

# From Beats to Ballots: The Hip-Hop Generation and the 2004 Presidential Election

F. Erik Brooks

*Georgia Southern University*

Nathan W. Pino

*Texas State University – San Marcos*

Kyong Hee Chee

*Texas State University – San Marcos*

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*This article aims to contribute to the debate surrounding civic engagement and voter participation by investigating what factors are associated with voting behavior among younger African Americans in the 2004 presidential election. We surveyed data from African American students in a Civil Rights Movement class at a mid-size university in the South as part of a pilot study to determine the patterns of participation and non-participation in the recent election. We also conducted focus group interviews with voting and non-voting groups to obtain further specification. The study drew from three bodies of literature, namely hip-hop, civic engagement and voting, and social capital, to understand the patterns of voting among college students. Findings suggest that voters in this sample are more engaged in their communities, more socially connected, and more informed about voting processes and issues than are non-voters. Non-voters were as likely as voters to think that the elections were important but they were confused with the absentee ballot process. Implications for future research and policy are discussed.*

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Putnam (1995) notes that Americans' direct engagement in politics and government has decreased steadily and markedly over the last generation. Decreases in voter turnouts over time are attributable to the fact that older generation voters are continuously replaced by younger generations who demonstrate much lower political involvement. Miller and Shanks (1996) report that older generations are generally more involved in the political process than younger ones. In 1971, the Twenty-sixth Amendment lowered the voting age to 18, and about half of them turned out to vote in the 1972 elections (Sidlow and Henschen 2002). There have been a host of studies examining why young people have become disconnected from the political process. Many young people simply may not care about the politics or the political process (Sidlow and Henschen 2002). Can we say the same regarding African American youth? What do we know about their political beliefs and civic engagement? To date, there is not much research in this area, even though there has been a concerted effort to increase voter registration and turnout among younger African Americans, particularly through popular media representing the hip-hop culture. Psychology has embraced research in this area while other disciplines, in

particular political science, have failed to capitalize on this rich area of research (Cohen 2005).

Prior to the 2004 election, the NAACP National Voter Fund focused on the hip-hop generation that generally refers to younger adults today. Rock the Vote registered 325,000 people aged 18 to 30 years over a 6-month period. Hip-hop entrepreneur, Sean "P. Diddy" Combs, began another campaign, Vote or Die, aimed at mobilizing the same cohort. Citizen Change was a non-partisan initiative to get young Blacks and Latinos to the polls using on-line outreach, direct mail, phone banks, door-to-door canvassing, and "to educate hip young people to the hustle of the politics and the power to vote" ([www.CitizenChange.com](http://www.CitizenChange.com) 2005). Russell Simmons, a hip-hop legend, channeled his efforts to reach the hip-hop generation through the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network (HSAN), whose Web site informed this generation through e-mail newsletters that contained voter education information (<http://www.HSAN.org> 2005). Simmons's HSAN is still actively educating and registering voters. HSAN, which registered nearly 2 million people before the 2004 election, is also concentrating its power locally, focusing on California and the New Jersey governor's race. The Young Voter Alliance also made efforts to reach the hip-hop generation by phone, by knocking on doors and by less traditional means, for example, through basketball leagues, barbershops, hip-hop spoken-word events, and book club discussions on "How to Get Stupid White Men Out of Office" ([www.YVA.org](http://www.YVA.org) 2005). All of these efforts show that the hip-hop movement and artists are becoming a voice in politics.

The trend of mobilizing the hip-hop generation led to the National Hip-Hop Political convention, held in Newark, New Jersey in June 2004. At the convention, organizers put forth a five-point social justice agenda that included criminal justice, health, human rights, economic justice, and educational empowerment (Niamo 2004). While critics of this kind of mobilization argue that the hip-hop movement lacks the necessary strategy and leadership needed to truly empower the hip-hop generation (Baker 2004), it appears that with all of this mobilization, the generation could be primed for a political movement like no other seen since the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1960s. The present study builds on literature on civic engagement and social capital, and describes the hip-hop generation and the hip-hop subculture before analyzing the patterns of voting among African American college students, who are part of the generation.

### **Civic Engagement and Social Capital**

There have been peaks and valleys in voter participation rates since 1972 despite some scholars' assertion that students are becoming increasingly involved in elections (Levine and Cureton 1998). Voting data show that there was a peak in the 1984 presidential election, followed by a slight decline in 1988 (Lopez, Kirby, and Sagoff 2004). From 1988 until 1996 there was an increase, which was followed by another dip in 2000. In the 2004 presidential election, 20.9 million more young people cast votes; this marked an increase of 4.6 million from the 2000 presidential election (Fleischer 2004). In particular, younger people's voter turnout was even higher in states in which the margin of victory was 5 percentage points or less, including Florida, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin (Lopez Kirby, and Sagoff 2004). The 2004 election also marked the largest voter turnout for younger African Americans (Lopez, Kirby, and Sagoff 2004) whereas the voter turnout for this group had been relatively stable prior to 2004. The African American

youth turnout jumped more than 11 percentage points over 2000, representing the largest increase in turnout of any racial or ethnic minority group during the presidential election (Lopez, Kirby, and Sagoff 2004). Forty-seven percent of younger African Americans participated in the 2004 elections; this was just 2.5 percentage points less than whites (Lopez, Kirby, and Sagoff 2004).

