

Students catch election fever

Like the rest of the country, young Americans have been mobilized by such issues as the war in Iraq, the state of the economy and the job market, says **Arun Venugopal**

'Make room at the polls,' the ad reads. 'More than 20 million are coming.'

The picture below shows an endless ocean of young people, arms thrust into the air in a triumphant display of solidarity. If the full-page ad for MTV, run in the *New York Times* just days before the election, is to be believed, youth have returned to the political process in a very serious way.

But it's not just MTV who's making the claim. A poll by the Pew Research Center at the end of September found that 85 percent of young voters were planning to vote November 2, up from 67 percent in 2000. It also said the percentage of young voters registered to vote was at its highest in 12 years. And officials in many states have publicly noted unprecedented levels of voter registration among young voters.

Like the rest of the country, young Americans have been mobilized by such issues as the war in Iraq, the state of the economy and the job market, as well as more immediate ones like tuition rates and the much-rumored military draft. But they are also the beneficiaries of a massive and sophisticated campaign by various groups to ensure that people get registered and to the election. Over 1.2 million voters have been registered by Rock the Vote and 800,000 by Declare Yourself, many of them by downloading voter registration forms from the internet. More crucially, perhaps, the New Voters Project has registered hundreds of thousands of young voters in swing states such as Iowa, Oregon and New Mexico, which may completely throw off pre-election predictions.

South Asian students, 20-somethings and youth groups have been just as caught up in the action, mobilizing young people to simply vote and in some cases, doing whatever it takes to get their candidate into office.

When contacted over phone, University of Michigan senior Shiny Mathew was standing in the middle of her Ann Arbor

campus, at an outdoor area known as the Diag. There, she surveyed her peers as part of a multi-city project for South Asian American Voting Youth.

"Among the South Asian community, the vast majority — over 95% — are registered and they pledge to vote on Election Day," said Shiny, who also participated in numerous voter registration drives.

Just then, she turned to an Indian-American student, Gaurav, and heard him list his top three campaign issues: immigration, the environment and fiscal issues. She then watched as he filled out a survey asking him whether he was eligible to vote, whether he was registered, and if he'd pledge to vote.

"He put 'Yes' next to all of them," she said, pleased. On a campus the size of Ann Arbor's, such efforts — even when targeted at the South Asian student population alone — can yield substantial results. South Asians, by Shiny's estimate, comprise five to eight percent of the 35,000 students on campus. And judging by surveys so far, healthcare issues such as rising insurance costs and Medicare are crucial for them, but more than anything, it's the war in Iraq. "They're saying they're opposed to the war," said Mathew. "They feel it's taking away resources that could be spent here in the United States, on education, healthcare and domestic issues."

Across the country, Akash Kuruvilla, another SAAVY fellow, was surveying students at the University of Florida-Gainesville. After SAAVY asked him to register local voters, in August, he turned to his fraternity brothers at Sigma Beta Rho, a national South Asian fraternity, and suggested they get involved. They proceeded to create a new post, National Voter Registration Chair, which Kuruvilla himself filled, and spread the program to all 23 colleges where the fraternity operates. "They're utilizing their contacts, and getting the job done," said Kuruvilla of his frat



■ University of Michigan senior Shiny Mathew (left) participated in numerous voter registration drives

brothers. "The next phase is Get out the Vote. It's no good to have people registered if they're not voting."

According to SAAVY National Coordinator Tanzila 'Taz' Ahmed, the organization registered 2,500 South Asian voters over a ten-week span, and expects to turn out twice as many to the election. At one of its locations, the University of Georgia at Athens, students are actually renting vehicles to drive voters to the election.

But college campuses weren't the only places where youth activists were going.

"I registered a lot of young voters at rock concerts in Chicago," said Ramona Gupta, of the South Asian Progressive Action Collective, "and the energy there was always amazing. People were excited to register to vote. I didn't see the stereotypical 'young voter apathy.' These kids understand what is at stake with this election, and they want their voices to be heard."

In Ramona's experience, the "large majority" of young voters she encountered were vying for Kerry, the result of the war and job losses that either they or their parents had suffered. Another big issue was the a military draft, something the Bush administration has flatly denied would happen under its watch but which has received considerable media play in recent weeks.

On Election Day, Ramona, 27, and other members of SAPAC are headed for the 50th ward of north Chicago, an area that encom-

passes Devon Avenue and Gandhi Marg, the largely South Asian enclave. "Our goal on Election Day is to get 2,500 new voters to the election," she said. "We will be canvassing door-to-door, making sure to visit each home 2-3 times over the course of the day and to leave door-hangers that list each resident's polling place. We will concurrently run a phone bank to make sure these same people get two calls that day. We will also have drivers available to drive voters to the election, bilingual volunteers helping us communicate with our voters, and election watchers to collect data on which of our voters have cast their ballots. Overall, we will need about 100 volunteers to reach our goal. I'm so excited about it that I even recruited my mother, a newly naturalized US citizen and first-time voter, to volunteer with us on Election Day."

