

Rock the Vote picks up the beat;
A decade after its heyday, the group renews its push to get young adults to polls.

Susannah Rosenblatt - **Los Angeles Times**

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There was a time when voting was cool. A time when a presidential candidate stumped for support by playing his sax; when MTV, Madonna and R.E.M. were adding to the political discourse and candidates were addressing the concerns of young adults.

A time -- a decade ago now -- when Rock the Vote, a nonpartisan organization that registers young people to vote, was creating a buzz. Now its leaders say it's their time again and, as the 2004 election nears, they are making plans to elbow back onto the political -- and pop cultural -- stage.

Founded in 1990 by record company executive Jeff Ayeroff and headquartered in Westwood, the group's message clicked with younger voters, whose participation in the 1992 election spiked to 43% from 36% in the previous election. That was the highest turnout in that age group -- whose participation had been steadily declining -- since 18-year-olds were granted the right to vote in 1971.

"I think it's very rare that I talk to someone my age that was not touched by Rock the Vote between 1990 and 1992," said the group's 31-year-old executive director, Jehmu Greene.

But by 2000 the magic seemed to have faded and the momentum stalled. The numbers of young adults casting votes tumbled back down -- 32% in 1996 and 2000. Just 45% of that age group was registered to vote in 2000, a 30-year low.

"The novelty has worn off," said Diana Owen, a Georgetown University associate professor who specializes in voting patterns. Rock the Vote "is now a routine stop for candidates on the campaign trail."

That's why Greene and Hans Riemer, the director of the organization's recently opened Washington office, think it's time to shake things up again. The group hopes to recapture its original momentum, relying in part on a new partnership with country stars the Dixie Chicks.

"Because we want to put a real focus on young women in the next election, there's really no better group we could think of than the Dixie Chicks," Riemer said. "The Chicks have a real girl power vibe going."

The Grammy-winning Texas trio drew a firestorm of criticism after lead singer Natalie Maines made an anti-Bush remark to a London audience in March, leading many fans and radio stations to boycott their music. Rock the Vote welcomes the group's recent notoriety.

"Rock the Vote is an organization that is strongly for free expression," Riemer said. The Dixie Chicks, who just gave \$100,000 to the organization for a voter registration Web site, will help spread the group's message online and in TV and radio public service announcements.

Supplementing the Dixie Chicks campaign is a massive Internet-based voter registration program that debuted last month. The application was designed with eye-catching graphics and Internet accessibility to appeal to young people.

"The application can take you all the way through the process," Riemer said. Users simply "print it, sign it, lick it and mail it. One of the big reasons young people aren't registered to vote is that they don't know how to do it."

In addition to the PSAs and Internet presence, Greene and Reimer said they will employ "guerrilla marketing" techniques, such as using cell phone text messaging to organize events and papering cities with banners and fliers.

Rocker Lenny Kravitz, one of the group's celebrity endorsers, drew 4 million visitors to Rock the Vote's Web site (www.rockthevote.org) when he released his new protest song "We Want Peace" there in March. The organization also will co-host a two-day music festival later this month at the original Woodstock site in upstate New York.

"Celebrities are important in opening [young people's] ears so they don't immediately block out political messages," Greene said. "We ... use celebrities to bring them in the door."

They also want to bring in the politicians. Young people need to be spurred into civic involvement because, Greene said, the 26 million 18- to 24-year-old voters in the U.S. are being ignored.

"The candidates aren't reaching out to young people," Greene said. "The political parties don't include young voters as a primary target as far as where they spend their resources.

"If we really look at it, then democracy is facing a crisis when generations are opting out of participating," she said. Voter participation "is not going to immediately increase as we grow older. It's not a youth problem, it's an American problem."

The new Washington office, which opened in March, will bring the organization closer to the political action. "You can't influence power without having a relationship with it," Riemer said. He hopes to work with organizations and politicians in both parties to create new programs for Rock the Vote.

Some politicians seem to be getting the message. **Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-III.)** hopes to "connect the dots for young people, between their lives and Washington decisions that will be

made on their behalf," she said in a recent interview.

Although Rock the Vote does not endorse candidates or lobby for legislation, it does skew left on particular issues, like gay marriage. "It's not partisan to say everyone deserves the protection of the law in terms of civil unions and marriage," Riemer said. "If people in Washington think that's partisan, then that's their problem."

Rock the Vote also plans to jump into the increasingly bizarre tangle of California politics. The group, which does not endorse a candidate in the gubernatorial recall election, will urge young voters to participate -- primarily to oppose Proposition 54, the Racial Privacy Initiative that would prohibit the state from gathering racial demographic data for state programs.

The proposition "makes racial minorities invisible in the eyes of the government," Riemer said. "It's going to have disastrous results for education, housing, health care... It makes the government powerless to put a stop to discrimination and racism."

With 12 full-time staffers in its two offices, Rock the Vote has registered more than 2 million people since 1990. Its \$10-million budget for the 2004 election comes from donors, private grants and corporations, said Chief Operating Officer Michael Evans.

As the political climate has evolved since 1992, so has Rock the Vote's mission. Once primarily focused on promoting voter registration in a trendy package, the group's agenda has expanded, becoming more issue-oriented.

"The organization is saying, the way we're going to get young people excited about going to the polls is not just using celebrities to talk to them, but actually discussing issues," Riemer said. He hopes to build and strengthen connections with labor unions and civil rights groups. Rock the Vote already has partnerships with the NAACP, MTV, World Wrestling Entertainment and rap mogul Russell Simmons' Rap the Vote project, among others.

Rock the Vote has lately been spreading the gospel of political engagement through community street teams, small groups of young volunteers that canvass large cities registering one young person at a time. The program was launched in 2001 with seven teams; this year there are 50, with 100 projected for 2004. The current corps of about 1,000 volunteers will be expanded to 10,000 closer to the election, Evans said.

"Our role in the 2004 election is to put young people on the map," said Greene, who says she first registered to vote through Rock the Vote at a 1991 Janet Jackson concert in Austin, Texas. "There are several places in the country where we'll be able to increase 18- to 24-year-old turnout by 1%, 2%, 3%. Elections will be decided on those votes; young people are going to be part of the decision-making on election day in a way that I don't think we've seen before."