In the case of college students, Niemi and Hanmer (2004) found that voter turnout was higher among college students registered at their college address. According to their study, most college students voted for president, Congress, and other ballot initiatives. The study also found that mobilization efforts geared to college student groups played a part in higher registration. Most students voted in their hometowns, and students were worried about the tabulation of votes. This research also shows that humanities and the social science majors overwhelmingly voted for Kerry, while education, science, and business majors supported Bush (Niemi and Hanmer 2004). In general, younger people cited the war as the most important issue in deciding whom to vote for in 2004. That issue was followed by moral values, the economy, education, health care, homeland security, and taxes (Niemi and Hanmer 2004).

Increased voter participation rates during 2004 notwithstanding, many charge that there has been an erosion of democratic participation among the 18 to 24 age group. Younger people still vote at a lower rate than older populations, and a number of studies suggest that students are relatively less interested in public affairs (Bennett 2000). On a national survey conducted in 1999, only 12 percent of those between 18 and 24 years of age agreed that voting is a tenet of good citizenship (Tarrance Group and Lake, Snell, Perry and Associates 1999). A poll of college students shows that there is a distinct disengagement among younger people (Panetta Institute 2000). A variety of scholars have studied why this erosion exists in terms of civic participation and voting. Some scholars imply that the younger generation does not perceive the need to perform the duties of citizenship and has left the responsibility of governing to the government (see Putnam 2000). Generational changes, including a news and information gap, increased use of electronic entertainment (especially television), and increased time spent commuting to work and school have reduced social capital levels among the youth. This helps explain why the youth are not active in community organizations (Putnam 2000).

Civic engagement does not occur in a vacuum and therefore should be understood as an act that occurs in a certain social context. In thinking about the process of civic engagement, people first have to be aware of the need to be engaged and sometimes need encouragement before actual engagement. People can learn about the need for civic engagement from the mass media, but according to studies of diffusion and mass communication, people are more likely to act on mass-media information when it is communicated through personal ties (Granovetter 1973).

Recent research findings involving social ties and Internet use show that those who are more engaged in their communities, maintain social ties with others in their communities, *and* use the Internet more regularly, are more likely to build connections with others, build social capital, and facilitate collective action (Kavanaugh, Reese, Carroll, and Rosson 2005). Kavanaugh et al. (2005) also found that those who use the Internet but are not as socially connected are not any more likely to become engaged in their communities, reinforcing the findings regarding the importance of social ties. Still, engaged people can use the Internet to contact non-engaged persons in a more effective way than traditional methods such as the telephone (Kavanaugh et al. 2005). Social

relations are, therefore, an important dimension of the social context deserving closer attention by researchers studying civic engagement.

Granovetter (1985) proposes that actions are embedded in structures of social relations. Consistent with this perspective, social capital is a useful conceptual tool for thinking about the influence of social relations on actions. Social capital can be understood as resources that are embedded in a social structure, utilizable for purposive actions (Lin 1999). Lin (1999) identifies two major perspectives of social capital. One perspective focuses on individuals' investment in social relations and their uses of the resources in the relations in order to benefit from them. The other perspective focuses on social capital at the group level. Here questions pertain to how groups develop and maintain social capital as a collective asset and how such an asset enhances group members' life chances. Both of these approaches assume that group members maintain and reproduce social capital through interaction with others (Lin 1999). Coleman's (1988) depiction of social capital is consistent with the second approach because he conceptualizes it as a group-level characteristic that has value for the group as well as its members. Social capital is a resource that is found in social relations, and therefore cannot be easily traded and or owned by any one person (Coleman 1988).

Putnam (1993) also conceptualizes social capital at the group level, as social organizational features such as networks, norms, and social trust. Social networks, for example, are important for generating and maintaining norms of reciprocity (Putnam 2000), which may encourage certain actions, including an act of civic engagement. Individuals in a certain group may either internalize norms of engagement or be encouraged to follow such norms, sometimes because of their expectation of reward or their fear of being punished (Coleman 1988). Members in a group may also be motivated to act for the common good because of a common group identity. Individuals sharing a common fate tend to bond and identify with each other as they interact and support each other (Portes 1998). Putnam (2000) calls this type of social relations as "bonding social capital" (pp. 22-24). This form of social capital can be a powerful motivational force for civic engagement. Another way in which enduring social relations and networks may help mobilize a group is by channeling and diffusing information to group members. Information about problems or issues facing the group can flow through social networks to which group members are connected. Putnam (2000) refers to this kind of group attribute as "bridging social capital" (pp. 22-24).

