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Posted at 7:35 a.m. PDT Monday, October 9, 2000

Young Americans choose volunteering over voting

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Brian Miller has volunteered thousands of hours helping others: He fought fires during a year with AmeriCorps and now he is working with the homeless in Washington.

But, like many other young Americans who are offering up more of their time to community service, he is disillusioned with politicians and does not plan to vote in the Nov. 7 presidential election.

"I see a whole bunch of reasons not to vote and very few to vote," said Miller, a student at George Washington University.

He is not alone.

Voter turnout of 18-to-24-year-olds has been plunging over the past few years. Since 18-year-olds were first given the right to vote in the 1972 elections, the turnout rate of 18-to-24-year-olds has dropped to from 50 percent to 32 percent in 1996, the Federal Election Commission reported.

And it is even worse for those under 20: Only 11 percent of 18-to-20-year-olds voted in 1998.

"It's obviously a dangerous trend because we depend on the sovereignty of the people in a democracy," said Leon Panetta, former White House chief of staff and director of the Panetta Institute for Public Policy.

Even more disturbing to service organizations was data showing that many young people see volunteering as an alternative to

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that many young people see volunteering as an alternative to voting. According to a Harvard University study published this year, community volunteerism is high, with 60 percent of college students involved in community service.

YOUNG DISILLUSIONED WITH POLITICS

But more are disillusioned with the political system. The study showed 85 percent of college students surveyed prefer volunteering to political engagement as the better way to solve important issues facing their communities, while 60 percent prefer it as a way to deal with issues facing the country.

Steve Culbertson, president and chief executive of Youth Service America, an alliance of 200 organizations that works to increase volunteer opportunities for young Americans, said the data worried him.

“Studies show young people are actually making a choice to volunteer instead of vote,” he said. “There are a lot of reasons to be cynical about the political process, but the idea that they were literally going to choose to volunteer instead of vote, you have to sit and think -- that's dangerous.”

Culbertson said YSA, which has spent 15 years boosting volunteerism among young people, was well-placed to try to change some minds.

“The key message point to share with them is that, if you are volunteering and not voting as a young person, 20 years from now your kids are going to be cleaning the same dirty rivers that you're cleaning today, or tutoring in the same mediocre school system,” he said.

YSA created ServiceVote 2000, which has been lobbying around the country to increase youth voting with slogans like: “With your faith and a hammer, you helped build a house ... what will the next president do to house the homeless? You gotta vote too. Volunteer today. Vote for tomorrow.”

It hopes to identify 100,000 young people who volunteer who have chosen to vote for the first time this year.

WHY DON'T YOUNG PEOPLE VOTE?

“I think that the problem most youth have with the candidates is that we can't really connect with them,” said David Kalina, a 21-year old from Bradenton, Florida, who has not voted since he registered in 1996.

Miller agreed, noting that since young people traditionally do not

vote, candidates ignore them. "We don't vote, we don't contribute money, so they don't court us. And most politicians are out of touch with what is going on in the real world."

Some politicians, like Sen. John McCain of Arizona, are worried by the trend and have been trying to woo the youth vote. "Too many young people have grown people disillusioned by politics. They feel that Washington is not listening to them, and far too often it is not," he said.

"Young people don't have six-figure checks they can write to political parties and they don't have lobbyists or special interests to represent them. But they do have the future of our nation in the palm of their hand, and that is why we must do everything we can to take our government away from the special interests and give it back to the American people -- young and old alike."

YSA is sponsoring regional forums around the country to try to bridge the gap between the two groups, Culbertson said.

Will Hauser, an 18-year-old senior at Manatee High School in Florida, is a co-chair of the "I volunteer and I vote" campaign. His group is sponsoring forums for local and state officials to speak to young people and is trying to find innovative ways to encourage young people to vote.

"Lots of them feel disenchanting," he said, explaining that many see instant gratification from their volunteer work but they often do not see the long-term advantage of voting. "I want more people to vote. This is the place to start -- these people are going to be voting for the next 50 years."

Several states are also trying to woo young voters. California's secretary of state sends birthday cards to all 18-year-olds and several states are working to make Internet voting possible and make it easier to register online.

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