

THE SEARCH FOR VANISHING VOTERS

JANE EISNER '77, A COLUMNIST FOR THE *PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER*, BELIEVES THAT THE FAILURE OF YOUNG PEOPLE TO VOTE THREATENS OUR DEMOCRACY, AND IT'S TIME FOR EVERYONE TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT THE PROBLEM. **BY WILLIAM L. HOLDER '75**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL BURKHART

Call it the paradox of civic engagement. Young people are volunteering for community service projects in record numbers yet cannot be bothered to cast a ballot in elections. Ever since 18-year-olds gained the right to vote in 1972, their participation at the polls has gone nearly straight downhill.

Jane Eisner '77, a columnist with the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, argues that this decline is “the hottest civic issue of our time.” Failure to address it, she believes, will have profound implications for the future of representative democracy in the United States, which historically has been based on the engagement of a large middle class with centrist values. Without this rudder, more extreme minority points of view may come to dominate our politics.

The urgency of the problem has made Eisner determined to try to do something about it.

Her interest began with a personal epiphany on May 21, 2002, when Pennsylvania voters had the opportunity to select their party's nominee for governor. Her eldest daughter, Rachel Berger '06, had just turned 18 and registered to vote. Eisner continues:

“I had looked forward to that Tuesday in May with anticipation. Eager to mark the occasion for my daughter, I queried some thoughtful advisers for suggestions of a book I could give her, and once I fixed on the right one, rushed to the bookstore the night before to purchase it. I envisioned the next morning as a sort of Frank Capra moment—the walk to the polling place before school and work, the gift, the passing down of a civic tradition from the daughter of immigrants to the granddaughter.

“Of course, nothing goes as planned with teenagers. Running late, ankle hurt, she asked, Why can't we just drive, Mom? She smiled politely when I gave her the slim book of Walt Whitman poetry, bound in paper soft to touch, but I don't think she cracked it open. Truth is, at that hour of the morning, I was simply glad she was awake.

“I didn't expect a demonstration of joy from her. No, the epiphany came afterward, when I realized that no one else seemed to care, either. Oh, the poll workers, bless them, clapped when they heard this was her first time voting, but in every other respect this significant civic milestone went largely unnoticed.”

In 1972, no one expected the enactment of suffrage for 18- to 20-year-olds to produce meager results. The Twenty-Sixth Amendment was the culmination of efforts waged over a 30-year period. As had been the case for blacks and for women, many arguments were

advanced against lowering the age of suffrage. Congressional approval came slowly, grudgingly. But with young people fighting and dying in Vietnam, their exclusion from the voting booth appeared less defensible. When Congress approved the amendment on March 23, 1971, states rushed to ratify it. Five states voted approval the very day of Congressional passage—the swiftest ratification in American history. On July 5, President Richard Nixon certified the amendment on a mahogany desk thought to have been used by Thomas Jefferson during the Continental Congress.

Approximately 11.5 million 18- to 20-year-olds became eligible to vote. *U.S. News & World Report* speculated that George McGovern might be the bene-

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ficiary of their liberal tendencies. Yet anyone who thought that politics was about to be upended soon discovered differently. Richard Nixon was reelected in a landslide that left McGovern with only one state in his column: Massachusetts.

The larger surprise came during the ensuing decades as young people, unlike other disenfranchised groups that had gained suffrage before them, ignored their newly won right. In 1972, more than 50 percent of the nation's 18- to 24-year-olds voted. By the year 2000, in the race of Bush vs. Gore, that percentage had dropped to one-third. Among 18-year-olds, it was an even more dismal 26.7 percent. Statistics in mid-term elections are much worse.

Richard Boyd, professor of government at

Wesleyan, says that the phenomenon of low youth turnout is common to many Western democracies, but is particularly noticeable in the United States. It is increasingly difficult to get people to the polls with any kind of tactic, whether that be old-style shoe leather, phone banks, or Internet communication. “Many people, and disproportionately young people,” he says, “are so disengaged from normal politics that they are not easily mobilized. Both parties will put in an extraordinary amount of resources to mobilize potential voters in this election cycle because of the competitiveness of this election and the ideological polarization that characterizes the parties now.”

