

**OLD ENOUGH TO VOTE – OLD ENOUGH TO CARE**  
**Why young People Care Again About Politics and News**

**Robert Mann**  
**Professor, Communication Arts**  
**Caldwell College, Caldwell, NJ**

“Old enough to fight, old enough to vote!” That was the rallying cry for America’s youth in 1971. I remember it well. It was my senior year in high school; I had just registered for the draft. I was one of the millions who wanted the Twenty-Sixth Amendment passed!

It was ratified and it granted voting rights to Americans eighteen years of age and older. In the 1972 election more than half the people between the ages of 18 and 24 went to the polls. Most of them voted for George McGovern. They must have been the only ones who did! Richard Nixon won in a landslide.

All the passion for politics soon waned among America’s youth. My original proposal for this presentation was “Why Young People *Don’t* Care About News and Politics?” Then, “Time” Magazine announced, on February 11th of this year, that 74% of young people surveyed said they cared about the presidential race. A title change was definitely in order. I had never before had to revise the title of a presentation because the facts had completely changed. America’s young people apparently do care again. If they’re old enough to vote, they should be old enough to care. But how much of this is surface level involvement? Will it be sustained throughout future elections? This is what we’ll discuss during this presentation.

My background is communications, not political science. This presentation will stress the role of the media in this entire phenomenon. One of my primary resources is my own radio program. I host and produce a weekly talk show on media issues called,

“Let’s Consider the Source.” The program is carried nationally on XM satellite radio on XM public radio channel 133. Here in the Midwest, you can hear it at 6:30 PM Central time (7:30 PM Eastern; 4:30 PM Pacific). I have the opportunity to get first hand, expert reaction and opinion from scholars and newsmakers. Many of the quotes you hear in this presentation are taken directly from “Let’s Consider the Source.”

Let me begin by defining “Young People.” It’s a bit hard to get a universal definition when it comes to this subject. While most studies refer to 18 to 24 year olds as the cohort in question, some will list statistics among 18 to 31 year olds. Some researchers even look at the “Under Forty” demographic when they speak of “Young Voters.” For our purposes, we can be somewhat broad as long as we keep in mind that our undergraduate college students fit the profile regardless of the boundaries. The percentage of young people voting in presidential elections dropped after 1972. According to the Center for Information and Research on Civil Learning and Engagement, the percentage of eligible 18 to 24 year old Americans who voted in the 1976 race dropped to 44%. This is just after Watergate, and people of all ages were disillusioned. In 1980, only 43% of this group voted in the Reagan-Carter contest. In 1984, Reagan-Mondale drew only 44% of the young voters. A new low came in 1988 when Bush-Dukakis interested less than 40% of the nation’s young voters.

But in 1992, the youth vote was revived by MTV. Then the voice of the nation’s youth, Viacom owned MTV, launched a show called “Choose or Lose”. The first guest was young Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton. At the time he was trailing badly in the polls. This appearance changed everything.

The show was hosted by Tabitha Soren, who was then the network's top personality. But Soren didn't ask the questions. She acted merely as a facilitator. Clinton's questioners were the young audience members themselves. At the time of the telecast, in June of 1992, Clinton had just secured enough delegates to win the Democratic nomination. But, he was facing incumbent President George Bush and wealthy third party candidate Ross Perot. Clinton's support was at only 18% in the polls. In one segment of the two hour program, he was asked a very direct question about his plans to deal with the HIV/AIDS crisis. The smooth-talking candidate didn't get away with a quick soundbite. The young audience member asked a number of follow up questions and there were no time limits on the answers.

"Choose or Lose" eliminated one of the major components of the mediated communications paradigm. It took away, at least to some extent, the so-called "gatekeeper" or "go between." The questions came directly from the audience with no filter. That resonated well with the nation's youth.

That same week, Clinton went on the hottest late night show in the country. It seems dated now, but Arsenio Hall's syndicated talk show was so popular in 1992, that he drove Johnny Carson into retirement. Bill Clinton went on that show and let his saxophone do the talking. The charismatic Clinton played his rendition of Elvis Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel" to start the Arsenio episode. The crowd gave him a standing ovation.

This was clearly a case of youth-oriented media driving the interest. But 1992's so-called talk show democracy was short lived. An all-time low was hit in 1996. Clinton-Dole attracted a meager 35% of the young voters. That didn't improve much in

2000, as Bush-Gore improved the numbers by ½ a percentage point. The steady decline was reversed in 2004 with a jump to 46.7%.

My interest in this topic all started when I did one of my XM talk shows with Dr. David Mindich in 2006. Mindich is Associate Professor and Chair of Journalism and Mass Communication Department at St. Michael's College in Vermont. His book *Tuned Out...Why Americans Under 40 Don't Follow the News*, explains why young people, for so many years, just didn't care about the political process or the news which surrounded it.

In the first chapter, Mindich compared the youth frenzy over the 2003 "American Idol" voting with the 2003 presidential race. They were both close races, but Idol had stirred much more passion among the nation's youth. He goes on to talk about his own interactions with undergrads. "If the measures I used to assess young people's political awareness could be compared to a heart monitor, most of the respondents (but clearly not all) would be flatliners."