Putnam's (2000) research on the relationship between social capital and civic engagement, in particular, helps explain the limited political participation of younger people, as well as offer insights into how the political participation of those in the hip-hop generation might increase. At the individual level, a general lack of involvement in social networks may explain the supposed lack of norms about voting participation among members of the hip-hop generation. At the group level, both bonding and bridging social capital within this generation may increase the likelihood of the generation's collective, political action. The hip-hop generation's individualistic tendency may mean generally lower levels of social connectedness (i.e., social capital), which in turn result in lower levels of civic involvement such as voting. Within the hip-hop generation, however, those who maintain more social relations with others are predicted to vote whether it is maintaining closer family relations or being connected to groups through their associational memberships. Meanwhile, the presence of a common identity shared by members of the generation suggests the existence of bonding social

capital, which represents potential for acting together. We will now turn to a discussion of the hip-hop generation and hip-hop as a subculture and a movement.

### **The Hip-Hop Generation**

Chuck D. and other experts on hip-hop culture note that hip-hop is a subculture of black culture in much the same way that jazz and blues are subcultures of black culture (Niamo 2004). The hip-hop generation has been referred to as a group of individuals born between 1965 and 1984 (Kitwana 2003). This generation has also been considered as a subculture of Generation X born between 1965 and 1980 (Kitwana 2003). Yet, some claim that the hip-hop generation includes teenagers and young adults of today. For example, The National Hip-Hop Political Convention (2006) (see <http://www.hiphopconvention.org>) includes younger people, particularly younger voters between 18 and 24 years of age, in the hip-hop generation. The Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community (2004) even claims that the hip-hop generation roughly consists of people between 15 and 38 years of age.

It appears then that many young people would include themselves as part of the hip-hop generation in terms of what we call the "new school" hip-hop generation. This group consists of the cohort of individuals immediately following the "old school" hip-hop generation that was coming of age while hip-hop grew as a phenomenon from the early 1970s to the early 1980s. Both "old school" and "new school" hip-hop artists attended The National Hip-Hop Political Convention, which was attended by political and community activists. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, we include young college-age voters as part of the hip-hop generation. While it is possible that not all of the members of our young-adult African American sample would consider themselves part of the hip-hop generation, numerous scholars would consider our pilot study participants as part of this generation. Many of the voter mobilization and other social action campaigns that target young black youth do so within the context of hip-hop, and various popular hip-hop stars and music label owners have taken it on themselves to mobilize young African Americans to vote and participate in other political activities.

Many see the hip-hop movement as a continuation of the Civil Rights Movement and as a continued effort to gain access for poor African Americans in American social policy and civic engagement. Powell (2004) sees hip-hop as the movement that rose out the ashes of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Powell further states,

Hip-hop is a reaction to institutionalized white racism, American classism, the material, spiritual and psychological failures of the Civil Rights movement, the American government's abandonment of its war on poverty, and the horrendous lack of vision and incompetence of traditional black leadership (Powell 2004: 8).

Kristine Wright (2004) describes hip-hop as those that spring from society's periphery, serving as an expression of and an alternative to various urban problems affecting their lives, such as problems of unemployment, poverty, and racial discrimination. The discussion of hip-hop has expanded from mere definitions of hip-hop; it is now broadened to include discussions of politics, policy, social change, and hip-hop's actual and potential influence on civic engagement.

Ron Hayduk (2004) believes that hip-hop as a social movement has grown in three stages. First, the culture emergence stage consisted of celebrating and recognizing black voices to critique social problems through music and art. This stage is followed by the social creation stage that saw the development of alternative institutions and nonprofit organizations. Hayduk believes that hip-hop and the hip-hop generation are in the third stage, that is, the political stage that recognizes the use of power geared toward desired political outcomes.

Even with the aforementioned scholarship, there is still a dearth of empirical research on the hip-hop generation's civic engagement and voter participation. Generally those who have written on the subject have focused on its history or charismatic figures (see George 1998; Ogg 1999; Haskins 2000; Dyson 2001; Ro 1996; Fricke 2002; Iwamoto 2003), or hip-hop from a cultural standpoint (Fernando 1994; Dyson 1996; Maxwell 2003; Bennett 1999; Chronopolous 2000; Conyers 2001; Forman 2002; Gause 2003). Other works have focused on the aesthetic and art forms of hip-hop (see Binder 1993; Gladney 1995; Ramsey 2002; Shusterman 1991; Stewart 2000; Osumare 2001). Some well-known African American scholars have just begun to write about hip-hop and the empowerment of the hip-hop generation (see Dyson 1996; Chuck D. 1997; George 1998; Kitwana 2003; Dyson 2001; Boyd 2003; Powell 2003).

In this context, this paper is an attempt to expand our understanding of the hip-hop generation and its civic engagement by examining younger African American college students' participation in the recent election. We draw on social capital as a theoretical construct and rely on empirical data in order to explore and explain reasons for some of the differences between voters and non-voters within the group.