To Eisner, this disengagement is more than just disheartening, it threatens the foundation of our political system. It also provoked her to dig more deeply into causes. A petite woman whose rapid-fire speech suggests a life in overdrive, she has just concluded a year as a senior fellow with the Robert A. Fox Leadership Program at the University of Pennsylvania (while continuing to write occasional columns). Her year of teaching and research produced a book, *Taking Back the Vote: Getting American Youth Involved in Our Democracy* (Beacon Press), which will be published in August.

Today's young people, Eisner insists, are more committed to social change than any previous generation, even as they disdain politics. According to UCLA's annual college survey, more than 80 percent of incoming first-year students report frequent or occasional volunteer work, compared to 66 percent in 1989. The number of high school students involved in service learning increased nearly 4,000 percent in the 1990s. Young people see community service as dignified, she says.

“For many people, service is becoming the new politics, a training ground for leadership, a channel for a great deal of youthful energy and idealism, and—here's the worrisome part—a substitute for the accumulation and exercise of political power.”

While serving a meal to the homeless is praiseworthy, it's no substitute, in her view, for political change designed to reduce the number of homeless individuals.

If young people don't make the connection between the exercise of political power and social change, it may be that no one has taught them how government functions. In the era of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society program, high school students routinely took three civics-related classes. In today's curricula that emphasize standardized tests, civics has been a casualty. Most students take only one course.

Whatever students hear in civics class, the cultural

message about politics has been a turnoff. Both Republicans and Democrats have long since abandoned Great Society idealism for an attitude that government, more often than not, is the problem. Many of those who will vote for the first time in 2004 grew up with politics defined by the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal.

“Politics seems sleazy and dirty,” Eisner says. “It's no coincidence that this decline in voting has happened when there has been a decline in civic education, when there has been an increase in the influence of money on politics, and a real decline in the civility of political campaigns.”

The way in which young people assimilate information has also changed, according to Marc Eisner, professor of government at Wesleyan (and no relation to Jane Eisner). Not only are they inclined to get most of their information online, in small chunks, they also may receive only customized news. It's a different experience than reading the *New York Times* over coffee, where stories that might be disturbing or go against one's preconceptions compete for attention.

“Students have a very superficial knowledge of the world that's made up of newzoids and rumor and urban legend,” he says. “My concern is that people who are involved superficially can be very easily manipulated. If I get the right set of symbols, the right music, the right PR firm, then I can get them to do what I want them to do.”

In the absence of good civics instruction, the political process appears to be cumbersome and unresponsive. It may seem anachronistic in an age of instant gratification and often delivers much less than participants had hoped. Jane Eisner teaches her students about this problem through the example of AmeriCorps, which took years to be enacted. “It required bipartisanship, leadership, and risk-taking,” she says. “It's always easy to complain that government is slow. The more I've studied, the more I think that's actually a good thing. It helps to prevent silly mistakes.