While Ramona and others involved in election efforts have tried to temper their partisan convictions for the greater cause, some young activists embraced campaign work for the first time. Amit Patel, a student at Stanford, was in Spain last year when he noticed a pattern in the headlines coming from the US. President Bush, he recalled, was breaking all campaign fundraising records.

"I thought it was disappointing to know that corporate and partisan interests would again have such an influence in the political process," said Amit.

When he returned to Stanford the next semester, he watched as Senator Kerry won the Democratic primaries. Then, with the support of his friends, he launched the idea of a National Service Day for Kerry, in which student supporters of the candidate would put their enthusiasm into social service.

The idea spread to other universities, and by October 23, when the day actually took place, 52 colleges were involved.

At the University of Puget Sound, in Washington, one group of students planted 200 trees and restored a run-down park. At Texas Tech in Lubbock, another group helped repair local schools and provided assistance to a food bank. And in northern California, students from Stanford helped build homes for low-income families in collaboration with Habitat for Humanity.

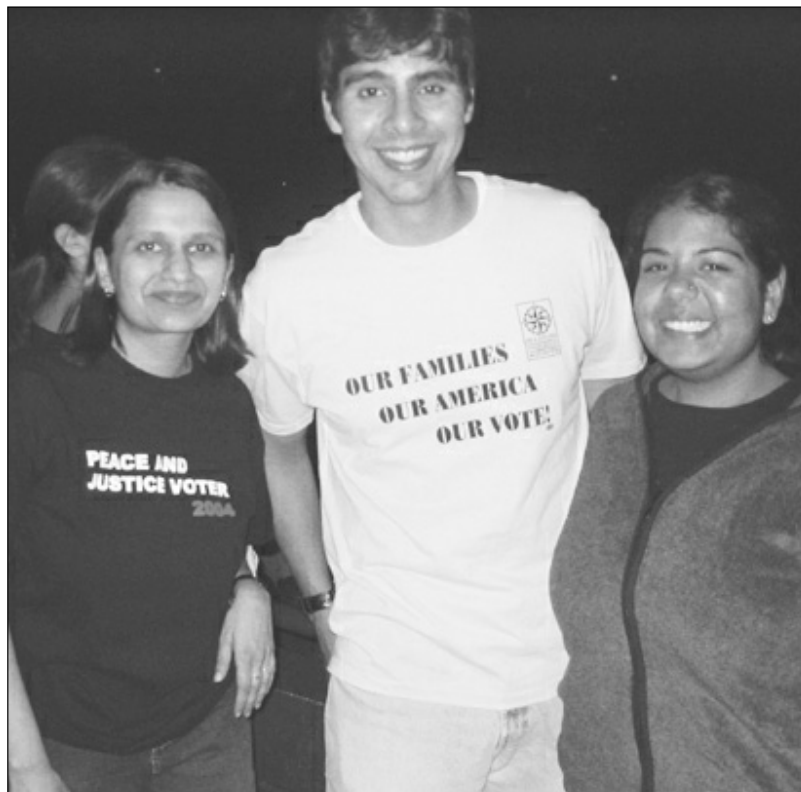
"I wanted to show they can participate in the political process and make their voice heard," he said.

On the question of fundraising, Amit thinks Kerry is less beholden to corporate interests; many of his recent contributions, he points out, are smaller and have come via the internet. And he thinks he will have a more nuanced foreign policy than President Bush.

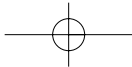
Whether it comes to mounting national debt or the war, many of the most pronounced issues of the campaign bear



■ Bush supporter and University of Minnesota senior Rohini Khanna is positive about the war



■ From left: Ramona Gupta of SAPAC, Dan Thomann of Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights and Alpana Sharma, a SAPAC volunteer



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■ Rohini Khanna's brother Rohun has been busy preparing campaign literature

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heavily on younger voters, in his opinion. "The decisions made by our president will decide what place in history we have to assume," he said. His sobriety is shared by other Democrats like Anant Shah, an employee of the Centers for Disease Control who has

been phone banking, canvassing and organizing rallies for the Kerry-Edwards campaign in Atlanta. In Shah's opinion, civil liberties have been severely impacted under Bush. "Now you look at examples of people at Guantanamo Bay being held for years without being charged, which just scares me," said Shah, who interned at the Indian American Center for Political Awareness in 1999. "As a young citizen who's been to countries like India and seen the corruption, now to see the same issues in our country, shows me how far from reason and fairness we've come around issues like the Patriot Act. Due process is at stake, it really is." In contrast to her Democratic peers, University of Minnesota senior and Bush supporter Rohini Khanna is more positive about the war and its long-term impact. "People are upset about Iraq but they forget about Germany and Japan and how it took five years to reconstruct," she said from her home in Edina, Minnesota. While acknowledging that everything hasn't gone according to plan, she pointed to the steps that have been taken en route to an Iraqi democracy. She also is more upbeat about the job

