

ICESC

Institute for Civic Engagement and Social Change

RAPPs

Research, Advocacy, Policy, Participation



NORTH CAROLINA CENTRAL UNIVERSITY

Durham, North Carolina 27707

No. 2

(919-530-7256; www.nccu.edu/ICESC)

SUMMER 2009

The mission of the Institute for Civic Engagement and Social Change (ICESC, pronounced I-Sick) at North Carolina Central University (NCCU) is to raise the level and quality of civic engagement on the NCCU campus and in the community. To do this, ICESC will promote *Research, Advocacy, Policy, and Participation* (RAPP). Thus, “ICESC RAPPs” will be the primary vehicle through which the Institute will share its work (or its RAPP) with the broader community. Periodically, “ICESC RAPPs” will provide data, information, and analyses that can be used by activists, community organizations, policy makers, elected officials, teachers, and other scholars who work to empower communities of color through robust participation in the political and policy processes. By focusing on the extraordinary turnout in Durham, North Carolina’s 49th precinct, which contains NCCU, a historically Black university, this second edition of *ICESC RAPPs* will examine the impact of the 2008 election on the political participation of young African Americans.

“HYPER-MOBILIZATION,” THE 2008 ELECTION AND YOUNG AFRICAN AMERICAN VOTERS

Based on the results of the 2008 election, we offer the idea of a “hyper-mobilization election” (hy-mo) as an instructive analytic concept to aid our understanding of what happened at NCCU and other places. By hy-mo election, we mean one that mobilizes the least or irregularly active segments of the electorate. But also we submit that a hy-mo election deepens and strengthens the civic engagement of those segments by encouraging political activity beyond voting and by having a positive impact on critical civic engagement attitudes. Finally, a hy-mo election should have an enduring impact on civic engagement, extending into subsequent elections. Consequently, as a result of intense mobilization efforts, a hy-mo election produces unusually high turnout by those groups who generally exhibit relatively low voting rates. Accompanying this high turnout is evidence that more individuals in those groups are engaged in voting and non-voting political activity such as working for a political campaign, issue advocacy, etc. Moreover, they exhibit enhanced civic attitudes, such as feelings of optimism about the

For more information, please go to www.nccu.edu/ICESC.

future of the nation and a sense of personal and group efficacy or effectiveness, that predictably encourage increased political participation and engagement. Hence, we will use NCCU as a setting to explore these elements of a hy-mo election that were revealed during the 2008 vote. Of course, determining whether all of these factors actually result in a lasting impact on the civic engagement of young African Americans will have to wait for future investigation.

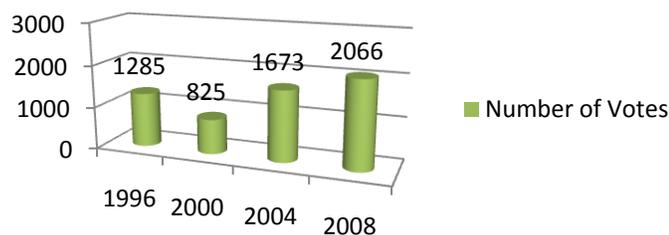
A note before proceeding: When we refer to the 2008 election, we are referring to the totality of factors, i.e., the various campaigns, voter registration drives, voter education, get-out-to-vote efforts etc., that invariably impact the extent and depth of civic engagement.

Voter Mobilization and the 49th Precinct

Turnout. Heightened turnout is *the* essential element of a hy-mo election. In 2008, turnout in the 49th precinct was unprecedented in the primary and general elections. The polling site for Durham County’s 49th precinct is located on the campus of North Carolina Central University.¹ In fact, most of the precinct is the NCCU campus but several non-NCCU precinct voters reside on adjacent streets. As a historically Black university, NCCU is 84% African American. Approximately 2,100 of NCCU’s more than 8,000 students live in the precinct as on-campus residents. Off campus students reside in other precincts throughout the county and region. Given the predominance of the campus in the precinct, 93.3% of the voters are African American, they are heavily Democratic, and most are between the ages of 18 and 22. Consequently, nearly all of the voters were voting in a presidential election for the first time.

