



Can't Vote, Still Care

Getting Your
Teen Involved
in the Election

by Lucy Rimalower, M.A.

Regardless of who delivers the next State of the Union address, this is an election that your teens will be telling their grandchildren about. With candidates setting precedents across race, sex and generational lines, it's an exciting time for those who are able to vote -- and extremely frustrating for those who can't. Despite voting restrictions, the election provides a wonderful opportunity for parents to connect with their teens and to generate their interest in politics and activism.

Positive Impact Of Election And Politics On Teens

For a teen, actively supporting a candidate is a way to feel aligned with his community through the values that leader represents. A recent study found that civic activism helps young people to feel socially connected to a shared cause and a greater good (Pearce and Larson, 2006). It also teaches a teen how to be an informed voter once they are able to do so. In her recent research in *Gender & Society*, Hava Gordon describes political activism as a way for teens to see themselves as "visible agents of social change." As teens face so many changes in their lives from their developing bodies to their shifting social circles, feeling active politically in their communities may afford them a sense of being effective and making a positive contribution. But without the right to vote, teens may feel excluded from the election and uncertain as to why or how to be engaged in political discussion, despite the fact that politicians are reaching out to teens in pursuit of the coveted youth vote.

Politicians may provide a refreshing alternative to other celebrity role models. While candidates are being measured by their values, intellect and character, other pop icons keep teens focused on issues such as body image and physical appearance. Rather than "skinny" or "hot," the buzzwords for presidential candidates include "change", "experience", and "action".

This election, in particular, is providing an unprecedented diversity of politicians allowing more teens to identify with the candidates. A recent study in the *Journal of Instructional Psychology* found that teens from both urban and rural settings listed politics among their preferred topics for writing, suggesting that politics connect strongly with the developmental changes in adolescents across demographics. This notion fits with what Erick Erickson called "identity vs. role confusion," the process of identifying our morals and social interests as we begin to separate from our parents to become individuals. As such, teens may see politics as an avenue to express their burgeoning identities, to engage their parents' perspectives, or to forge their own concepts of being active in their communities.

Teens Are Targets For Candidates

While many teens model their political views on those held by their parents, a 2004 Gallup Youth Survey showed that teens are beginning to establish their own political identities independent of their parents. This is not surprising given the way that candidates are targeting teens across the political spectrum.

Using technologies that appeal to teens such as texting, blogging and social networking sites, politicians can reach teens and allow them to opt in to the dialogue, giving them to a voice even if they don't have the vote. In fact, Barack Obama's campaign went so far as to hire Chris Hughes, a cofounder of the social networking Mecca, Facebook, as its "online organizing guru." This hire might contribute to the 790,931 supporters Obama has on Facebook. Hillary Clinton has 150,485 supporters, while John McCain has 117,164. Meanwhile, Senator Clinton has reached a younger audience through Students for Hillary, an organization which offers involvement opportunities for students in middle school, high school, college, and graduate school, including passing out fliers and providing information about their candidate to their communities. While John McCain may be less present on the Internet, he has been reaching out to the younger set through late night talk shows such as *The Daily Show* and *David Letterman*. Such outreach is prudent given the turnout in the previous presidential election. The youth vote (ages 18-29) increased by 20% in 2006 compared to 2002, according to CIRCLE (The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement).

"I Can't Vote - Why Should I Care?"

Teens And Parents Talk Politics

With the media bombarding us with images of candidates, teens may be frustrated that they do not have the right to vote. We're asking our teens to recycle their cans, to sit in overcrowded classrooms, to pay the same \$4 a gallon that we are, but we do not afford them the right to vote. Adding insult to injury, voting age is determined by the assumption that "under-eighteens" do not have the capacity to independently make a decision on such a matter, a measure that is, at best, difficult to empirically determine.

It's incumbent upon parents to consider that their vote represents their household and the teens living in it. As the de facto representative, a parent has the opportunity, some might even say obligation, to enlist his teen's political point of view, to find out what issues are important to her, and how she would vote if she could. In fact, there's an impressive list of parents who are embracing their children's political perspectives. According to a recent *New York Times* article, politicians such as Missouri Senator Claire

McCaskill, Kansas Governor Kathleen Sebelius, and Wisconsin Governor James Doyle cite their children as an important influence on which candidate they've endorsed.

Tips For Talking To Your Teen About The Election

They may not have the right to vote, but teens do have the cognitive ability to think critically about politics. While the election may seem like an easier topic to discuss with your teens than sex and drugs, the conversation may become equally charged. Politics can be fodder for strongly opposed opinions on sensitive issues. Here are some ways to invite them into a discussion about politics with justice for all:

Let Your Teen Be The Expert

- Ask your teen what she knows about the election and the candidates.
- Keep in mind your powerful influence as a parent; let your teen ask you about your views rather than imposing your views on your teen.
- Beware! Political dissonance can be uncomfortable for teens and parents alike. Be sure to create some ground rules that create respect for multiple political perspectives at the table.

Family Media Time

- If your teen is showing an interest in politics, tune in together to political talk shows, websites and newspapers.
- Introduce your teen to the concept of "spin" in a fair manner by showing them a few different political perspectives on the same issue.
- Help them understand and question context to become critical consumers of political media.

Hot Button Issues

- Be aware of what issues might be sensitive areas for your teens such as reproductive rights, gay marriage and the war in Iraq.
- Make room for and respect multiple perspectives.
- Don't push your teen to accept your point of view.

Help Them Get Involved

- You're still their #1 role model - demonstrate enthusiasm and interest for politics.
- With parental guidance and consent, teens can make their own campaign commercials for their favorite candidates.
- Teens can support their favorite candidates by volunteering - Barack Obama's campaign allows volunteers as young as 13 to make online calls, and the campaigns of John McCain and Hillary Clinton offer internships.

Get Educated Together

Not sure how the whole election process works? Ask your teen what he's learning in school about the election and US government. You and your teen can learn together at websites like these:

- *Rock the Vote* (www.rockthevote.com/rtv_elections_101.php)
- *Project Vote Smart* (www.votesmart.org/resource_govt101_06.php)
- *PBS* (www.pbs.org/weta/washingtonweek/educators/election.html)
- *Political Action For Teens - Online Resources*
- *CIRCLE provides nonpartisan research and analysis on the election.* www.civicyouth.org/
- *Mobilize.org provides information to empower young people to be politically active.* www.mobilize.org
- *Youth Policy Action Center offers creative ways for under-eighteens to get involved and stay informed.* www.youthpolicyactioncenter.org
- *Scholastic News Online: Election 2008 Offers news, updates and activities for all ages.* <http://teacher.scholastic.com/scholasticnews/indepth/election2008.htm>

As Jana, a sixteen-year-old from Sherman Oaks, stated "Everyone's saying this is the most exciting race in history." You, as a parent, have the opportunity to help your teens to be involved. Whether politics become your teen's extracurricular activity or just a fun dinner discussion, the glitter of this election year is a wonderful way to jumpstart a life of advocacy and activism.

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Bio

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