

Nat Hentoff: The still missing: Millions of young voters

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When Colin Powell declared his support of Barack Obama on NBC TV's "Meet the Press," part of his explanation was: "I think Senator Obama has reached the feelings of the young people of America."

But which young people have significantly raised the percentage of Americans from 18 to 29 who are actively exercising this vital function of citizenship? Who's missing?

On Super Tuesday (Feb. 5) — when 24 states held primaries or caucuses — 79 percent of the young voters that day had attended some college, thereby demonstrating that a disproportionate percentage of other eligible young voters had stayed away. This low participation of young Americans who did not attend college underlines the failure of our school system to prepare these students for citizenship.

When I was a kid in school long ago, there were civics classes showing us — through vivid examples in our history — how voters can help determine much of what happens in our daily lives, and especially in times of national crisis, by who they choose to represent them.

That's how many of us back then gained a very personal interest both in our history and the battlefields of current events.

Now, a lamentable effect of the No Child Left Behind Act is that civics classes are absent in many schools that feel bound to keep testing and retesting on subjects whose students' scores determine the school's status, or even its continued existence.

A basic source of information on how well students are learning how to be an organic, lifelong part of discovering why we are the oldest free nation on the globe, despite murderous threats from abroad and even a terribly costly Civil War, is Circle: The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University in Medford, Mass. Its director, Peter Levine, makes a crucial point overlooked in our celebration of the rising number of young voters without our realizing that they are disproportionately college-educated.

Says Levine: "Campaigns and interest groups mobilize youth on college campuses, but it's harder to reach non-college youth. ...

Research shows that schools can boost young people's participation by providing ... social studies classes, service opportunities, discussions of current events and other activities." But, a Circle report adds, school systems around the nation provide more opportunities to learn about, and then participate, in our constitutional system of self-government "to higher income students, white students and academically successful students." Once, in Miami, I was asked to speak to a large number of high school students in connection with my book "Living the Bill of Rights." Before I went on stage, two teachers told me not to be disappointed at the youngsters' lack of interest because "all they care about are music and clothes." After an hour of telling them stories about how we Americans won and then fought to preserve our First Amendment rights and the right of blacks and women to vote, as well as the essential checks and balances in our government to keep us free citizens, I got a standing ovation. Not because I was so eloquent but because these youngsters had discovered America.

Where we are now is described in a recent Circle Working Paper by two very concerned educators and researchers at Mills College in Oakland, Calif. — Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh of that school's Civic Engagement Research Group: They found, says Circle, that "students in higher-income districts are up to twice as likely as those from average-income districts to learn how laws are made and how Congress works, for instance. ...

African-American students are less likely than white students to have civic-focused government classes and current-events discussions." There is much more research at Circle and at Mills College documenting how "schools are exacerbating inequality in voting when they could be narrowing the gap." The solution is elementary, says Joseph Kahne. Since school systems below college "reach a broader section of youth than colleges (it follows that) if they provide quality civic learning opportunities to all students, they can promote more equal participations" in the very process of democracy.

In "Phi Delta Kappan" (the professional journal for education), Kahne and Joel Westheimer issued a call for action to parents, educators and school boards: "At the same time that lobbyists are spending hundreds of millions of dollars, many ordinary citizens are passive and apathetic when it comes to major issues that affect their lives. ...

"Improving society requires making democracy work. And making democracy work requires that schools take this goal seriously: to educate and nurture engaged and informed democratic citizens." Transcending political parties and focusing on basic civic education, let us all — parents, educators, school boards and students — go to it! The most enthusiastic audience I've ever had in discussing the stories of the tumultuous history of the Bill of Rights was a fifth-grade public-school class!

Nat Hentoff is a nationally renowned authority on the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights and author of many books, including "The War on the Bill of Rights and the Gathering Resistance" (Seven Stories Press, 2004).