Traditionally, youth voter turnout has been the lowest of any age group. Although there have been several positive trends in recent presidential elections, up to 2004, younger voters between 18 and 30 years old still exhibited the lowest turnout rates.² However, the 49th precinct’s 2008 general election turnout, as a percent of registered voters, exceeded significantly the statewide rate, 90% to 69.6%. Indeed, turnout in the primary and the general election was historic for the 49th precinct. Figure 1 illustrates that the 49th precinct eclipsed 2,000 votes in 2008; this was an increase of almost 400 votes from 2004, when the turnout was 80%. The high turnout was a direct result of intense mobilization efforts that took full strategic advantage of opportunities to increase the vote of NCCU students.

Figure 1
 Number of Votes NCCU Precinct
 General Elections, 1996-2008
 Source: Durham County Board of Elections



¹ Here we will refer to it as Precinct 49; however, the official designation of the precinct is #55-49. The change came when there was a need to consolidate precincts #11 and #49 into #55. That allowed NCCU students who live resident halls in Precinct 11 to vote in Precinct 49.

² For more on this see <http://www.civicyouth.org/> for several reports regarding youth voting.

Intense Mobilization. Several campus organizations including the NCCU Student Government Association, the Civic Engagement Task Force, and the campus chapters of the NAACP and Common Cause engaged in massive mobilization efforts that included voter registration drives, voter education, and get-out-to-vote campaigns. Furthermore, candidates' campaigns were omnipresent on campus. None was more prominent than the "Obama Squad," which organized students in support of the presidential candidacy of Barack Obama. Moreover, non partisan civic engagement groups such as the North Carolina NAACP and Democracy North Carolina appealed to African American voters to vote during the early voting period and to engage in innovative get-out-the-vote efforts such as "Souls to the Polls." For the latter, communities were urged to demand that their county boards of election permit voting on Sundays during the early voting period and then they were to encourage churches to organize their members to vote on a Sunday.

On October 16, 2008, the first day of early voting, over 2,000 NCCU students, faculty, and staff participated in a march to the early voting site.



Unquestionably, the highlight of the campus mobilization effort was the March to the Polls, sponsored by the Civic Engagement Task Force, the NAACP Common Cause, and other organizations. On October 16th over 2,000 NCCU students, faculty, and staff and community residents walked through the streets of Durham to the campus early voting site. This march was part of a statewide campaign led by the North Carolina NAACP called the "Millions Voting March." The purpose of the march was to bring attention to the beginning of the early voting period and to encourage students and others in the community to go to the polls. Other strategies also promoted the early vote as well as expanding the electorate.

The Early Vote. Similar to several other states, North Carolina provides an early voting period where voters can cast absentee ballots at designated polling sites prior to Election Day. In addition, for the first time for a North Carolina presidential election, unregistered voters could register and vote at the same time during the early voting period. This was known as "same day registration" or SDR. North Carolina is one of only 9 states and the only Southern state with SDR. Promoting the early vote, for example the March, was an important strategy for civic engagement groups, and the results were significant for the state, Durham, and the 49th precinct:

- Statewide 252,984 participated in SDR, while 10,936 Durham voters registered and voted on the same day. This accounted for 5.8% and 8% of votes cast respectively.³

³ Source: Democracy North Carolina.

