

Polls need priority, young voters assert

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, only about 60 percent of all eligible United States citizens voted in the last presidential election, with single young adults being less likely to visit the polls.

The good news is that some of those young folks are working hard to bring the percentages up. Take Jen Manierre and Olivia Fagan, who weren't yet old enough to vote in 2000. They devoted most of their summer toward urging adults of all ages to vote — something they will do themselves on Nov. 2.

Jen and Olivia took part in a summer internship through the Faithful Citizenship Project, a voting campaign operated by the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice in conjunction with the Southern Tier Labor-Religion Coalition. They were based in donated office space at Catholic Charities of the Southern Tier in Elmira, but spent much of their time registering people to vote

Youth

in such public venues as parishes, food pantries, concerts, carnivals, stores and farm markets.

During the course of their internships, which ran from mid-June to mid-August, Jen and Olivia registered nearly 600 new voters. To attain those impressive numbers, Jen said she and Olivia had to be at their persuasive best.

"People won't just come up to our tables. We go 'Excuse me, are you registered to vote?'" said Jen, 21, a native of the St. Casimir/St. Charles Borromeo cluster in Elmira who's a senior at Hamilton College.

Olivia said she has emphasized a quote from the U.S. bishops' statement, "Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility": "In the Catholic tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue; participation in the political process is a moral obligation."



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

Jen Manierre, a senior at Hamilton College and native of the St. Casimir/St. Charles Borromeo cluster in Elmira, helps people register to vote outside the Knights of Columbus hall in Hornell Aug. 3. She and Olivia Fagan both took part in summer internships through the Faithful Citizenship Project, registering a total of almost 600 new voters during that time.

Yet this obligation shouldn't be considered terribly burdensome. "It only takes a minute to register, and five minutes to vote. It's something you can squeeze in very easily," said Olivia, 19, who grew up in St. Mary's Parish in Elmira and is a sophomore at SUNY College at Albany.

In Rochester, Jamie Farley took part in a similar effort while still in high school. She was involved in a successful voter-registration service project among her senior class at Rochester's Wilson Magnet High School, from which she recently graduated. Jamie is also a big advocate of the Web sites www.rock-thevote.com and www.elections.state.ny.us/voting/voting.htm, each of which provide online opportunities for voter registration along with other useful voting information.

Jamie, from Rochester's Holy Cross Parish, said it's crucial for young voters such as herself to take part in the political process as soon as possible.

"We no longer are the people who have to have adults make the decisions for us. We are now active citizens making a difference, and the best way for that to happen is to vote and make our voices heard," she said, adding that in light of the Americans who fought for their convictions through women's suffrage, the Civil War and the Revolutionary War, "the least I can do is to exercise the rights that their lives paid for."

Jamie and two fellow 18-year-olds from the Diocesan Youth Committee, Nazera Douglas and Katie Shanley, all said they are preparing to vote this November by watching the news frequently. Nazera, a parishioner in the Flower City/Lexington parishes, said she's paying special attention to "the things that happen in the U.S. that might affect my freedom." Jamie listed her top voting issues as rising college tuition, the unemployment rate and particularly the Iraq conflict because she is entering the New Mexico Military Institute. Katie, from Holy Family Parish in Rochester, said her main concerns are Iraq as well as developments affecting the Rochester City School District, where she hopes to someday teach.

Katie noted that although the presidential race is this year's big news, the importance of local voting should not be forgotten. "In a presidential election, voting, although exceedingly important, does not come down to the votes of a mere one or two people. However, in local elections, it very often can," she said.

Olivia in Elmira said that her voter-registration efforts may actually yield such a result, saying, "The more voters you get, the more you do make a difference." Jen added that through her internship, "I realize there is a lot more to vote for than a presidential election. The local elections are just as important, if not more important."



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