

FACTS & OPINIONS

On Public Interest Issues

Quotes

You must get involved to have an impact. No one is impressed with the won-lost record of the referee.

John H. Holcomb

Good citizenship is the foundation of a nation.

Monument in honor of
William Boyd Allison

Freedom is increasingly perceived as just one more government handout like food stamps

James Bovard

A man who can't make a choice, makes a choice.

Anonymous

Time is Running Out

Adam D. Streetman

One of the many topics which will arise during this election year is voter participation or turnout. Candidates in every election ask for "your vote" yet there are huge numbers of votes never cast, especially from young voters. The problem of low voter turnout is nationwide and extends to every age group, but the statistics from youth voting patterns are very low and merit examination.

This problem is more serious than many think. We as a nation are extremely close to losing a whole generation of voters. Without these voters, the basic fundamentals of our government are at risk. If America loses this generation, it is very likely that the generations to follow will be doomed to the same fate. In the end, America will be doomed.

Upon ratification of the 26th Amendment in 1971,¹ which lowered the voting age in America to 18 years, there were high hopes that young Americans would impact the number of

voters. Sadly though, these hopes were soon met with the despairing reality of declining voter participation.

Graph one shows the voter turnout in every presidential election since the ratification of the 26th Amendment. Nineteen seventy-two, the first election in which young Americans could vote, posted the highest turnout for voters 18 to 24, at close to 50%. The turnout rate has decreased almost 20% to date.

Politicians, leaders, educators, even voters themselves ask the question why is there such an epidemic of apathy? The U.S. Census Bureau polled voters between the ages of 18 and 24 on the reasons for not voting. The top three reasons why young Americans do not are: too busy (25.83%), not interested (16.52%), and out of town (13.41%). These answers are just the tip of the iceberg. There

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FACTS & OPINIONS

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Dr. Don Racheter

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What's New at Public Interest Institute?

Adam D. Streetman

The staff of Public Interest Institute visited Omaha on January 7th and 8th for the State Policy Network Regional Meeting. The first seminar was on public transportation. John Charles of the Cascade Policy Institute, Bob Corkins of the Kansas Public Policy Institute, and Wendell Cox from the Texas Public Policy Foundation added information on the present and future of America's mass transit system.

Ron Nehring from Americans for Tax Reform and Michael Flynn of American Legislative Exchange Council explored the topic of technology and internet taxation in the second seminar.

The third seminar was on the environment. Jo Kwong from the Atlas Economic Re-

search Foundation discussed the theme of Religion and the Environment. Tom Kimmell from the Irrigation Association, Roger Patterson of the Nebraska Department of Water Resources, and Dennis Schweiger from Valmont Irrigation spoke on the real facts about our water.

The weekend concluded with guest speaker Grover Norquist from Americans for Tax Reform. The weekend was a great source of information and networking.

Arlan DeBlieck traveled to the Libertarian State Convention on February 26, 2000 where he spoke on the economic effects of subsidies. He also traveled to Auburn University for the Austrian Scholars Conference March 24th through the 26th.

Arlan DeBlieck and Adam Streetman met with the Assistant State Auditor on March 14th concerning the Institute's current project of Children's Health Insurance Programs, mainly the Hawk-I program.

Adam D. Streetman is an Intern with Public Interest Institute.

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Time is Running Out (continued)

Adam D. Streetman

The main problem is lack of information and skills about voting and the democratic process

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are deeply rooted problems that must be addressed.

A study done by The Terrance Group and Lake, Snell, Perry & Associates on the profile of young Americans found ironic evidence that voting rates have been decreasing, but at the same time volunteerism has steadily risen for Americans between the ages of 18 and 24. Why then are young Americans not voting?

Many critics of young Americans argue that the main reason for such low voter participation is a loss of patriotism, but I believe the main problem is lack of information and skills about voting and the basic democratic process.