He blames "Infotainment", the blurring of the lines between journalism and entertainment, as one of the primary culprits. This is the same warning uttered by NYU Professor Neil Postman in his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

Other potential reasons for the lack of interest include the perception that an individual's vote doesn't really matter in the big picture. Young people have also said they are disillusioned by corruption, bored by news and politics, and feel it an interest more appropriate for older people.

But when the "Time" article appeared this year, I asked Dr. Mindich to come back on the program. He said that his book was not necessarily out of date. He says you can

confuse passion with paying attention. Mindich told me, “Young people could say they’re paying attention, but if they don’t even know the bare outlines of a leading candidates political biography, then they might not be getting in depth knowledge of the issues.” Professor Mindich gave an example from his interaction with his own students. He explained, “I’ve recently asked crowds of young people how they would define the issue of abortion in terms of the Democratic and Republican platforms. Young people typically don’t know.”

At Caldwell College, we have a very practical Communication Arts curriculum. Sophomores, in an Introduction to Broadcast Journalism class, have to do a campus based television newscast. I assigned Francheska Caputo to do a story about the level of interest among our students and to see if it reflected the national trends.

One of the students she interviewed was Granville Butler, an international student. He feels this is a generational issue. Butler said, “We’re not finding the things that our parents found in their generation in politics.” Butler claims the things the Baby Boomers believed in and fought for are no longer present for his generation. But, Caputo’s report also included an interview with Caldwell College Political Science Professor Dominic Maffei. Dr. Maffei feels there is a huge issue looming for America’s youth, a possible draft. Professor Maffei explains, “That’s the age group that’s going to be drafted if we get into another major conflict.”

One segment in the report, which many could find disturbing, is this comment from a student named Jemima Louis. She feels the youth “should use the people we look up to like actors, actresses and singers to get us interested in the political process.

But is that so bad? A public service announcement from the television show “One Tree Hill” would have to be viewed in a positive light. The popular teen show on the CW Network has affiliated itself with the website Rock the Vote.com. Young web surfers can click on a link and see a public service announcement in which cast members explain why they are passionate about politics. The actors walk about such diverse reasons as soldiers, families, outrage and making a difference.

One factor which clearly accounts for a stronger youth involvement is the increased role of the internet in political campaigns. A music video widely known as “Obama Girl” has become a You Tube phenomenon. In it, a sexy young woman (Obama Girl herself) sings to video images of the candidate. Here are some of the lyrics: “You seem to float onto the floor. Democratic Convention 2004. I never wanted anybody more than I want you. So I put down my Kerry sign. Knew I had to make you mine. You’re sexy and so fine. Cause’ I got a crush on Obama.”

At latest count, that video has been viewed more than eight million times on You Tube! Eight million! The video is sexy but not exactly issue-oriented. Granted, many people just watch it as a joke or out of curiosity, but it has to have some sort of impact.

By the way, even in sexy web videos, Hillary will not be outdone. “Hillary Guy” did a rock video with these lyrics: “Hillary ’08. Winning the debates. I’ve got a crush on Hillary. I’m not half political, but I know what I want you.”

One source of proof that young people have discovered the political process is a new creation from CNN. That’s right, stogy old CNN. It’s called the League of First Time Voters. Rich Sanchez, the anchor of the weekend show, “CNN Newsroom” was my guest on XM to discuss the new operation. He says the root cause of the change is

easy to identify. “One word, the Internet. It’s made all the difference in the world. What they say is “we are not able to not just have an idea, but connect with each other.”

But will it last? What can be done to keep this momentum going into the less sexy or rather mundane midterm and off year elections? Or at least to keep it alive for 2012?

Professor Mindich has some solutions. First, he suggests that the Federal Communication Commission should get tough on broadcasters when it comes to license renewal. The Commission is already tough on indecency, but had dropped many of its mandates for extensive news and public affairs programming. Remember, the airwaves are owned by the public and the stations and their affiliated networks only get licenses to use those airwaves. They can be revoked. Broadcasting does not carry inherent First Amendment protection.

Mindich also challenges us in the field of higher education. He suggests that admission standards also include civic knowledge. He says that politics need to matter again. In the 60’s and 70’s, young people cared about the war, civil rights and the environment. They issues are just as potent now. Finally, Mindich calls for good journalism to be taught in the nation’s communications programs. The news must be made relevant to the young media consumers. That takes more than flashy graphics and “infotainment.”

Since the internet seems to be the catalyst in the young vote renaissance, I will leave you with an internet video seen by millions. It’s called “Yes we can.” I’m not endorsing Senator Obama by showing this clip. I am merely pointing out its influential power in this relatively new media. The candidate’s words are set to music in a split-

screen format. Even a McCain supporter would find it moving merely from a production standpoint.

So, can this trend of young voters caring again about our political process continue? I believe it is up to us in higher education, up to those in the media and up to the candidates themselves. But I do believe that indeed we can.