

Rockers

'Pick up a hammer' politics

What do you do when half of America doesn't vote – and too many of those folks are young voters?

It used to be – not much. Sure, someone would pass out some recycling literature to you at a concert. There might be a lonely voter registration table or two. Or sometimes, there would be an impassioned plea from the stage – but frankly, it was pretty hard to hear other than "(Insert politician's name) sucks!"



Now I am not here to tell you that a cherubic, young generation of idealistic activists are rising up to lead America to the promised land. Not quite. But there are some folks who have had it and aim to turn things around. They are not waiting for permission or for a rule book. They are building their own structure as they go, rather than waiting for directions from above.

Informed by the barnstorming style of Habitat for Humanity rather the fund-raising style of Ron Wyden and the DNC, breaking ground requires no mission statement or long-term commitment – people just work together on one project and see how they like it. If it works, they rinse and repeat. If it doesn't, they move on down the road. Fuzzy projects are frowned upon, practical efforts honored. Does this register a voter? Does it build my skills? Does it build real community? Otherwise, forget about it.

In a nutshell, call this approach "pick up a hammer" politics.

So where's the inspiration for this? It comes mainly from the perspiration and the shoulders you rub up against in the work. It comes from honoring the foot soldiers, not the general. It's rooted in the Public Enemy/Chuck D classic: "Don't Believe The Hype."

Hip-hop writer Jeff Chang wisely points out how today's generation needs to first be convinced that political action of any kind, especially voting, is even *remotely* important. Can you prove that anything can change according to the rules that exist? Can you get young people excited in a world where 4,000 advertising images are pushed in their faces everyday? Selling easy answers, which is what most politicians do, is a tough sell in this environment.

Why should this generation give a hoot? Born in the Reagan era, bred under Bush and then undercoated on the final assembly line with a Clinton presidency stained by blue dresses and school uniforms – no risk of hero worship in the average 18- to 25-year-old, that's for sure. So, don't believe the hype. Believe what *you* can see. Believe what *you* can do, with *your* friends.

The Oregon Bus Project is a homegrown example of what this new sensibility, and a little door-knocking, can do. Happily, the Bus Project is not the only bright spot – a new book called *How To Get Stupid White Men Out of Office* documents great stories of young people in action all over the country. And groups like IndyVoter.org are training youth organizers to cook up more recipes for success.

There's a lot for us all to learn here. This crew isn't spending any energy moaning about Kerry's shortfalls – because they don't look to him for most of the answers. Hell, he's just step No. 1 in building a new political architecture – tearing down the House of Bush. (Note to disappointed Clinton fans from 1992 now expecting big things from Kerry: Try humming the Who's "We Won't Get Fooled Again" for emotional protection.)

Young activists aren't the only ones taking matters into their own hands. The artists and bands have had it too – they are organizing themselves in ways never seen before. An exciting new collaborative, called Air Traffic Control, is spearheading new efforts to connect progressive grassroots organizing and music fans more effectively.

So are you ready to rock? RockTheVote.com, PunkVoter.com, MusicForAmerica.org and IndyVoter.org are three great places to start plugging in.

Or you could make the scene at www.hiphopconvention.org where some serious organizing is going down in June. To be a delegate, you need to have registered 50 voters before the event. So absolutely no posers are allowed at the convention – ya gotta be real. That certainly applies to me, even though I've been greeting folks for years with "Yo" because I spent some formative years in Philly. So from this post-punk poser to Billy, Adrienne, Baye and crew, all I can say is rock on.

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