

# GET IN THE BOOTH

A Citizen's Guide to the 2004 Election

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**A**sk any casual observer of politics why every vote counts and you'll likely get this one-word answer: Florida. The 2000 presidential election was decided in Florida by merely 537 votes. And if you were a supporter of Al Gore, you might go further and say the election was decided by a single vote—on the Supreme Court. Indeed, every vote counts.

If Florida answers the question of whether every vote counts, what about this question: Why *should* you vote? That calls for another one-word answer: Madonna. The pop singer said it best in 1992 when she literally wrapped herself in the American flag and instructed MTV viewers: "If you don't vote, you're going to get a spanking!"

Wow. A spanking. But Americans don't seem worried about the Material Girl's threat. Arguably, some might even crave a Madonna spanking—an incentive *not* to vote. It's one reason, admittedly a flimsy one, to explain our reluctance to turn out at the polls on Election Day.

How bad is it getting at the polling sites? Check out these headlines from newspapers reporting elections held just in the last couple of years:

**Worcester Telegram & Gazette:** "Clean sweep for incumbents in Worcester; Record-low turnout is 16.6%."

**St. Louis Post-Dispatch:** "Voter turnout within county hits record low for April elections."

**Baton Rouge Advocate:** "Rising voter apathy should be concern."

**Washington Post:** "As Turnout Falls, Apathy Emerges As Driving Force."

**Boston Globe:** "Why didn't you vote? Boston held an election Sept. 23 and only 13.6 percent of registered voters cast ballots."

**San Mateo County Times:** "Turnout hits only 20 percent; County's incumbents win big as most voters choose to stay home."

**Buffalo News:** "Shunning the Polls: Young voters continue to stay away from the voting booth, especially in local races. Reasons for their non participation include the feeling of alienation and apathy."

The numbers back up the depressing headlines—in particular, for the youth.

A 2002 survey by Gannett News Service found that most young people believe voting is a choice, not a duty. Nearly 60 percent of young people Gannett interviewed described voting as a choice, while 39 percent said it is a constitutional duty. That's nearly the exact opposite of older people, of whom 36 percent in the poll described voting as a choice and 62 percent said it is a constitutional duty.

In other words, for young Americans, growing up with the right to vote doesn't necessarily mean appreciating it. Absent defining issues—say, a draft—young people stay away from politics. In fact, many laugh at it.

No joke. In January 2004, the Pew Research Center reported that “young people, by far the hardest to reach segment of the political news audience, are abandoning mainstream sources of election news and increasingly citing alternative outlets, including comedy shows such as the Daily Show and Saturday Night Live, as their source for election news.” The Pew Research Center poll showed that one-in-five young people (21%) say they regularly get campaign news from comedy shows. For Americans under 30, these comedy shows are now mentioned almost as frequently as newspapers and evening network news programs as regular sources for election news.

Surely Simon & Garfunkel were onto something when they youthfully observed decades ago: “Laugh about it, shout about it/When you've got to choose/Every way you look at it, you lose.”

We've got new losers now—an informed, albeit well entertained, electorate.

Pew concluded in its survey: “Young people also are much more likely than older generations to learn about the campaign from late-night talk shows like Jay Leno and David Letterman.” Since they're so powerful in influencing young peoples' political understanding, perhaps Leno, Letterman, and Jon Stewart will cut public service announcements urging young people to vote in 2004? Yeah, right. Fat chance. Who do we think they are, Madonna?

But don't blame the comedians. They're just relaying the “news.”

Who's to blame? During the 1992 Democratic presidential primary, candidate Jerry Brown said on CBS News: “In the last election, two-thirds of the people stayed home. And they stayed home because they're being manipulated by empty TV commercials and computer letters to think that politics doesn't make any difference.” By 2000, things really hadn't changed. The Vanishing Voter Project at Harvard's Shorenstein Center blamed increasingly negative and lengthy campaigns for declining voter participation. With studies showing that this affects turnout—young adults included—the Vanishing Voter poll found at the height of the 2000 Florida recount that 61% were discouraged by “what has happened in the campaign during the past week.” And in the closing days of the actual campaign, 55% called the campaign “boring.”

Boring? The epic Bush *vs.* Gore race? We don't want democracy. We want entertainment.

No wonder MTV research in 2000 found young people—here's that word again—bored by that year's campaign. Seventy percent of those polled identified issues they were concerned with, but only 30 percent said they were interested in politics and government. MTV Networks research Betsy Frank told the Associated Press: “Young people don't think politicians are listening to them and politicians see low turnout among this group and don't think young people care what they have to say. So there's a growing communication gap.”

