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ELECTION INTEREST UP SHARPLY FROM 2000: YOUNG ADULTS CONTRIBUTE TO RISE

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From the Vanishing Voter Project

<http://www.vanishingvoter.org>

Election interest at this stage of the 2004 presidential campaign is substantially higher than during the same period of the 2000 campaign. In the Vanishing Voter Project's April national poll, 42 percent of respondents said they are paying "a great deal" or "quite a bit" of attention to the campaign. Four years ago in the same month, only 15 percent claimed to be paying close attention.

Heightened interest was also clear from other indicators. In our April survey, 43 percent said they had seen, read, or heard a campaign news story within the past 24 hours. In our survey during the same week in 2000, only 22 percent made this claim. Compared with 2000, Americans were also more likely to say (32 percent versus 14 percent) they had talked about the campaign within the past day and to say (56 percent to 27 percent) they had spent time in the past day thinking about the campaign.

Accompanying this increase in interest is an accelerated pace of candidate selection. In our April 2000 survey, 56 percent of registered voters said they had not yet made a choice when asked: "Which presidential candidate do you support at this time, or haven't you picked a candidate yet?" This time, only 35 percent of registered voters failed to name a candidate. This figure, of course, is still much higher than in the national surveys that show a small percentage of uncommitted voters. But these surveys virtually force respondents into a choice by reading them the candidates' names and asking them which one they prefer. Our question is designed to determine whether citizens are involved enough to embrace a candidate without such prompting.

In 2000, after March's Super Tuesday contests, Americans and the news media took an extended break from the campaign. In contrast, this year's spring campaign has been everything but silent. In fact, the level of involvement this spring is close to that of the final month of the 2000 campaign, a period when election interest ordinarily peaks.

### **Interest Surges among Young Adults**

Heightened involvement in 2004 owes considerably to strong interest among younger adults. Although interest is higher among all age groups, younger adults show the greatest increase. They are far more involved than they were four years ago.

In our recent national survey, 42 percent of adults between the ages of 18 and 30 said they are paying "a great deal" or "quite a bit" of attention to the campaign. During the same period in 2000, three times fewer—a mere 13 percent—said they were paying close attention. Compared with 2000, younger adults this time were also more likely (36 percent versus 20 percent) to say they had read, seen, or heard an election news story within the past day. They were also more likely (42 percent versus 14 percent) to say they had talked about the campaign within the past day and more likely (54 percent to 20 percent) to say they had spent time in the past day thinking about

the campaign. And among registered voters in this age group, only 31 percent did not have a candidate in mind when asked whether they had picked one. In April of 2000, 72 percent had not yet settled on a candidate.

Underlying the heightened interest of younger adults is the belief that the stakes are high in this election. In our Vanishing Voter survey of last month, 57 percent of younger adults felt the election would have “a great deal” or “quite a bit” of impact on the future of the country. In fact, younger adults were more likely than older adults (51 percent) to hold this belief. In 2000, only 33 percent of young adults felt that the election’s outcome would have a substantial influence on the nation’s future.

The heightened involvement of young adults in the 2004 campaign portends a rise in voter turnout in November. Turnout has declined substantially in recent decades, and young adults account for much of the drop. Their turnout rate in the 1972 general election was nearly 50 percent. In 2000, it was barely above 30 percent. A campaign that captures the imagination of young adults is one that could produce a sharp increase in the number of voters going to the polls.

### **The Other America: The Uninvolved**

Although the 2004 campaign has generated unusually high interest, large numbers of citizens remain uninvolved. Our survey suggests that roughly one in three Americans are paying almost no attention to the campaign and are making little effort to sort out the issues and candidates. The majority of them can be expected to stay away from the polls on Election Day. Indeed, most of them are not registered to vote.

These Americans are disproportionately individuals with lower levels of income and education. They are part of a long-term trend. As voter turnout has declined in recent decades, the drop has been concentrated among working-class Americans. The turnout gap between the top and bottom fourth by income is by far the largest among western democracies and has been widening.

The gap is especially wide among younger adults. This year, younger adults with a college background are nearly as attentive to the election as their older peers. However, for most of the non-college young, the campaign might as well be happening in another country. They are tuned out of and turned off by election politics.

Both political parties have active strategies for encouraging young adults on college campuses to register and vote. Neither party has a comparable strategy for mobilizing non-college young adults. Thus, if turnout does rise dramatically in the fall election, as appears likely, an attendant effect will be a widening of the participation gap between America’s more and less affluent citizens.

The results reported here are from nationwide telephone surveys of approximately 1,000 adults conducted April 14-18, 2004. The surveys have a sampling error of  $\pm 3\%$ . The [Vanishing Voter Project](#) is a study by the [Joan Shorenstein Center](#) on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at [Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government](#).