## **Methodology**

For this pilot study we surveyed and engaged in focus groups with African American students enrolled in an undergraduate Civil Rights Movement class at a mid-sized university in the Southern region of the United States. Students were not forced to participate, and they were not given extra credit or other incentives to participate. Each student filled out a survey prior to the focus group, and this allowed us to make simple comparisons on theoretically important variables and helped participants to focus on the later discussion. Twenty-seven out of twenty-eight students filled out surveys and participated in the focus groups. Two focus groups were conducted, one with those who participated in the 2004 presidential election ( $n=21$ ) and the other with those who did not ( $n=6$ ). Nine of the twenty-one who voted (43%) did so absentee. The large proportion of students who voted surprised us, but because of this larger-than-expected number we felt we would encounter a wide range of reasons for participation in the presidential election. The sample consisted of 18 females and 8 males (one did not indicate his or her sex). Respondents were between 18 and 24 years old with an average age of 21. Ten respondents were seniors, eleven were juniors, two were sophomores, and three were freshmen (one respondent did not indicate classification).

The survey asked students if they were registered to vote and for how long, if they voted in the 2004 elections and the number of previous elections they participated in, the voting and voter registration history of their parents, and the number of close friends of theirs who voted in the 2004 elections. The survey also asked for the amount of time respondents spent on schoolwork and attending class, listening to hip-hop music or watching hip-hop videos, socializing with friends, working for pay, participating in

student groups, watching television, playing video games, and participating in groups or organizations that are not campus-affiliated. In addition, students were asked how many days in a typical week they read newspapers or news magazines, obtained news from a news-oriented Website, watched the news on television, read African American interest publications, and watched news-oriented programming on Black Entertainment Television (BET). Finally, in addition to demographic information, respondents were asked if they were members of a fraternity or sorority or African American interest group, which political party best fit their political ideology, if they thought women's or African American issues were addressed adequately during the 2004 elections, if they thought the elections were important to them and why, and the reasons why they thought George Bush won the 2004 election.

Focus groups concentrated on reasons for voting or not voting, why George Bush won, why the election was important or not to them, and why one should or should not vote in general. One investigator conducted the voter focus group while a different investigator conducted the non-voter focus group. The focus groups lasted approximately one hour. Focus group data were analyzed by identifying themes that emerged from the data. Multiple investigators (3) examined the data and found that the same themes emerged among each other and that the investigators interpreted the data similarly. This was not a surprise because themes corresponded to the questions we asked focus group members and discussions stayed on task.

Studies with a small sample size can benefit from the focus group method. Focus groups offer a number of advantages, including their flexibility, high face validity, speedy results, low cost, and the fact that focus groups are a socially oriented research method capturing real-life data in a social environment (Krueger 1988). Contrary to conventional wisdom, focus groups can be moderated by someone who has experience working with groups, but who has not been formally trained as a focus group facilitator (Morgan and Krueger 1993). Well-planned focus groups may consist of respondents who know each other, and sensitive subjects can also be covered without producing conformity or a group-think phenomenon. With this qualitative method, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the topics they study than by using quantitative methods. While focus groups do not need to be validated by other methods, they can also be used to complement other methods for purposes of triangulation (Morgan and Krueger 1993).

Focus groups can achieve reliability and validity. Krueger (1988) states, "focus groups are valid if they are used carefully for a problem that is suitable for focus group inquiry" (p. 41). Reliability can be assessed because we have more than one focus group facilitator and more than one individual will analyze the focus group data. Also, because there is more than one focus group session, it is possible to assess the reliability of the data by comparing statements within and across sessions (Knodel 1993). According to Knodel, "the extent to which consensus is found within and between groups about their expectations, allowing for possible systematic differences, can indicate the reliability of the information collected" (1993, 50). The systematic difference between the focus groups in this study is that voters and non-voters were in their own distinct focus groups.

Focus groups do have their limitations, however. Results from focus groups cannot be considered generalizable, and therefore results from focus group studies are not conclusive. This is one of the reasons why focus groups benefit from triangulation with other methods. The low sample size of this study and the selection bias inherent in

sampling one class exacerbate these limitations, but because this is a pilot study covering a largely neglected topic we feel the results can still inform future research.

## Results

### *Survey results*

Because of a low sample size we were unable to examine the statistical power of these results. However, the results reveal some interesting patterns between voters and non-voters in terms of their individual attributes and social environments, and we think that these patterns can help guide future research in this area. First, we will examine individual attributes of the respondents and their parents' registration status and voting behavior. Table 1 displays these results.

