



## **The Coveted Voting Bloc: Older Americans**

*Robert H. Binstock, Case Western University*

*Curtis Gans, Committee for the Study of the American Electorate*

*October 26, 2004, 3pm*

*Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, DC*

**DE LUNG:** Hello, my name is Jane De Lung, president of the Population Resource Center, and I would like to welcome you to our briefing this morning on the coveted voting block, the older American.

The Population Resource Center has, for more than 30 years, brought leading academics to Congress to discuss the demographic dimensions of public policy. And we are really very pleased today to continue our collaboration with the Alliance for Aging Research and a series of programs on different demographic changes in the older Americans.

I'd like to also thank the offices of Representatives Rush Holt and Danny K. Davis, who are both PRC board members, and are co-sponsoring this program.

As we all know, we are coming up on a major election. Many say it's the most important that we have ever had. I think probably 1860 was a little more important, but I think that the older voter is of great—demands great attention and is a very desired voter from both parties.

So I am pleased today to be able to present the two distinguished speakers that we have.

I would now like to turn the program over to Dan Perry, who is the executive director of the Alliance for Aging Research. He will introduce our speakers. Dan?

**PERRY:** Thanks very much. Jane. I am with the Alliance for Aging Research, and we are very pleased to be partnering today for this program of SAGE Crossroads with the Population Resources Center.

SAGE Crossroads is a program of the Alliance for Aging Research and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. It consists of a Web site in which we look at the intersection between science, medical research, and the politics, the economic, the bio-ethical background that is going to be affected as we learn more about the aging—the

older population in America, and especially as we begin to modify the reality for aging in America.

Today we are going to be taking a close look in this political season at the most coveted voting block. You might think watching population television that this election is all about the—the younger voter. But candidates know very well that the older voters are those that studies consistently show are more likely to turn out at the polls.

In fact, in the 2000 election, over 62 percent of voters age fifty-five to sixty-four voted. Compare that with the eighteen to twenty-four group in which less than 23 percent actually turned out that the polls.

This program will also be Webcast on the SAGE Crossroads Web site. That address is [www.sagecrossroads.net](http://www.sagecrossroads.net). On October 25, there will be a long and important article about this same subject, that will be posted on the site.

As you leave today I invite you to take one of the blue cards and fill it out so that we can send you an email alert when the article is ready, and when today's discussion will be posted on the net.

Again, it's [sagecrossroads.net](http://www.sagecrossroads.net). I am also grateful to the three foundations that provide necessary funding for the SAGE Crossroads program. They are the Archstone Foundation of Long Beach, California; the Atlantic Philanthropies of New York; and the Retirement Research Foundation of Chicago.

It's a great pleasure to work with the Population Resources Center. Now I want to introduce the first of our two panelists. Dr. Robert Binstock is truly one of the most prolific and cogent thinkers when it comes to aging, and especially its intersection with policies and with politics. Dr. Binstock is professor of aging health and society at Case Western Reserve University, and he also, while he has a primary appointment in the Department of Epidemiology and Bio-Statistics in the medical school, he also has appointments in the Departments of Bio-Ethics, Medicine, Political Science, Sociology and the School of Nursing. So he's sort of a quintuple threat when it comes to understanding aging and politics.

He has been president of the Gerontological Society, a director of the White House Task Force on Older Americans, and the author of more articles and books than I could possibly mention in the time that we have. So, without going into all of those details, it is a great pleasure to introduce Dr. Bob Binstock.

[APPLAUSE]

**BINSTOCK:** Thank you, Dan. It's a pleasure to be here with you this morning. Those of you in the audience, there are handouts available of the slides that are going to accompany my talk. And you may find them helpful to refer to because the lighting may make some of the lines in the slides a little less visible than they might be.

Well, you are all familiar, I am sure, with this perennial cliché, “Seniors are a key battleground in this election.” Actually, that’s a quote taken from (Salun DeLakey) Democratic Pollster, written by—in an article by Robin Toner of *The New York Times*.

Well, why this cliché?

Well, the first reason is that older persons are a sizeable percentage of the electorate. Although persons aged twenty-five—uh, sixty-five or older are only 12.5 percent of the electorate.

They are 16 percent of the voting age population.

In addition, the proportion of persons who register to vote increases with age.

We have the percentage of the voting age population by age groups, and you will see that older persons in the far right column are the highest, and that as age groups increase the percentage registered to vote increases.

In addition, older persons turn out to vote at a higher rate than other age groups. In fact, if you look at this figure, you can see that over time the percentage of people sixty-five and older who turn out to vote, has increased while the percentage for all the other age groups has decreased.

In the case of the eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds substantially by 34 percent. Now, Curtis Gans offered a good explanation to me of why the percentage of older persons turning out might have increased over the years. That’s that whereas years ago people seventy-five and older didn’t turn out at a very high rate—in fact, lower rate than younger old people—today they do turn out at a much higher rate than they did before. And that population, within the older age group, that is those seventy-five and older, has been growing substantially.

So you get an increase in that respect.

If you look at, therefore, the percentage of persons who actually voted in 2000 by age groups, you will see that 68 percent of people sixty-five and older turned out to vote, compared at the other extreme with the youngest age group, where a bit over 30 percent did.

The overall turnout rate was 54 percent. So you can appreciate the high turnout rate of 68 percent of older persons.

Is that in the last election, for example, though persons sixty-five and older were only 16 percent of the voting age population, 20 percent of the electorate’s total vote was accounted for by older persons. So that’s a gap that’s been gradually increasing over the years.