market, as are her classmates. "They're extremely confident," Rohini said. "We have a lot of companies coming to recruit, including Ford and local companies. I don't see students stressing out. It's more like 'Which job do I want?' That whole idea of a jobless recovery, while it may be true in the numbers, it's not really true in the people I interact with, day to day." She simultaneously took issue with some of Kerry's proposals, namely his healthcare plan. "Kerry's healthcare plan isn't going to work," she said. In recent weeks, Rohini and her 15-year-old brother, Rohun, have been busy preparing campaign literature for distribution. They've also helped with Bush and Cheney rallies. Although a poll by the local

paper, the *Star Tribune*, forecast an easy Kerry victory — something that confirmed for her an extreme liberal media bias -- she said people were leaning toward the President. Living as she does in a fairly white community, she knows few Indian Americans who are Republican. Often gets shocked looks when she mentions her party affiliation. "People say, 'What? You're of color and Republican?'" she said, with a laugh. If anything, she thinks people — Indian Americans included — need to move beyond color lines as thinking of community issues is not only outdated but counter-productive. "I think it's about time for the second generation to get out of the mind frame that we need to be 'the Indian vote,'" she said. "If we want our needs to be met, we should realize our needs are individual needs."

Debating politics over pizza and pop in Cerritos

MONIKA JOSHI

Julio's Pizza is a favorite haunt of South Asians on the west coast, the attraction being the topping of sauce that appeals to the spice lovers' palate. October 13, the pizzeria in Cerritos, California, was bustling with clients while President Bush and John Kerry debated for the third and final time at Arizona State University. At Julio's, the chefs and servers raced to replenish the fast-vanishing garlic bread, pizza and drinks as the 80 guests watched the two candidates lock horns. Among the patrons were young professionals, college seniors, and those in their middle ages. Of these, 65 percent were men.

There were a few snickers and laughs when the President said he was not going to get a flu shot this year, recalls Pankit Doshi, who was present. Silence fell when moderator Bob Schieffer asked the candidates if they believed homosexuality was a choice. Doshi, 23, who organized the 'South Asian Debate Party', says the idea was to get the community to watch the debate together, discuss the candidates' positions on various issues and decide who they wanted. Two volunteers from the South Asian American Voting Youth were at hand to register voters and hand out 'I'm South Asian & I Vote' stickers. (The deadline in California was October 18.) The issues dear to South Asians include civil liberties, healthcare (there are many doctors in the community) and foreign relations -- John Kerry's position that India and Pakistan be treated as different has gone down well with the community, Doshi said. Economic policies are of interest, and tax cuts for the middle class are favored. Kerry's plan to reverse tax cuts for the rich is palatable; the wealthy in the community don't mind paying up, he opines. In the end, the organizers, including Doshi, Vikram Jadhav, a student of architecture and city planning, and Angira Jhaveri, a student of social work at Loma Linda University in southern California, took an informal survey. They concluded Kerry had won by 3 to 1, though the decision was not reached without a heated

debate. Many argued that though Kerry showed he was presidential material, he appeared insipid; Bush, often the subject of ridicule, benefited from low expectations. Jagdish Patel, who drove from his workplace in Brea, recalls it as a very lively debate interspersed with laughs and scoffs. The discussion that followed had some animated moments as an aggressive Bush supporter took on others. "That created some interesting moments," he says. For Patel, a second-generation Indian, the unlimited pizza at Julio's was as big an attraction for the 20-minute drive as the opportunity to attend a South Asian event. Doshi, who last year graduated from Loyola Law School, Los Angeles, decided to organize the party as he watched the second town hall-style presidential debate October 8. He realized that in such a close race, debates help Americans who do not follow politics form impressions about the candidates and their positions. He also wanted to do something to make the South Asian voice heard. In the next five days, the organizers put the event together, calling up friends and families, putting up flyers and relying otherwise on word-of-mouth advertising. The entry fee at Julio's was \$15. That accounted for unlimited pizza, garlic bread and drinks. A part of the proceeds from the event will go to a charity, Manav Sadhna, aimed at poor women and children in India. Though Doshi is affiliated to South Asians for Kerry (the campaign has given them a list of registered voters in important states like Ohio and Florida to call), he decided to make this a non-partisan event so everyone could attend. Among the participants were supporters of both Bush and Kerry and those who are yet to pick their choice. "You can decide for yourself — what your values and beliefs are and whom they closely resemble," says Doshi. The attempt was to make South Asians voice their concerns, and get into a discussion, he says. "We want them to be politically savvy."



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