

Hispanic students eager to get to polls

In essays, seniors at Sunnyside say voting is important

Published: 10.13.2004

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ARIZONA DAILY STAR

A majority of the students in a Sunnyside High School senior class say they are willing and eager to cast their ballots for the first time, despite statistics showing young Hispanic voters historically have low turnout.

The 33 Sunnyside students were asked to speak to their friends and family members about their political opinions and voting habits, then write an essay about their findings. Nearly nine out of every 10 Sunnyside students are Hispanic, according to the school district's demographic Web site.

While a U.S. Census Bureau report said only 15.4 percent of Hispanic 18- to 24-year-olds voted in 2000, all of these students say they realize the importance of voting, not only for their age group, but for the Hispanic community in general.

"To see all the major issues discussed in elections and how much my Hispanic community is affected, I am excited to get old enough to vote," said 17-year-old Ema Garcia.

Although they are enthusiastic, they also say several problems arise when trying to get kids their age to vote, and not just Hispanics. Overall, the census report says just 32.3 percent of the 18-24 age group voted in the last presidential election.

Excuses include laziness, apathy and lack of knowledge about politics, politicians and the issues.

Of those in the age group who didn't vote, 30 percent said they were

too busy or had a conflicting schedule. Another 12 percent reported they were not interested or felt their vote would not make a difference, according to the census.

Teens "are caught up in their lives and do not think of the future," Alyssa Garcia, 17, wrote in her Sunnyside essay.

For many, the students say, voting has never been a topic of conversation at home because some family members are not U.S. citizens. Yet the students still understand the importance of getting available Hispanic voters to the ballot box.

"I feel I need to make up for my family not voting. I will be turning 18 years old before November 2nd, and I do not want to wait four more years to vote. I also feel that we, the youth of the nation, are the future of the United States," wrote Liliana Cruz.

Although they know that turning 18 makes them legal adults, many feel they are not informed enough to be able to form an opinion or choose a candidate. Having teachers and speakers talk about the candidates' positions would help, they say.

Campaigns specifically aimed at youth voters also help shape opinions.

"Certain teenagers don't know what the presidents are supporting or disagreeing about, so they don't know who to pick. (Candidates) are not trying hard enough to get the issues across to the teenagers, so they end up confused," wrote Melissa Figueroa, 17.

Recognizing the impact of getting the largest group of young voters since the baby boom to vote, youth-driven media have stepped up their voter campaigns. MTV has "Choose or Lose" commercials in heavy rotation. Celebrities, musicians and actors are speaking out more than ever and hosting campaign fund-raising concerts.

The message doesn't seem to be lost on these Sunnyside students.

"Young people are part of a world where we are always being told what to do, what to say, how to act and how to think," Cruz wrote. "We are part of a society dominated by older people. The youth want to be heard, and now is the time."

Web sites

FOR young Hispanic voters

www.votolatino.org

Voto Latino is a nonpartisan, youth-driven, national organization. The site has links to state representatives; featured articles relevant to Hispanic voters; a breakdown of issues, including education, immigration and health care; definitions of political-office positions; and an explanation of political processes. The site is available in Spanish.

FOR Hispanics

www.svrep.org

The Southwest Voter Registration Education Project Web site. Register to vote or view news stories relevant to the Hispanic voter.

For young voters

www.youthvote.org

Youth Vote Coalition, a national nonpartisan coalition. Register to vote, view information on elections by state, officials by state, and statistics on youth voting.

www.Rockthevote.org

Rock the Vote, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization. Register to vote; get information on voting essentials; view a guide to elections and a daily blog of election news.

www.declareyourself.com

Declare Yourself, a national nonpartisan, nonprofit campaign for young voters. Register to vote; find absentee ballot forms; find a polling place and view candidate bios and public-service announcements.

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