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The Virgin Vote: How Young Americans Made Democracy Social, Politics Personal, and Voting Popular in the Nineteenth Century

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The years from 1840 to 1890 constituted a ‘golden age’ of turn out in American elections. Although only white men were assured of their votes, this period saw the highest rate of political participation among the eligible electorate, with roughly 70–80 per cent of voters casting ballots in Presidential elections; as compared to today’s figure of about 55 per cent.

The atmosphere on election day was also very different then. Party bosses hosted hog roasts and plied potential voters with whiskey and beer. Before 1884, when America introduced the so-called ‘Australian System’, there was no such thing as the secret ballot. People knew exactly whom their neighbours were voting for and frequently took offense at their choices. During the 1840s and 1850s, 89 people were killed trying to cast their vote during election day riots. Steeped in violence, and catering to a limited electorate of white men, this was politics that Donald Trump can only dream of.

Nonetheless, Americans who were sober enough to vote, and had escaped the intimidation of political rivals, had done something of real significance. The United States was one of the few countries in the western world with universal white male suffrage during the mid to late 19th century, and, not surprisingly, voting held an important place in the culture at large. *The Virgin Vote* explores the often-neglected role of young people in the political life of this period, and the part they played in its demise at the turn of the century.

Grinspan argues that a voting age of 21 didn’t stop adolescents, and even children, from taking a keen interest in politics. During their first years at school, Americans brought their parents’ party loyalties into the classroom. A chorus of ‘Democrats eat dead rats’ caught on in schools throughout the South and Midwest in the 1840s whilst kids traded political gossip during class. One journalist from the *Newark Evening News* called the ‘vast majority of children’ ‘violent little partisans’ (p. 24). In their mid to late teens, young peoples’ passion for politics only grew stronger. Some attended political rallies and attempted to sway undecided voters; others argued with their peers about whether the Whigs or Democrats were more anti-slavery.

According to Grinspan, even turning 21 was no guarantee of enfranchisement. Voters often had to convince

pollsters that they were old enough to vote. Many Americans had only the vaguest idea of their own age, and those that were sure struggled to prove it. One young voter had to bring in a witness to vouch that his mother had been pregnant 21 years earlier. Another was made to give an account of his mother's sex life whilst she was working as a prostitute to prove to judges when he was conceived. These were just some of the lengths young Americans would go to participate in the political process. Politics consumed them, and absorbed their waking hours. The question Grinspan asks is why?

He contends that politics provided young people a way to transition into the adult world. Political participation was a sign of maturity and, by casting their first ballot, a 'virgin voter' could enjoy the status and excitement that accompanied political life. This was particularly important during the period the book grapples with. Technological developments, like the steam train and telegraph, connected previously unimaginable distances, creating an interconnected market economy in place of isolated states of subsistence farmers. These changes enabled Americans to become more mobile, and, after 1840, many left their home states; an opportunity few of their parents had shared. At the same time, the new economy obliterated old forms of labour. Rather than working within a tightknit rural community, young people increasingly looked for opportunities to hire their labour out for wages, alongside other factory workers. Throughout the period, the population quadrupled, whilst more immigrants entered the United States than had lived in the entire nation before 1840.

In this social context, Grinspan argues that young Americans felt a creeping sense of insecurity and angst; akin to the sense of status anxiety we might associate with millennials today. Gripped by a faith in progress, yet frequently stifled by a lack of meaningful opportunities, young Americans longed to imbue their lives with purpose. Promoting a political cause offered these groups a sense that they might be contributing to the common good – and the possibility that they could achieve a degree of social status and recognition. Furthermore, partisan loyalty provided them with a pre-packaged external identity in an ever-changing society with few opportunities for self-expression.

For young American men, political participation furnished them with a masculine identity; a sense of 'manhood' that not only distinguished them from women but also children, and their own, younger selves. Grinspan reveals how young men would dress up and strut around the election booth on their first day of voting, carefully trimming new goatees in a performance of their masculinity. Political language itself was highly gendered. Voters and campaigners chose the metaphor of the virgin vote because it 'spoke to a combination of commencement and commitment, excitement and danger, youth and maturity, that casting a vote and sexual intimation had in common' (p. 67). Grinspan describes the frustration many women felt being denied this identity, and the lengths they went to influence their husband's vote. But, also the pride they took in their partner taking part in a right of passage for American men.

As well furnishing boys with a newfound masculinity, Grinspan argues that young Americans took an interest in politics to improve their social life. Rallies and campaign barbeques gave both men and women the opportunity to find love, and an occasion to drink and socialise. 'Crafty campaigners' recognised this fact, and promised to ' "wifeless young voters" that "all the handsome and intelligent young ladies" supported their party' (p. 44). Amid the rootlessness of 19th-century America, the main parties hosted events, where like-minded people might be found with similar convictions and beliefs.

Whilst treating American youth as serious political actors, Grinspan doesn't make these adolescents more earnest than they were. He contends that young people were as motivated by the excitement and sociability of political life, as much as by their ideological convictions. As a consequence of his focus on sources where politics and personal life intersected – like diaries – Grinspan's characters appear fully rounded: adolescents might have taken an interest in politics, but often through indirect means and with broader ends in mind. At a time when a lot of politics is played out on social media, this book asks provocative questions about the way we use politics to sure up parts of our personal identities.

