'08 election stirs youth movement
Under-30 generation is energized to propel U.S. in new direction

Jay Rey - NEWS STAFF REPORTER

It's not easy figuring out young voters.

Most times, you can't count on them. This year, they're election darlings, as they turn out in force for presidential primaries and caucuses -- at least in most states, and particularly among Democrats.

But is it an election blip or a sign of things to come?

Is it the Obama factor, or is there more going on?

Those who follow the habits of young voters attribute at least some of what's happening to the nature of America's Millennials.

They're members of the under-30 crowd that, for one, command attention for their collective size, which rivals that of their parents' generation.

While their knowledge about important aspects of politics and government is generally poor, most say they do follow the news, according to recent polling by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement.

The majority of young voters -- who have grown up post-9/11 and during the war in Iraq -- also say they've lost confidence in the government.

At the same time, these young Americans are engaged in a broad range of civic activity, such as voting, volunteering or even boycotting a product because of the conditions under which it was made, said Peter Levine, director of the Maryland-based center.

"To me, what that means is they care, and they are directly concerned with some issues," said Levine, a native of upstate New York.
So, Levine said, they listen and respond when they hear a politician talking to them and challenging them to get involved.

That's what has 21-year-old Scott Nichol voting for Democratic Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois, who has won the youth vote in more than two-thirds of the presidential primaries and caucuses, according to the civic center.

"The candidates, especially what I see from Obama, seem to be speaking more to younger people and really reaching out to the youth vote," said Nichol, a University at Buffalo senior.

"He's such a charismatic speaker," Nichol said. "He seems more like he's talking to you, rather than talking at you."

Not everyone under 30 is voting for Obama.

Stephanie Molnar, 20, a UB junior, voted in the Democratic primary for New York Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton. "I think a woman as president would be a little more compassionate," Molnar said. "I just like her politics a little bit more."

T.J. Marfoglia voted for Clinton, too.

"I didn't make a decision until I was right there [at the polling place]," said Marfoglia, 22, a senior at Buffalo State College. "Either way, I see it as a win-win. I'd be happy to see Obama as president."

Despite their difference in candidates, Nichol and Molnar, members of the College Democrats at UB, just try to inform students on campus about the contenders and steer them to Web sites with the candidates' views on issues concerning young voters -- among them the economy, higher education, health care, Social Security and the war in Iraq.

In fact, technology gets some credit for turning out the youth vote.

Former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean's 2004 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination was really the first to go online to rally enthusiasm among young voters, said Joshua J. Dyck, assistant professor of political science at UB. Since then, the Internet's political influence has been growing.

"Campaigns are going to the Internet," Nichol said. "College kids these days look to the Internet to figure out what it's all about. It's more convenient for them to get information and make an effective choice. It's opening up the political process to these voters."

Dyck has another theory for this year's youth turnout: the idea of replacing President Bush with the country's first woman or first black president.

"It's clear Obama's message is most tailored and suited to young people, and he is
mobilizing them," Dyck said. "But the historic nature of the race is also mobilizing people."

Lianna Tatman would agree.

It's also the first time the 18-year-old from Orchard Park will be able to vote in a presidential election, which adds to her enthusiasm.

She and her friends Amanda Brown and Kelsey Lauer were in a Buffalo State lounge Wednesday debating Obama's credentials.

"I just don't think he has enough experience," said Lauer, 19, a freshman.

"But he hasn't been around long enough to be corrupted by the system," Tatman shot back.

"We try to avoid this," explained Brown, 18, of Amherst. "It gets intense."

All of this youth hype, of course, could be just an election blip.

The presidential race in 1992 brought a large youth movement to the polls for Bill Clinton, while many young people turned out to vote for John Kerry in 2004, Levine said.

Levine believes that this year is part of a trend.

In 2004, he pointed out, the percentage of registered voters younger than 30 was reported to be the highest it had been in 30 years, even as popular culture has embraced the theme of getting out the vote.

Tatman, for example, registered to vote while at a concert festival last summer.

In fact, the voter turnout rate among 18- to 29-year-olds has been rising since 2000, Levine said.

Exit polls during Super Tuesday estimated that the percentage of young people who voted rose in seven of the eight states involved in Super Tuesday eight years ago. That rate doubled in Massachusetts and tripled in Georgia, Missouri and Oklahoma.

"The increase is remarkable," Levine said. "In some states, it has been a fourfold increase."

That said, there was one exception: here in New York, where the percentage of young voters who turned out was estimated to be the same as in 2000.

It's not clear why. Despite conceding New York's overall primary vote to its own senator, Obama appeared to win the state's youth vote, according to Levine's organization.
"I think a lot of people want to be interested, but it's up to them to really do the research on the candidates," said Van Daniel, 26, of Buffalo, "and I think that's where a lot of people my age probably stall."

While voter turnout has been much more noticeable among young Democrats, Levine said, there have been moments for young Republican voters, who helped propel former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee to victory in Iowa's Republican caucuses, for instance.

"Once we have a nominee and once things start to pick up, there will be more excitement," said Dan Aiken, president of the College Republicans at Canisius College.

Levine, though, provides a word of caution to politicians: Young voters can turn on you, too.

It seems one of their other traits is they want their political leaders to be positive.

"I think what could happen is politicians could deflate young people again, and do that by being very petty," Levine said. "So it's possible for politicians to mess it up."

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