

A STORYBOOK ELECTION FOR YOUNG VOTERS

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The youth vote promises to be a factor in next week's election, but few could have expected that local youngsters would throw a monkey wrench into the works by casting their ballots in droves for a third-party candidate.

Even less predictable: That the candidate would be Curious George.

The beloved children's book character, along with his running mate, the Man in the Yellow Hat, is one of three contenders put forward by the Toledo-Lucas County Public Library as part of its Storybook Election to get kids interested in voting.

"We wanted children to have an opportunity to participate in the election," explained Nancy Eames, youth services coordinator for the library.

"Obviously they can't vote in the real election, but they're certainly seeing so much about it in the media. We thought this would be a fun way to give them an opportunity to participate in the process."

Instead of having children cast ballots for the real candidates, though, the contest asks them to consider their favorite fictional characters, including Junie B. Jones and Lilly the mouse. Of course, that hasn't stopped some youngsters from taking things pretty seriously. Barack Obama and John McCain have also gotten votes, Eames said.

A recent Harris Interactive Youth Center of Excellence YouthQuery survey indicates that children are keenly aware of coverage of the real presidential race, even though they can't vote. Seventy percent of 8 to 17-year-olds polled say they are very or somewhat closely following news of the candidates, and 82 percent say they will vote when they are old enough.

Young voters have become a group to be reckoned with in today's electoral landscape.

"Their turnout was historically very low but it rose in 2004 by about 12 points, which is a lot, and it looks like it's going to rise even more, and that makes them an electoral force," said Peter Levine, director of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, a nonpartisan research center at Tufts University that studies young people as citizens.

He said programs targeting youths can help by making them comfortable with the voting process, which can be intimidating to some, and increasing discussion of current events.

Jeff Cabot, executive director of Kids Voting Central Ohio, is working to see that youth voting numbers continue to rise. His organization, a local affiliate of the civics education organization Kids Voting USA, is holding an online mock election in which tens of thousands of schoolchildren from the Columbus area are expected to vote.

"We think that the earlier that you start and the more that they practice, the more likely it will become a habit," he said. "Academic studies ... show that kids who participate in the Kids Voting program are more likely to be engaged voters at 18."

When children get interested in the process and take their questions and enthusiasm home, it can make their parents more likely to vote too, he said.



Children meet with Curious George during a 'campaign stop' at a local library branch. (THE BLADE/ANDY MORRISON)

There's no question that 7-year-old Matthew Meyer of Sylvania Township was excited about the process last month when he met Curious George and the Man in the Yellow Hat during a campaign stop they made at the Holland branch library.

As a result of Matthew's enthusiasm, his mother, Debra Meyer, promised to take him with her to the polls when she casts her own ballot for president — for real. That left Matthew with just one more important question.

“Who are you rooting for?”

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