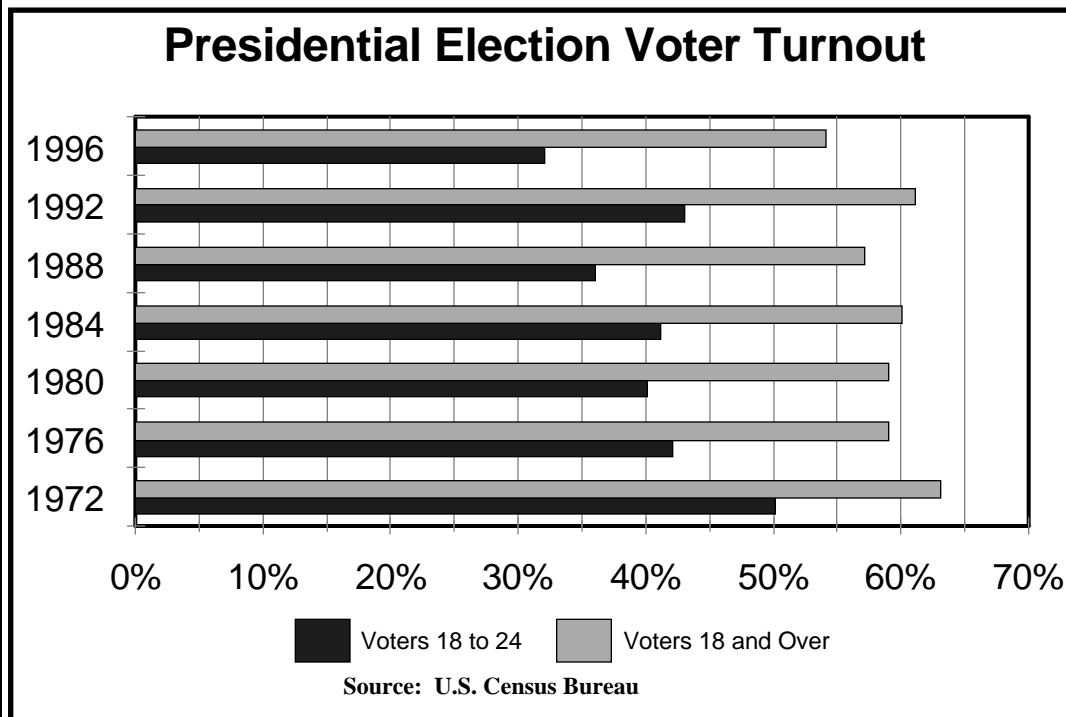
Many young Americans agree that being an American citizen is extremely important. Yet when young people are asked to explain specifically what the characteristics of American citizenship are, very few can actually answer. "I'm 21 years

old. I've got other things on my mind right now. But as far as being a citizen,...I don't know what to say. I really don't know." (Des Moines-Non-college, Non-voter).² Many of today's young Americans can only identify America's freedoms and the rights associated with citizenship such as: freedom of speech, right to vote, right to bear arms, freedom of religion, etc. Young Americans are mostly uncertain of the responsibilities that citizenship entails. Many responses about citizenship from America's youth are vague and deal mainly with the private sector rather than the public realm.

Most young Americans believe gaining skills and knowledge is particularly important. However these same young Americans are not obtaining information about citizenship or politics.³ A large minority of the youth (41% surveyed) do not ever pick up a newspaper and

read it. Over half of young Americans say that they pay little or no attention to the television when it contains issues on politics. Even more young Americans claim they have never read a book or a magazine outside of school that pertains to politics or the

Graph 1.



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Time is Running Out (continued)

Adam D. Streetman

Young Americans do not only have ignorance about how to vote but for whom to vote

government. Many young Americans today do not concern themselves with political issues even when they are right in front of them.

This lack of interest has affected young Americans' knowledge of basic civics as well as the democratic process. In an earlier INSTITUTE BRIEF by Amy Frantz titled "Civic Education is in Decline", she noted that 35% of high school seniors fell below the basic knowledge level in civics, even though the students in public schools are generally required to take a government or civics class to graduate. However, over one-third still do not know the basics of our political system and their role as citizens.

This is reemphasized by the number of young Americans who do not know how to cast a vote, one of the most basic democratic privileges. The survey by the Terrance Group found that 62% of young people with some college education and 50% of high school students claim that high schools do not do an adequate job of educating youth about the mechanics of voting and current political events, ironic when many youths do not take the time to look at a newspaper or listen to the news, "Government class teaches you like rights and the Constitution. [but] It doesn't teach you about politics and parties." (Baltimore-College, Non-voter).⁴ Other youths claim they are embarrassed to ask for help with operating the voting machine.

