



# STATE OF MINNESOTA

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Governor Jesse Ventura for the New York Times  
Op-Ed 10/9/00

I might make a controversial observation now and again, but I think most people agree with me on at least one thing: the Presidential campaigns last *way* too long. But there is one positive to the never-ending campaign: it gives us more time to try to get America's young people engaged in the political process.

Right now, the news is a little disheartening. My campaign for Minnesota governor in 1998 helped bring out the young people, but lately I've read about a number of national polls that indicate 18-to-24-year-olds just aren't interested in voting, or even following the presidential debates on television.

Then what were young people watching while the October 3<sup>rd</sup> debate was broadcast on just about all the over-the-air channels? Probably "Dark Angel" on Fox. Seventeen million Americans tuned into that show when it ran opposite the debate, and you can bet a large percentage of them were in their late teens and early 20s. For them, the debates were just politics as usual, which continues to neglect young people and their concerns.

What young person wants to watch the same old politicians (or their sons) going at it over issues like Medicare and prescription drugs?

It's a vicious circle. Politicians give youth-related issues a low priority because they see that young people aren't voting. Young people, in turn, don't bother voting because they think the candidates rarely talk about the issues young people care about in ways that are relevant to their lives.

What's more, any fresh new face is shot down by the tired old two-party system. In fact, under the current guidelines, Abraham Lincoln would not have been allowed to debate when he ran in 1860! He wasn't considered much of a national candidate, and he was a member of a new third party, the Republicans.

Is it a coincidence that the two states that consistently lead the nation in voter involvement, Minnesota and Maine, have independent governors who were elected in three way races?

If our political system would encourage more choices, our government would be more representative and our young people would be more engaged.

But even though it looks like we're stuck with the two-party system, at least for the short term, the presidential candidates do have a chance to start taking an interest in young voters.

## Ventura op-ed, page 2

The last Presidential debate is October 17th at Washington University in St. Louis. It will be a "town hall" format where the candidates field questions from the audience. The more than 75 national organizations and partners that make up the Youth Vote 2000 coalition, including MTV, the WWF, and the National Association of Secretaries of State, are asking that a majority of the participants in that debate be people between the ages of 18 and 30.

This is not a controversial proposal. It won't cost the candidates, the commission or the public a single extra cent. But you know the old guard's going to say, "But why a youth debate? Don't issues like education and health care speak to both young and old Americans?"

Sure, most major political issues affect all Americans. But there are aspects and dimensions of these problems that are particularly relevant to young people, and those aspects are usually overlooked. Take health care, for example. That's a perennial topic on the campaign trail, but you never hear that people ages 18 to 24 form the largest segment of uninsured Americans.

It's time for candidates to break the vicious circle and show their leadership. There are 50 million voting-age Americans who have been virtually ignored for too long. Ninety minutes of prime time attention can be a major step toward showing them that their vote matters.