



capturing the youth vote

Senator John Kerry probably is not a fan of pro wrestling. And despite Jenna and Barbara Bush's valiant efforts to convince Americans that President George W. Bush grooves to OutKast, most hip-hop fans cannot envision W. passing the Courvoisier to rap star P. Diddy. To their surprise, Kerry and Bush found themselves defending their political views to young fans of pro wrestling and the hip-hop community during the heated 2004 presidential election campaigns. OutKast fans and SmackDown devotees were expected to play a bigger role than soccer moms or NASCAR dads in determining the election.

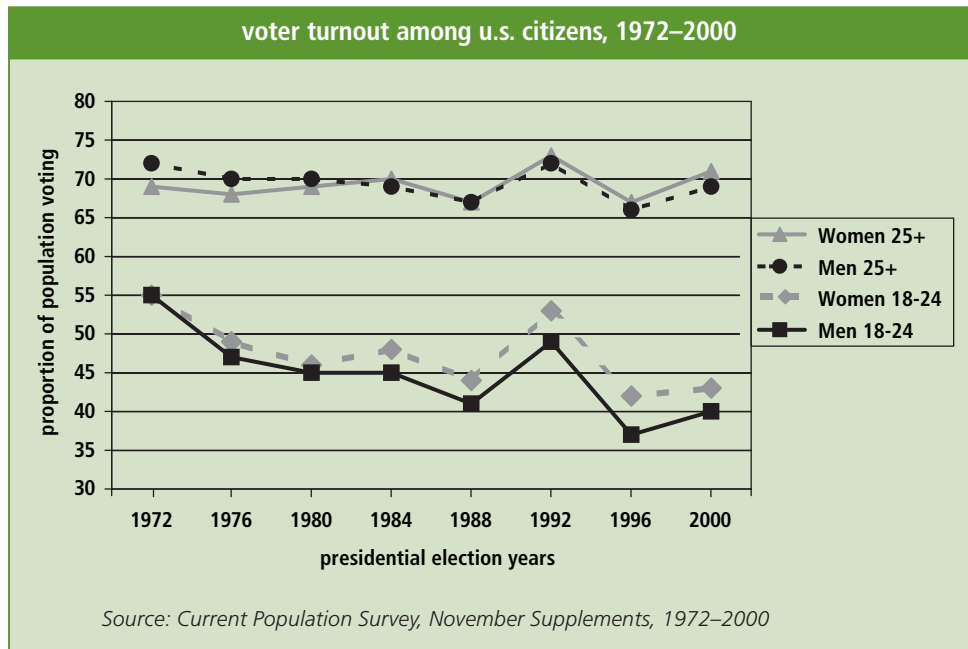
Why? Roughly 30 million "missing" youth votes were up for grabs. Just 42 percent of 18- to 24-year-old Americans voted in the 2000 presidential election, compared to 70 percent of people 25 and older (see figure). The gender gap in youth voting has also increased slightly over time, with black and white women more likely than their male peers to vote. Among young Hispanics, however, men and women are equally likely to vote: just 30 percent voted in the 2000 presidential election.

This political apathy is a far cry from the late 1960s when 18- to 20-year-olds demanded to know why they were being called to fight in Vietnam yet could not vote until they were 21. In 1971, 18- to 20-year-olds won the right to vote with the ratification of the 26th Amendment. It is not clear whether novelty, the political zeitgeist, or a streak of youthful political activism was at work, but 55 percent of 18- to 21-year-olds voted in the 1972 presidential election, and that proportion has been inching downward ever since. Experts attribute declining voter turnout among youths to the distinctive characteristics of the Generation X and Y cohorts, including apathy, disillusionment, a lack of civics education, and high exposure to television ads that downplay candidates' ideological differences yet play up their personal transgressions.

Recognizing the potential impact of young voters, inno-

vative programs to increase the youth vote cropped up everywhere from the inner city to rural mobile-home parks in 2004. Rap star P. Diddy started the "Citizen Change" program, urging young adults—particularly urban African Americans and Latinos—to "Vote or Die!" World Wrestling Entertainment initiated the "SmackDown Your Vote" program in 2002, a non-partisan effort to encourage young Americans to become informed citizens. The centerpiece effort was "18-30 VIP" (vote.wwe.com), a Web-based forum where Kerry and Bush shared their views on jobs, the economy, terrorism, college loans, and other topics of interest to young voters.

We cannot determine with any certainty whether these programs are effective. While youthful voters did turn out in large numbers in the 2004 presidential election, they hardly drove the election outcome, as some political observers had predicted. According to exit-poll data from the Associated Press, 18- to 24-year-old voters accounted for just 10 percent of all voters in 2004, the exact same proportion as in 2000. The more uplifting news is that total number of voters increased from 105 million to an estimated 116 to 120 million, and the youth vote is believed to have increased proportionally. Experts attribute this less to young adults' heeding the call of their celebrity icons and more to the fact that issues critically important to young people—the war in Iraq, the economy, and funding for education—were at stake.



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