

## Get Out the Vote!

by Bradley Siciliano and Jessica Green

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What if they had an election and nobody voted?

It is not that unreasonable a question. Across the country and in New York, Americans are voting less and less. In 1953, 93 percent of registered New Yorkers voted in the mayoral election. In 1996, only 58 percent of eligible voters cast ballots. In the 1999 City Council elections, voter turnout was less than 20 percent. It was a pitiful three percent for the school board elections. The trend is the same on the national level. In 1996, 95.8 million Americans voted in the presidential election -- eight million fewer voters than in the 1992 presidential election, and the first time that less than half the eligible electorate voted since 1924, when Calvin Coolidge was elected.

Since Americans are voting less and less, the hard work of campaigning is only as good as candidates' efforts to get people to the polls and vote. In the weeks leading up to Election Day this year, candidates shifted their focus from debating the issues to an unusually vigorous "get out the vote" campaign. Three weeks before the election, [Vice President Al Gore](#) began devoting less time campaigning for swing voters, and more time trying to energize key supporting constituencies to go to the polls.

[Governor George W. Bush's](#)

campaign donated one million dollars left over from his primary campaign to the Republican Party to aid in get out the vote efforts in key districts. Why? To be elected, candidates must make sure that some registered voters -- at least the ones who support them -- show up and vote.

Candidates should be very, very afraid.

### WHY DON'T PEOPLE VOTE

In the greatest democracy on earth, why do so few Americans choose to participate in the political process? The answer is the product of many factors:

#### 1. Some Non-Voters Are Not Eligible

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"The electoral system actually or effectively shuts out tens of millions," says a current article in the [Village Voice](#) -- actually, convicted felons (which number almost 4 million nationwide); effectively, such populations as the homeless. But the largest numbers of those excluded are immigrants. Roughly two-thirds of New York City's population is foreign born or first-generation immigrant. Of the voting-age population, which is about 5.8 million New Yorkers, only 4.2 million -- a little less than three-quarters -- are eligible. The ineligible are not citizens; some await citizenship, while others do not plan to apply. While these numbers may seem unsurprising, when broken down by race, the discrepancies become clearer. Only 63 percent of voting-age Hispanics are eligible; less than half of the city's Asians are eligible. The numbers are higher for whites and blacks, which includes Eastern European, Russian and Caribbean immigrants, but still far short of 100 percent.

Immigrant populations across the city are becoming increasingly aware of the lack of participation at the polls, and subsequent under-representation in government. Next year's big turnover in the city council, where thanks to term limits 36 of the current 51 council members will be unable to run again, has attracted many minority and immigrant candidates, who see this as their opportunity for unprecedented progress. Term limits may actually achieve one its goals: to lure new candidates to office and spur voter participation. Minority groups are organizing to get out the vote. Woodside's Center for Latin American Immigration in Queens has put together a Voters Guide in Spanish for area voters. They have joined forces with the New York Immigrant Coalition's ["200,000 in 2000" campaign](#), which aims to educate 200,000 new citizens on community issues and voter participation. (See also [L](#)  
[atino Vote 2000](#)  
and  
[Youth Vote 2000](#)  
for targeted efforts to turn out the vote.)

### 2. Frequency Of Voting

New Yorkers may not vote in large numbers, but those who do vote, vote frequently. This year, we had a presidential primary on Super Tuesday, March 7th; a special election for the 10th Senate District on March 28th; a state and local primary September 12th; and now a presidential election on November 7th. And do not forget elections for the school board. That is a lot of trips to the polls, especially if you have to take the kids to practice, commute, work, or do pretty much anything else. Maybe fulfilling our civic duty is simply too large a burden in New York.

### 3. Lack Of Competition

In state and local races especially, many races are no-brainers. Incumbents are reelected in staggering proportions; an incumbent's defeat is virtually unheard of. This lack of competitiveness of races gives voters the sense that there is little point in going to the polls. In

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1998, every single incumbent in the New York State legislature was reelected. And while newly imposed term limits will address this problem in the City Council, the issue remains unresolved on many other levels of government.

### 4. Cynicism

Scarred by scandals from Watergate to Monicagate, Americans have developed a deep distrust in those who govern. With little to trust from the lips of their leaders, and nothing to offer but a lone vote, many Americans have signed over their fates to lobbyists and deep-pocketed interest groups.

