

AJC 3-17-03

Young voter apathy imperils democracy

Jane Eisner - Philadelphia Inquirer

Monday, March 17, 2003

They're at it again at Wissahickon High School, bless them. Backed by a couple of indefatigable Rotarians, two student leaders of the Class of '03 will be fanning out in the hallways and commandeering the lunchroom for two days at the end of this month, doing their bit to keep democracy alive.

There's no military build-up involved, nor need for that elusive U.N. consensus. The only enemy is apathy.

Battling the apathy of their classmates --- and, unfortunately, their generation --- is no small task, but I'm sure that Greg Waldman and Joseph Hope are up for it. I saw the two in action last fall, when they managed to persuade 80 percent of the eligible students at their Montgomery County, Pa., high school to register to vote. The goal this spring is 100 percent.

We should toast their effort, raise the flag, and wonder why there aren't more like them. A report released Wednesday by the Carnegie Corp. underscores the seriousness of the choice by most young Americans to sit out the political process. "In the eyes of many who are concerned about the future of our democracy," writes Alison Byrne Fields, "we have a crisis on our hands."

Those between 18 and 30 are now the largest voting bloc in the nation --- 43 million people, 25 percent of the electorate. But since that monumental moment in 1972 when the 26th Amendment granted 18- to 21-year-olds the right to vote for the first time, youth voter turnout has steadily declined. Only 26.7 percent of 18-year-olds reported casting a ballot in the can't-get-much-closer election of 2000.

And you wonder why politicians yammer on and on about prescription drugs for the elderly when the central concerns of the youth of our nation are ignored without penalty?

Byrne Fields is the former chief strategist for Rock the Vote, the jazzy nonprofit dedicated to engaging the MTV generation in the political process. She remembers sitting in the audience at the second presidential debate in 2000, waiting for the candidates to say something, anything, about young people.

Finally, George W. Bush made a fleeting reference to the number of recent graduates who are trying to start their professional lives but don't have health insurance.

"I had to restrain myself from making any noise," Byrne Fields recalls.

It was that rare an occasion.

Among the growing number of civic-minded do-gooders worried about this trend, there was hope that the events of Sept. 11 would remind young people of the necessity of

strong political leadership and the preciousness of the democratic process. Sadly, the message was to volunteer, and shop, not to exercise the franchise.

It's going to take a lot more to confront this crisis.

No doubt the 30-year decline in civic education in most American schools has contributed to the situation; it's hard to evaluate candidates for government posts if you have no idea what government even does.

The promise of service learning, now part of many a school curriculum, remains largely unfulfilled. While these programs encourage young people to serve their local communities, many have not taken the next, necessary step to help students draw a connection between the needs they see all around them and the long-term policy implications that only government can address.

There is also the possibility that a controversial war with Iraq may galvanize the young in the way the Vietnam War did to my generation. But the parallels are incomplete.

Without a nationwide compulsory draft, and absent a widespread terrorist attack or economic depression, most young people probably won't be directly implicated in this military adventure unless it is with us for a very long time.

Truth is, the research suggests that the best way to get young people to register, to vote, to engage is to ask them. Bryne Fields remembers that her own political awakening was courtesy of a priest at her Catholic high school, who asked her to attend a conference on nuclear disarmament at a nearby college. The message behind that request to a 15-year-old was simple but profound: You have a role to play. Play it.

Perhaps without realizing it, the Wissahickon students are doing something even better: Bothering to ask themselves. If only more would follow their lead.

JANE EISNER is a columnist for the Philadelphia Inquirer. Her column appears occasionally.