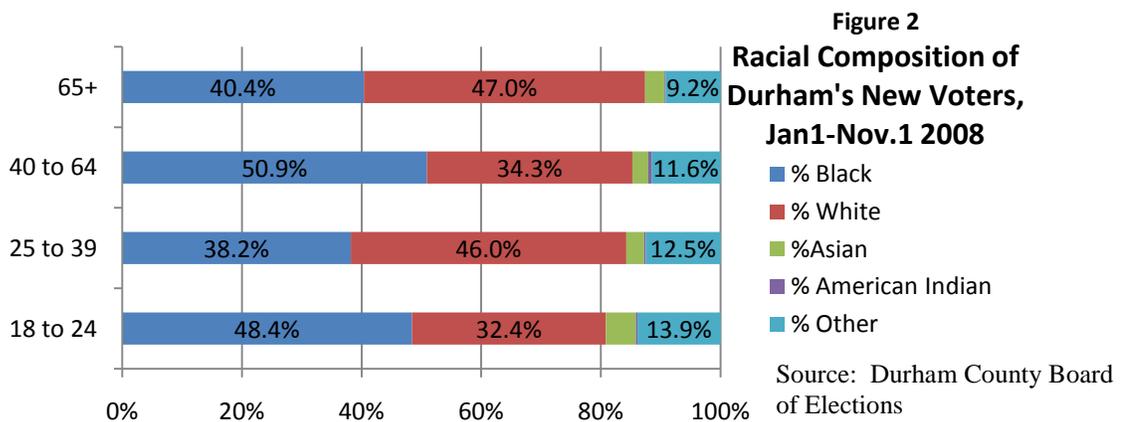
- Meanwhile in the 49th precinct, 281 NCCU students took advantage of SDR, representing 13.6% of registered voters;
- In Durham County, 23.5% of young Black voters between the ages of 18 and 29 voted during the early period while that figure statewide was 18.5%;
- There was an early voting polling site located at NCCU. More than 14,000 voters cast ballots at this site. This was 14% of the total for Durham County;
- In Durham County, 75% of votes were absentee ballots. The number of early voters was slightly higher in the 49th precinct at 78%. In fact only 373, of the more than 2,000 votes, were cast on November 4, the official Election Day; and
- The early vote benefited many candidates but significantly about 98% of votes from the NCCU early voting site went to eventual presidential winner, Barack Obama. (Source: Durham County Board of Elections)

Consequently, the early vote along with SDR played a significant role in the mobilization of voters in the state but especially those in the 49th precinct, and the Obama campaign benefited greatly.

New Voters/Expanding the Electorate. Another important strategy for many civic engagement organizations as well as campaigns was the expansion of the electorate, particularly by registering young voters.

- Nationally, 64% of 18-24 year olds were first time voters;
- Young voters accounted for 32.8 % of newly registered voters in North Carolina;
- They accounted for 36.4 % of new voters in Durham County;
- Overall, Black voters made up 45.7% of all new voters in the county; and
- In the 49th precinct, 65.7% of the 2,293 registered voters were added during 2008. (Source: Durham County Board of Elections)

Although not directly portraying the 49th precinct, below Figure 2 depicts the relative significance of younger Blacks to new Durham voters. African Americans accounted for about half of the new voters in the 18-24 and 40-64 age groups. In the youngest cohort, non-whites made up approximately 50% of the voting age population but they accounted for over 67% of the new voters of the 18-24 age group.



Therefore, young Black voters, including those in the 49th precinct were a significant part of the expanded electorate. Of course, the natural target of campus organizations would be youth. But this was augmented greatly by the efforts of campaign organizations. Unquestionably the strategic decision to expand the electorate by mobilizing young voters, especially African Americans, was significant for several candidates, especially the Barack Obama. In fact, according to CNN exit polls, Obama received practically all of the 18-24 year old Black vote in North Carolina.

What happened at North Carolina Central University--high turnout and the mobilization tactics and strategies that produced it--was likely emblematic of what happened in many places throughout North Carolina and the country. That is, the strategic thrust of this election for many civic engagement and campaign organizations was to promote the expansion of the electorate and to maximize minority youth early voting. This coupled with the fact that critical issues and candidates that generated excitement about the election had NCCU students and other voters around the country poised to respond positively to these efforts and unmistakably ready to begin a new political day. The result was extraordinary turnout, a fundamental element of a hy-mo election.

Broader Political Activity

The 2008 election had an undeniable positive impact on the turnout of NCCU students. But there is evidence to suggest that the election also produced significant political activity beyond voting. For NCCU, this evidence is found in some of the preliminary results of a civic engagement survey conducted in the spring of this year.⁴ ICESC and Political Science class 4880 (Special Topics in Political Science): conducted a survey of North Carolina Central University students in part to answer the following question: How did the 2008 election impact student participation and interest in politics? In fact, one section of the survey asked students whether they were involved in certain political activities “Before 2008;” then the survey posed the same question for “During 2008.” Any change in the percentage of respondents involved in these activities should offer a good indication of whether the 2008 election may have affected the scope of respondents’ political activity. Although many of the respondents were voting for the first time in 2008, a significant number were involved in extra-voting political activity prior to officially joining the electorate. Moreover, these results should help us understand how elections can affect neophyte voters.

