

Politics

Edited by Robert Schlesinger

Engaging young voters

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The generation of Americans that has the most at stake in the future of the country is the least engaged in this political process. Despite substantial progress in youth civic engagement, the young electorate (specifically 18- to 24-year-olds) still has a lower voter turnout than other age groups.

This disengagement is troubling on many levels. Voting is a civic duty that is crucial to the health of our democracy. People who do not vote waste their best ability to influence how their government will shape the nation and the world. They are opting out of a political debate over their own futures.

Low voter turnout among young people is especially unfortunate since technology would seem to promote their political engagement. Young voters are more comfortable than their elders in cyberspace, a domain where much of modern politics plays out. They are a natural audience for blogs, which are challenging traditional sources of news and commentary. And political "shorts" forwarded via e-mail can often reach young viewers faster than television.

But technology is only a means and an inadequate one at that. Even as new communications innovations make the country smaller in some ways, the importance of person-to-person, local, grassroots organization has never been greater — it is the key to mobilizing young voters.

Part of the reason is that young people — even those who are energized by specific issues — often do not feel connected with the platforms of parties or the campaign programs of candidates. Some candidates have failed to convince



Jamie-Andrea Yanak/AP

Sean "P. Diddy" Combs appears on stage at an appearance of the Vote Or Die "Shock and Awe" Tour in Cleveland Oct. 27, 2004. Combs appeared in the three-day, six-city tour to mobilize young voters.

young people that the outcome of an election is relevant to their lives. Others may have written off the youth vote and concentrated on age groups more likely to vote. Or young people themselves aren't making enough effort to study the issues and make their views known at the ballot box.

But, blame — whether for candidates' cynicism or young Americans' apathy — is not going to solve the problem. Part of the solution is to stop seeing low youth voter turnout as a once-every-four-years national problem and treat it instead as a day-in-and-day-out local challenge. Politics is personal, or at least it should be. But for too many young people, it is not: They do not feel tied to political outcomes and are therefore disinclined to participate in the process that produces those outcomes.

One way to connect youth to politics is to make the issues more personal. That shouldn't be hard to do: The political choices touch

us in very direct ways, whether or not we participate in them. As we have been reminded in recent months, the most contentious topics of political debate often involve the most intimate aspects of life: sexuality and justice, family and freedom, reproductive rights and decisions about dying loved ones. Politics is the means for producing a healthy consensus on these vital issues.

More young people would connect with politics if they were exposed to the issues in their communities through social networks and religious groups, at cookouts, pool halls and concerts. The goal should be to get them not just voting, but interacting with politicians, participating in campaigns, debating and discussing the issues.

At its most basic, voting is an exercise of putting our trust in elected officials. And personal connection at the local level is the most effective means of building that trust.

In order to engage younger vot-

ers, the parties should take a lesson from last year's presidential battle in Ohio. There, the GOP's locally-based, homegrown outreach strategy there proved more effective than the armies of out-of-state canvassers and national celebrities who spearheaded the Democratic effort. The personal approach used by the Bush campaign was key to turning out young voters.

Whichever party ends up benefitting from the increased political engagement of American youth, the country will be the winner. Yes, technology has increased the political tools available to connect with more young voters, but at its core, politics is still about people. And it is not enough to just connect, you have to make a connection.

Adrian Talbott and Devin Talbott are the co-founders of Generation Engage (www.GenerationEngage.org), a new grassroots youth civic engagement effort.

Progressive reader

Tids and bits from the left side of the blogosphere and newsstand

On Deep Throat

"Felt is a hero," former Reagan White House Chief of Staff Kenneth Duberstein told *New York Post* editorial writer Robert George, according to George's blog entry on The Huffington Post (www.huffingtonpost.com):

"In not-exactly-easy circumstances, 'He put America first' ... Duberstein said that, in reading all the media reports of the last few days, he put himself back in his shoes as White House chief of staff. He thought, with the information Felt had in front of him, 'What options did he have?' He couldn't go to the White House Chief of Staff (Haldeman or Ehrlichman); he couldn't go to the Justice Department (John Mitchell); he couldn't go to the White House Counsel (John Dean). He did something responsible. The congressional committees hadn't been formed yet. What do you do? Felt put America first.'"

[Disclosure: Politics page editor Robert Schlesinger also contributes to the Huffington Post].

Iraq point ...

"Far too large a proportion of the party's rank-and-file are anti-war for a nominee to position herself as a credible Iraq hawk," Matthew Yglesias writes on TPMCafe (www.tpm-cafe.com). "Conversely, far too large a proportion of the party's national security elites were pro-war to put together a viable anti-war team."

... And counterpoint

"Maybe it's just the mountain air out here in Montana ... but I just can't get over how insulated D.C. pundits can spout off and claim that a handful of Beltway elites should be viewed with the same significance as the millions of people out in the American heartland who constitute the 'grassroots,'" David Sirota says on DavidSirota.com.

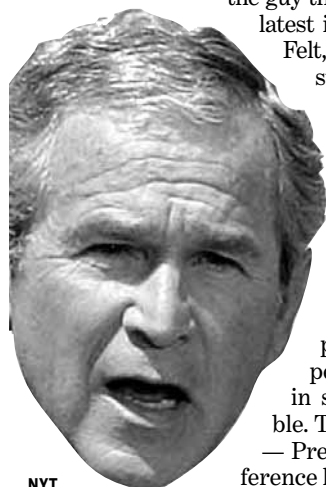
"Beyond even the national party's lack of a position on the war issue, this is a classic symbol for what's wrong with many Washington, D.C., insiders who claim to speak for progressives: They look at ordinary people with disdain, while self-importantly pumping up the significance of the elites that they are surrounded with. It is exactly the opposite of what the Republicans do. It is arrogant, it is pathetic, and it is, well, elitist — and it's one of the big reasons national Democrats keep losing elections."

... Joke

Mark Felt revealed himself in an article cryptically titled "I'm the guy they called Deep Throat," in the latest issue of *Vanity Fair*. No doubt Felt, realizing his identity would still be partially concealed behind *Vanity Fair*'s 87 pages of Donna Karan adds.

... Not a Joke

"It seemed like to me they based some of their decisions on the word of — on the allegations by people who were held in detention, people who hate America, people that have been trained in some instances to disassemble. That means not tell the truth." — President Bush at his news conference last week, once again dismantling the English language



NYT

Data points: Congressional travel, 2000-05

- Number of privately funded trips taken by members of Congress: 5,825
- Number of trips to Israel (the most popular non-U.S. destination): 134
- Cost of that private travel: \$17,412,082
- Amount spent by the Aspen Institute, the most generous trip-giver: \$3,151,206
- Number of members who took trips: 618
- Amount of travel received by Rep. James Sensenbrenner, R-Wis., the member who had the most expensive travel: \$176,718
- Number of trips taken by Democrats: 3,269
- Number of trips taken by Republicans: 2,541
- Number of trips taken by Rep. Harold Ford Jr., D-Tenn., the member who took the most trips: 62
- Number of trips within the U.S. (the most popular destination): 4,407

source: FECInfo (www.tray.com/fecinfo)