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18 to 24s -- unnoticeable at the polls

- C.W. Nevius

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Don't you love it when the smart guys -
- the smug ones who have it all figured
out and can't wait to tell you -- get it all
wrong?

They certainly did in this election. As
the final days wound down, it was
nearly impossible to escape some deep
thinker eager to explain why the youth
vote was going to change this election.

Unfortunately, they were wrong. Even worse, I was among them.

In fairness, I was in good company. It wasn't just political pundits sounding off. On the eve of the election, Democratic vice presidential candidate John Edwards gave a speech in which he said, "If you drive by the polling places and there are long, long lines, and those lines are filled with young people, I guarantee that John Kerry will be president of the United States."

Or not.

What happened? It is a little confusing. As Michael Fleischer of the University of Maryland's Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement said, "I've seen headlines that said, 'Youth Vote Fizzles,' and I've seen headlines that say, 'Enthusiasm Skyrockets.' "

In simplest terms, both were right.

Participation among the nation's 40 million 18- to 29-year-olds was up --

to 20 million, compared with 16.2 million in 2000. But so was voting across the board. With a total voter turnout greater than 120 million, the much ballyhooed youth voters turned out to be 1 out of 10, which is just about exactly the percentage they were four years ago.

But wait, it gets worse. In July 2003, the U. S. Census Bureau estimated there were roughly 29 million Americans between 18 and 24. This was supposed to be the mother lode of youth votes, the P. Diddy brigade that was going to march straight from Eminem's "Mosh" video to the voting booth.

They didn't.

According to a spokesman for **Edison Media Research**, which performed the exit polls, that group represented 9 percent of the total, or about 10.8 million votes. So only a few more than 1 out of 3 of them bothered to click off MTV and vote.



At Scott MacDougall's American government class at Diablo Valley College this week, some students were kicking themselves. As one student put it, the group "flaked out" on the election.

"We are the offspring of the generation that got the vote" at age 18, lamented Julia Contreras of Concord. "Now we (act like we) don't care."

Don't take it so hard, Julia. Only about half of us in that first group of 18-year-old voters showed up in 1972, when Congress lowered the voting age to 18 from 21. And we probably had some of the same excuses MacDougall's students offered: The polling places were sooooo far away. The candidates were uninspiring. When one student suggested that there should be some kind of payoff for voting -- a break on college tuition for example -- MacDougall had to break in.

"Are you under the impression that these (political campaign) people want you to vote?" he asked. "They would much rather that you didn't."

To be honest, it isn't fair to pick on MacDougall's students. Most of them voted, and they certainly seemed engaged. One student said she grew so incensed watching President Bush's victory speech that "I started yelling at the TV."

But, like Donica Gorman of Martinez, they also have friends who were just too "lazy to get up and go to the church or wherever the polling place was."

Too bad. They could have been important. If the 18-24s had even gotten up to 50 percent participation it would have meant nearly 4 million more votes in an election decided by 3.5 million.

What would get out them out of bed? Well, if MacDougall's class was any indication, the Howard Deaniacs live.

"P. Diddy can say all he wants," said Travis Garcia of San Leandro, "but it is nothing about what matters to kids. Howard Dean was talking about gay marriage and legalizing marijuana -- youth issues."

Yeah, well, I wouldn't want you to hold your breath waiting for a debate on those topics, Travis. They might have been a big part of what lost this election.

If there was anything that came through from the class, it is that these 18-24s want to be inspired. They want passion. They want a candidate who fires them up. Of course, some of them also want a hot latte while they vote.

But the point is, unlike a lot of the country, they didn't see the two presidential candidates as vastly different. They were just two old guys saying the same things over and over. Maybe it has always been this way, but it can now definitively be said that it takes more than T-shirts and slogans to mobilize this group.

And the real question is: What will this mean to young voters next time?

"I'm more fired up than ever," Contreras said.

That's great. But some must feel like Gorman's friend Stephanie, who glumly told her, "I was told if I voted, I could make a difference. It didn't. "

There's your irony. Suppose the greatest youth vote push in history ended up putting them off elections for good?

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