Specifically, the survey asked questions about the students’ involvement in the following political activities: voter registration drives; giving a voter a ride to the polls; giving money to political campaigns; handing out campaign materials; advocating for an issue; and participating in a march or protest. Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents who participated in these activities before 2008 and during 2008. For each activity, there was a significant increase in the percentage of students who participated.

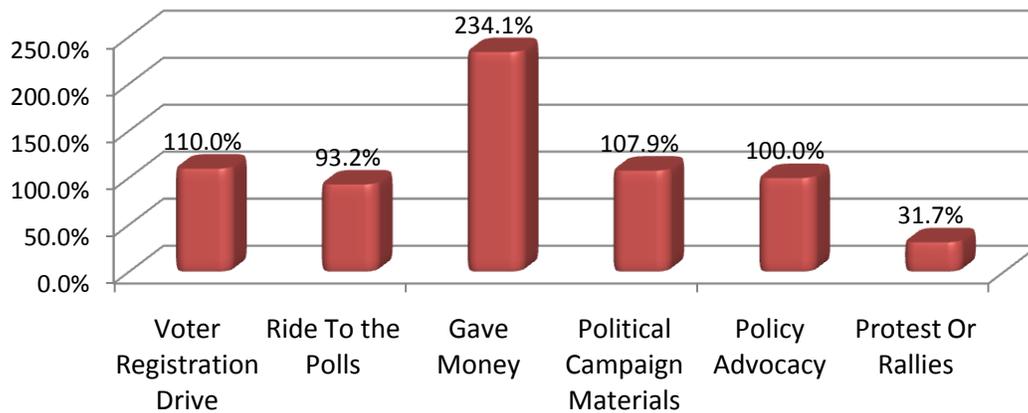
⁴ The survey interviewed 229 students at North Carolina Central University during the 2009 Spring semester. The students who participated in the survey were enrolled in classes that were volunteered by their instructors. A more detailed and complete analysis of the data is forthcoming. The undergraduate students who participated in administering the survey and doing preliminary analysis of the results were: Jasmine Bell, Dante Jones, Khadjah Mosely, Burnett Small, Kenneth Watson, and Kent Williams.

Table 1

Political Activity	Before 2008	During 2008
Voter Registration Drive	10.0%	21.0%
Ride To the Polls	5.9%	11.4%
Gave Money	4.1%	13.7%
Political Campaign Materials	11.4%	23.7%
Policy Advocacy	9.6%	19.2%
Protest Or Rallies	14.2%	18.7%

However, Figure 3 illustrates the dramatic extent of those increases. For example, the percent of respondents who said that they participated in a voter registration drive increased from 10% “Before 2008” to 21% “During 2008,” representing a 110% increase in the percentage of students saying they engaged in that political activity. The percentage increase for all the activities was near or well over 100% with the exception of those involved in protest and rallies. Interestingly, the highest percentage increase was found among those who gave money to a political campaign. This is a noteworthy result given the wide disparity between whites and minorities in campaign contributions.⁵

Figure 3
% Change In Political Activity
Before 2008 to During 2008



Unfortunately, we do not have baseline data to compare with these results. But we believe that the increases in extra-voting political activity are very significant. It indicates that young African American voters were engaged in a variety of political activities and that the intense mobilization around the 2008 election likely played a major role.

⁵ For more information regarding this see “The Color of Money” at <http://www.colorofmoney.org/>.

Optimism and Efficacy: “Hope You Can Believe In” and “Yes We Can”

Heightened turnout, intense mobilization and broadened political activity are all important to our notion of a hy-mo election. But so are some of the less tangible factors. For instance, the depth of civic engagement can be measured in part by an evaluation of important attitudes, such as optimism and efficacy. Did the 2008 election have an impact on these attitudes in young African Americans? After all, the importance of these attitudes was echoed in many voter empowerment efforts and campaigns, none louder than the constant refrains from the Obama campaign: “Hope We Can Believe In” and “Yes We Can.” Indeed, in our judgment, the resonance of these slogans with young African Americans and the increases in their sense of hope and efficacy was no mere coincidence.