So whom do young people think are listening? Would you believe, professional wrestlers?

Let's return to a kinder, gentler time in American politics. The 1998 Minnesota governor race. Jesse Ventura, running on the Reform Party ticket, got 37% of the vote and won, beating St. Paul Mayor Norm Coleman (R) and state Attorney General Hubert H. Humphrey 3rd (D). The race generated near-record turnout primarily because Ventura's candidacy brought voters of the woodwork. Young voters.

According to the Voter News Service exit poll, Ventura was the candidate of choice for voters 44 and younger and among those who identified themselves as moderates. Forty percent of Ventura's voters were between the ages of 30 and 44. And a quarter of the 18- to 24-year-olds said they wouldn't have voted if Ventura hadn't been in the race. In 1998, the Minnesota youth were a larger share of the vote than elsewhere in the nation.

Why did Ventura drive young voters? Here's how the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* put it: "Ventura clearly found the coveted middle ground that so often gets a politician labeled 'safe' or even 'boring.' Ventura was never perceived as safe or boring, but the exit-poll data show, remarkably, that he was never perceived as threatening, either."

Again: boring. Does 'not boring' equal 'key to voter turnout'? Sure looks that way. Then again, we have to be careful not to hang the future of republican democracy on wrestlers-turned-politicians. Voting isn't an exact science, and Ventura proved that when he said, "Look, 45 percent of Minnesotans don't vote....I can get 20 percent of them to vote this one time and watch your vote count. Rest assured, I can get the other 20 percent. And in a three-candidate race, 40 percent wins it."

Mathematicians everywhere still scratch their heads over that one. They might be puzzled by this next ditty, too. Reporting on youth vote outreach, the Associated Press carried a fun little anecdote about a bass player named Fat Mike who plays for a punk group called NOFX. I'll let the A.P. tell the story: "Fat Mike suffered from insomnia after the Florida recount, where Bush defeated Al Gore by just 537 votes to win the presidency. He began calling colleagues in the music industry and soon launched a group with the dual purpose of motivating punk fans and unseating Bush in 2004. 'I've probably sold 50,000 records in Florida. If 500 of the fans had voted in 2000, it could have been a different election,' Fat Mike said." Ah yes, the Nader factor, the Buchanan factor, the confusing ballot factor, the hanging chad factor—all pale next to Fat Mike's electoral impact.

The youth vote has made the difference for a colorful collection of presidential candidates. In 1968, anti-war candidate Sen. Eugene McCarthy (D-MN) made a spirited challenge to President Lyndon Johnson. Young people were his foot soldiers. Same thing for Sen. George McGovern (D-SD) in 1972—his campaign was flooded with young volunteers. And young people flooded the polls in 1972—the year after the voting age was dropped from 21 to 18 (historic note: lowering the voting age in 1971 was the last successful constitutional amendment initiated by Congress). The anti-war protesters had found the ballot booth. And that year set the benchmark—43% of young people cast ballots for president.

Clearly, defining issues—war, the environment, abortion, for starters—drive young voters. And what happens when there are no such issues? A *Newsweek* poll in February 2004 found 18–29-year-olds "say they are most concerned about unemployment, the economy and

national security this election year. The firebrand issues hardly show up on young voters' radar screens." The poll had this warning for the President Bush's campaign: the "lack of interest in social issues could prove significant in a presidential race where both parties are attempting to frame their opponents' positions on topics like gay marriage as extremist, accenting America's cultural divide." What does lack of young voters mean? According to a Washington Post study reported in October 2002, "The nation's electorate is rapidly graying, with the cadre of older Americans who plan to take part in the Nov. 5 elections outnumbering people younger than 30 by more than 2 to 1, creating a distorted national politics in which the issues that dominate campaigns and Capitol Hill reflect an ever-smaller slice of the country."

Never one to miss a trend, the hip store Urban Outfitters started selling in 2004 a T-shirt featuring the motto: "Voting Is For Old People." The long-sleeved Tee shirt for \$28.

The 2004 presidential election may be the latest in a series of elections in which the youth vote underachieves. In 1996, around a third of 18- to 24-year-olds voted in the presidential election. Same thing in 2000, which actually set a record low for young voter turnout (29%). And what about the 2002 mid-terms elections? Let's let actress Hillary Swank speak to that, from a Feb. 2004 National Press Club appearance: "Young people between 18 and 25 are 13 percent of the voting-age population, but they were only 5 percent of the vote last time around."

