

# TUITION RELIEF AND YOUTH VOTER TURNOUT IN 2008



## **Political Context: The Rising Power of Young Progressives**

As the margins of success in US presidential elections grow increasingly narrow in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, progressive candidates have demonstrated a reinvigorated commitment to young voters. This constituency has enormous potential as a tipping point for close electoral races, particularly in a battleground state like California. Although young people between the ages of 18 and 25 are more likely to identify as Democrat or progressive than any other generation alive today, these young people are still the least likely age demographic to vote.<sup>1</sup> In order to successfully harness the potential of this voting block, progressive candidates need to adopt new organizing strategies that speak directly to the interests of young voters.

## **Tuition Relief: A Key Strategy for Youth Engagement**

In tandem with the mounting presidential campaigning for the 2008 election, young people across the state of California have been organizing themselves around a student-led ballot initiative for tuition relief. Such an initiative has already begun mobilizing the youth vote in California by catalyzing student organizing around a common cause, and is likely to significantly improve youth voter turnout in 2008. This initiative proposes to forestall egregious tuition hikes at UC and Cal State, tying their increases to the modest and predictable annual rise of the California Consumer Price Index.

While ballot initiatives themselves have been well documented to produce increased voter turnout for both mid-term and presidential election years<sup>2</sup>, the increased necessity of youth involvement for progressive candidates emphasizes the collateral benefits of a youth-oriented ballot initiative. In their 2005 study on ballot initiatives, Professors Caroline Tolbert and Daniel Smith argue that “the mobilizing effects of statewide ballot questions could be the determining factor in future presidential elections.”<sup>3</sup>

This campus-based ballot initiative appeals to the immediate needs of tuition relief and affordable higher education, and thus is much more likely to mobilize the youth vote than a strictly partisan or candidate-based approach. Such an initiative not only provides opportunities for youth involvement in campaigning and voter registration, but also yields better turnout during primaries and elections. Such an initiative is also likely to draw in parents who themselves face the daunting challenge of financing escalating college fees.

## **The True Meaning of Victory in 2008**

Beyond the impact of the measure itself, this student-led campaign for tuition relief offers a broad gamut of benefits for building progressive power in California. While the ultimate victory for the campaign would be to qualify and pass the initiative, there remain a string of smaller victories to be achieved along the way. They include:

- 1) **Energizing students across California to get involved in the democratic process**
- 2) **Getting tens of thousands of students registered to vote**
- 3) **Building enough student power to successfully demand affordable higher education**
- 4) **Highlighting the importance of California’s university system to our collective future**

## **Concluding Summary**

With over 2 million students enrolled in public higher education in California<sup>4</sup>, a tuition relief ballot initiative activates a crucial part of the progressive base. Such an initiative not only mobilizes the youth vote on Election Day, but also catalyzes campus-based youth involvement in progressive electoral work at large.

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<sup>1</sup> The Pew Research Center. “A Portrait of Generation Next.” (2007)

<sup>2</sup> Tolbert, Caroline and Daniel Smith. “The Educative Effects of Ballot Initiatives on Voter Turnout.” *American Politics Research*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 283-309 (2005)

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> California Post Secondary Education Commission, “Statewide Snapshots.” (2007)