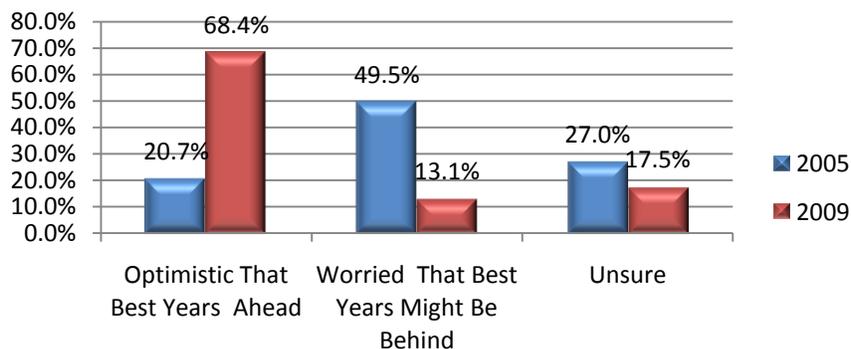
Consequently, in the remainder of this edition of ICESC RAPPs, we will examine changes in these attitudes by looking at more results from the spring 2009 survey. Conveniently, a similar survey was conducted in 2005. Therefore in some instances, we are able to compare responses from 2005 with those from 2009. So, what do the surveys tell us about the 2008 election and NCCU students’ sense of optimism or “Hope You Can Believe In,” and efficacy or “Yes We Can?”

Optimism (Hope We Can Believe In) Both the 2005 and 2009 surveys asked students:

Do you feel more optimistic that America’s best years as a country are still ahead of us or do you feel worried that America’s best years might already be behind us?

Figure 3 compares the results from 2005 and 2009. The current economic situation notwithstanding, students are remarkably more optimistic in 2009 than those in 2005. This year, more than two-thirds of students surveyed are optimistic that America’s best years are ahead of them. Meanwhile, almost a majority of students in 2005 were worried that America’s best years may be in the past.

Figure 4
Optimism v Worried



Does optimism impact political participation? It appears that the answer is yes. Other survey results revealed that those who were more optimistic were more likely to engage in political activity such as volunteering for a political campaign or joining a political club.

But is this optimism due to the election or other factors? Certainly this hopefulness belies the fact that similar to other Americans, NCCU students are extremely concerned about

the economy and related issues, especially given that this appears to be no ordinary economic downturn. The survey asked students to identify and rank-order the four most important issues facing America today. Given the barrage of bad news regarding the nation’s economy, predicting that concerns about America’s financial health would trump other issues would not be a difficult task. As indicated in Table 2, this was in sharp contrast to the issues that were regarded as paramount in 2005 when AIDS and Bush as President were the primary concerns.

Table 2
MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES FACING AMERICA

Rank	2005 Issues	2009 Issues
1	AIDS	Economy
2	Bush As President	Jobs
3	Iraq War	Education
4	Economy	Healthcare

Focus group interviews that followed the 2009 survey indicate that much of the optimism demonstrated by the students stemmed from their belief that these very problems could be addressed by new leadership, especially in the office of President of the United States.⁶ For example, one student’s comments captured many in the focus groups when she said, “I am confident in Barack Obama’s ability to lead us out of this (bad economic) situation.” Other comments by focus group participants confirmed that their confidence and therefore optimism were fueled by both an ability to identify with new officeholders at different levels and a belief that those new leaders possessed the vision, intelligence, and courage to solve the country’s problems. Consequently, in this regard, much of the optimism was generated by the election and its outcome.

Efficacy (Yes We Can). Inevitably, a high sense of efficacy or effectiveness contributes positively to civic engagement. The efficacy or “Yes We Can” factor can be assessed in part by looking at responses to two questions posed in the 2009 survey. Students were asked to agree or disagree with the statements in Table 3. For both statements, an overwhelming majority of students believed that they can make a difference in solving community problems as an individual but especially by working together with others.

