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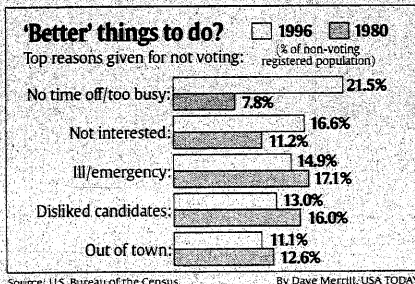
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You get what you don't vote for

By DeWayne Wickham

PHILADELPHIA — The most important issue facing the nation in this year's presidential election isn't likely to get much attention from the Republicans assembled here to officially make George W. Bush their standard-bearer. Nor will it be a major topic of discussion Aug. 14, when Democrats gather in Los Angeles to bestow their party's mantle upon Al Gore.

Between now and Election Day, both men will talk a lot about what they think ails this nation. They will speak of Social Security and public education. They'll discuss the threat of rogue nations and the dilemma of how best to use the budget surplus to ensure that "no one is left behind" during the current economic boom. Each will offer up prescriptions for a cure, but neither will come close to diagnosing the real threat to the health of our democracy: the declining percentage of people who vote in national elections.

In 1900, also a year in which the Republican convention was held in Philadelphia, 73.2% of the eligible voters cast ballots in the contest that pitted William McKinley against Williams Jennings Bryan. Four years ago, when Bill Clinton and Bob Dole squared off, that number slipped to 49.08%.

Over the past 100 years — a time during which this country went from being a sleeping giant to the world's reigning superpower — the great democratic experiment launched in this City of Brotherly Love has shown serious signs of disrepair. Our government "of the people" is perilously close to becoming one that is fashioned by an alarmingly small percentage of voters.

Fringe voting, fringe results

No democracy can long survive as a truly egalitarian state if this drop in voter participation goes unchecked. The smaller the turnout in presidential elections, the more likely the winner will be hostage to the narrow-minded ideas of those who inhabit the ideological fringes of our society.

But instead of sounding the alarm, Bush and Gore have remained quiet.

Turning this situation around ought to be a top goal of anyone who runs for the presidency — and who seeks to lead this nation with "the consent of the governed." But so far Bush and Gore have been more interested in exciting their natural followers — the party faithful — and courting middle-of-the-road voters, than in rousing non-voters from their slumber.

More than a fifth of registered voters who didn't cast ballots in the last presidential election said they either did not get time off to vote or were just too busy. Another 17% just weren't interested in the outcome.

Political indifference is a deadly hallucinogen. It dulls the minds of people who stay away from the voting booth — and paves the way for those who want to impose undemocratic ideas upon the rest of us.

Take away reason for not voting

To keep this from happening, federal elections should be made national holidays. Giving people the day off to vote increases the possibility that more will do so. There's a good chance that interest in the outcome of presidential and congressional elections might spike upward if people aren't forced to choose between casting a ballot and earning a day's pay.

But don't expect to see a big push for this idea at either the Republican or Democratic conventions. New voters, especially those who are not herded into a polling booth by one party or the other, are an unpredictable lot. They're not easily assessed by pollsters or corralled by political operatives.

And the last thing the men who seek to lead our great democracy want to encounter on Election Day is an unpredictable voter.

DeWayne Wickham writes weekly for USA TODAY.

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