

# Oregon votes 2002

## No vote, no room for complaints

The number of student voters has been dropping for the past 30 years, weakening their power in deciding on policy changes and elected officials

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She's a student, she's 18, but Audrey Douglas does not feel particularly chosen. However, on Nov. 5, Douglas will become part of very select group: a member of the 18 to 20 age group who will actually exercise the right to vote.

"I feel like I am finally taking part in the political process," the first-year environmental science major said. "And not just sitting back and watching."

If national numbers tell the truth, Douglas is an anomaly.

Statistics from the Federal Election Commission show that student-aged voters have the lowest voting percentage of any age group. In 1972, the first national election in which 18-year-olds were given the right to vote in, 48 percent of those age 18 to 20 turned out to vote, compared with 63 percent of the U.S. total.

Voter turnout has been declining for most age groups since the 1972 election. However, student-aged voters are now far-outnumbered on election day by older voters.

Academics, student organizers and education leaders admit the drop in voting has weakened students' leverage in front of the Eugene City Council or in Salera and Washington, D.C. However, there is much speculation on how much effect this voting trend has on creating public policy.

### Why students don't vote

Reasons for not voting are as widespread as campaign ads on television. While students who do not vote will rarely comment on the issue, academics find many reasons why young people turn their back on the political process.

"Politics is a complicated and messy business and sometimes it is controversial," Associate Dean of Social Sciences Priscilla Southwell said. "Sometimes when you're 18 or 19, you don't want messy controversies."

Students' transitory lifestyles make voting difficult for a number of reasons, said Southwell, who is also a political science professor. In many states, it is difficult to register or re-register to vote after changing addresses. Also, people who know they will be leaving the area soon have less of a personal stake in local politics.

Once young people get into their mid-20s, they tend to leave behind their ramen noodles, change of address cards and second-hand furniture. As people grow older, Southwell said, many find employment above the minimum wage, get married, have children and buy a house. All of these rites of passage give people a stake in communities and their politics, she said. The Federal Elections Commission reported 50 percent of those age 25 to 34 voted in the 2000 election.

### Self-fulfilling prophecy

Low student-age voter turnout is a self-fulfilling prophecy that allows politicians and candidates to ignore their concerns without being held accountable, Dan Isaacson said.

"We all know that senior citizens vote. Politicians and elected officials listen to seniors primarily because they vote," he said. "The demographic that gets the least amount of attention is 18- to 34-year-olds."

Isaacson, a University student who is managing the Measure 23 campaign, would like to see candidates reach out and better address the concerns of young people.

Laura Bridges of X-PAC, a Portland-based organization that attempts to increase young people's political participation, agrees that candidates should reach out more to young people, but she pointed out there is no such thing as a "young issue." Everyone is affected by the environment or health care reform, she said.

Southwell agrees. "If you look at the wide-range of issues that do come to the forefront in Oregon, the economy — which is probably the most important issue — is probably more relevant to young people than to someone who is retired," she said.

### Untapped resource

Regardless of low turnout at the polls, no politician — or issue — can overlook the student vote, Southwell said.

"Every politician knows that the potential (for students) to surge is a pretty dynamic force. If somebody or something mobilized students, they would almost be like a swing vote" in sheer number of voters, she said. "Students are almost like an untapped resource."

This is especially true in Eugene, where the University's 20,000 students make up a fair share of the city's 137,000 inhabitants. University students voted in high numbers during the 2000 presidential election, which usually attracts the highest number of voters. ASUO registered 3,200 students to vote in the upcoming election, nearly 2,500 fewer than the 2000 election. While

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"I don't vote in all the elections because you don't always get all the information. I do the big ones. They tend to be more important and have a more significant outcome."

— J.C. Barnhart  
senior, accounting

"I vote because I feel that my vote counts." — Jessica Rose  
undergraduate,  
environmental studies



"I haven't registered to vote here yet. I will at some point because that's how we get the important things done. You have to be involved at all times whether you are a student or not."

— Jonathan Valdez,  
graduate student, psychology

"I probably will vote, but I've been pretty busy."

— Nathan Wax  
undergraduate,  
architecture



"I think voting is really important and I will vote when I am 18."

— Nikki Favre  
senior,  
Thurston High School