Table 3

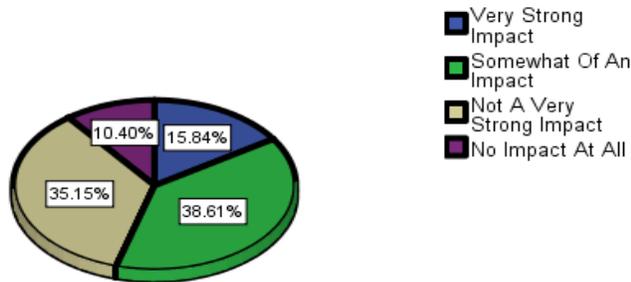
Statements	A Great Deal of Difference	Some Difference	“A Great Deal of Difference” Plus “Some Difference”
I Can Make A Difference in Solving Community Problems	24.3%	51.9%	76.2%
People Working Together Can Make A Difference In Solving Community Problems	69.9%	21.8%	91.7%

⁶ The POLS 4880 class conducted two focus groups after the survey had been administered. During these focus groups participants responded to more detailed questions about issues raised in the survey.

In as much as this part of the survey did not ask how students thought they could solve the community’s problems, these results do not necessarily mean that students believed that they can make a difference through political action. North Carolina Central University’s strong community service program, with a required number of volunteer service hours, has produced a high level of civic engagement that is not directly political. In fact, other survey results show that students are actively engaged in community service activities such as helping the elderly, and donating clothes to the homeless. But the juxtaposition of the results about efficacy mentioned above with additional survey findings suggests that students regard political action as a significant vehicle for change also. For example, as indicated in Figure 5 below, more than half (54.4%) of respondents believed that they have either a “Very Strong Impact” or “Somewhat Of An Impact” on government decisions.

Figure 5

How Strong of an Impact Do I Have On Government Decisions ?



Moreover:

- 70% of students who believed that they either had a “Very Strong Impact” or “Somewhat of an Impact” on government decisions believed that they “Can make a Difference . . .” and
- 64.3% of those who believe that “People working together can make a difference . . .” joined a political club or organization.

Consequently, it appears that students believed that they could make a difference through political action. Again focus group results support the idea that the 2008 election played a role here. For example, one student said that this election showed them (the students) that “change started with us.”

Hy-Mo Election and Beyond

For the students at North Carolina Central University, the 2008 election was a hyper-mobilizing because it produced extraordinary turnout, broadened political activity, and strengthened political attitudes. We believe that what happened at NCCU reflected similar scenarios with other groups of voters throughout the country. So, what next? Whether this election has an enduring impact, especially with young African Americans, depends on several factors. Based on what we discovered about the 2008 election, much of the mobilization of NCCU students was impacted by candidates and their campaigns, key issues, and the work of

civic engagement organizations. Most importantly, it resulted because of the willingness of young voters to play a role in turning to a new page in American political history. Therefore, we suggest that the following are necessary conditions for the continuation of hyper-mobilization:

- A very qualified diverse candidate pool that can activate the electorate through charisma, empathy, and a creative and courageous approach to critical issues that extend the boundaries of public policy;
- A well articulated agenda of issues and approaches to those issues that resonate with otherwise marginalized segments of the electorate. Some may say that this is the crisis factor which is difficult to either predict or utilize with respect to having an impact on voter mobilization. However, many of those marginalized segments of the electorate are constantly in crisis, (that is what makes them marginal) especially in the areas of education, employment, health care, and the ill-serving criminal justice system to say the least; and
- A community of civic engagement organizations that are committed to the expansion of the electorate and the mobilization of segments of societies that are too often left out.

Of course, the common denominator in all of these is people; people who are willing to go against conventional wisdom and to think creatively and innovatively about how to maintain the mobilization of the groups they target. Ultimately our message is: Given what did happen in 2008, indeed this past election could have a long and enduring impact on civic engagement and ultimately on the kind of political decisions that are made by elected officials: decisions that have a significant impact on the quality of life of people they supposedly serve. But it will take people to do it. In truth, it is as the socially conscious singing group, Sweet Honey in the Rock, reminds us, it takes, “We all, everyone of us.”

For comments and further information about the Institute for Civic Engagement and Social Change and *ICESC RAPPs* please contact:



Jarvis A. Hall, PhD.,
Director
109 Edmonds Classroom Building
North Carolina Central University
Durham, NC 27707

(919) 530-7256 phone

(919) 530-6246 fax

jhall@nccu.edu

www.nccu.edu/ICESC

Note: Special thanks to Dr. Jeffrey Elliot of the NCCU Department of Political Science for his assistance with this issue of ICESC RAPPs. Also, thanks to Dr. Artemisia Stanberry and Ms Margaret James of the Department of Political Science for their reviews and comments.