

REPORT #3: INTERVIEWS ABOUT TOOLKIT REACTIONS

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By

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Background

This is the third in a series of reports being prepared by the Strauss Institute for Phase III of the Campaign for Young Voters (formerly the Young Voter Initiative) sponsored by the Council for Excellence in Government in Washington D.C. and funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. This report is based on phone interviews conducted during December 2002 with four persons affiliated with congressional campaigns during the Fall elections.

During the summer of 2002, the Council staff in Washington contacted several campaigns and asked them to use the CYV Toolkit in preparation for the upcoming elections. While no specific requirements were demanded of the campaigns, each person being contacted was made aware of the Council's desire to evaluate their use of the Toolkit after the election. With the help of CYV's Project Director, Adam Anthony, the Strauss Institute talked to four individuals who had agreed to participate in this phase of the study.

Although several of the interviewees admitted to not having much direct experience with the CYV Toolkit, all made a sincere effort to respond to the questions posed. Naturally, our sample is a small and self-selected one so they do not represent a broad cross-section of campaigners or candidates.

The Interviewees

While the four interviewees arranged for us by the Council represent a mix of both Democrats and Republicans (two each), they are unique in other areas. Three of the interviewees worked for challengers, although none defeated the incumbent they faced. Our participants included a young (23 year-old) campaign coordinator, Edna Ishayik, who worked for the losing (38% of the vote) Democrat, Ann Sumers, of New Jersey's District 5. Our sample also included Donny Ness, campaign manager for incumbent Jim Oberstar's (D-MN) of Minnesota's 8th District. Veteran political advisors were represented by Craig Schoenfeld who helped Stan Thompson (R-IA) gain 45% of the vote in a losing effort in the Des Moines area. Finally, Dr. Bill Choby (R-PA) was our sample's only candidate. Although not victorious in the election, Dr. Choby was more than willing to answer our questions.

The Interviews

All interviews were conducted between Wednesday, December 11, 2002, and Friday, December 20, 2002, approximately one and a-half months after the elections. All interviews were done by phone and were audio-taped. While our impressions are often based on careful notes taken during the interviews, we also offer direct quotations taken directly from the audio recordings (paraphrased, in some cases, for efficiency's sake). All participants knew that their conversation was being recorded, each of which lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Appendix 1 lists the questions that guided the interview.

Overview

Our primary goal in conducting the interviews was to assess the usefulness of the CYV Toolkit. Given the campaigns' less-than-desirable usage of the Toolkit, we found it necessary to branch out in other directions during the interviews and question our interlocutors about the role of young adults in politics. Accordingly, our report is divided into three parts: (1) reflections on young adults; (2) opinions of the CYV Toolkit; and (3) general advice about working with young people.

Reflections on Young Adults

While our interviewees differed from one another considerably, they shared many views about young people, one of which is that they are a potentially powerful voting block (a perception which probably led our interviewees to exploring the CYV Toolkit in the first place). They also had the following things to say, many of which echo observations included in Report #1 for this project:

1. Young people today are surprisingly conservative compared to those who came before. We asked the candidates to compare today's youth to those they had known when they themselves were young. One of the interviewees, the oldest, suggested that today's youth had a different attitude toward politics. Dr. Bill Choby, for example, said, "Yes [they are different]. I believe that a lot of it had to do with leadership when I was growing up and in my twenties. We had LBJ, and we had Vietnam, of course. We had very little faith in government and rightly so." Dr. Choby saw today's generation as more hopeful, almost as if they were reaching out to "fulfill a destiny." Craig Schoenfeld agreed, saying that today's youth are more involved, and more serious, than they had been previously: "I think 9/11 definitely had a major impact on folks."

2. Still, young people are generally uninterested in politics. Speaking of young people's failure to participate, Bill Choby said, "They just don't show up. They are not interested. They are interested in their studies, or their jobs or the opposite sex. They are not interested in politics." Edna Ishayik echoed this sentiment. While recounting the benefit of having a large number of young people volunteer for her campaign, she questioned whether these volunteers were representative of their peers: "I think that they were shining examples, not the norm ... If you look at those kids, you would see an optimistic future. They were just really into it. I hope there are

more kids like that out there, but I don't know that there are." Ms. Ishayik's generational misgivings were not hers alone.

