

Political group goes trick-or-treating to get out the vote

Washington Bus aims for more youth engagement

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The [Washington Bus](#), a two-year-old non-profit group dedicated to supporting and training young people to engage in state politics, is at it again this year -- going door-to-door to request not your treats, but your votes.

The event is a canvassing effort called Trick-or-Vote and involves Washington Bus volunteers armed with clipboards listing Seattle residents who have not yet voted, pounding the pavement and on front doors to nudge them toward the polls.

The Trick-or-Vote was a nationally coordinated effort last year with costumed volunteers getting out the vote in Portland, San Diego, Denver and Chicago, among other cities. The idea behind the event is that Halloween is one of the few days of the year when knocking on a stranger's door and asking for something is acceptable.

"We don't want to take politics and make it fun, because that's corny," said Toby Crittenden, the Washington Bus' communications director. "But we try to take something fun and throw in the politics."

Volunteers for the Trick-or-Vote are encouraged to come with friends, get some candy while they canvass and attend the dance party hosted by the Bus afterward.

"This is for everyone," said Crittenden, who refers to the event as the "gateway drug into politics."

"Even if you think you're too old to trick-or-treat, you're never too old to Trick-or-Vote."

The Washington Bus was created two and half years ago to empower and motivate young voters -- whom they identify as people aged 15-29 -- to engage in local politics. With its outreach programs to high schools and neighborhood rallies, the Bus connects with young people who may never have been civically engaged and attempts to present issues in attractive ways that might foster a continuing interest.

This summer's "Candidate Survivor" event -- a City Council candidate forum designed to emulate the concept of popular television show "Survivor" that allowed attendees to hear candidates' perspectives on issues related to young people -- is a prime example of how the Bus has been transforming the way politics is played out for the young voter.

At the same time, the group's long-term goal is to train young people to become effective political leaders. They hope to have more young people in local and state government advocating for issues that affect the lives of young constituents. It's for this reason that dozens of Bus volunteers travel around the state to get involved in various races where progressive young candidates are running and dozens more volunteers come knocking.

Part of the importance of cultivating civic engagement in young people is also to show current candidates that there is another framework from which issues should be approached, Crittenden said.

"The average age of Washington voters is 37 and the average age of a person voting in a non-presidential election is 62," Crittenden said. "There needs to be a full representation."

Dorsol Plants, the 25-year-old who ran for City Council Position 4 and lost narrowly in the primary, agrees.

Plants said people of different age groups would have very different concerns when it comes to issues such as transportation, renter's issues and health care. More young people are needed within the ranks of local governments in order to implement policies that reflect what young constituents need.

"Renter issues for most of us are difficult. Right now on the City Council there is not a single renter," Plants said. "The issues we're talking about now are things that won't be fixed in five years or 10 years. It's better to start getting involved now than wait and have to deal with the decisions other people have already made later."

City Council President Richard Conlin, who is seeking re-election in this year's race, said young people may not be getting involved because many of them do not yet seem to have a sense of what is at stake.

And that's where groups like the Washington Bus come in.

Plants said the creative ideas the Bus has been using to hook young people are "brilliant." He will be participating in the Trick-or-Vote.

And if this is any indication that groups like the Washington Bus have brought the importance of the young vote to the forefront, Conlin said the city council has been trying to get more involved in technology. A few months ago, they opened Twitter and Facebook accounts.

This year the Washington Bus alone is doing the Trick-or-Vote, which takes place just three days before the Nov. 3 election.

"We don't believe in off years," Crittenden said. "We saw so much enthusiasm last year and we have this momentum we can't just let disappear."

The target of this year's Trick-or-Vote is more issue-specific. The Bus has teamed up with other candidate groups to advocate a yes vote on Referendum 71, the ballot item that would uphold a state law which extends domestic partnership rights to same-sex couples, and no on Initiative 1033, which limits government spending.

The Bus hopes to get 300 volunteers to sign up. Last year's 300 managed to knock on more than 6,500 doors. As of two weeks ago, 200 people had committed to help, Crittenden said.

People who want to join can sign up on the Washington Bus Web site or the Trick-or-Vote Web site. Crittenden said the only dress code is that volunteers cannot wear campaign buttons, so if people want to go as gory zombies or sexy kittens that's up to them.

"But it is a political event," Crittenden said with a laugh. "You have to know you might have an awkward moment at the door."

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