

Technology, Issues and Role Models Drive Youth Voter Participation

by Tabatha Blacksmith

April 20, 2013 - Young Washingtonians are more likely to vote when information is readily available, the issues are important to them, and their role models are active voters, said Secretary of State Kim Wyman, our state's top election official.

"You have to be where they live [and] most 18-25 year olds live online...they're on Facebook, they're on Twitter, they're on their smart phones," said Secretary Wyman. "They never look at it as a phone, this is their communication device," Wyman added.

And our state is doing a good job of using technology to educate voters, according to a recent study conducted by the Center for Governmental Studies. The Center ranked Washington State number two in the country for providing voters with comprehensive information. The study, "Voter Information in the Digital Age: Grading State Election Websites," is available at <http://policyarchive.org/handle/10207/bitstreams/96561.pdf>

"Our office is very committed to having a printed voter's pamphlet, putting that information online so people can get to it easily, mailing it to every household for those who can't get to the internet. I think candidates are getting much more savvy, and having a Facebook page, Twitter account, and web page, that's just the basic campaign, even for local races. And, again, I think it's getting it out there where people can see the value and importance in it, and making decisions that are based on that information," said Wyman.

While getting information out to potential voters is important, Wyman believes other issues also play key roles in driving participation. "Turnout is driven far more by what's on the ballot or who's on the ballot," said Wyman, who cited the 2012 election year as an example. In Washington, "we don't see large numbers of people not getting to vote because they weren't

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registered, which tells me we don't have a lot of barriers to voting. It's driven by the people being motivated to participate," said Wyman.

Wyman said her office will always promote every eligible person's opportunity to vote, but she understands that people get busy. Yet important issues seem to trump busy lives. "[If you look at the ballot last year...gay marriage and legalizing pot, and then of course the governor's race and the presidential race, those are all so high profile, there's so much...passion and emotion. That helped drive turnout up," said Wyman.

Secretary Wyman said one of the biggest challenges for people of all ages – and perhaps young people in particular – is making voting important to them. Wyman said studies show that lifelong voters vote more frequently and role models make a difference. She notes that active, lifelong voters tend to have someone in their life to whom voting was important and they passed that on. "Sitting down at the kitchen table and going through the ballot and voting materials... When the child sees it's important to someone important in their life, that is actually the biggest motivator for people to be lifelong voters," said Wyman.

Secretary Wyman reached out to young voters when she visited SPSCC last month to kick off her agency's annual College Civics tour. The 16-campus tour is intended to help address her question, "How do we connect [with young people] and let them see that they actually have an impact?" When she visits young people across the state, Wyman said she routinely asks them if they feel elected officials listen to them. Their answers are usually No, so she tries to explain the connection between voting and being heard. "It's a very circular argument. If you're not participating, and you're not affecting their re-election campaign [then] you're probably not going to be listened to," said Wyman. She adds, "There are people sitting in

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Olympia right now that are making decisions that are going to affect you...and if you didn't help elect them, you're not going to be represented."

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