**Table 1: Comparison of voters' and non-voters' individual attributes**

Variable	Voters % (n)	Non-Voters % (n)
Democratic Party	81% (17)	83% (5)
Republican Party	0% (0)	0% (0)
Women's issues not addressed	100% (21)	100% (6)
African American issues not addressed	76% (16)	100% (6)
Election important	91% (19)	100% (6)
Mom registered	95% (20)	67% (4)
Mom voted 2004	91% (19)	50% (3)
Dad registered	76% (16)	18% (1)
Dad voted 2004	67% (14)	18% (1)

There were no real differences in gender or political ideology between voters and non-voters. Five out of six non-voters reported that the Democratic Party best fits their political ideology, while seventeen (81 percent) out of twenty voters reported the same. None in either group indicated that they were Republicans. Both groups unanimously responded that women's issues were not addressed adequately during the November 2004 elections, and all of the non-voters and 16 out of 21 (76.2 percent) voters responded that issues important to African Americans were not adequately addressed. Interestingly, all of the non-voters felt that the 2004 presidential election was important to them, and nineteen of twenty-one voters thought that the 2004 presidential election was important to them.

In terms of parents' registration and voting behavior, two-thirds of the non-voters had mothers who were registered to vote whereas almost all voters did. The remaining students did not know whether or not their mothers were registered. Virtually all of the voters said their mother also voted in 2004, whereas only half of the non-voters said their mothers voted. Only 1 out of 6 non-voters knew that their father was registered to vote, with the remaining 5 unaware of the registration status of their fathers. On the contrary, the majority of the voters responded that their fathers were registered to vote.

Among voters, only 1 student had a father who was not registered, and the remaining 4 did not know whether or not their fathers were registered. Whereas only 1 out of 6 non-voters had a father who voted in 2004, two-thirds of voters knew that their fathers voted. Interestingly, most non-voters (5 out of 6) did not know if their fathers voted, but only about one fifth of the voters (4 out of 21) did not. Only 3 student voters said their fathers did not vote.

**Table 2: Comparison of voters' and non-voters' activities and political awareness**

Variable	Voters (Mean)	Non-Voters (Mean)
Days per week newspapers or news magazines	2.5	1.7
Days per week Web news	2.7	0.8
Days per week TV news	4.1	3.2
Days per week African- American pubs	1.9	0.8
Days per week BET news	3.8	1.3
Father's education	4.6	3.8
Mother's education	4.9	4.5
Hip-Hop	2.9	3.0
Volunteering	1.3	0.5
Student groups	1.5	1.0
TV	3.0	4.2
Video games	1.1	1.5
African American interest group	0.2	0.0

Table 2 displays differences between voters and non-voters in terms of political awareness, and respondent interests and activities. We found some differences between voters and non-voters in terms of political awareness. Half of all non-voters do not read newspapers or news magazines at all (1.67 days per week on average), whereas the typical voter read the same 2.5 days a week on average. In a typical week, 4 out of 6 non-voters did not read any news on the Web. They read .83 days per week on average in comparison to 2.67 days per week on average for voters. The same pattern is found in watching the news on TV. Non-voters watch the news on TV 3.17 days per week while voters on average watch 4.1 days. Non-voters read African American interest publications such as *Jet*, *Ebony*, and *Essence* .83 days per week on average versus 1.86 days per week for their voter counterparts. Voters are also more likely to watch news-oriented programming on BET (3.76 days per week vs. 1.33 days per week).

Parental education and voting behaviors also varied among voters and non-voters. A father's educational level was higher for voters than for non-voters. A typical voter had a father with some college education while a typical non-voter's father had either a high school diploma or GED. The mother's educational level was higher for voters than non-voters as well. A typical voter had a mother with some college

education, but a typical non-voter had a mother with post-secondary education other than college.

Are there any differences among voters and non-voters in their interests and activities? First, there was no difference between the 2 groups in terms of the number of hours spent listening to or watching hip-hop music or videos. A typical voter and a typical non-voter both spent an average of 3 to 4 hours a week engaged in these activities. Next, voters spent more time volunteering compared to non-voters. A typical voter spent one to two hours a week for volunteering, but a typical non-voter did not volunteer at all. Only 2 out of 6 non-voters volunteered a few hours a week whereas about a third of voters volunteered anywhere between 3 and 20 hours a week. In addition, voters tended to participate more in student groups. A typical voter spent 1 to 2 hours a week, but 3 out of 6 non-voters did not participate at all. Meanwhile, non-voters watched more TV, spending 6 to 10 hours on average relative to 3 to 5 hours spent by voters on average. Non-voters also played video games for a longer period of time, about 1 to 2 hours a week compared to their voter counterparts. A majority (62.0 percent) of voters did not play video games at all. No one among non-voters was a member of an African American interest group whereas 5 out of 21 of the voters were. Finally, we found some differences concerning living arrangements. Half of the non-voters lived in college residence hall or residential suite; more than half of the voters lived in a private home or apartment with non-family members.

In summary, voters and non-voters differed in many aspects of their characteristics and social environments. Among African American students in this sample, voters read or watch the news more often. They are more likely to volunteer and be members of African American interest groups, and are less likely to watch television, play video games, and tend to live in a college residence hall. Voters also have more educated parents and have parents who are more likely to vote.