The only recent up-tick in youth voting came in 1992, when 48 percent of the youth came out to vote. What was so special about that election? Ask Arsenio Hall. He put Bill Clinton on his late night comedy show. Clinton blew the sax, and blew away the youth.

Again, politics as entertainment and entertainment as politics. No 'boring' there. That's where the Black Eyed Peas comes in. After performing their hit song "Where Is The Love" during the 2004 Grammy Awards, the group Black Eyed Peas screamed "Vote!" For political messages, you can't beat that for simplicity and succinctness. Given the entertainment world's pro-Democratic history, there should be little doubt whom each one of the Black Eyes Peas want young people to vote for.

(By the way, the Black Eyed Peas might want to advise fellow performer LL Cool J. In 2002, Mr. Cool J endorsed George Pataki's re-election bid for New York governor. One problem: LL Cool J wasn't registered to vote. On the day of the endorsement, LL had to fill out a voter registration form.)

Someone else who screamed during the 2004 campaign was Howard Dean. The former Vermont governor never topped the Iowa whoop for pure entertainment, and he could never top John Kerry in the voting. But he did push youth involvement. When he dropped out of the race on February 18th, Dean plugged the youth: "We really appreciate people from all over the country, particularly young people. One quarter of all our people who gave us money were under 30 years old in this campaign. I have not seen that happen since I was under 30 years old, and that was a long time ago."

How telling for Dean that he mentioned money, having spent \$41 million and getting little to show for it. Still, the thought was there. *USA Today* concurred with this editorial about Dean: "His campaign made history by tapping the Internet's potential to energize young voters."

Energized young people may actually make better voting citizens than the jaded, cynical older generations. Take Ed Asner. Please. The actor once said, "I didn't vote for George Bush,

so why should I have to listen to what he says?” As Lou Grant might have said to Ed Asner—you’ve got spunk. I hate spunk.

Better yet, take the entire state of Iowa. I’ve always been fascinated by their caucus system, in which voters can choose “uncommitted” over an actual candidate. Best example of how absurd *that* system is: In 1976, Jimmy Carter was declared the winner of the Iowa caucuses—but he only got 27% of the vote. More votes went to “uncommitted” (37%). So let me get this straight. In Iowa, voters trudge through bitter cold and foot-high snow to the caucus sites, they stand in corners of rooms for hours in a meeting, they publicly bicker with their neighbors over who should be the next president—and then a third of them vote no vote for anyone? Why did they even show up? I mean, come on! No wonder Howard Dean screamed after Iowa. I would, too.

Now you see why college kids don’t vote. They’re too busy laughing at the folks who *do*. No wonder Representative Barney Frank (D-MA) once said, “Voters are angry with politicians like me. And they’re angry with you in the media. Well, let me tell you something: The voters are no bargains either.”

Indeed. And if young people are voting less, well so is everyone else. The highest rate of turnout for a U.S. presidential election was 1960, when John F. Kennedy squeaked by Richard Nixon. Turnout was 63 percent—nearly two-thirds of the nation’s voting-age population went to the polls. The rate stayed high during the 1960s—remaining above 60 percent in 1964 and 1968. Then it dropped, down to 55% in 1972 and even further by 1988, to 50%.

The next election—the high voltage rumble among Bill Clinton, President George Bush, and Ross Perot—saw a rise in turnout to 55%. But it dropped again in 1996, leading to 2000 and the tight race between George W. Bush and Al Gore. Even with that historic razor-thin match-up, turnout only got to 50%.

And forget about elections that don’t feature a presidential race. Turnout in midterm elections nearly always end up below 40%.

So what’s in store for 2004, both young and old? Democrats have been crowing about record and near-record turnout in the early primary voting. And the media picked up on it. As kind of a rebuttal to the newspaper headlines at the beginning of this introduction, check out what the *Telegraph Herald* of Dubuque, Iowa had to say: “Coming off a near-record turnout on caucus night, Iowa should use that momentum to keep people involved in politics. It is a good indication of interest in politics when more than 120,000 Iowans cared enough to spend hours at caucuses last week.”

Drama critic and editor George Jean Nathan (1882–1958) wrote, “Bad officials are elected by good citizens who do not vote.” Now the question is: Which one will deserve Madonna’s spanking?

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