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Young candidates seek respect

FLASHY CAMPAIGNS ASIDE, HOPEFULS SAY THEY'RE SERIOUS

By Julie Patel and HongDao Nguyen
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They're known for selling thongs on the Internet, throwing fraternity parties and campaigning at bars. One candidate can't even drink legally. But the twentysomethings running for governor want to be taken seriously.

``The coverage always goes like this: `Aw, look, he's 21 and running for governor. How cute,' " said candidate Daniel Watts of San Jose. He's a University of California-San Diego student who'd rather talk about affordable higher education than the video games he plays for fun.

To show they're not in the race just for kicks, several young candidates are scheduled to debate today at University of California-Berkeley on issues ranging from the death penalty to balancing the budget.

Young candidates say they bring a perspective to politics that's not often included in public policy discussions.

``When was the last time MSNBC called a 20-year-old to ask what their ideas were?" asked candidate Bryan Quinn of Los Gatos, who was recently interviewed on the network.

Public officials assume young people aren't interested in politics, said Jehmu Greene, director of Rock the Vote, a non-profit group that promotes youth civic engagement. She said it becomes a vicious cycle where politicians don't speak to youth issues and young people -- who will one day create public policy and lead the country -- tune out.

U.S. voter turnout has declined most sharply among young people in the past few decades, according to the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate.

Although most of the young candidates don't expect to win, they say they're using the campaign as a forum to air their views and to engage young voters.

``I want to promote activism among young people," said Nathan Whitecloud Walton, 25, a Stanford University MBA student and the son of basketball Hall of Famer Bill Walton. He is focusing his campaign on the environment and social-justice issues. ``Democracy relies on people becoming involved, and in our country, the numbers are less and less active," said Walton, who is running as an independent.

Quinn, a Republican and a member of Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity at the University of the Pacific, said young candidates also offer fresh approaches to the state's problems.

``I can think of ideas the average 55-year-old wouldn't come up with," said Quinn, who says California should declare bankruptcy to deal with its budget problems.

Watts, a Green Party candidate, is using his bid for governor as a platform to protest tuition increases at state colleges and universities. Georgy Russell, 27, a software engineer from Mountain View, is adamant

about campaign finance reform, alternative energy sources and universal health care.

But Russell, a Democrat, has received more attention for the thong underwear she sells on her Web site, highlighting a dilemma faced by many of the young candidates: Do you play your age for all it's worth to get attention for your issues? Can you have your thong and your budget deficit, too?

In a speech to a political science class at UC-Berkeley, Russell recounted being berated by one interviewer when she showed up to tape a segment for a television morning show without one of her ``Georgy for Governor'' thongs.

``There was no way I was going to lower myself to holding a thong up on my first national TV appearance,'' she said. The interviewer then asked her if she was *wearing* a thong. (She was. But not a ``Georgy for Governor'' one.)

Other candidates also complain that mainstream media treat them as curiosities and ask stereotypic questions based on their youth. Walton recalls being asked about his ``wildest date'' and whether he has used the Internet for dating.

They may not use the Web to troll for dates, but the candidates are savvy about using the medium to get their messages out.

Russell campaigns in virtual reality chat rooms such as www.there.com where visitors can interact with each other in the form of three-dimensional characters as if they were in a video game. Watts posts his instant message buddy name on his Web site, and invites voters to look him up on Friendster, the of-the-moment social networking site.

A grass-roots, direct-to-the-voters approach to campaigning is ideal for young candidates who may not have a lot of money to spend, their advisers say. Mary ``Mary Carey'' Cook, a 23-year-old porn actress who is running as an independent, offers a date with anybody who contributes \$5,000 to her campaign.

``I have to be creative and develop more unconventional methods of raising money,'' she says on her campaign Web site.

Brooke Adams, a 25-year-old independent candidate from Orange County, accentuates her youth -- and her looks -- in her press releases, but then uses the media attention to push her platform, which includes lowering taxes and reducing services for undocumented immigrants.

One release called her ``Attractive, articulate, tough as nails.''

Adams is campaigning on college campuses throughout the state with a rock band in tow, and hit Gordon Biersch in San Jose around happy hour one recent Friday.

When she told 33-year-old Cesar Medina she was campaigning, he sputtered: ``For governor?''

On reflection, he added, ``It's good to see people of our generation running.''

But Gena Rinaldi, 18, a freshman at the University of California-Davis, said a young candidate wouldn't necessarily win her vote just because of his or her age.

``You have to have a lot of experience to have a position like the governor of California,'' Rinaldi said.

Since a quarter of California's voting population is under 30, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, young voters could have an impact in the race. But less than half of them register to vote, a 2002 Field Poll found.

And with 135 names on the recall ballot, the impact for any one candidate will be splintered.

``The recall makes it impossible for all of these voices to be taken seriously," said Greene, of Rock the Vote.

But the recall campaign could have a lasting impact of more civic engagement among youth, Greene said.

``I hope young people running for office doesn't end Oct. 7," she said.

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