Now, if we look at this on an electoral basis, in states with the highest percentages of older people, older voters cast even more than their national average of 20 percent of the ballots.

Let's consider the states in which 15 percent of the population are aged sixty-five and older. And so on the left, you'll see, is Florida in which, actually, in 2000, 28 percent of the ballots were cast by older people. Some of them perhaps erroneously.

Then, you see it swing down to the right, and even in Pennsylvania about 23 percent of the votes were cast by older voters.

However, older voters are far from the biggest age group in the electorate. Other age groups cast a far larger proportion of votes than older people.

Here in this slide, you see that the age group of forty-five to—excuse me, twenty-five to forty-four cast 37 percent of the vote. The age group forty-five to sixty-four cast 35 percent of the vote. And then you have the 20 percent of older people and just 8 percent from the youngest age group, eighteen to twenty-four.

There's an interesting historical item here. If you look at the left of the younger group's turnout, you will see a big rise between 1968 and 1972. And that's, of course, because the 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment was passed in 1971, giving eighteen-year-olds the right to vote in every state of the union. There had only been four where that was the case before.

But since then the turnout rate for younger people has just gone down, down, down. And perhaps Curtis Gans can throw some light on that. I've read the literature on why younger age groups may be decreasing over time. Frankly, there is no consensus in the literature on that.

The birth cohorts that have constituted those age groups over the years have actually changed. There are different people in those groups, and yet there is this decrease.

So it's very hard to say it's a period effect, like Watergate turned people off from participating or Vietnam turned people off from participating (and so on).

Those explanations really don't hold up to my thinking.

So election exit polls—so again, why the cliché about seniors as a key voting block? Well, older people are a program constituency. Existing old-age policies, Social Security, Medicare, create a benefits program—benefit program, political constituency, that can be targeted by campaign rhetoric.

Often the goal is to swing the older voter on the basis of old-age policy issues. But how, in fact, do seniors vote? Well, older people—are they a single issue? Excuse me, old-age benefits voting block. Do they respond significantly to campaign rhetoric regarding

Social Security and Medicare, and is it true that Social Security is the third rail of American politics. Touch it and you're dead!

Well, election exit polls show first, older people don't vote as a single-issue block. Second, they tended to distribute their votes among candidates in the same proportion as the electorate as a whole. Third, the age group that deviates significantly from the others is the youngest age group, eighteen to twenty-four.

Now, if we look at this next slide, this is a sample—a couple of elections: the 1980 election for president and the 1984.

I selected it because it is a good test of the cliché, “Touch Social Security, and you're dead!” politically. You should recall, or some of you perhaps are too young to recall, but in 1980, in his first term, President Reagan managed to delay the cost-of-living adjustment on Social Security benefits for a year. Then he came out and said he wanted to cut Social Security benefits.

Well, people in Congress screamed right away. They said, “Quiet. We don't want to hear any more of this.”

But nonetheless, in 1984, the Democrats campaigned against Reagan as an enemy of Social Security. So what happened?

Well, as you look at 1980, you will see that Reagan got 54 percent of the older vote. And in 1984, he got 60 percent of the older vote. So it hardly hurt him politically. In fact, older people increased their support for Reagan, just like the rest of the electorate.

So if you compare the bottom line in 1984, you will see older people gave Reagan 60 percent of the vote. In the top line—the overall electorate was 59 percent for Reagan, right?

This is a classic case of how the votes of older persons distribute among candidates in much the same proportion as other age groups cast their votes.

If we look at this over time, in this next figure, this compares the percent of all voters and the percent of aged voters, in terms of their support for Republican presidential candidates over the period 1980 to 2000. And perhaps the lights make the visibility on that a little tough; but, in fact, if you look at your handouts, you will certainly see that there's hardly any difference whatsoever.

If we look at the next slide, you will see men and women, aged—men and women are (rated/arrayed) there over time, and you will see that there are some substantial gaps—10 percent gaps in some of the elections, including the last one which, I believe, was about 11 percent, if I recall the figure.

Then if we look at older men and women in the next figure, you will see that there is a gap there. It's less than the gender gap overall. But a distinct gap there with older women voting more for Democrats and older men voting more for Republicans.

If we look at the next slide, this shows you a gap of blacks and whites over time, voting for Republican candidates for president.

I put this out for you just to contrast what a real block of voters can be, OK? If it were the other way around, of course, blacks would be showing 90 percent or so across the board for Democratic candidates.

Well, why don't older persons vote as a self-interested block in response to senior issues?

Well, one reason is that a birth cohort, diverse in economic and social class, ethnicity, race, religion, education, health status, family status, residential locale and political attitudes and partisan attachments does not suddenly become homogenized politically when it reaches the old age group.

OK? Another point is that old age is only one of many personal characteristics with which seniors may identify. OK.

Even if some older were voters, primarily identify themselves in terms of age status, age identify self interests may not be the most important factor for an electoral decision. Of greater importance may be, are they long-standing Democrats or Republicans? Policies that have nothing to do with old age, such as the war in Iraq, and how it's viewed. Confidence in a particular leader. Altruism and many other stimuli. Is the candidate appealing or very unappealing?

In addition, self interest and intensity of self interest of seniors and old age policies varies a lot. Some older persons have a lot at stake in matters of Social Security, for example, and others don't.

For example, Social Security is 82 percent of the income for the lowest income quintile among older people. It's only 18 percent of income for the highest quintile. So, obviously, the bag lady and George Soros have a different level of concern about Social Security benefits being reduced.