### *Focus group results*

Two focus groups were conducted, one with voters and the other with non-voters. Twenty-one students were in the voter group and six in the non-voter group. This surprisingly large proportion of voters may be due to sample selection bias. It is entirely possible that those who choose to take a Civil Rights Movement course as an elective are more interested in politics and similar issues and are therefore more likely than the average college student to vote. This relatively large percentage of voters was a positive development, however, because we may be exposed to a wider range of reasons for why college students vote and what issues are particularly important to African American students who do vote.

### *Voter focus group*

Voters were asked to talk about why it was important for them to vote in general. Focus group members agreed on a number of reasons including: "to be heard," that votes add up even if it is one vote at a time, and that Americans died for the right to do so. We also noted a consensus that one should not complain if one doesn't vote. They also agreed that participation in local elections was more important to their lives than voting in national elections.

One comment from a female focus group member started a small debate during the discussion. She said that it is important for African Americans to vote because they

“would be ungrateful as African Americans” if they didn’t vote. A few students who disagreed with this thought that the voting system was illegitimate because of various problems such as fraud, intimidation of African American voters, votes not being counted, and not letting convicted felons vote (no one specifically mentioned the historical struggle surrounding African American voting rights). Men in the focus group were more likely to take the latter position, leading to a discussion on whether or not African American men were more likely to vote than African American women. A consensus in the end was such that men were more cynical about the voting process than women and that because of this it was harder to get African American men registered to vote than African American women. One of the group-defined cynical men said that he still voted because “it can’t hurt even if it is a waste.”

The voter focus group was then asked why this particular election was important to them. All of the focus group interviewees responded that they wanted to vote George Bush out of office. The general consensus in the group was that John Kerry was not adequate as a presidential candidate, but was better than Bush. Almost all of the focus group members indicated that they voted against Bush rather than voting for Kerry (see below). Only one person indicated that he was excited by Kerry’s message.

Students then provided other reasons why the 2004 elections were important to them, and we rank-ordered their responses by level of agreement in the group. The important issues to them, in order of importance, are: (1) the war on terror (not a single respondent was pleased with how the war was currently being waged), (2) the economy (none of the focus group members thought the economy had improved under the Bush administration), (3) affirmative action (a number of students approaching graduation were worried about their job prospects), (4) education and the fate of after school programs, (5) abortion, gay marriage, and stem cell research (a large majority of students who offered their opinions on these issues were for abortion rights and gay marriage rights. Students who were knowledgeable of the stem cell research issue—about one third of the focus group members—indicated their support for stem cell research), (6) Social Security (students did not want changes to be made to the program because they were worried that changes would lessen the chances that they would benefit from the program when they retired), and (7) the environment, specifically the Alaska oil drilling issue (only a small number of students indicated that this issue was important to them).

The rank-ordering of political issues generated from this focus group differ in interesting ways from the rank-ordering of political issues displayed in Niemi and Hanmer's (2004) study, suggesting that more research with a generalizable sample of younger African American voters is needed to compare with the larger population. While both groups placed the war on terror as the top issue, and education fourth, moral issues, homeland security, and taxes were considered less important or not at all by the focus group. Abortion, gay marriage, and stem cell research are considered moral issues, but they were lower in importance for the focus group than the national sample. The focus group ranked the economy slightly higher, and had three concerns the larger sample from Niemi and Hanmer's (2004) study did not rank highly: affirmative action, Social Security, and the environment.

Students were then asked why they thought George Bush won the 2004 election. The general lack of enthusiasm for the Kerry campaign was explained in the discussion of this issue. Students were in strong agreement that Kerry was “wishy-washy,” “doesn’t stand for anything,” and did not campaign in non-swing states, while George

Bush was “on a mission,” believed in something, and appeared more determined than Kerry. Focus group members were also in agreement that religious issues concerning abortion, gay marriage, and general moral values helped the Bush candidacy. They also thought that white people and rich people (regardless of race) were much more likely to support Bush, and that the media enabled the Bush campaign by not questioning Bush’s policies enough and by allowing more Bush supporters on television than Kerry supporters. Focus group members also agreed that people would support a president in war time, even if they are not in total agreement with the war (One student said, “he started it, he should finish it”), and that the general public is not very knowledgeable of most issues. Finally, some respondents said that they thought the Republican Party is better organized and gets its base out to vote more successfully.

### *Non-voter focus group*

Non-voters had a wide range of responses to our questions. The most popular reasons for not voting involved absentee ballots either being received late or not at all. When asked directly why they did not vote, most stated that they had problems with the absentee process. One said, “My absentee ballot came late and I live five hours away. There is no way I could have gotten home and back to school.” Another non-voter complained that the absentee voting process was confusing and said, “I did not know the details of the absentee process and I did not know about early voting.” Some other non-voters also believed that some people did not have enough information to make an informed decision in the voting process.

Non-voters also believe that neither candidate addressed African American issues. They overwhelmingly stated that they would have liked the candidates to address the education gap between minorities and whites, poverty among blacks, cutting federal education funding, and affirmative action policies. One non-voter said, “Bush would not even go and meet with the NAACP. That shows you that he does not care anything about black people.” Another non-voter stated, “Either way it goes African Americans are going to get the short end of the stick. It really does not matter who is president.”

Next, non-voters were asked why they thought George Bush won the election. Many of the responses revolved around Bush’s campaign strategies. One non-voter said, “I did not like either candidate. I believe that people voted for Bush because they were more familiar with him. People stick with what they know.” Another non-voter candidly responded, “Kerry did not take a stand. People did not know what he stood for, therefore people voted with Bush because he stuck by his decision even if he was wrong.”

Students in the non-voter focus group expressed dissatisfaction over how the war on terror was being conducted. A very poignant moment in the focus group occurred when a female student spoke up about why this election was important to her. She stated that the election was important because she believed that the president went to war with selfish motives and it was time to elect a different president. She said,

At first it really did not matter to me about the election. Then I saw one of my high school friends in a wheel chair without his legs. He went over there and lost his legs over some oil. This election was important because this war needs to end. I regret that I didn't vote, but I just didn't think that my vote counted. I felt bad after I saw my friend in that wheel chair.

In summary, our focus groups and survey data suggest that, among younger African Americans who are college students, voters appear to be more engaged in their communities through volunteering and group memberships on and off campus, more interested in obtaining news from various sources, more informed about the voting process, and less likely to watch television, listen to hip-hop music, or play video games. Voters were also more likely to have parents who voted. Both voters and non-voters were dissatisfied with the first G.W. Bush administration and its policies. Each group also felt that John Kerry's campaign was inadequate in a number of ways, including not having clear and forceful ideas regarding public policy issues. Neither group felt that African American interests were adequately addressed during the campaign.

## **Discussion**

Voting patterns revealed in our pilot study imply that there is a congruence between the students' and their parents' voting patterns, suggesting the influence of bonding social capital (Putnam 2000). Voters in our sample, in comparison to non-voters, have more educated parents, and their parents seem more likely to vote. Thus, it is plausible that African American young adult voters have more cultural capital associated with their parents than non-voters of the same racial group. These younger voters seem more interested in watching or reading the news and therefore should have more political knowledge, which in turn makes them more likely to vote.

Above all, young adult voters appear to be much more socially connected than their non-voting age peers because the former are more likely to volunteer, to participate in student groups, and to be members of African American interest groups. Not surprisingly, the voters were also spending less time with more individual-oriented entertainment sources such as hip-hop, TV, or video-games. All of these patterns may be related to more time for social activities that lead to greater social connections and social capital for voters. As suggested by Granovetter (1985), Lin (1999), and Coleman (1988), social networks can be tapped for various social and political activities such as voting. Group affiliation and identification can lead to social activities out of an obligation for the greater good (Portes 1998). Bridging social capital (Putnam 2000) may also play a role, by letting information about candidates, elections, and voting processes be spread through social networks, thereby increasing the likelihood of individuals in a social network to be informed about elections and to participate in voting. Thus, the fact that non-voters appeared to be less knowledgeable about the absentee voting process may be in part due to their lower levels of social capital in the forms of social ties and/or associational memberships. Non-voters appeared to be less engaged in their communities as they are more occupied with individual-oriented activities and interests although they also felt that African American issues were not addressed adequately in the campaign to the point where they thought the election did not really matter.

Even though this is a pilot study with a non-representative, convenience sample of African American college students, we hope that it adds to the discourse on the hip-hop generation's civic participation and particularly voting behavior by helping to inform future research on this neglected topic. This research attempted to make a direct contribution to the literature by examining which issues during the 2004 presidential election were important to young people who primarily listen to rap music. Despite their limited generalizability, the findings of this research may be relevant to efforts to mobilize young hip-hop voters, and more importantly for connecting mobilization with

actual voting on election day. These findings may also assist interest group organizations in developing a coherent agenda that addresses the needs of those who are hip-hop voters. The hip-hop generation is the first generation of African Americans that did not have direct contact with the Civil Rights Movement, and therefore it is critical that we examine this generation and find ways to involve this generation in various political and social activities. Some courses on these issues are currently offered in university settings, such as those on civic education and classes that make use of service learning education strategies. Of course, more of these kinds of policies and activities should also focus on those in non-higher education settings.

