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Courting the Youth Vote

Will young people determine this election?

By AMY CHOZICK

Young voters could help sway the presidential election in Barack Obama's favor -- if they vote.

While Sen. Obama has had months to hold sweeping registration drives, his campaign now has only a handful of early voting days and a few hours on Election Day to make sure people under 30 get to the polls. It's an age group that historically has turned out at lower rates than older voters, and has repeatedly disappointed politicians relying on them.

From parties on college campuses to text messages and voting reminders implanted in video games, the Obama campaign is rolling out new techniques to try and motivate this historically elusive electorate.

"In many ways, our fate is in their hands," Obama campaign manager David Plouffe said on a recent conference call with reporters.

Republican John McCain is also working to motivate his youngest supporters to show up at the polls. But the effort is particularly critical for Sen. Obama, who has built his candidacy on mobilizing first-time voters.

According to a Rock the Vote poll conducted in September by the Tarrance Group and Lake Research Partners, voters 18 to 29 years old favor Sen. Obama over Sen. McCain 56% to 29%.

Roughly nine million new voters of all ages have registered to vote this year, the vast majority of whom are Democrats, according to an Associated Press tally. But registration doesn't always translate into votes.

In a survey conducted last month by The Wall Street Journal, NBC News and the MySpace networking Web site, only 54% of new voters said they would definitely vote on Nov. 4.

Sen. Obama, 47, has campaign offices on most major college campus and paid youth coordinators in 14 swing states that coordinate tens of thousands of volunteers. Field staff has recently been reassigned to street teams that will knock on doors on early voting days and Election Day.

These teams plan to blanket college dorms, bars and music venues, as well as places like technical schools, beauty salons and factory floors where non-college youth might be.

Sen. McCain meanwhile plans to rely largely on volunteers organized through a

national youth coordinator. His campaign is taking a more targeted approach by homing in on football games, fraternity houses and events honoring veterans, where Republican support runs strong.

"It's like comparing a carpet bomb to a smart bomb," says Rich Beeson, political director at the Republican National Committee.

Mr. Plouffe says the Obama campaign's get-out-the-vote strategy is centered on in-person peer-to-peer outreach and a big push during early voting.

According to a Wall Street Journal analysis, voters under 30 have not widely participated in early voting this year. In Florida, they account for 8% of cast ballots, though they make up 17% of voters. In North Carolina, voters under 30 make up 11% of cast ballots, but make up 19% of voters.

For months, Obama aides have reached out to local authorities to encourage them to increase the number of early voting sites and put polling stations on college campuses.

A billboard in the Xbox 360 car racing game Burnout Paradise shows a photo of Sen. Obama over the words "Early voting has begun."

Trisha Maynard, 24 and a student in Kansas City, Missouri, says she didn't vote in 2004 because she wasn't sure how to register and it seemed like a hassle.

This year she voted early for Sen. Obama after a volunteer knocked on her door and explained how to vote at a nearby grocery store. "It was worth standing in line," she says.

For Sen. McCain, a challenge is breaking through the more vocal Obama presence on college campuses, Republicans say.

"We want to make visible that college freshman 2,000 miles from home who thinks he's the only person supporting McCain," says **Harout Samra**, the 25-year-old chairman of the Florida College Republicans and a law student at the University of Miami.

The 72-year-old Sen. McCain acknowledged at a recent town-hall style meeting that he still has "a lot of work to do on the youth vote." He plans to rely in part on a 72-hour program run by the RNC in the days before Nov. 4 that includes dispatching young volunteers to inundate college students with free rides to the polls, block parties, and both automated and live phone calls reminding them to vote.

Before a big University of Florida football game earlier this month, Louisiana's 37-year-old Republican governor, Bobby Jindal, attended a pre-game party on behalf of Sen. McCain. Mr. Jindal stood on the front steps of a fraternity house to encourage hundreds of rowdy football fans to vote.

Despite the onslaught of new efforts and a spike in enthusiasm, a strong turnout among young voters is not guaranteed.

"Since 1968 there has been a long line of unsuccessful candidates who had staked their stuff on the youth vote," says Republican strategist Alex Vogel. "It's not exactly a reliable turnout."

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