Finally, it's usually difficult for voters to sort out any differences between the candidates' positions on senior issues. For example, in 2000, both Gore and Bush promised prescription drug coverage. You had to be a policy analyst to discern the difference in their proposals to follow all the details of it.

But things may change in the future. In this campaign, perhaps Bush in the next few weeks may strongly promote his privatization of Social Security proposal, and Kerry might emphasize the threat of that proposal to benefits for current seniors, pointing out the so-called \$2 billion in transition costs and how the date when the trust fund has to be

drawn on would be moved up substantially. The trust fund would be smaller in the years ahead, and so forth.

OK. But my basic view, well, let me back up and point out this: In the years ahead things may change very substantially in terms of older voters distributing their vote. You can see here that 27 percent of voters will be sixty-five and older in about 2035. Then if you look at a couple of other models briefly, projecting to the future by extrapolating from the past if we could have the next slide, you will see here it can get up as high as 41 percent. But these are not reliable things.

So for now, I expect in 2004 that older persons will distribute their votes among candidates in the 2004 election, much as the electorate does as a whole. And if an age groups deviates, it will be the eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds who haven't had partisan attachments that they have exercised and have not been reinforced. They are always the deviating group.

The last thing I would say before stepping down is that nonetheless, despite the absence of an old-age voting block, there's no question that people in Congress are very concerned that they might get caught out voting for something, or voting against something, that could be portrayed as anti-senior, because it's a good bit of leverage for their opponents if that does happen when they run for re-election. And so old age issues stay on the agenda. We're all for seniors. And very few, if any, want to be caught out in the cliché of voting against seniors. Thanks for your attention.

[APPLAUSE]

**DE LUNG:** I am quite pleased to welcome Congressman Rush Holt and I'm going to ask the Congressman to make a few comments. As I said earlier, he is on our board, but not only is he on our board, he is my Congressman. So Rush, could you please come and make a few comments, particularly as what it's like to be a Congressman dealing with seniors. That would be sort of interesting.

**HOLT:** Well, from my observation of the electorate, I would have to agree with these recent—with, with the last remarks.

I don't want to spend a lot of time because you have more interesting things that you will hear from the others here. For those of you who are eighteen to twenty-four, you don't need to think of yourself as deviates.

[Laughter.]

But in fact, I really do think that's true, those—all of those observations. I'm eager to hear the rest of them.

The point I wanted to make, though, is the importance of the Population Resource Center. Is that it is often thought that demographers are just crunching numbers, and it is of academic interest only.

I think Jane and her group have really made great—taken great pains and made great efforts to show policymakers how much attention they should be paying to demography in a whole range of issues. In this case, practical politics.

I think they have been really the best in doing that. And so I am delighted to see them here on the Hill again continuing that public education. Thanks.

[APPLAUSE]

**HOLT:** I'm not leaving. I'm just getting more coffee.

**DE LUNG:** My board are my best advisors and best advertisers. Thank you, Rush.

I'm now very pleased to introduce Curtis Gans, who is the director of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate. Curtis has been so gracious in doing this program with us every two years for an election. It's always quite a pleasure to have him discuss what the American electorate is like and what he thinks it is going to be like in the next election. He is one of the ranking experts on voter turnout and participation, and has been on all of the talk shows and throughout much of our intellectual and political trade—and the talk shows that we have. Curtis, I welcome you.

[APPLAUSE]

**GANS:** Congressman Holt decided to depart but I was going to give him some kudos for what he's doing in terms of electoral integrity and paper trails in our ballot—I was just commenting on what you've been doing on paper trails for our ballot, which I think is a very important thing.

**HOLT:** Thank you.

**GANS:** Dr. Binstock was assigned the task of, you know, doing the older Americans. And I was assigned the task of doing everybody else. And within a limited time frame.

I did want to say, you know, elaborate a little bit on the point you referred to. I did a paper for the International Longevity Center on the older vote. And when I was looking at the statistics, you know, what Dr. Binstock said is exactly right. You know, sixty-five and over—used to be fifty-five and over—but now it's sixty-five and over—the only group that has increased its rate of participation as an age group. The other, you know, the South as a region has also done that.

When I looked at the numbers, the increase was concentrated in seventy-five and over, which said to me that the real reason for the increase is modern medicine. You know, people can vote.

I am sometimes known as the Chicken Little of the electoral industry, insofar as I regularly, you know, before elections, talk about how the sky is falling for American democracy and usually the turnout.

I am not going to do that today, although I am going to go back to, you know the sky is falling as a generic question for most of what I have to say. But I will eat—you know, not only my hat but also my suit and anything else I'm wearing if turnout does not go up substantially this year.

I think it will go up substantially amongst every demographic group in our society except moderate Republicans.

We had 106 million people in a 54 percent voter turnout in 2000. The likelihood is that it will go up between—between 58 to 60 percent, and that means an increase of 13 to 16 million voters. And if you are counting partisan chickens, you know, that probably benefits the Democrats in this election. It wouldn't be in all elections. If that same increase had occurred in 1984 Ronald Reagan would have gotten more votes.

But there's a limit to the amount of—to the demography, additional demography that the Republicans can build. There are the 4 million Christian evangelicals that Karl Rove is after. There are some people in the rural areas. But almost every other group is likely to increase its participation and its ability to use potentially Democratic, you know, provided, that Kerry does not fall on his face in the last two debates.

There is a limit to the upward level of voting, which best probably can be outlined by the UCLS freshman survey.

They take an annual survey of incoming freshman, which is a higher participating group than the overall eighteen to twenty-four category or, you know, eighteen-year-olds.

There's been a slight increase in interest in politics. It's gone all the way up from 29 percent to 34 percent, and it's probably a little higher now. But in the 1960s it was 60 percent. We are talking about not only this generation, but two generations prior to that which had continually declining political interests.

So there are going to be limits to the upward mobility—

I want to spend the balance of what I have to say, you know, talking about the fact that this election and its sizeable turnout increase is essentially due to the lightning rod of the nature of the George Bush presidency and that the real condition of American democracy is worth being Chicken Little about.

Which is essentially to say that we had slight increases in, you know, 2000 and 2002, but if you look at the 1996 election, we had the lowest turnout since 1924, the second lowest since 1824. The lowest outside the South since 1824. If you look at the '98 election, you

had a slight increase in 2002, we had the lowest since 1942, but outside the South the lowest since 1802.

We have 25 million people in our midst who used to—you know, used to vote and no longer do so. We have had a decline in voter participation of about 25 percent nationally, a little under 25 percent nationally and a little over 25 percent outside the South.

Young people in both '98 and 2000, eighteen to twenty-four, voted at an under 15 percent rate and, you know, eighteen- and nineteen-year-old first-time voters voted under a 10 percent rate. The United States stands 139<sup>th</sup> of 172 democracies in the world.

There are people who say, you know, that that's not something one should worry about. You know, that low voter turn out or declining voter turn out is a sign of voter satisfaction. That if nonvoters voted as older—they would be like older voters only more so, which is—um—they would vote, you know, at least on the level of president, you know the way that the rest of the electorate votes.

That government goes on. People get elected and people do the job of government. I would like to disabuse people of all of those notions. The people whose regular participation is lowest and declining the most are people at the bottom end of the income scale, the bottom in the (inaudible) scale, the bottom in the education scale. Not a picture of a happy mesomorphical effort.

There is not one poll of nonvoters which shows any significant level of satisfaction, you know, for their non-vote.

It used to be, at least on the presidential level or the highest state office level, the non-voters would vote as the rest of the electorate, only more so, because they are not as attentive. Polls of non-voters in 1984 showed, well, Reagan won by 59, you know. Non-voters would have voted for him by 64 percent.

But in 1996 Frank Luntz did a poll of non-voters on an election day. The actual results of the election were 49 percent Clinton, 41 percent Dole, 10 percent Perot. The poll of non-voters was 47 percent Clinton, 18 percent Dole, 32 percent Perot. You know, we are talking about a very different and increasingly alienated electorate.

Finally, on the last point, there are specific and major downside risks to declining voter turnout, because voting is, by and large, a lowest common denominator political act. You know, people who don't vote tend not to participate in any other societal activity on a sustaining basis. We have, thanks to serve learning programs, you know, many compulsory in high school, an increase in volunteerism.

But that's not a sustaining activity. You know, as voter turnout goes down, the reservoir of people to do society's necessary functions, you know, in the political sphere, goes down with it.

Perhaps more important is the obverse, which is, as voter turnout goes down, our politics becomes increasingly dominated by the interested—those interested in a particular policy outcome and the zealots—those, you know, who focus on single issues.

You see that at this point mostly in the Republican Party combined with another phenomenon. You know, the phenomenon is the increasing tendency to draw districts for House of Representatives and for state legislatures, which are safe for one party or another. You know, either partisanly drawn or incumbent protection drawn, depending on whether it is somebody that has, you know, full control, you know, the legislature and the governorship.

But if you draw those districts in a partisan fashion, the relevant election is not the general election. It's the primary.

The average turnout of a statewide Democratic primary in a presidential year is 10 percent. The average turnout in a statewide Republican primary is 8 percent. Turnout for Congress and State legislatures is less.

So essentially it means that an organized minority of 3.5 percent can propel a candidate to win a primary. That candidate is now in office. If you want to explain the current polarization of American politics, it's because the organized minority in the Republican Party tends to be the religious and secular right.

The same danger exists in the Democratic Party, but there is no left-left in the Democratic Party.

If voter turnout goes down, you know, politics becomes increasingly adjudicated upward by those that vote heavily. People in this room—at least the older people in this room—obvious—you know, perhaps can remember the bill for catastrophic health care that passed in 1990, and was repealed as the first act of Congress in 1991 because, particularly the more affluent older American—I mean, it wasn't a good bill, but you know, people—more affluent Americans objected to co-payments.

Public employees constitute one-sixth of the country, vote heavily. When about half the rest of the country votes, as they do in presidential elections, that one-sixth becomes one-third.

If a third of the rest of the electorate votes as they do for Congress, that one-six becomes closer to one half. Then try to change civil service or abolish agencies, and it can't be done.

If young people vote in the election that is most likely to speak to their sustaining interest at 15 percent rate, then we are talking about a bleak future for both leadership and participation.

If, as a concomitant to the decline in participation is, as it is, decline in allegiance to either major political party, then we have a problem, you know, with cohesion. If, you

know, non-voting is a sign of inattention, then the danger of unchecked demagoguery and authoritarianism become much greater.

If people don't learn how to make changes within the political system, then there is—while no clear and present danger, a future danger that they may want to make changes outside the political system. And finally government matters. I mean, you can ladle soup in as many soup kitchens as you want to, but only government can address poverty. You can recycle as many cans and bottles and newspapers as you want to, but only government, you know, in whatever way can address climate change and air and water pollution.

So far all those reasons I think we need to be concerned, you know, that the government that prides itself on being the best of all—of for and by the people in the world is becoming an increasingly government of, for and by the interested few.

What we know is that the problem of low and declining participation is not a problem of procedure. We have arguably made it easier over three decades, you know, to vote and to register. President Kennedy created a commission in 1963, which recommended the abolition of the poll tax, the literacy tests, you know, enfranchisement of the blacks, enfranchisement of the young, registration by mail, shortening the time or—between the close of registration and elections, bilingual ballots, voter outreach programs—eighteen recommendations, seventeen were adopted in whole and in part, and voter turn out went down.

We had a surge in registration after the motor voter bill was enacted and voter turn out went down.

You know, we just—I—my group just produced some data that shows that some of the gimmicks that are currently being tried actually hurt turn out. Early voting, no excuse absentee. And mail voting.

Demography should favor higher turnout. You know, Ray Wolfinger and Steve Rosenstone wrote a book in 1980 called, *Who Votes?* Who votes most are people who are more educated, people who are older, people who are more residentially stable, and people who are married.

More than twice as many people go to college and graduate college as did in 1960. And voter turnout has gone down. Our population, I think, has been aging since 1969 and our voter turnout has gone down.

With the exception of three years in the 1980s, our mobility rates are lower than they were in the 1960s, and voter turnout has gone down.

Only in the area of marriage does, you know, theory correlate with fact. We are less married, more single, more, you know, single parenting and I used to say, I would

hesitate to recommend marriage as a cure for nonvoting, as I would hesitate, you know, to recommend a presidency of the type of George Bush's as a cure for nonvoting.

On the other hand, it should be said that I think, on a more serious note, the decline in marriage is one of the declines in institutional cohesion in our society, and I don't think it's unimportant.

Our elections have also become more competitive. Now, you know, Common Cause puts out, you know, propaganda essentially supporting their campaign finance reforms. The re-elect rate in the House of Representatives is 95 to 100 percent, which is also more due to redistricting than campaign finance.

But the people vote most for president, governor and senator. The last two of those used to be decided by a one-party whites only vote in the South, with turnout rates in the 20s. Now those elections are competitive in every place in the United States, except perhaps where we are sitting, and maybe Utah. And voter turnout's gone down. So if it is not a question of competition, it's not a question of demography, it's not a question of procedure, it's got to be a question of motivation.

I will spend the next five minutes and end this speech talking about the things that I think have contributed to motivation. I can do this in a more academic fashion, but I'm not going to.

Let us look at what's happened in the last forty years. We've had presidential statements like, "I am not going to send American boys to do what Asian boys are supposed to do." "I am not a crook." "I did not know anything about Iran Contra." "Read my lips." "I did not have sexual relations with that woman." And "I—we are in imminent danger of weapons of mass destruction."

We have a lower level of trust in our leaders now than—definitely at any time in my lifetime and perhaps forever.

That level of trust—lack of trust—has infected the people, you know, earned lack of trust has infected the people who transmit our politics to our citizenry and the media. We have a much more cynical portrayal of American politics.

We have had shocks to our political system, Vietnam, Watergate, Iran Contra, impeachment in Iraq. And particularly, and this is where I don't agree with you, you know, with respect to the war in Vietnam, which the public turned against in 1968, and which ended in 1974, to the tune of 30,000 additional American lives and the destruction of the promise of the Great Society. We raise the question of responsiveness of governing.

The greatest year-to-year declines are between '68 and '72 and '70 and '74, and only a very small portion of that, you know, has to do with the enfranchisement of eighteen- to twenty-year-olds.

It continues to be raised with, you know, with respect to the issue of gridlock. When you have people living more stressful lives and you know, two-wage earner families trying to make the same ends meet, is one. More single parenting and things like that.

We have increasingly atomized and fragmented our society, physically through things like the interstate highway system, suburbanization, the strip mall, the abandonment of family farms, all the things that undermine community. Politically, through identity and single-issue politics, but most profoundly through our media, starting with television. Television likes to say it brings the world community into your living room. But what it does most profoundly and in society is it brings you into your living room And I don't mind—you know, it makes you spectators and consumers rather than participants and stockholders and atomizes our society into individual living rooms. And it also wastes a lot of time. According to *TV Guide* people are supposed to watch TV seven hours a day, on the average. If you sleep eight hours a day, work eight hours a day, and eat and commute an hour and a half, that's 24 and a half. Doesn't give you a lot of time for other things.

Then we have cable and satellite, which gives you some nice things like CNN and C-SPAN and History and Discovery, but it gives you 200 and some odd channels, 180 of which you can watch all day every day without any intersection with politics and public affairs. It fragments our information base. To which you add the Internet, with I don't know how many million Web sites, all self-selected, in which politics and public affairs is not the one of choice.

Commerce and pornography beat politics and public affairs by a lot!

[END OF SIDE ONE; BEGIN SIDE TWO]

Our young are going to schools, which are—have been suffering through a decline in quality, particularly in two areas. And urban America, as middle class parents like myself wanting the best education for my particular child, go to the suburbs and send our kids to private school, eroding the base of urban education.

The other places, place like California, where you limit, you know, through Prop 13, you limited the amount of money into what was the best single school system in the country and made it one of the worst.

You have had a decline in civic education, you know, both in quantity and quality. You have had a decline amongst young people in newspaper reading, and study, debate and testing on current events. Only 29 percent of people eighteen to thirty read any newspapers at all.

You have had a decline in reaction to the excesses of the sixties in commitment to the mediating and training institutions of the young—student government, student newspapers, Hillel, Wesley Newman book.