### 5. Prosperity And Contentment

Optimists posit that in these flush times, Americans have less reason to vote. With record low levels of crime, unemployment and inflation, many feel that there is little role for government in their lives.

## WHY VOTE?

common refrain of the non-voter is "what difference does my vote make?" Ironically, even the most hardened cynic would say "a lot." Why? Because turnout, however skewed, can mean the difference between winning and losing. (As Woody Allen once noted, 95 percent of life is just showing up.) Shifts in turnout rates by region, community, and of course, demographic group can make a Republican seat go Democrat and vice versa.

New York's elections are testimony to the power of increased voter participation of certain regions or demographic groups. Many analysts attributed Rudy Giuliani's 1993 victory over David Dinkins to the fact that turnout was extraordinarily high in pro-Giuliani Staten Island, where a popular referendum on succession was on the ballot. Similarly, in 1994, upstate voters came out in disproportionate numbers to allow Governor George Pataki to defeat the incumbent Mario Cuomo. Had turnout been consistent with past elections in both the city and the state, when Democrats came out in larger numbers, the political landscape of New York might look very different today.

While never publicly admitted, so great is the issue of turnout to the outcome of elections, that in some instances efforts are made to suppress turnout in opponents strongholds. The most notorious of these efforts was in 1993, when it was reported that New Jersey Governor Christine Whitman's campaign manager, Ed Rollins, had actually offered money to minority ministers to discourage turnout in the heavily Democratic parishes. Similarly, late in 1997 the

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New York State Republicans were reportedly planning to cede the state comptrollers race to Carl McCall, a popular African American incumbent, for fear that a competitive race would bring out the often-complacent minority community.

In the neck and neck Senate battle between [Rick Lazio](#) and [Hillary Clinton](#), turnout may be the key to victory. Unions are busy manning phone banks, posting flyers and using other grassroots tactics to turn out the Democratic vote for Clinton. While local Republican machines are busily doing much of the same, state Republicans feel that Clinton's candidacy may be a powerful enough tool to bring Republicans to the polls.

### HOW TO GET PEOPLE TO THE POLLS?

Efforts to increase voter participation typically focus on two strategies: 1) make it easier to vote; 2) make races more competitive.

#### Easier Registration and Voting

A number of efforts have been focused on making the process of registering easier. The best known of these policies is the "motor voter" registration. Under this law, New Yorkers voters can register to vote when they renew their driver's license. What about New Yorkers who do not drive? Pending [City Council legislation](#) introduced by Public Advocate Mark Green and City Council member Gifford Miller would require city agencies to provide voter registration cards with whatever other agency forms they distribute. A more

[aggressive law](#)

introduced by New York State Assemblyman Scott Stringer, would allow same-day registration. Instead of registering some 6 weeks in advance, voters could walk into the polling place on Election Day, register and vote. Such a change, however, would require amending the state constitution, a process that requires the legislature's approval of the bill for two consecutive years, and then passage by referendum. Susannah Vickers, legislative aide to Assemblyman Stringer, says, "passing the bill is definitely an uphill battle. But participation numbers are so low that people are getting tired of the status quo. Vickers adds "there is definitely support for it, so we were cautiously optimistic."

Registration, however, is only one part of the equation. Getting registered voters to the polls is a separate, equally challenging task. Some states are experimenting with alternatives to traditional polling place voting. Oregon has adopted voting-by-mail for all elections. The results have been dramatic: The 1996 Oregon presidential primary had the largest turnout of registered voters in the nation at 54 percent. Even New Hampshire, which holds the much-publicized first primary of the election season, had a lower turnout at 45 percent. Oregon's special election to fill a vacant senate seat in 1996 boasted a 66 percent voting rate; that figure contrasts starkly

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with a similar race in Texas, which drew only 21 percent of registered voters.

Internet technology is also beginning to infiltrate innovations in voting practices. In a January straw poll in Alaska, three remote districts participated by Internet through the company [VoteHere.net](#)

. In the 2000 primary, the Arizona Democratic party allowed its members to vote online, four percent did so. These events have increased discussion about the Internet as a voting tool.

