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Campaign 2004: Vote by poor may skyrocket this year Political experts cite big registration drives in low-income areas

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As the resident dean of the Crest Mobile Home Park in North Seattle, Wayne Nelson knows plenty of families struggling to keep food on the table.

Voting can seem like a pretty useless exercise when there's a stack of unpaid bills on the kitchen table; he knows that from his own years of supporting a family on a cabdriver's wages.

"Politicians seldom do what they say they will, and I think that's one of the reasons I didn't vote for so long," the 59-year-old disabled retiree said. "I just didn't think one vote would affect the things I was dealing with in my life."

Nelson's work with hungry people at a Greenwood food bank motivated him to become a voter a few years ago, and recently he has been registering his neighbors. But for someone who lives on a little more than a \$10,000 a year, he is the exception.



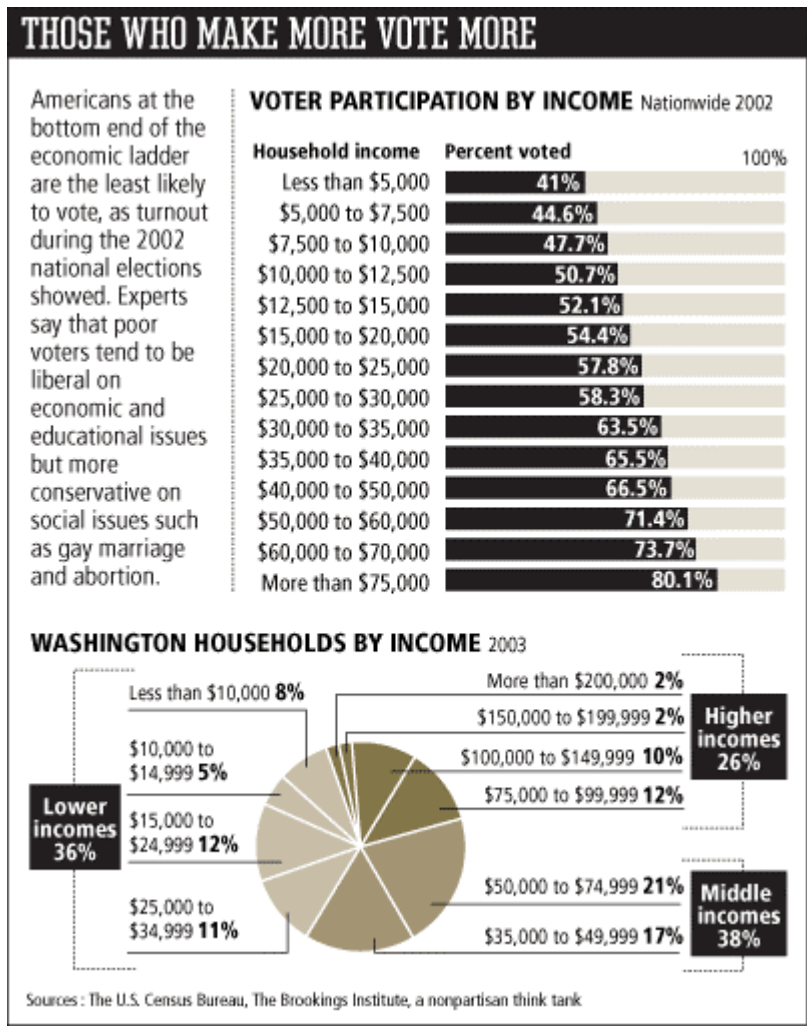
 Ron Wurzer / P-I

Wayne Nelson, a retired cab driver living in North Seattle, became a voter a few years ago, and is now registering some of his neighbors to vote also.

People on low incomes are the least likely group to vote, even though the issues they say concern them most -- better job opportunities, affordable health care, access to education -- are actually things politicians can address. In America, the people who are thriving financially -- those who are employed, well-educated, own homes and are married -- are the ones who turn out in droves to vote.

In 2002, 80 percent of families with incomes greater than \$75,000 annually voted, compared with just 25 percent of families with incomes less than \$10,000, according to the Census Bureau.

But political scholars and voting experts believe that 2004 could be a boom year for voting among the poor -- in part because of a massive effort by a range of political and grass-roots organizations to register new voters in poor and minority neighborhoods in swing states and here in Washington.



Washington Citizen Action, a grass-roots lobbying group, registered more than 50,000 voters this summer and fall -- most of them in King and Snohomish counties. The group has fought state cuts to health care programs for the poor and wanted more voting power behind its efforts.

At the same time, the Statewide Poverty Action Network, a non-profit group dedicated to the creation of living-wage jobs, was knocking on 20,000 doors in working class, ethnically diverse neighborhoods of apartments and rental homes in Auburn and Kent.