You have a majority of young people now growing up in households both of whose parents don't vote, and a large majority doesn't discuss politics. You've had shifts in our overall value structure. My parents' generation, you know, in large numbers, grew up in the depression or were immigrants, or both, and essentially they committed their lives to, you know, create, making sure that their children didn't suffer the same privations that they did.

My generation, which is the generation post World War II up through the mid-1960s, essentially translated those parents' values because we were secure, into making life better for future generations. This generation, the last two and a half are into making their own lives better. That's not conducive to participation.

The second value shift began with the second Nixon campaign, but was done in a very sophisticated fashion, which is the tendency to demagogue against the idea of government, not making government in partnership with states and private enterprise, but that, as Tom DeLay says, "Government is bad and business is good and that's it," doesn't make people want to participate in government.

Then you have, you know, the value shift, you know, to more libertarianism and consumerism, which undermines civic engagement value. So for the young, we are not getting the socialization in the home, the school, the curriculum, the co-curriculum, the values ethos.

Then they face the politics the rest of us face. Politics without national goals, you know, and which are subject to the centrifugal forces of intense interest. Politics, as Putnam writes, in which the integrating institutions of our society, with the exception of fundamentalist churches, our churches, our schools, our unions and our political parties have become weaker.

Our political parties which used to have sustaining grass roots, precinct captains and the like, and used to separate the wheat from the chaff of, you know, issue group advocacy into something that resembles coherent program, now do two functions: they raise money and dispense consultant services, and they do targeting.

We have a part—we have a misalignment of our political parties, with one way to the right of the American center, and one, you know, without any durable message because it's been playing off against that right.

We have the technology of American politics, which increasingly is getting more sophisticated so you target only likely voters for your side, which means that, you know, that you target, you know, the old a lot. But unless they express strong preferences, as they did for Reagan in '84 and Clinton in '92, you don't target the young people at all.

You have the abdication of the media from the coverage of politics, which we witnessed with three hours of convention coverage by the networks, you know, and reduction of election-night coverage. Reduction of overall coverage, although the selection will be higher.

Presidents who can no longer command the press conference in prime time and have to do it in the afternoon to get three minutes on the nightly news. We have the way we conduct our campaigns in 30-second attack ads, which for one to two hours a day tell you how awful every, you know, candidate is and create a miasma with the political process and essentially, all things being equal, which in some elections they are not, you know, drive turnout down.

We have the lack of anticipatory mechanisms government, and by that I mean I don't know of anybody who was in a 20-minute traffic jam going to work ten years ago who is not a 30- or 40-minute traffic jam now, and it doesn't matter who gets elected. Which is to say, we have had powerful reasons for the decline in participation. Now, three last things. It's been fashionable to blame the citizen for their lack of participation. That's what the national commission on civic renewal did.

But during this period of decline, we've had a number of individual elections with record high turnout. When Jane Byrne took on Michael (Blandick) and made it a referendum on the first daily machine and snow removal, we had a record high turnout. When Denkins, Gant, Wilder, Washington, Stokes ran as the first African Americans for their respective office, we had record high turnout. When David Duke and Ollie North ran we had record high turnout.

But we've also had record high turnout when the gentile but highly respected Terry Sanford and Broyhill ran in North Carolina. We had record high turnout when Audrey Moore here in Fairfax County joined the issue of growth and transportation.

People will vote when the politics give them some reason to hope, vote and some reason for hope.

Second to last question, thing I am going to say, is voting is essentially a religious act. I actually have participated in an election that was decided by one vote. My friend in Virginia who I went to college with, he was a junior, I was a senior at North Carolina—Jim Scott—his first election to delegate, after the vote and two recounts was decided by one vote.

But on a purely rational level, most elections aren't, and therefore, in some rational basis your vote doesn't make any difference. But we have wanted to be part of a sort of Russonian General Wells to give asset—and would draw asset from a direction or a policy or a person. And it's that religious impulse that has been dampened down by all those things that I spoke about earlier.

We no longer have the religion of civic duty. We only have instrumental voting.

The last thing is, we won't solve this problem unless we deal with those bigger issues. The problem is large. The solutions are large. And about which we should not think small. Thanks.

[APPLAUSE]

**DE LUNG:** No...are there no questions? Well, I have two. I'll start with questions.

The one is with Curtis. Is there any indication from your work that moving our election to a Saturday or Sunday would make a difference?

**GANS:** It would probably make a difference negatively.

**DE LUNG:** Oh, really?

**GANS:** Yeah. The late, and possibly unlamented Mario Biaggi, asked, because he liked the idea of election holiday or election on weekends, asked the Congressional Research Service to do a study of other democracies.

It actually found that for those democracies who have, like we do, voluntary voting, not compulsory voting, turnout was actually slightly lower when they had elections on weekends or holidays.

Second, you know, point is that there are some states that have occasional elections—Louisiana and New Jersey, you know, on Saturdays, and turnout is very low.

The third thing is that if you do not have an election on a work day, you deprive the system of the mobilization of things like employers, shop stewards, you know, teachers and the like.

And finally, if you buy into my analysis, which I hope you all do, and you are going to come back and see that the problem of voter participation, it's a problem of motivation.

You give people a free day off and they will go fishing rather than voting.

What every state should do, however, is have New York's hours. New York opens its polls at 6 a.m. and closes at 9 p.m. and it has three hours on both sides of the work cycle and that should happen!

**DE LUNG:** My other question is, if one looks at cohort voting, or you look at individuals who were eighteen—oh, say, twenty-one to thirty, in 1960 to '65, did their voting participation rates increase as they age? And do you see the same, or what's the difference in the increase in voting participation with the younger groups? I don't know if I made myself clear.

