

Thursday, October 14th, 2004
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

WILL YOUNGER VOTERS SHOW UP ON ELECTION DAY?

Four years ago, I remember seeing T-shirts on the LSU campus that read "Voting is for Old People." This year, you might think it is different. Rapper Lenny Kravitz, P. Diddy and other high profile entertainers are often in concert wearing T-shirts that say: "Vote or Die." Quite a difference in the attitude of our young. Or is it?

There's a major push in Louisiana and throughout the country to both register and encourage young people, twenty-five and under, to vote. One of the better efforts being pushed locally is a project called "Voices for Votes," headed up by Cox Communications executive Rusty Jabour. T.V. spots, billboards and handouts are all part of a well-planned aggressive campaign. But will it really make any difference?

One of the most persistent and disturbing trends in U.S. politics is the steady decline in youth turnout. Political pundits are saying that if mobilized, the 24 million young people eligible to vote could sway the election. But unfortunately, the vast majority of young people don't "do" politics. In 2000, only 28.7% of eligible voters ages 18-24 voted. And the numbers have been declining for years.

So why don't young people vote? There are a number of reasons, both procedural and substantive. Here's a list:

1. It's often hard for college students to register and vote on campus. College students, in many college towns, are looked on as transients. And their political views may be perceived as different from the norm in the local community. There are many examples, even here in Louisiana, where local registrars make it difficult for students to register and vote from campus addresses, even though the Supreme Court has ruled they have a right to do so. With few exceptions, polling places are not set up on campus.

And our colleges have to share some of the blame. Under the Higher Education Act of 1998, colleges and universities receiving federal funds must make a good-faith effort to distribute voter registration forms throughout the campus. But a new released study by the Chronicle of Higher Education found that fewer than 17% of colleges are in compliance, and one-third, including Louisiana schools, are not even making minimal efforts.

2. Neither Bush nor Kerry has paid much attention to younger voters -- perhaps an appearance on MTV, or getting their kids out on the campaign trail. The Republican National Committee is making a big thing out of a 56-foot, 80,000-pound, 18-wheeler dubbed "Reggie the Registration Rig. Not much to get one excited. Both campaigns are stressing geographic tactics over demographic

ones. Messages are being tailored for all ages in hotly contested states like Michigan, Ohio and Florida, rather than a focus on issues that might attract young voters.

3. There also is a significant amount of skepticism about the intentions and capabilities of both parties. In discussions with a cross section of young people throughout the state, I continue to hear that Bush tried to jam a conservative Republican agenda down our throats following 9/11. Maybe because he could. And the Democrats “wimped out” in posing serious opposition or offering reasonable alternatives.

Many of these more informed young people feel that Bush missed a grand opportunity to moderate his ideological proclivities, and reach out to a cross section of Americans who, following 9/11, were ready to respond to his leadership. And then the feeling that a double standard seemed to be imposed by Republicans. Any attack on Bill Clinton, quite popular with young voters, was morally justified by conservatives. But any attack on George Bush was flat out unpatriotic. This double standard bred cynicism in many of our young.

But Clinton, in many conversations, is not let completely off the hook. While Bush might have consciously abandoned his golden opportunity for a more unified country by instead pursuing a more narrowly-based Republican majority, Clinton lost his chance to end the polarization he faced by unleashing the political furies of his affair. There is plenty of skepticism.

Democrats are seen by many younger voters as embodying neither strength nor hope. They kept hearing rhetoric about what the opposing party in Washington was not, (almost an obsession) and few specifics as to just who they were. Defense. Defense. Defense. “We Democrats are **not** too liberal, we are **not** too weak on defense, and we are **not** too culturally permissive.” Almost an apology for big government. Little inspiration for millions of young voters to connect.

These kids want problem solving, not pontification about free market bromides and moralization about “family values.” How to pay for college, getting a decent education, affordable health care and finding a job. That’s what’s important to so many of these young people. And both parties are viewed with distrust when the tenor of this campaign allows problem solving to be replaced by ideological enthusiasms.

4. The draft and sacrifice. There’s little at stake in the minds of many young voters. A majority are strongly against the war, but it doesn’t hit home without mandatory service. The rich get tax cuts. No one is really giving up anything. Life goes on, so why get that concerned and that involved?

In light of the close presidential election we face in less than three weeks, the youth vote could well make the difference. But will they vote in large numbers? Don’t

look for any records to be broken. And a good bit of the blame is at the feet of the Parties themselves.

WHERE THE MONEY COMES FROM.

Want to know whether any of your friends or neighbors are giving money to either Democrats or Republicans....or perhaps both? You can go on line and find out. Just pull up www.fundrace.org . You can check by someone's name, or just put in a street address. National politics is now hitting close to home.

And you can check what celebs are giving to whom. Bill Gates gave \$2000 to the President. Jerry Seinfeld gave \$2000 to Senator Kerry. Donald Trump gave \$2000 to both candidates.

You can even check up on all federal races, including Congress, by going to www.opensecrets.org. This site also will show you who contributes to the so-called 527 committees that have spent millions in opposition to each candidate.

SOME PRIVACY RESTORED

A federal judge in New York used some common sense last week, and struck down a federal law that gives the FBI open season on every email message you write. Simply by writing a letter, an Internet service company would be required to provide personal information about any subscriber the company did business with. And if your email was seized, you would be told nothing about it. No court authority. No one to review such a request to be sure there was no witch hunt. Just write a letter and every personal email you might write would be open to FBI review, for whatever purpose they might make up.

The federal judge vehemently rejected this onerous provision, saying that it was "unique in American law in its all-inclusive sweep and had no place in our open society."

If a crime has been committed and email is part of the investigation, any law enforcement authority can go to a judge and get a warrant to seize. What's so bad about that? It's a protection for all of our freedoms. A little common sense from a federal judge. Refreshing.

"So you're saying if we give them all the evidence, it might trash our case. But isn't that our purpose here? To find out the truth?"

Bobby Donald "The Practice"

*"Democracy is too good to
share with just anybody."*

Nigel Rees

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown