

REVERE THE RIGHT TO VOTE

BY LACEY B. HOYER

In less than two months the 2004 Presidential election will be upon us. Two more months of wearying mud-flinging and rhetorical promises stand between then and now. I only hope I can make it.

I can't even glance at a newspaper or turn on the television without being bombarded by "Cheney Attacks Kerry," "Kerry Berates Bush," "Republicans Concoct Scathing Rumors About Democrats," "Democrats Howl Like Unhappy Banshees About Cheney's Attack On Kerry," and so on and so forth.

My God. What is this — adult politics or toddler temper tantrums?

In front of my eyes politics, and the intelligent debates and platforms that should accompany politicians, have devolved into mindless, testosterone-charged sporting events. The purported leader of our country and his arch-rival seem to be standing in the middle of a field screaming trash-talk at each other and just barely refraining from blows. Meanwhile, American citizens line the field and pack the stands, throwing garbage and attacking their opponent's supporters. Eventually all structure will collapse and everyone will be reduced to violence and swear words.

Well, so it goes.

In a perfect world, democracy would stand strong and people wouldn't be part of political parties — they would choose their candidates for the values and issues each held important. Unfortunately, our world is far from perfect, more middling to bad than anything else. Instead of even having the slightest clue about what a politician's platforms are, many citizens put themselves into party categories and stick there like glue. I know certain Republicans who don't approve of what Bush is doing with Iraq or the economy or abortion. But they still vote for him because he is "on their side," which means that because they are all Republicans, they must band together, whether they agree with his policies or not.

This is not democracy, this is not what America is all about! Democracy, as you may well know, is a form of government in which the people hold the power and exercise that power through a system of representation and voting. (Democracy is also defined as having an absence of hereditary and arbitrary class distinctions or privileges, but don't tell that to the President. It would break his little, corporate heart.)

The soul of this country is rooted in democracy, and democracy is rooted in the ability of the people to elect their candidates based on policies and to "fire" leaders who aren't doing their jobs. However, democracy seems to be floundering. Many people aren't voting for leaders based on policies, but instead voting for whoever happens to be on their team — good or bad. And, as the brick that broke democracy's back, a large number of Americans aren't voting at all.

Before I tell you why voting is important, let me tell you a little tale about the history of our government system.

The Roman Empire was the first government to employ democracy, back around 509 BC. After a revolution against a monarchical government, a republic was set up, with a senate and all sorts of other positions for leaders to hold. The goal of this was that no one person could have too much power.

However, the Roman Republic was never really a democracy, because there was a "client system" in place. A "client" was a loyal supporter of a powerful Roman family. In return, the patron of the client could reward or punish him. Clients were required to support that family in everything they did, especially

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WHO WILL MAKE
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OREGON WOMEN!

UNMARRIED WOMEN COMPRISE THE LARGEST GROUP OF UNREGISTERED AND NONVOTING CITIZENS IN THE UNITED STATES

ACCORDING TO U.S. CENSUS DATA A NATIONWIDE SURVEY

IF UNMARRIED WOMEN VOTED AT THE SAME RATE AS MARRIED WOMEN, OVER 6 MILLION MORE VOTERS WOULD HAVE GONE TO THE POLLS IN 2000.

22 MILLION UNMARRIED WOMEN HAVE THE POWER TO CHANGE THE MOST ABOUT: HEALTH CARE, EDUCATION AND THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE WHETHER OR NOT TO HAVE CHILDREN.

22 MILLION UNMARRIED WOMEN WHO WERE ELIGIBLE TO VOTE DID NOT VOTE IN THE 2000 ELECTION.

NATALIE TURNER (WWW.OREGONWOMENVOTE.COM)

when they ran for political offices. At elections, it is thought that people voted exclusively along family loyalty lines.

Eventually, Rome set up a standing military and traveled far and wide to expand their empire. Because the politicians were so involved with the swelling empire, they neglected to tend to the food shortages, homelessness and other sorts of chaos that abounded in Rome. Eventually, the senate stopped running elections, an emperor took absolute control and demo-

cracy was no more — until the 1700s, when America tried it on for size.

Democracy has its perks. Believe me, there is nothing I like more than my right to free speech, the authority to practice any religion and to print these words in the press. I appreciate that I would enjoy the right to a speedy and fair trial, should I ever have to have a trial, and I love that I cannot be forced into involuntary servitude.

But my absolute favorite part of living in this democratic nation is simple. I relish and revere my right to vote.

When November comes around, I appreciate the fact that I have the right to cast my ballot. And cast it I will, with fervor.

But apparently, there are a number of citizens, both men and women, in this country who won't follow suit.

According to a U.S. Census Bureau report on voting and registration in the 2000 Presidential election, 186 million people were eligible to vote (meaning they were older than 18 and citizens of the United States) but only 130 million were registered. Of those 130 million, only 111 million voted.

It gets worse.

In 2002, during the Congressional elections, of the 193 million people eligible to vote, only 128 million voted. Forty-six percent of the eligible U.S. population votes. Less than half.

When reading statistics like these, I wonder what people are talking about when they extol themselves as "patriotic" citizens? How, exactly, are nonvoting citizens "patriotic" when they aren't even performing the single, most-important duty of their citizenship?

By voting, you are hiring or firing elected leaders who are supposed to be working for you. You can cancel out the vote of someone you don't agree with and actively make the world a better place for you or your children or grandchildren or whoever will be shouldering the brunt of policy decisions.

If people who are capable of voting don't vote, they are allowing someone else to make decisions for them. Essentially, they are letting the minority rule.

What Americans need to do is extract themselves from political parties and base their votes on issues that are important to them. If you don't want the country to go to war, vote for the guy least likely to go to war. If you want cheaper health care, then by all means vote for the guy most inclined to create it.

If you don't believe in one issue or another, then make the intelligent choice and vote for the corresponding politician. Don't make your decisions as if you are supporting a sports team. Otherwise, you are simply giving politicians more power to ignore the people. By not voting, you are allowing politicians to choose a dictator who makes decisions that benefit him and his cronies.

I won't cry doomsday and go on about how America's democratic government is crumbling, but I do know that people need to become more involved and concerned with how the government is run.

This is your country. If you want to be patriotic or support the troops currently fighting overseas, then appreciate the freedoms available to you. Vote. Vote for what's important to you and vote for the enduring power of our democratic nation.

Lacey Hoyer spent the past summer as an intern at the Daily Astorian, from which her article is reprinted. She and her twin sister Megan are born and bred Astorians, daughters of Teresa and Kerry Hoyer. Lacey and Jasper Devereaux (also a lifelong Astorian, son of Sam Devereaux and Elizabeth Nikkila) were married this summer. She is a senior at the University of Oregon and will graduate with a degree in journalism.

1 MILLION BLACK VOTES DIDN'T COUNT IN 2000

BY GREG PALAST

In the 2000 election 1.9 million Americans cast ballots that no one counted. "Spoiled votes" is the technical term. The pile of ballots left to rot has a distinctly dark hue: About one million of them, half of the rejected ballots, were cast by African Americans although black voters make up only 12% of the electorate.

This year it could get worse.

These ugly racial statistics are hidden away in the mathematical thickets of the appendices to official reports coming out of the investigation of ballot-box monkey business in Florida from the last go-round.

How do you spoil two million ballots? Not by leaving them out of the fridge too long. A stray mark, a jammed machine, a punch card punched twice will do it. It's easy to lose your vote, especially when some politicians want your vote lost.

While investigating the 2000 ballot count in Florida for BBC television, I saw firsthand how the spoilage game was played — with black voters the predetermined losers.

Florida's Gadsden County has the highest percentage of black voters in the state — and the highest spoilage rate. One in eight votes cast there in 2000 was never counted. Many voters wrote in "Al Gore." Optical reading machines rejected them because "Al" is a "stray mark."

By contrast, in neighboring Tallahassee, the capital, vote spoilage was nearly zip; every vote counted. The difference? In Tallahassee's white-majority county, voters placed their ballots directly into optical scanners. If they added a stray mark, they received another ballot with instructions to correct it.

In other words, in the white county, make a mistake and get another ballot; in the black county, make a mistake, your ballot is tossed.

The U.S. Civil Rights Commission looked into the smelly pile of spoiled ballots and concluded that, of the 179,855 ballots invalidated by Florida officials, 53% were cast by black voters. In Florida, a black citizen was 10 times more likely to have a vote rejected as a white voter.

But let's not get smug about Florida's Jim Crow spoilage rate. Civil Rights Commissioner Christopher Edley, dean of Boalt Hall School of Law at UC Berkeley, took the Florida study

nationwide. His team discovered the uncomfortable fact that Florida is typical of the nation.

Philip Klinkner, the statistician working on the Edley investigations, concluded, "It appears that about half of all ballots spoiled in the USA — about one million votes — were cast by nonwhite voters.

This "no count," as the Civil Rights Commission calls it, is no accident. In Florida, for example, I discovered that technicians had warned Governor Jeb Bush's office well in advance of November 2000 of the racial bend in the vote-count procedures.

Herein lies the problem. An apartheid vote-counting system is far from politically neutral. Given that more than 90% of the black electorate votes Democratic, had all the "spoiled" votes been tallied, Gore would have taken Florida in a walk, not to mention fattening his popular vote total nationwide. It is not surprising that the First Brother's team, informed of impending rejection of black ballots, looked away and whistled.

The ballot-box blackout is not the monopoly of one party. Cook County, Illinois, has one of the country's worst spoilage rates. That's not surprising. Boss Daley's Democratic

machine, now his son's, survives by systematic disenfranchisement of Chicago's black vote.

How can we fix it? First, let's shed the convenient excuses for vote spoilage, such as a lack of voter education. One television network stated as fact that Florida's black voters, newly registered and lacking education, had difficulty with their ballots. In other words, blacks are too dumb to vote.

This convenient racist excuse is dead wrong. After that disaster in Gadsden, Florida, public outcry forced the government to change that black county's procedures to match that of white counties. The result: near zero spoilage in the 2002 election. Ballot design, machines and procedure, says statistician Klinkner, control spoilage.

In other words, the vote counters, not the voters, are to blame. Politicians who choose the type of ballot and the method of counting have long fine-tuned the spoilage rate to their liking.

It is about to get worse. The ill-named "Help America Vote Act," signed by President George W. Bush in 2002, is pushing computerization of the ballot box.


California decertified some of Diebold Corporation's digital ballot boxes in response to fears that hackers could pick our next President. But the known danger of black-box voting is that computers, even with their software secure, are vulnerable to low-the spoilage games: polls opening late, locked-in votes, votes lost in the ether.

And once again, the history of computer-voting glitches has a decidedly racial bias. Florida's Broward County grandly shifted to touch-screen voting in 2002. In white precincts, all seemed to go well. In black precincts, hundreds of African Americans showed up at the polls with machines down and votes that simply disappeared.

Going digital won't fix the problem. Canada and Sweden vote on paper ballots with little spoilage and without suspicious counts.

In America, a simple fix based on paper balloting is resisted because, unfortunately, too many politicians who understand the racial bias in the vote-spoilage game are its beneficiaries, with little incentive to find those missing one million black voters' ballots.

Greg Palast is a BBC investigative reporter and writes for the UK Guardian newspapers and is the author of *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy*. He wrote this article for the *San Francisco Chronicle*.



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