**GANS:** I think it's true. I haven't looked at every individual age cohort, but you go down from about sixty and I think every individual age cohort is lower. Fifty-nine being lower than sixty, fifty-eight—

So what's happened is, you know, as Dr. Binstock said accurately, young people's, you know, rate of participation declined by 35 percent. You know, eighteen to twenty-four. Twenty-four to thirty-five has declined by 25 percent.

Essentially, there is an increase when they, you know, they'll get into older, you know—they get older, they have families and things like that. But the increase is substantially less. I mean the level is substantially less than it was, you know, ten years ago, twenty years ago, thirty years ago.

What we are getting is bracketry. When I said used to be fifty-five and over increased their rate of participation, you know, now it's sixty-five and over.

**DE LUNG:** Dr. Binstock?

**BINSTOCK:** Just an additional point on this, the steady turnout at a good rate for older persons is not just a matter of the demography of more healthy older people being involved. It's, in addition, that older people have had a longer time in which to reinforce their partisan attachments. One of the things that predicts turnout is strength of partisan attachment, OK?

So you've had it more years. It gets reinforced more years. You see things through those lenses more and more. The other thing is that studies show that older people, perhaps because of different allocation of time demands, seem to be a little bit more knowledgeable about politics, follow it more frequently and are better informed about what's going on.

So they are engaged more for a lot of reasons.

**GANS:** Also they are part of the civically engaged generations. (Inaudible.)

**DE LUNG:** Is there a significant difference between the percentages of newspaper readers over sixty-five?

**GANS:** I don't know.

**DE LUNG:** You don't know. Rush?

**HOLT:** Jane, well, as someone who's interested, of course, in the problem that we face as society where assertion takes the place of evidence often, whether it is weapons of mass destruction or other things, I like to find out just how good the data are.

When we talk about age cohorts, how good are the data? In New Jersey, when you register, you have the option of giving your birth date, so that the voter registration figures have good birth dates for fewer than half of the registered voters.

So when you—if you are going to trace cohorts from the sixties to the present and so forth, how good are we at actually collecting that information?

**GANS:** Well, the basic source is the Census Bureau's P20s. This is essentially—people don't go in to vote as eighteen-year-old blue-eyed Puerto Ricans, or whatever. The only way you can figure out who votes is through surveys. The largest survey is the Census Bureau's bi-annual survey, current population survey which asks registration—

**HOLT:** That's self-identification.

**GANS:** No—

**HOLT:** I have far more people voting for me after I've won an election than I did the first election.

**DE LUNG:** They don't ask who you vote for.

**GANS:** They know their demographic base. It is true that that survey suffers from over-reporting and from having the different denominator, you know, being used in other places. But you can quantify the over-reporting, which is to say, I track actual votes.

So when they—you know, when we get, you know, as we did in the 2000 election, a 59 percent say they voted against a 54 percent actual rate, you can correct the response rate for that.

**HOLT:** But the error in self-identification might be different in different age cohorts.

**GANS:** It is—and the Census Bureau actually did a little study of that and showed, you know, that particularly in younger age cohorts they are more likely to over-report.

**HOLT:** That's my experience.

**GANS:** OK.

**DE LUNG:** But also the CPS does not ask whom they voted for. They only ask are they registered and did they vote?

**GANS:** Yeah, but, as far as the generic question they are the best source.

And you know, the only other, you know, the sources on partisan are worse, which are the exit polls.

**DE LUNG:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** Over the past years we've seen the Internet become more important in campaigning from—specifically from a fund-raising perspective. Is it ever going to be valuable to have online voting?

**HOLT:** NO! Valuable or advisable?

**GANS:** It's a terrible idea. We will never have 100 percent security for software breakdown, hackers, viruses, privacy, or capricious use. You know, and therefore this should never happen. Also, what we know, you know, with things like early voting and no excuse absentees, the more you decentralize voting, the more you hurt turnout.

Now, the other thing about the Internet, I mean, you know, people talk about how influential it was for fundraising and various things, you know, particularly in the primary campaign, some say the general campaign—people have to have prior interest before they go to a Web site.

The Web site does not generate interest. The interest has got to come prior to that.

People had to be interested in Howard Dean before they went to Howard Dean's Web site.

**DE LUNG:** That's true.

**GANS:** It's very important to see the internet for what it is, which is—there are things it can do. Once you have that interest, it can help you galvanize that interest and turn it into dollars and various other things.

But it does—but it is a self-selecting medium and you've got to have a reason to select a particular site.

**BINSTOCK:** I think that Mr. Gans' earlier point about voting as a religious experience bears on this. I think it's a very good point, and I think part of what reinforces people is that they show up there with their fellow citizens at the—and you know, I sort of feel that when I go to vote, as opposed to the absentee thing, which is a piece of paperwork, like a bill to pay, and so on.

I think the Internet certainly would dilute all that. So you know, I think your basic point on the religious experience bears heavily here.

**GANS:** Well, the absentee thing also has other risks. One of them is differentials of information. There are probably two million people or so who have already cast their vote before the first debate.

Now, if we had three days before the election a stock market crash or Osama bin Laden captured or a terrorist act, you know, relevant things, you know, when people vote, there

probably would be 25 million votes that have already been cast. That's not what we ought to have.

**DE LUNG:** Yes?

**QUESTION:** I just had a question on whether you can come—both of you can come up with some good suggestions on what positive steps we could take to get people out to vote? Very simple. I think the (inaudible) key beyond civic engagement, there political movement now with older adults to get folks active working with the numbers in their community. Is there something that could play to not being (inaudible). (Inaudible) politically socialized development.