3. The political process turns young people off. "[Politics] is not cool," said Edna Ishayik. "Young people see it as boring." Other interviewees felt that the increasingly conflictual nature of politics causes young people to tune it out. Young adults abhor "the money and the corruption and the politicians who speak out of both sides of their mouth or place one group over another," said Donny Ness. Craig Schoenfeld agreed, observing that "the level of negative campaigning during the last [presidential] election turned off voters of all ages, especially if you're looking at trying to get somebody involved. Why would they want to?"

4. Young people are hard to find but they are there. Edna Ishayik echoed what a number of political consultants have long observed: that young people "are notoriously difficult to pin down. They are at school, they are traveling, their address is never the same for two years in a row. If you don't have their cell phone number, forget it." There are, however, young people who can be found and who want to be counted. Speaking on the subject of young politicians and young campaign workers, Bill Choby said "there is a generation that is trying to emerge." Choby was quick to add, however, that the political process itself does not always welcome these fresh recruits.

5. Young people bring high energy to campaigns. All of the interviewees made some mention of how energetic young people are and of how beneficial this can be for a campaign's momentum. Craig Schoenfeld argued that in his campaign "we specifically reached out to young voters for a couple of different reasons. Obviously there is the volunteer aspect, but there is another level. What we've seen is that it's a nice base of enthusiasm. When you've been around this business for a while, it's refreshing to be around someone who is not so cynical." Schoenfeld's observation flies in the face of the popular view of young people as misanthropes. Our interviewees seemed refreshingly immune to this stereotype.

6. Non-college students are largely invisible to campaign professionals. This is a finding we reported earlier: our interviewees almost always equated young people with college students. While educational level is surely an important factor in voter turnout, thinking only about college students leaves a large subsection of the population unaccounted for during campaigns. That sort of logic would be deemed unacceptable when reasoning about other age cohorts. One could not, for instance, equate senior citizens with "assisted living residents" only. Such easy generalizations about young people seem less troublesome to campaign workers, however.

To be sure, college campuses provide a central location for finding young people. Young professionals, in contrast, are much harder to track down. To get to such persons, says Edna Ishayik, "You have to advertise on channels they might watch and on radio stations they might listen to. You have to change your whole strategy, which is extremely expensive. And you're really taking a risk." While chancy, Craig

Schoenfeld saw this as a genuine opportunity during his candidate's campaign. Because young professionals "are trying to network in their careers," said Schoenfeld, "we tried to foster that by getting them involved in the political process."

Experience with the CYV Toolkit

Unfortunately, our interviewees' knowledge of the CYV Toolkit was modest at best. Although each had agreed to use the Toolkit during their campaign and to evaluate its usefulness for the Council, only one of our interviewees did so diligently, with the others admitting to having glanced at the Toolkit a few times. Thus, their evaluations must be viewed cautiously and hasty generalizations avoided. We will discuss the interviewees one-by-one:

Dr. Bill Choby. Bill Choby is the only working politician interviewed by us and it is not surprising that he only glanced over the Toolkit: "Well, I had a few people, young republicans in the district and at the college, and the best way for this to work was through them. So I forwarded it to them." Unfortunately, Dr. Choby received no feedback from those to whom he sent the document. Although uninformed, he was nonetheless upbeat about the project: "Anything that helps them [i.e. youthful political professionals] learn about the process is good, and I think your Toolkit has that potential."

Craig Schoenfeld. "I saw it. That was the extent of it," said Craig Schoenfeld when reflecting on the Toolkit. He quickly added, however, that his candidate's campaign was already following the Toolkit's structures. When asked again to summarize his evaluation of the Toolkit at the end of the interview, Schoenfeld offered that "It's probably beneficial to the first time candidate—someone who is looking at how do I put together a campaign."

Donny Ness. Although Donny Ness confessed that the Toolkit contained "a pretty good amount" of information, he also said he had only looked at the instrument once (early in the campaign). Like Choby and Schoenfeld, Ness said, "it was a good reminder and a way to reinvigorate efforts to reach young people, but I don't know if it offered anything new." When asked to offer suggestions for making the Toolkit better, Ness said he had nothing to suggest.