Building social capital through civic engagement among the hip-hop generation might increase voter participation among this generation. In addition to individual-level social capital, bridging and bonding social capital can both be increased within this generation at the national, regional, and local levels through schools, religious institutions, mobilization drives, and hip-hop conventions and organizations. Bridging individuals among young adults can use their technological savvy and Internet usage to link greater numbers of people than through traditional methods. Long-term improvements in civic engagement and voting behavior can be sustained through the building of networks characterized by trust and reciprocity. Citizens Change, Hip-Hop Summit Action, the NAACP, MTV's Choose to Lose, and other voter mobilization drives help account for the spike in voter participation among the younger hip-hop generation. However, it remains to be seen if this initial effort will sustain and influence future presidential elections. The 2004 presidential election points to the high levels of activity among hip-hop generation voters when they are targeted by political candidates, parties, and universities. Political candidates, strategists, and scholars have long debated how to get younger voters to participate in our democracy by voting. One way to increase voter turnout among the hip-hop generation and young people in general may simply be a push into participation by activities geared toward them.

Our results suggest that absentee ballots may be a major issue for non-voters among college students. Voter registration and the complications with absentee voting present a major concern, specifically inaccurate voter registration databases and registration lists. There needs to be more research on the issues of absentee ballots and non-voting in general. As we noted above, all of the non-voters in our sample thought that the election was important, so they may have voted if they were less confused about or knew where to get accurate information about the absentee ballot process. Is the absentee ballot process a major factor in the failure to vote among similar cohorts? This question needs to be addressed further. While researchers investigate why students and other groups vote, equal consideration should be given to why people do not vote, especially among younger and minority voters. According to the data from our pilot study, future work should incorporate issues concerning the absentee ballot process as well as social capital.

Future research would ideally sample a wide variety of young adults belonging to the hip-hop generation from different backgrounds, or eligible voters in the general population for comparative purposes. As noted before, research on younger African American voters is scarce, and our findings from this pilot study suggest that more research is needed. Studies concentrating on college students should sample those from different universities across the country, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The use of focus groups in future research is encouraged because focus

groups enriched our study by providing additional specification and meaning regarding the voting behavior of our sample. Future research should also obtain information on respondents' religious affiliation and participation, especially considering that churches tend to be important in Southern African American social life. The differences between our sample and the predominantly white, national samples on the importance of various political issues during the election cycle warrant more research as well. Finally, the concept of social capital should be utilized in future research on voting among the hip-hop generation and other young adult cohorts, utilizing qualitative and quantitative methodologies, because social capital is a useful concept for studying the relationships among social connectedness and civic engagement.

Public policy changes may be needed in order to increase voting rates among younger and minority voters. There will be merit in educating younger age groups, and the hip-hop generation in particular, on the political process, and the method and strategies to employ in order to get their interests on the public agenda. Younger potential voters also need to be more aware of how the absentee ballot process works. Policy makers should make it easier for younger people on college campuses and elsewhere to vote absentee and to understand the process. With the increase in voting rates during the last election and a potential trajectory upward in voter participation, maybe it is time for standardized rules for casting and counting absentee ballots, polling procedures, voting machines, and training of poll workers that all states would have to follow.

There is considerable power and collective strength in the hip-hop generation as a voting bloc, and therefore this generation can be galvanized to pool this potential collective power. Given the apparent interest of our sample in political issues and social policies, this younger constituency should not be taken for granted. The hip-hop generation's political participation could fuel the next generation of unbridled thinking and innovative ideas and public policy.

The hip-hop generation cannot solely look to hip-hop artists as the cross bearers to continue the movement. Many in this generation are looking for a clear-cut charismatic leader to take the reigns of the movement, possibly suffering from a so-called "messiah complex" (Kelly 2004, 26-27). Although hip-hop artists and executives have sponsored many voter registration drives and other initiatives to get the hip-hop generation to vote, for many of them this has been just plain rhetoric because it is well known that some of these same individuals have failed to participate in voting, which is the minimal act of political participation in a democracy.

We propose that there be new ways of thinking, and a new dialogue between the hip-hop generation and the civil rights generation. Traditional civil rights organizations that have been at the forefront of the freedom fight and achieving the right to vote seem to be locked into an outdated model of mobilizing the masses to vote. This is evidenced by the apparent disconnect that occurs as many voter registration drives mobilize numerous voters. Given the importance of interconnectedness in civic engagement, Internet technology can serve as the medium for a new discourse and as an equalizer among different generations. If the hip-hop generation and civil rights generation wish to connect and mobilize themselves, Internet technology can be used as a tool in making it happen. For example, the technological savvy of younger people who are already active participants in civic affairs can spearhead in connecting others at the grassroots and in linking efforts at different levels (group, community, state, regional, and national). A

greater number of younger African Americans could potentially become more civically engaged, especially based on the issues surrounding the 2004 presidential election.

In conclusion, our findings suggest that the hip-hop generation can energize its base by being more socially connected and becoming more engaged in the political process. A shared group identity within the hip-hop generation can be tapped to build its bonding social capital. The generation can also develop and sustain its bridging social capital through various civic engagement drives, membership and participation in different associations, and connections with other generations, especially the civil rights generation. With adequate attention and support, this younger generation typically known to be individualistic, less connected, and less engaged could be more connected within themselves and with other cohorts and could participate in political discourse through grassroots initiatives and help shape American public policy.

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