Young Americans are not only ignorant of how to vote, but for whom to vote. Young people do not vote when they do not have a good handle on who the candidates are, what the candidates stand for, or even what their job responsibili-

ties entail.

Many young voters feel that candidates do not make an effort to reach them. Since young Americans vote in such low percentages, many campaigns do not target them. They see targeting youth as ineffective use of campaign funds. When campaigns do not target young voters it reinforces their perception that their votes do not really matter.

Without guidance from schools and parents, youth have little exposure to politics. At the most basic level, they see few practical reasons to participate in politics, because they do not see examples of how young voters can influence the political process and cannot articulate concrete ways in which government affects them. Furthermore, young voters argue that politicians rarely target them because no one asks for their support in means that resonate. Often young Americans doubt that their one vote will make a difference to the election or to anything in their own lives.

Voter turnout has fallen among adult Americans as well as our youth. This change has had an effect on young voters. In our homes today, young Americans are just as likely to learn not to vote as they are to vote from their parents. Political discussions in the home happen less and less frequently. Only one-fifth of young Americans surveyed say they talk to their parents about politics, while one-third say they talk about politics with their parents sometimes. Almost half of the surveyed youth never talk to their parents about politics. This lack of parental guidance affects youth's views towards politics and voting. "[My parents] didn't vote.

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Time is Running Out
(continued)
Adam D. Streetman

*"[My parents] didn't vote. So I guess that's why I don't vote."
(Baltimore - Non-college, Non-voter)⁵*

So I guess that's why I don't vote." (Baltimore - Non-college, Non-voter).⁵

On the other hand, young voters who have had politically engaged parents are more apt to be politically engaged themselves. Young people who grow up with parents who vote are far more likely to become voters themselves. Political discussion in the home also has a significant effect on young people's propensity to vote. Fifty-one percent of the young voters in the 1998 election often spoke to their parents, while only 26% of the youth who voted in 1998 rarely or never discussed politics with their parents.

Parental guidance is indeed important in voting patterns for young Americans, but nothing has a more profound effect on voting behavior for young voters than schools. Level of education has a marked impact on young people's orientation towards political participation. College students, young people with at least some

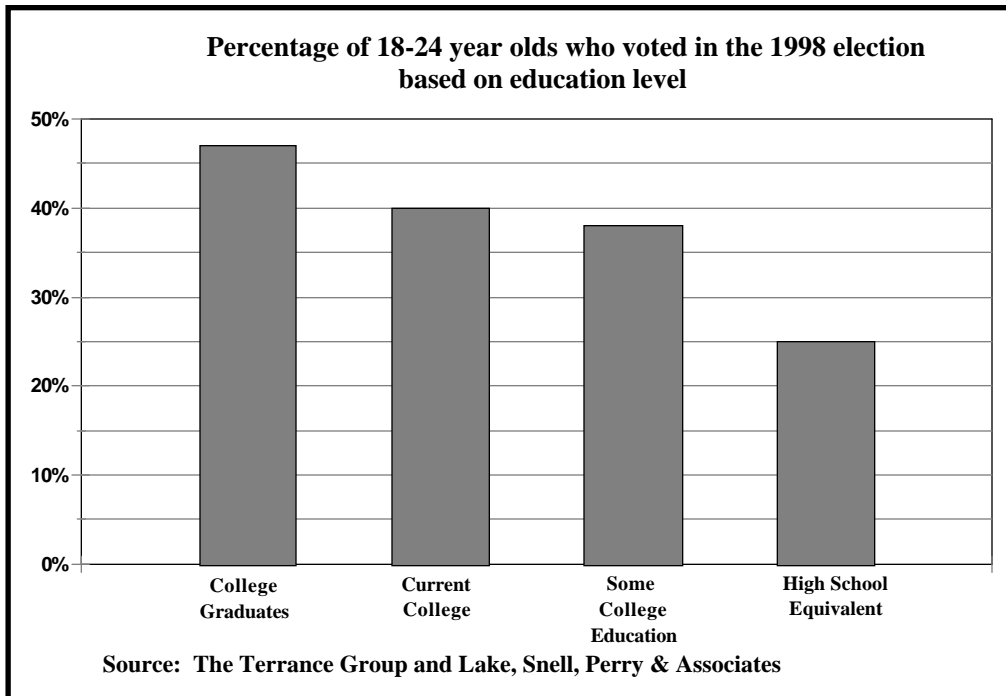
college education, and college graduates are much more likely to be registered and to vote than those with lower levels of education. Graph two illustrates this.