Edna Ishayik. Of the four interviewees, Edna Ishayik was the only one to offer a specific evaluation of the Toolkit. She felt that it "wasn't detailed enough. It oversimplified the issue." More positively, Ishayik took advantage of some of the suggestions made in the Toolkit. "We did two high school debates," Ishayik said, "as a way to get volunteers." In addition, "our biggest debate was on the college campus. We thought both of those were beneficial."

What surprised her during the campaign? Ishayik admitted to having originally believed that young people were almost exclusively liberal and hence doubted the Toolkit's assertion that "being young is not the defining factor in how they will vote."

By the end of the campaign, however, Ishayik reported finding many conservatives on local college campuses. She attributed this new realization on her part to the Toolkit's observations.

While generally positive about the Toolkit, Ishayik offered one suggestion for improvement. "Something not in the Toolkit that we thought would be useful," said Ishayik "is absentee ballots for young people. If we saw [on our voting rolls] that these people were 18-24, we tried to send them an absentee ballot, call them early and get their vote before they left for school." According to Ishayik, this tactic was effective in getting out the youth vote.

While no generalizations can be made on the basis of the foregoing, it is noteworthy that the only campaign professional to make extensive use of the Toolkit was also the youngest. As we have mentioned in earlier reports, the Toolkit is probably not well suited to a major Congressional race or to veteran campaign professionals. "Going local" and "going young" might well become CYV's watchwords in the future.

Overall Political Advice

We also asked our interviewees how young people might be mobilized more effectively. Even though most of the persons we interviewed had been part of losing campaigns, their advice was nonetheless helpful in several respects:

1. Politicians must be shown the importance of the youth vote. The interviewees were quick to point out that politicians cannot be expected to allocate time and resources to young people until it can be shown that they represent a substantial, mobilizable voting block. According to Bill Choby, politicians will "only [reach out to young people] when the politician can see that there are votes to be had." Donny Ness compared the problem to the chicken and egg phenomenon, suggesting that politicians won't pursue young people until young people pursue them. Right now, said Ness, neither group seems willing to make the first move. For her part, Edna Ishayik believed that young people must not wait for politicians to act—they need to start paying greater attention to the political process, even if this simply means reading the newspaper or watching the news. At present, though, both sides seem to be playing a waiting game.

2. Act early and get young people involved. Bill Choby suggested that it would be particularly lethal for politicians to treat young people in a token manner. "I would tell the young people," Choby said, "this is your future. No one is going to create it for you. If you want a piece of the American dream, you have to get involved." Craig Schoenfeld believed that one way to do so is to "reach out to them early on" since "your schedule during the last three or four months [of the campaign] is not going to allow you the time" to do so. Edna Ishayik was more specific, arguing that campaigns need "to be pro-active and start talking to the high school students."

3. Campaigns must make personal contact. Making personal contact with any cohort is important, but it may be especially necessary with young people, our respondents felt. Edna Ishayik spoke of the benefit she saw from going into young people's normal environments and debating issues. Bill Choby recounted the recent success of several young politicians who wore out shoe leather trying to contact young adults. Craig Schoenfeld said it best when recommending that politicians "spend time with them...in groups of three or four individuals." And when talking to young adults, said Schoenfeld, do more than simply toe the party line.

4. Young people today are issue-oriented. According to our interviewees, young people are not affiliating with traditional political parties, although they do have liberal and conservative tendencies. When asked what young people ideally want in a political leader, Edna Ishayik opined, "I think they want someone who responds to the issues they care about." Donny Ness argued more directly: "you can't organize young people around a political party. It doesn't work anymore. That's the old model. You need to engage them through an issue that is important to them, especially local issues." But what issues? Terrorism was mentioned by one interviewee. Two others mentioned the conflict with Iraq. Another mentioned the environment and abortion. As has been shown throughout the CYV project, young people are much like older Americans when it comes to the issues of the day.