There, residents told canvassers that their battles to get health care coverage and afford prescription drugs and their frustration with not being able to get training for better-paying jobs were their main concerns, said network director Aiko Schaefer.

A surprising number of people were already registered to vote, but said they weren't in the habit of voting because they "felt politicians don't pay attention to them," she added.

The group responded by creating a voters guide that was mailed to the targeted neighborhoods in which Washington candidates outlined their specific plans for expanding health care coverage to lower-income people, creating jobs and making it more affordable for working parents to return to school. It was an attempt to give low-income voters a map for making an informed choice.

Michael McDonald, a fellow at the Brookings Institution, a non-partisan Washington, D.C., think tank, and an expert on voter turnout, said he expects outreach efforts in poor neighborhoods across the country to have a significant impact in the Nov. 2 election.

McDonald said low-income voters are "very persuadable and easily mobilized" to vote when they receive the visits, mailings and follow-up phone calls usually lavished on likely voters. He predicts a record turnout of about 60 percent of the voting age population on Nov. 2.

"And since those at the top of the ladder already participate, the increase will come primarily from the lower rungs," said McDonald, who also is a political science professor at George Mason University in Northern Virginia.

Opinions differ on how they are likely to affect the elections.

McDonald said the poor tend to be liberal on economic issues but conservative on social ones. They are unhappy that the median family income -- \$46,868 a year in Washington state -- has been

declining in recent years and that their children's class sizes are getting bigger, he said. But they tend to be church-going and generally aren't supporters of gay marriage or abortion. And they might not be as angry as some Democratic politicians would like them to be over the fact that the rich are getting richer, he said.

"Research shows that they are willing to give tax cuts to the rich because they think, 'Maybe someday I will be rich' -- even though there is very slim chance of that," he said.

Matt Hogan, head researcher for Democracy Corps, a non-profit Democratic-leaning voter research organization, said a late September poll of 1,000 likely voters found that those with incomes of less than \$30,000 were solidly in John Kerry's camp, giving the Democrat a 20 percentage point lead in that category over President Bush. Although they have strong concerns about the war in Iraq, topmost on their minds are domestic issues, he said.

When asked to choose their top issue from a list including the economy and jobs, terrorism and security, Iraq, and health care, 44 percent cited the economy as their top issue, with 23 percent choosing terrorism and security and 19 percent choosing health care -- compared with 12 percent nationally. Those priorities are mirrored in the worries of Emily McDowell, a single, working mother who lives with her 18-, 10- and 4-year-olds in a rented townhouse in Auburn. She said she wants a president who will focus first on the problems in "our homes and country."

She earns about \$20,500 a year answering customers' billing questions and has no health insurance. She fears losing the other social supports keeping her afloat -- the Section 8 housing voucher that keeps her family in a safe neighborhood, and the state-subsidized child care her youngest child used while she works. She is leaning toward Kerry because "he seems more for the working American."

Cherron Thomas, a 30-year-old medical assistant raising her 11- and 13-year-old sons, said she is motivated to vote for the first time in many years by two issues: health care and the war in Iraq.

The shortage of troops in Iraq has made her fear that her sons will face the draft and end up "worrying about going off to war somewhere it isn't necessary when they should be worrying about getting into college," Thomas said. For that reason she'll vote against Bush.

And she worries about threatened cuts to the state's Basic Health Plan for the poor, which covers her two sons. One boy suffers from migraines, and she said if she were forced to pay for his

medication, she wouldn't be able to pay her rent. She earns about \$18,000 a year.

Another small factor that may push up participation among low-income voters in Washington is a concerted effort under way by the Department of Social and Health Services to meet the requirements of the 1993 Nation Voter Registration Act, best known as the motor-voter law.

A little-known provision of the law requires agencies providing food stamps, disability services, Medicaid and welfare grants to offer clients the opportunity to register. Washington had been lax in enforcing the law until this summer, when Gov. Gary Locke asked state agency heads to step up their efforts. DSHS has since had nearly 5,000 men and women take home voter registration forms.

"Washington is one of seven or eight states that has really taken the bull by the horns and registered more people," said Miles Rapoport, president of Demos, a national group working to increase enforcement of the act.

Nelson, the retired taxi driver, said despite all the statewide efforts, most of the Mexican immigrant families who live in his trailer park don't know how to register.

He offers neighbors help with the forms when handing out the extra cookies from the food bank where he volunteers.

He said the razor-thin margin of victory Bush got over Democrat Al Gore in 2000 showed him that one vote matters.

"I think change is possible," he said. "But you have to vote."

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