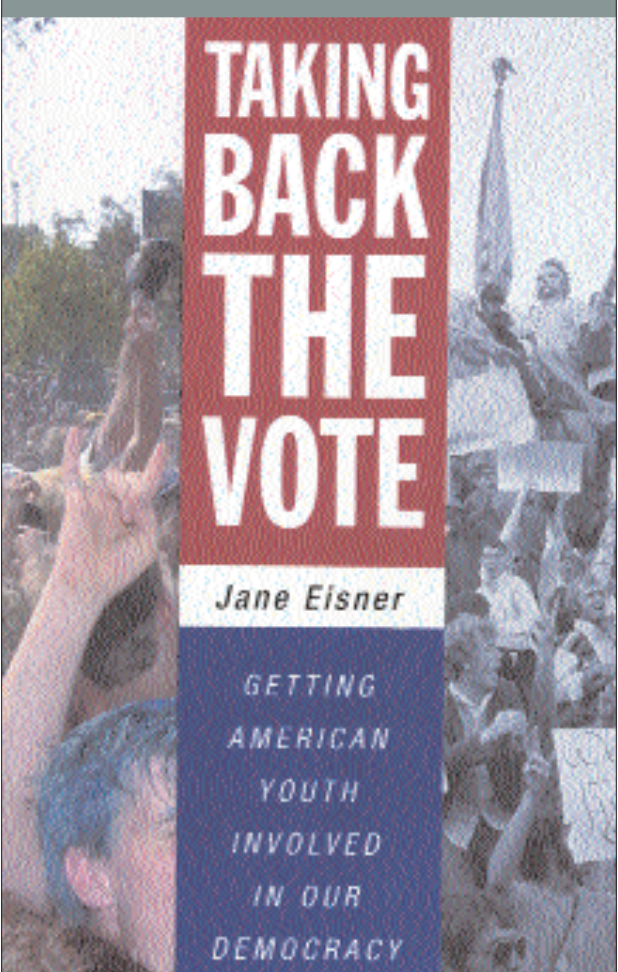
“That process, though, doesn't necessarily click with this generation.”

Possibly even more surprising than the pitiful turnout of 18- to 24-year-olds at the polls is the absence of any widespread outcry from the rest of the electorate. One of Eisner's students at UPenn addressed this fact in response to an assignment to interview people who had first voted in 1972. Ben Cruse wrote:

“As I sat down to reflect on the things I heard throughout my interviews, I noticed one strand that went through each and it disturbed me. The common

theme was that each one of these people, as they all hovered around the age of 50, accepted the fact that America's youth (and Americans in general) don't vote. They did not dispute it nor attempt to defend our nation's youth or the political system on which we ride. They offered no solutions, but approached the topic as a foregone conclusion.”

A study commissioned by the Center for Information



& Research on Civic Learning & Engagement at the University of Maryland found that about 90 percent of political party chairs nationwide believe that youth political engagement is a serious problem and that local parties could help young people become engaged. Yet few are actually doing anything about the problem.

“A key indicator of how far off the radar screen young people are is that few party chairs see them as an important demographic for the long-term success

of their party,” said John C. Green, a researcher at the University of Akron who helped conduct the study.

The silence of older generations speaks volumes to young people, Eisner says. Young people don't vote because no one tells them it's important. For the most part, politicians don't address issues of concern to youth; they focus on issues that matter among likely voters.

The answer, says Eisner, is to tell young people that voting is important—as simple as that. Research has shown that simply letting people know when and where to vote significantly increases turnout, and she believes that we could do a lot more to make the mechanics of voting easier.

We can also celebrate the act of voting. To that end, she has launched First Vote, which she describes as “a modest attempt to change civic culture incrementally and to function, in the best tradition of ritual, as a social statement of values.” The concept, which she intends to promote in her *Inquirer* column, is for parents, teachers, coaches, clergy, and other caring adults to think of ways to celebrate a young person's first vote.

First Vote is by no means the only ongoing effort to increase young voter turnout. For instance, “Smackdown Your Vote!” is a new collaboration between professional wrestlers and hip-hop artists intending to draw “Two Million More in 2004.” A marketing slogan unveiled at the Youth Vote Coalition, Eisner reported, is “Voter Virgin. Everybody's Doin' It in '04.” “Choose or Lose” is MTV's well-publicized effort, and there are many more. In mid-July, Declare Yourself, a non-partisan voter registration group, raised two giant billboards in Times Square, showing Christina Aguilera and André 3000 with their mouths held shut, next to the message, “Only you can silence yourself.” The same ads will appear in magazines directed at young people.

But First Vote is a campaign that any adult can join, and Eisner hopes her book will gain an audience and a following in the fall. Whether or not that happens, she is confident that the decline in youthful voting can be reversed.

“I have great respect for this generation of young people,” she says. “They are communitarian oriented. They are socially tolerant and more engaged in racial and cultural integration. I feel optimistic because I believe this generation can achieve great things.” ☛

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