High schools are virtually the only social institution to which all young people are exposed. Therefore, schools have a critical role to play in political socialization. Many students in high school believe that schools fall short in educating them in politics or the political process. Many students believe that their government class is boring. Many say that the class is mainly book reading and memorization which is soon forgotten.

Left with these negative impressions of government and politics non-college bound youth have little incentive to participate in the political process and few direct opportunities to receive further instruction or encouragement in political pursuits.

One of the main responses to why voters do not vote is efficacy.

Graph 2.



Efficacy is the idea that voting does in fact make a difference. Non-voters of all age groups argue that their vote does not make a difference. Without parental direction and effective school-based education, many young non-voters demonstrate low levels of efficacy. In fact it is the main reason young Ameri-

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Time is Running Out (continued)

Adam D. Streetman

Political perception is another reason why young Americans seem to be disenchanted with the political process

cans do not vote.

Political perception is another reason why young Americans are disenchanted with the political process. Young people have come of age in an era when politics is rife with highly publicized scandal. Most of America's youth no longer trust political leaders and believe that most are dishonest. This feeling of distrust has a negative effect on voting patterns.

The media has accentuated negative perceptions of politicians. Many young people point to the media's propensity to relay mostly negative information about politicians and to ignore the good they do. "Most of the Presidents that we had were sleeping around and doing drugs... I mean that's what our history classes basically kind of teach us. And like that thing with Jefferson...has like two different families. And of course like Clinton right now. No reason to look up to them." (Salt Lake City,- Non-college, Non-voter).⁶

Traditional motivations for political participation and voting are not working well for our youth. Except for a small minority of people, the sense of civic duty is muted. Strategies and messages for engagement must include creativity and participatory solutions if any real change is to occur. Generally, there also needs to be more effective education to provide youth with the information and skills they need to become motivated, enlightened, and active voters.

Schools have a powerful influence on young people's lives.

Civics and political education should be a high priority in our schools. Our educators should make every effort not only to encourage students, but also to teach them how to be effective citizens.

Schools should provide students with educational experiences that connect them to the political process, for example, giving extra credit for volunteering in campaigns. Volunteering offers exposure and would allow some students to test the waters of politics. Schools should also continue helping students become registered to vote.

Youth who discussed politics and government with their parents while growing up were more likely to be registered voters. But with adults also voting in relatively low percentages, there is little wonder that youth have failed to be more politically engaged by their parents. In order for young Americans to fully understand the importance of political and civic engagement and voting, older adults and parents need to be more involved.

Moreover, parents need to talk to kids about the importance of voting and the effects voting has on our society. With youth often narrowly focused on their own private lives, parents need to talk to their kids about how candidates, issues, and voting can and will affect their lives here and now. More than any other source, parents have the ability to bring civic engagement and voting into the world of young Americans.

