

The spike in young-voter turnout means today's twentysomethings have new leverage and power. They've proved they're out there, so next time around the two major-party presidential candidates can't so cavalierly discount their existence. It also means that political consultants and their clients understand there is a new voting block up for grabs -- one that they will want to swing in their favor.

To win young voters, politicians need to understand that today's youth -- who are in the thick of their battle to work or educate their way into the middle class -- are being hit by a one-two punch.

The economy no longer generates widespread opportunity and our public policies haven't picked up any of the slack. As soon as they graduate from high school, young adults are plunged into an obstacle course that has dramatically changed in just one generation. From the price of a college education to the new cutthroat realities of the economy, young adults are trying to establish themselves in a society that has grown widely unequal and less responsive to the needs of ordinary citizens. At each step in the obstacle course to adulthood -- getting an education, finding a job, starting a family and buying a home -- our nation's public structures are showing major signs of decay and distress. The outcome: This generation has less economic mobility and security than other generations.

What are some of the specific issues politicians would be smart to address? The high cost of college and the dramatic rise in student loan debt, to start. Today, the average college graduate leaves school with \$20,000 in student loans. Far more smart young people never make it through college because they can't scrape together enough loans, grants or money from minimum-wage jobs to foot the bill. Today, the cost of attending a public four-year state college is just more than \$11,000 -- about what it cost to attend a private university, adjusted for inflation, a generation ago. Young adults have gotten the message loud and clear that going to college is essential for getting into the middle class. They've got the ambition. What they lack are public resources. Gubernatorial candidates would be wise to commit to increased funding for higher education. Congressional and presidential hopefuls should start figuring out how to deliver more grant aid and end the debt-for-diploma system that has youth locked in its grip.

Health care is another big challenge facing young people. One out of 3 of 18-to-29-year-olds don't have health insurance -- the highest of any age group. And it's not because they think they're invincible. Only 3 percent of young adults are uninsured because they turned down coverage; the rest either aren't offered it by their job or they can't afford it. Not having health insurance has more than physical consequences; about half of young adults ages 18 to 29 without health insurance reported having problems paying medical bills.

Finally, winning over young voters means talking about improving the quality of jobs in this country. Compared to a generation ago, the earnings for young workers have declined considerably. Back in 1972, the typical 25-to-34-year-old male high-school graduate earned just more than \$42,000, in inflation-adjusted dollars; today they're earning just \$29,000. Even in the recession of the early 1980s, workers still made more money in real terms than those with only a high-school degree do today. What about college graduates? In 1972, a young adult male with a bachelor's degree or higher earned on average \$52,087, in inflation-adjusted dollars. In 2002, young male college grads earned \$48,955. Typical earnings for female workers have risen over the last three decades, but still fall well short of what they're male peers earn. The paycheck paralysis facing young workers gets even tougher when put in the context of soaring housing costs, health-care costs and student-loan debts.

Too many young adults are toiling without reward and are scared about being able to provide for their children. They're not aiming for the Ivy Leagues and the exclusive suburbs. Young adults' dreams are surprisingly old-fashioned, modest and rooted in the values of family, hard work and sacrifice. They dream of achieving what we've come to classify as a middle-class life. In one generation, that dream has become far too elusive.

Young adults are desperate for leadership. For years, this generation's idol hands were a politician's plaything. They ignored us and we ignored them. Well, those days are over. This generation is starting to pay attention. Our leaders in Washington would be wise to do the same.

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