

# Young Mexicans make up key voting block

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**MEXICO CITY** - Mexico's presidential candidates have talked about pot on MTV, buddied up with professional wrestlers and traded ties for soccer jerseys as they cultivate a hipper, cooler image.

Now with just days to go before Sunday's election, they're hoping to persuade Mexico's young adults - 40 percent of the electorate - to actually get out and vote.

There's a great deal at stake for Mexico's 30 million young voters. Many are already raising families and will move into their prime working years during the next six-year presidency.

Alejandra Santos Ruiz, a 26-year-old design assistant, said she likes employment proposals by conservative candidate Felipe Calderon, who is running nearly even with leftist Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

"It's the first time I will vote," she said. "Before, I wasn't interested because I wasn't working. But when you start working, you see how things are and you become interested in your country."

That kind of civic enthusiasm could be the exception.

Only three out of every 10 people between the ages of 18 and 30 voted in Mexico's 2003 mid-term elections. But they made the difference in the 2000 presidential elections: nearly 60 percent of 18-30 year olds who voted picked Vicente Fox, whose victory ended seven decades of one-party rule.

This year, politicians, non-profit organizations and even Spanish-language MTV are trying to break through the political apathy of the young.

Alejandro Hope, of polling firm Group of Economists and Associates, said politicians reaching out to young voters compete with other interests: sports, friends, parties.

"Young people, to be crude, have more things to do," Hope said. "Because of this abstention, public policy tends to have a 'pro-old bias.'"

All the candidates have proposed increasing funding for schools, sports and the arts, as well as creating more jobs, issues that are increasingly important to the young in Mexico, where the minimum wage is about \$4 a day.

Lopez Obrador, 52, of the Democratic Revolutionary Party, is supported by a group of young leftists who formed the National Youth Network for Lopez Obrador. The group travels across the country staging rallies in town plazas with rock bands, dancers and mural painters.

The former Mexico City mayor has proposed giving away free school supplies and near universal acceptance to public universities.

Calderon, 43, of the ruling National Action Party, has tried to charm young voters with endorsements from public figures like soccer star Francisco "Kikin" Fonseca, of Mexico's World Cup team, and soap opera actress Sherlyn Gonzalez. The youngest of three major presidential hopefuls, Calderon even staged a fashion show with models wearing his party's logo - some had it printed across their bottoms.

On his Web page, Calderon says he will support the younger generation by establishing more flexible work schedules, creating a national Web page for job listings, and providing more scholarships. He also proposes creating free book loans.

"Felipe Calderon has tried to paint himself as the candidate for the future versus the candidate of the past, and thus has made an explicit call to the young," Hope said.

"On the other side, Lopez has painted himself as the candidate of change versus the candidate of continuity, and with that has called on the young sentiment."

Despite the attention lavished on the young, only 13.8 percent of young adults are very interested in politics, according to the preliminary results of 2005's National Poll of Young People.

Laura Chavez San Juan, a 24-year-old bank employee, said she isn't going to vote, even though she is interested in politics. She sees her lack of participation as a form of protest.

"The candidates say one thing, and then they say something else, and I don't think that's right," she said.

Roberto Madrazo, 53, of the former ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party, is trying to boost his third-place standing in polls by pledging to include young people in government staffs and fighting drug and alcohol addictions.

Many young people like candidate Patricia Mercado, who has acknowledged smoking marijuana and supports same-sex marriages and decriminalizing abortion.

But her independent, low-budget campaign is unlikely to convert the leftist into a real contender.