In order to portray the impor-

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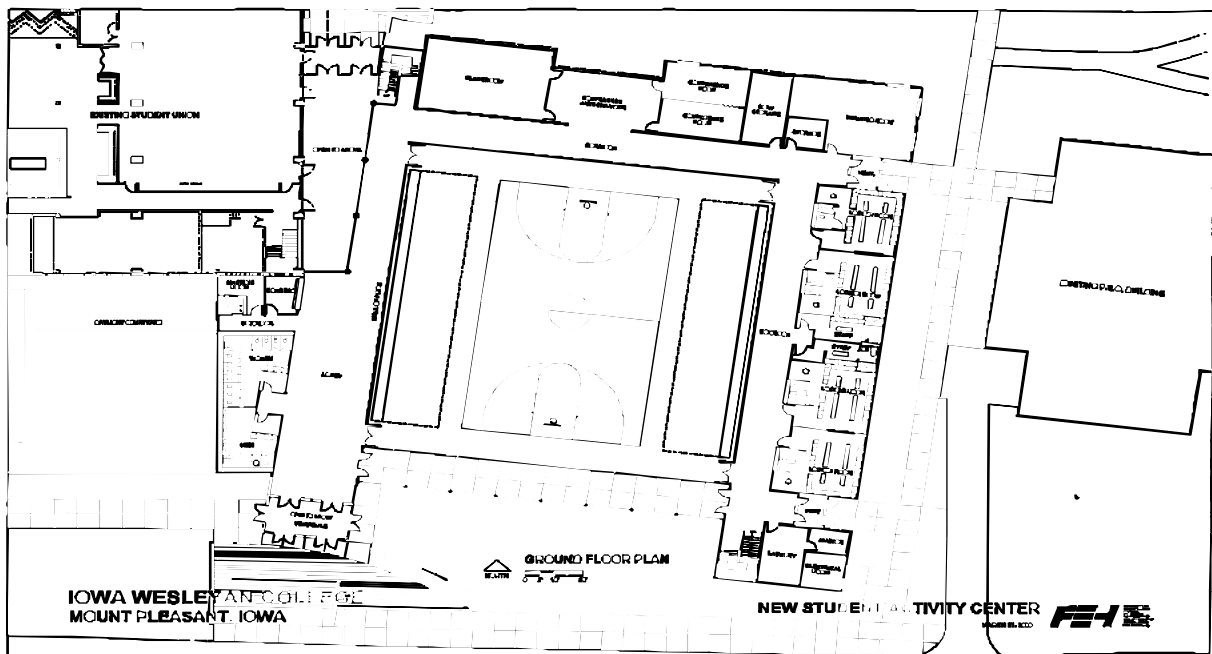
The interior design of the Iowa Wesleyan College Student Activity Center has officially been approved by the Student Activity Center Building Sub-Committee of the IWC Board of Trustees.

The new Student Activity Center will be a 36,000 sq. ft., two-story structure situated between the John Wesley Holland Student Union and the P.E.O. Administration building. The facility will connect to the current Student Union. Located on the ground floor of the facility will be the basketball court, a "smart classroom," conference antechamber, two conference rooms, two storage rooms, a large training room, four locker rooms, two staff rooms, the lobby, restrooms, hall of fame, concessions, janitor's room, laundry, elevator, electrical room and machine room. The basketball court includes bleachers for 800 people. The second level of the facility includes a walking/jogging track, large fitness/wellness center, eight offices, a

coaches' reception area, conference room and storage room.

"Last October the Campus Student Activity Center Committee determined what we believed were necessary components of this building," explained Carol Nemitz, IWC vice president for student affairs and chair of the campus committee. "We are happy to announce that all the Activity Center elements the committee desired are included in this design."

It is anticipated that the major construction of the facility will begin no later than June 1, however, planning and preparation for the actual construction has been ongoing. Recent testing has been completed to determine soil compaction, and a team is currently surveying the area and conducting a water retention study. The exterior design of the building and landscaping has yet to be determined. A completion date for the Student Activity Center is tentatively scheduled for August 2001.



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tance of civic engagement and voting, parents should take their children with them to the voting booth — especially when children are young. This would at least familiarize youth with the mechanics of voting.

Candidates as well as government officials have the potential to play a major role in reconnecting young Americans to politics and voting. If voting among young people is going to increase, campaigns need to target young voters. Candidates could make more stops on college campuses and spend more time on issues of concern to young voters.

The media also can be a powerful tool in getting young voters more involved in the

democratic process, by helping young Americans get the information they need to make decisions about civic engagement.

But it does not have to stop there. Everyone could have a key role in increasing voter turnout. Increasing the voter participation for young Americans is vitally important to the future of our nation. If you know a young person who does not vote, try to persuade them to do otherwise, because that one vote could make a difference.

Endnotes:

¹"Youth and Politics". Close Up Foundation, <http://www.closeup.org/youth.htm>

²"New Millennium Project Part 1". National Association of Secretaries of State, <http://www.nass.org/nass99/youth.htm>

³*Ibid*

⁴*Ibid*

⁵*Ibid*

⁶*Ibid*

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