Many argue that focusing on registration and ballot access fails to address the what they see to be the real cause of low voter turnout: lack of interest. The solution to this problem is often seen to be more competitive races. Increasing competitiveness of elections, however, requires more sweeping structural changes to the process than are required for ballot access.

### More Competition

New York City's 2001 will see massive turnover in the [city council](#) and [citywide offices](#) due to term limits. This, combined with the new

[matching funds](#)

offered by the

[Campaign Finance Board](#)

are creating the most competitive election in city history. Open seats, now held by some incumbents going back to the 1970s, are drawing a varied field of seasoned activists, first time candidates, and their constituencies into the electoral process. In addition, public financing allows those candidates willing to comply with fundraising and spending limits to receive four dollars for every dollar they raise. This makes the expensive prospect of running for office more feasible for those candidates with limited personal resources.

Action on such well-intentioned proposals is often bogged down in politics, as different proposals affect turnout differently for each party. For instance, motor voter and same day registration tend to favor Democrats, and thus have met with significant resistance by Republicans. Internet voting and voting by mail are seen as increasing Republican turnout, and are therefore widely opposed by Democrats.

### HOW CAMPAIGNS DELIVER

Talking about getting people out to vote in theory and making it happen on Election Day are two very different things. While the campaigns, special interests groups and the parties all do their part; the focus locally is through local political organizations and clubs.

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Delivering the vote involves a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches. From the top, national and local candidates campaign frantically, whipping up enthusiasm among their key constituencies. Last minute direct mailings and direct telephone calls (recorded and live) are made by the millions. Unions press the members to get out to vote Democratic, and lend their efforts to the campaigns directly. Conservative and liberal organizations do the same for their respective candidates.

Unions are just one of the many interest groups that rally their constituencies to get to the polls and support their candidate of choice. The [NAACP](#) this year launched Operation Big Vote, spending nine million dollars for such get-out-the-vote efforts as public service announcements by celebrities and popular politicians on radio and television. It also offers its members [ten reasons](#) to vote on Election Day.

Other advocacy organizations - to name just a few, the [League of Conservation Voters](#), the [League of Women Voters](#) (which includes a campaign called Take a Friend to Vote), the [United Federation of Teachers](#) and the "200,000 in 2000" -- conduct information campaigns and old-fashioned phone banks to get their members to the polls. Last year's proposed amendment to the city charter was roundly defeated in large measure because of the turnout generated by unions and good government groups. Still other groups, while not rallying around one particular issue or group, conduct nonpartisan voter registration, education and get out the vote efforts. (See [savvyvoter.org](#), [Democracy Net](#), and [Election.com](#) for information on national, state and local races.)

But the real hand-to-hand combat of getting out the vote occurs on the local level by local political clubs. In New York City, local political clubs, the lifeblood New York City politics provide the person power to deliver the vote. (See the [McManus Midtown Democratic Association](#) and the [Village Independent Democrats](#) for a taste.)

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Club members, many of whom are neighborhood activists, are the foot soldiers of a 48-hour battle. It begins the evening before Election Day, when volunteers work through the night blanketing the city with campaign posters. By 6:00 am on Election Day, club members appear in front of polling place armed with palm cards reminding voters who to vote for. As the morning proceeds, members station themselves in subway stops, grocery stores and other high traffic areas. By late morning, club members return to their clubhouses to get their marching orders. Depending on turnout, they are redistributed to phone banks, going door to door within the particular clubs jurisdiction, or are loaned out to other clubs that are involved in tight races or to the campaigns themselves. Particular effort is focused on senior citizens. Vans are often provided to polling places. By evening when traffic at the polling places increases, volunteers return with their palm cards to remind voters whom they are supposed to vote for.

For all the cynicism about politics, it is the efforts of thousands of unpaid activists -- students, retirees, and working people -- who take the day off to help their candidates that often make the difference on Election Day. Each vote they bring to the polls counts. In 1994, Congressman James Maloney of Connecticut defeated his opponent Ed Muenster by just four votes. Despite beliefs to the contrary, many races are decided by a handful of votes. With so much at stake in 2000 -- the Presidency, the Supreme Court, control of the House and Senate -- a vote can mean that much more. Just ask Jim Maloney.