**GANS:** We need to improve the quality of—all the obverse of the things I said. We need to improve the quality of education. We need to improve both the quantity and quality of civic education. We need to get young people back to reading newspapers and studying and debating current events. We need to strengthen our training institutions for the young, student government, student newspapers, the legislature, and various things.

We need to consider a mandatory year of national service at the end of high school. We need to have preaching from our various bully pulpits. A different set of values.

We need to strengthen and realign our parties and strengthen our other integrating institutions. We need to re-regulate the broadcast industry, based on market share so that they, you know, those with the largest market share will cover our politics.

We need to cease being the only—one of the only democracies in the world that doesn't regulate political advertising on television. And we need to build anticipatory mechanisms in government. If turnout still goes down after we've done those things, you know, I have no hope for American democracy.

But if we don't do those things, we're—you know, there's no mobilization program or public service ad or procedural quick fix. We've got to do the larger things if we are going to turn it around permanently.

**BINSTOCK:** I'd like to add one thing to the laundry list. Better quality of candidates.

**DE LUNG:** I also think that one thing people haven't thought of and—

**GANS:** And you have to deal with the redistricting problem.

**DE LUNG:** I think one idea also, though, would be somehow to tie the financing for both parties on turnout. That if, in fact, to—right now parties are totally focused on getting their base out. If there was a reward for increased voting, and somehow expenditures on the next election were tied to how many people voted this time, there might be more of an incentive to get votes out. Everybody.

**GANS:** I don't believe in that. I believe that we need to—I believe that you need to rekindle the religion.

**DE LUNG:** Rush? I'm sorry.

**GANS:** You cannot—I don't want to pay people to vote. I don't want to make compulsory voting. I want to rekindle the religion.

**DE LUNG:** Rush? You had a comment?

**HOLT:** Well, yes, first a comment on the last question, decentralized voting, whether it is Internet or—or no questions absentee balloting and so forth. To the extent that voting is a religious undertaking, I think you would find that there is no priest or rabbi or minister who would say that the congregation is stronger, becomes decentralized, if people practiced their religion at home and never show up at the temple.

Actually showing up can be a reinforcing mechanism. And something that has been carried out with a least tantalizing success so far in New Jersey is a “Take Your Parents to Vote” day, where students below voting age, often in elementary schools, are organized by the school board or by other groups—groups of parents—to take their parents to vote.

In New Jersey the children are allowed in the voting booth with the parents. It's not only, I think, a good educational experience for the student, but it does improve turnout. And one way this has been a gimmick that has been used in this is to give the students something to vote for that day also. In a separate ballot box off to the side, without the usual security measures, I suppose. A student can vote on what the school mascot should be, or whether seventh graders will be allowed to go to the prom this year, or something of that sort.

The experience has been quite good. It gets the youngsters and their parents to the polling place, where they can, well, in a sense, take part in this religious ritual.

And—as someone who not long ago won reelection by less than one vote per precinct, I, you know, am looking for every opportunity to increase turn out, many of which Mr. Gans and Mr. Binstock have identified. Some of them—some of the suggestions are debatable. But the problem is unarguable.

**GANS:** I remember, there was a group called Kids' Vote, that does the obverse which the parents, you know, take their kids to vote. I don't see anything—nor, if we are talking about unofficial ballots, I don't see why they can't cast them for president, rather than school mascot. I mean, Kids' Vote actually, you know, tries to put something in the school curriculum prior to the election. I think it's a very good program.

**DE LUNG:** Dan, you had a question?

**PERRY:** I do. It's sort of a closing question for both of our speakers. We are just a little more than six years from when the first baby boomer is going to turn sixty-five. Over the next few years beyond that, we can expect to see that huge demographic begin to swell the older population.

I think I saw in Dr. Binstock's slides the suggestion that that was going to increase voter turnout and voter participation. Is there anything else that we can expect to generalize about the baby boomers as they become the next generation of older voters, and become about twice as many as we have now?

**BINSTOCK:** Well, I think the generalization will be, the best generalization, is that they'll be a diverse voting population unless we fail to act in the years immediately ahead on dealing with Social Security and Medicare, and how we are going to sustain those programs for the baby boomers' old age.

If we wait we may really have a sort of a political crisis because if we come right up against a time when benefits will not be sustainable, the amount of money that would have to be raised to preserve those two programs would be far more than it is today. We could have a wrenching political debate in this country about whether we can afford our aging population in terms of the structures of those programs.

In that case, you could very well get an age group identification because you would have a real threat to the programs. Curtis?

**GANS:** And the only thing I'm going to say is that in the absence of that threat, my guess is, you know, the bracket creep that we saw between fifty-five and sixty-five, is going to go against the sixty-five to seventy-five. We are going to move, you know, to a narrower group that is sustaining increase in their participation because I think beginning with the second half of the baby boom generation and all generations subsequently, they are precisely the people without the civic religion.

**DE LUNG:** I want to thank all of you for joining us today for this really very interesting conversation. I thank both of our speakers very much. We will certainly, if you leave us your e-mail, the Alliance for Aging Research will let you know when it will be Webcast and then you can follow it and we can perhaps let you know when it's going to be on NPR.

The Alliance for Aging Research and PRC are going to have another program in early January, February, on the intersection of aging and immigration and what are some of the issues around that topic. So we will notify you when we have that program. Thank you very much for coming.

[APPLAUSE]