5. Talk to young people, not down to them. Simply asking our respondents to think about young people made them more reflective about the topic. Whether it was Edna Ishayik's surprise at how complex young people's political attitudes were, or Craig Schoenfeld's insistence that politicians talk directly to them on an individual level, there was general agreement that one dare not trifle with young adults. "When they come in contact with young people," said Donny Ness, politicians "should avoid simple rhetoric ... that does not really say anything." While this is surely good advice when dealing with political constituencies of any age, it is surprising how often this theme emerges when young people become the focus of attention.

Conclusion

Our interviewees were enormously cooperative during the interviews and for that we are grateful. They were not, however, dutiful when it came to using the Toolkit and that is an old story. Reflecting on how difficult it has been to get campaigns to cooperate fully with CYV, we sense that Toolkit-dissemination strategies cannot be limited to the campaign period itself. Yes, that does sound odd: a campaign tool that is not maximally helpful during campaigns. But the time-pressures, organizational pressures, and financial pressures of a campaign may simply be too overwhelming to get the Toolkit the attention it needs. And so it might be wise for the Council to work on deploying the Toolkit well in advance of the campaign season, working with state political parties, for example, to run youth-oriented workshops throughout a state or district. Political professionals may be in more open, expansive, and experimental moods during such moments and therefore willing to think harder (and more creatively) about young people and voting. This change would make the Campaign for Young Voters a more strategic and less tactical project, a shift in orientation we believe may be warranted.

APPENDIX 1

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

INTRODUCTION: Hello, this is Jay Childers calling from the Annette Strauss Institute at the University of Texas. We are gathering information about what candidates think about young voters and the Toolkit created by the Campaign for Young Voters.

Have I reached _____ (insert name)?

Adam Anthony has given us your name, and suggested that it would be o.k. to ask you a few questions for research purposes. I'm calling to talk to you about your perceptions of young adults and the Toolkit. Can you spare 30 minutes at this time to talk to me?

There are no known risks associated with this interview, we do not expect or presume any knowledge of any kind, and you may end the interview at any time. The interview will take 7-10 minutes to complete and it will be audio taped. The audiotape cassette will be kept in a locked file cabinet at the Strauss Institute. The tape will be heard only for research purposes by myself and my research associates and will be destroyed after it has been transcribed. Your decision to participate in this interview will not affect your relationship with the University of Texas at Austin. If you have any questions about this interview, you may contact Dr. Sharon Jarvis at 512-471-1961. Do you have any questions?

*I want to begin by asking a few general questions about young people before moving more specifically to the Toolkit.

General Experience

Think back to an encounter you had during the recent campaign with young voters?
Tell us about that experience. What makes it stand out in your mind?

Did anything in particular surprise you about young people during the campaign?
What was that?

Where are the young voters in your district? Tell us how you find them.

Think back, if you will, about your own reactions to political candidates when you were young. What did you think about politics back then? About politicians?

Do you think young people today think differently than you did back then? Have they changed much during, say the last decade or so?

*Thank you for your thoughtful responses. Now I would like to turn our discussion to the topic of the Toolkit.

Experience with the Toolkit

What was your reason for using the Toolkit? Why?

What is your overall impression of the Young Voter Toolkit? Why?

In your opinion, did the Toolkit offer too little, a good amount, or too much information?

In your opinion, did the Toolkit offer new information about young adults?

What was the biggest advantage to using the Toolkit?

In what area(s) did you feel the Toolkit could have been stronger?

Would you use the Toolkit in your next campaign? Or would you advise other campaigns to use it?

*Thank you, now I would like you to think about your answers to the two previous topics in answering the following few questions on your advice for other politicians about young people that you have learned from your experience.

Advice for Others

Given what you learned during the campaign, what seems to be on young people's minds these days? Do they seem worried? Carefree? Disinterested or distracted?

As far as young people are concerned, what is the ideal candidate like?

What turns them on the most about politics? What turns them off?

What issues, if any are most important to them? What sorts of people do they seem to admire most?

Do you think politicians are trying to reach out to young people these days? Can you think of any reasons why they should or shouldn't?

Do you think it's possible to get more politicians to take the youth vote seriously? What might persuade them to do so?

If one of your colleagues asked your advice about the best way to approach young people, what would you say? What's the one thing politicians should avoid when interacting with youth?

Did you come away from the campaign more hopeful or less hopeful about politics and youth?