Without labouring his argument, Grinspan makes a convincing case by stacking up insightful and

entertaining stories. Despite the brevity of the book, he rarely over-generalises, scattering rich anecdotes that are tied together with convincing and provocative conclusions. Grinspan's book straddles that widening gulf between specialist and general readers, and I can imagine it will inspire a number of students to look deeply into 19th-century democracy and youth culture. In particular, the author brilliantly portrays the subtle and multi-faceted ways people related to the political process in their everyday lives. The book is careful to let its sources speak for themselves: snippets of conversation and excerpts from letters help us understand what politics meant to young people, as they defined it in their own words. It also asks new and interesting questions about the role of young people in politics, and the discourse of youth in political culture more generally.

Perhaps as a result of his focus on storytelling, Grinspan sometimes loses sight of larger trends that would provide a broader view of the period. Although his focus on the years 1840–1900 is justified, it would be useful to get a sense of how young peoples' experiences of politics changed even in this period. The Civil War, for example, surely shaped how young people engaged in politics, and how ideas associated with youth featured in political discourse. However, Grinspan clearly sets out to tell individual stories, rather than making these broader analytical points, and certainly succeeds on his own terms.

Grinspan's final chapter focuses on more traditional 'political' sources, shifting our attention from individual voters to the parties themselves. Rather than asking why young people gravitated towards politics, here, Grinspan seeks to understand what politicians wanted from them. The short answer was the vote. Before 1840, he explains that few politicians took the presence of young people seriously. They were expected to defer to their elders' experience, and were not pandered to as a separate section of the electorate.

This all changed with the election of 1840. The Whigs launched their 'log cabin campaign' that saw political mastermind, Horace Greeley, blame the Democrats for stifling young people with a recession in the late 1830s. Similarly, before the election of 1844, Democrats appropriated the slogan 'Young America', promising to annex new territory in Oregon and California to provide homesteads for restless youths. In 1860, the Republicans funnelled aspiring young politicos into militaristic marching bands called 'Wide Awakes' to campaign for Lincoln. In each of these elections, politicians not only courted first time voters but appropriated the language of youth, with all its vigour and energy, in order to improve their party's image. More often than not, parties carefully cultivated their appeal to young people after losing an election, hoping a new generation of voters would return them to government next time.

In his conclusion, Grinspan details a dramatic decline in young Americans' interest in politics at the turn of the century, with turnout among first time voters falling by more than 50 per cent from 1888 to 1924 (p. 131). Grinspan cites two 'simultaneous revolutions' as accounting for this fall: the first among politicians and the second among voters (p. 131). With capitalism dominating late 19th-century life, commercial elites took more interest in controlling the political process and began to crowd out working-class men who had taken such an active role in the mid-19th century. Desperately reaching out to the youth vote through large centralised organisations, the main parties repelled young voters with their stale electioneering. At the same time, reforms like the Australian Ballot System, initiated in 1887, further bureaucratised political culture.

The second revolution was the invention of 'adolescence'. In the mid-19th century, people were identified as either 'children' or 'adults'. During their late-teens and early 20s, young men strove to become the latter, with no transitional identity to keep them grounded. By contrast, at the turn of the century, psychologists like G. Stanley Hall increasingly classified 'adolescence' as its own phase of development. Wider society, too, began to cater to this age group, eventually contributing to the emergence of youth culture. With institutions and norms tailored to the 'adolescent', young people developed interests besides politics, and preferred to mix with their peer group than the impersonal world of party machines. Grinspan also draws our attention to a fundamental irony in how the main parties responded, which might serve as a warning to politicians today: the harder political campaigners tried to reach out to young people, the more dull and hackneyed their message became.

It is, at times, frustrating that Grinspan confines these fascinating observations to a brief conclusion since they warrant further reflection. Although politics, in some senses, became more professionalised in this period, in other ways, it was more exciting and attractive to young people. Parts of the Progressive movements, in particular, do not fit easily with Grinspan's picture, and surely offered new avenues for young people's political enthusiasm. For example, the Settlement Movement inspired scores of young middle class women to live in communal housing projects, in an attempt to eradicate inner city poverty. Although not engaged in elections, these women were – in unprecedented ways – involved in politics; and, like many of Grinspan's mid-19th-century partisans, they sought 'friendship, livelihood, contact with the real world'.(1) This story clearly relates more to young people losing interest in electoral politics rather than political culture per se.

Furthermore, although Grinspan claims that young people 'led the way', he acknowledges that there was a wider decline in turnout during this period among the population at large (p. 131). This fact makes his thesis about the role of an emerging 'adolescent' identity less convincing, since it implies that young people were conforming to a wider trend, which extended across age groups. Although his earlier explanations are powerful, in this later period, the author appears to be fitting statistical trends a little too neatly onto a wider social backdrop, due to lack of space in the conclusion. His observations – put down in gripping prose – are fascinating and provocative. My only complaint is that there isn't a second volume in which to expand on them.

Notes

1. Kathryn Sklar, 'Hull House as a community of women reformers in the 1890s', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 10 (1985), 657–77.Back to (1)

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