

Title:

18 In '08 Gets My Vote

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Summary:

On October 1, I had the privilege to come to Rutgers to see a screening of 18 in '08, a documentary produced by David Burstein, a Haverford College freshman. The documentary's purpose: to get out the youth (18 to 24 year-old) vote and tell politicians how to make it happen.

Burstein and friends interviewed over 60 elected and former office-holders: Congressmen, Senators, Governors, mayors, state legislations and Presidential candidates, as well as activists, campus leaders...

Keywords:

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Article Body:

On October 1, I had the privilege to come to Rutgers to see a screening of 18 in '08, a documentary produced by David Burstein, a Haverford College freshman. The documentary's purpose: to get out the youth (18 to 24 year-old) vote and tell politicians how to make it happen.

Burstein and friends interviewed over 60 elected and former office-holders: Congressmen, Senators, Governors, mayors, state legislations and Presidential candidates, as well as activists, campus leaders, journalists and political consultants – but thankfully, only one celebrity – Richard Dreyfuss. If Burstein, et al. had to include a celebrity, Dreyfuss was an excellent choice; in Mr. Holland's Opus, he played a music teacher beloved by more than two generations of high school students.

18 in '08 is not a "Rock the Vote" appeal to youth. It includes the words of many current students and recent graduates of varied political persuasions; that makes it more real-life to college audiences than celebrity appeals. 18 in '08 does an excellent job of explaining the obstacles to youth voting, which included:

- The right to vote is under-appreciated and taken for granted. Passed by

Congress, the 18-year-old vote was signed into law by President Nixon in 1971. It was, oddly enough, a reaction to young people's complaints that if they were old enough to be drafted into the military service, they were old enough to vote.

- Politics offers little in the way of immediate gratification; you have to be involved or hold public office for a long time before you can achieve tangible accomplishments.
- Recent high school graduates, college students and recent college graduates are experiencing dramatic changes in their lives, such as a change in schools or move from school to work, so they lack the time to get involved or become more informed about political issues.
- Hassles in the absentee ballot process. College students and military personnel stationed far from home are not given clear information or direction on how to register to vote, or complete their ballot.
- Candidates talk down to young voters, or appear disinterested in "mainstream" issues such as terrorism, foreign affairs and affordable health care; younger voters are just as interested in these issues as their parents are.
- Young people do not believe that politicians are "interested" in them as voters, or as a voting bloc; some feel the two major parties ignore them, so therefore, an appeal to register by one party or the other means nothing.

Most amazing, this short (15-20 minute) documentary was directed and produced by a 16 year old; he and his friends believed strongly enough in the right to vote to contact and collect all of these interviews before they were old enough to vote. Burstein took a year off between high school and college to complete the project; it's a major sacrifice to delay personal life plans for personal convictions.

The hosts at Rutgers' Eagleton Institute of Politics had gathered some useful facts about the youth vote in the 2004 Presidential Election to complement Burstein's presentation. Most interesting was that 87 percent of students, registered voters, successfully cast a ballot on Election Day, while 13 percent tried to vote but were unable to or did not attempt to vote at all.

On a more positive note, 63 percent of students said they voted because they believed it was their duty as citizens. I hope this number increases; according to Young Voter Strategies, a non-partisan project at the George Washington University, potential Millennial Voters, ages 18-38 will become one-third of the

U.S. electorate by 2015. It seems contradictory for a generation known to resist authority (positively and negatively) and challenge convention to leave the decision about 'who governs' to their elders.

I don't know if this was one of Burstein's intentions, but 18 in '08 made me realize that a career in politics progresses as swiftly as other paths. Elected officials and campaigns are chock full of activists, managers, researchers and opinion leaders under 30, especially in leadership positions.

Young elected leaders also have a history of advancement to higher office. According to my Rutgers' hosts, of the 19 men who served as President of the United States during the twentieth century, 12 held their first elective office at age 35 or younger. The same is true for 57 of the 100 men and women in the U.S. Senate in 2003 as well as 215 of the 435 members of the U.S. House and 25 of the 50 governors holding office that year.

Taking those numbers to heart, politics is a young person's game. That makes it more surprising that candidates have such a difficult time attracting more enthusiasm from young people; they have staff more than capable of designing the right message.

Watch 18 in '08; you'll see this is a challenge for political leaders of all persuasions; candidates have more control over an apathetic electorate than an active one, but all of the office holders who appeared in 18 in '08 preferred an electorate that was active and engaged. Party and ideology didn't matter. Everyone felt the same.

If you're a parent, order a CD of the film at the 18 in '08 website (the url is 18in08 dot com). Watch it with your young voters. You won't need to persuade them to register to vote. They'll do it on their own accord.