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Margaret Chase Smith in 1970 stated, "Our birthright and duty to vote is the most important right and obligation we possess as citizens of a free society." To promote Senator Smith's firm belief in the importance of civic engagement, on the eve of the 2004 presidential elections the Margaret Chase Smith Library invited Maine high school seniors to submit essays proposing ways to encourage young people to become more involved in the political process. We feature here Becca Leathe's first place prize-winning essay, which draws upon historical examples as well as personal experiences and opinions.

The Margaret Chase Smith essay contest is sponsored each year by the Margaret Chase Smith Library. Interested students should contact the library directly.

Rejuvenating American Politics

by Becca Leathe

In his Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln stated that the government of the United States is a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people" that should never "perish from the earth." The government arises from the power of the people to run for and elect candidates, and in turn, these candidates create a government that gives back to the citizens. However, in order for a government to be truly by the people, all the people need to be involved. This includes young citizens under the age of 30, who have one of the lowest voter turnout records in the country.

In order to understand how to encourage young people to get involved, one must first look at the factors that are causing young people to remain politically inactive. First, many young people do not feel affected by politics. Most politicians

seem elderly and far removed from the average young person, and many of the issues facing politicians, such as Medicare and Social Security, are broad and unrelated to the lives of young people. Issues that really matter to young people, such as college loans, are often skimmed over in lieu of other pressing concerns. In addition, many young people are students. They are concerned with studying and, in their free time, their social lives and exploring their newfound freedom; politics is not a high priority for them.

Politics is also relatively inaccessible for many young people. They do not know where to register to vote, or how to take part in political activities such as caucuses or rallies, or even what options they may have to take part in the political process. Instead of aggressively going after political information, many young people simply become apathetic toward the entire process and make no effort to become more involved. This is the beginning of a cycle where young people have very little influence in their government because they are not involved, but they are not involved because they have very little influence. This continues the trend toward political apathy. Also, many younger voters are choosing not to identify with either major party, and thus often feel themselves alienated from the political competition and cohesiveness

of the country and turned off by the prominent negative images of politics.

What would help inspire these young people to become more involved? There are many historical examples that illustrate how new developments in the political system can increase voter turnout and involvement. One was the passage of the several voting rights amendments, most importantly the Fifteenth, Nineteenth, Twenty-fourth, and Twenty-sixth amendments. The Fifteenth Amendment was passed after the Civil War and gave African American men the right to vote. This was important in boosting voter turnout because suddenly a large portion of the population that had been denied the right to vote gained this right. However, African Americans were kept from voting by literacy tests and poll taxes the Twenty-fourth Amendment abolished, thus increasing voter turnout again. The Nineteenth Amendment was passed in response to the women's rights movement of the early twentieth century and gave women the same voting rights as men. This increased voter turnout, because the voting population doubled with this amendment. The last important voting rights amendment is the Twenty-sixth Amendment, which was passed in response to the Vietnam War to allow 18 year olds to vote. This is especially pertinent because it brought younger voters into the realm of political participation for the first time.

Another important factor that influences political participation of citizens is the political climate of the country at the time that they are of voting age. Eras dominated by controversial issues, such as the civil rights movement or the Vietnam

War, generate political awareness around those issues. This awareness is heightened by media attention and spurs people to take political action. For example, during the civil rights movement, protestors gave meaning to their cause by conducting marches and sit-ins that attracted the eyes of people all across America. They were then joined by many more people who were involved in various ways: legislators proposing civil rights legislation, outsiders coming into the South to help register black voters, and people everywhere throwing their support behind the movement. During the Vietnam War, people were also very involved in politics because they disagreed with the conflict the government was involved with in Vietnam. Many of these people were very young, and protests in schools and universities from Des Moines, Iowa to Kent, Ohio gained the attention of the country. In both of these situations, people were involved because they were concerned with the outcome of a particular matter. Their involvement brought more people into political activities until both the civil rights movement and the protest of the Vietnam War were nationwide concerns.

This sense of commitment to a cause and pride in political activity is what is lacking in many young Americans today. How can this attitude be changed? Perhaps the best way is to prevent it from forming in the first place. Teachers should begin teaching their elementary students about the political process and how it directly affects them. Too often social studies classes focus only on the history of the United States, and not on current issues and applications. By bringing current events and political functions into

classes from the beginning, students will grow up with knowledge of their political system. Young children could take part in mock elections to understand what elections are and how their vote counts toward electing an authority figure. They should also be taught that voting and being politically involved is their civic responsibility, but that it is not just a task but also something to take great pride in. History lessons about the foundation of the U.S. government and how it has evolved to the present day should be focused on making students feel good about their country, and thus maybe lessening the jaded attitudes towards politics that form later in life.

In junior high school students should focus on political figures of their time, controversial issues, and how decisions being made in Congress will affect them. They should gain an understanding of how small groups of people have historically made an impact on the government, such as the early civil rights movement that gained rights for American blacks or Shay's Rebellion that prompted the creation of the American Constitution. In high school, when students are nearly at the age when they can vote, they should understand ways in which the political process is accessible to them and the functions of the government. All students should be required to take a comprehensive government class about the American political system that should focus on topics such as the Constitution, the media's role in politics, political participation, and how the government functions on a day-to-day level. Candidates should make an effort to visit high schools to get students interested in their platforms and make them feel like

they have an important voice in their government. Students who are 18 years of age or older should be encouraged to register to vote, and information on how and where to do so should be made available to them.

After high school, young people still need to be encouraged to remain politically aware and active. Young citizens also need to feel that the government is interested in their voice and they need to stay educated about political issues and events. They need to be made aware of issues that concern them immediately and of issues that will concern them later in life, and know that how they feel about these issues is important to legislators. Programs such as Rock the Vote, which brings political information to young people in many ways, help make politics understandable and accessible to young people. Movements to help register more voters, such as the motor voter law, help to make registering to vote easy and clear. Organizations in colleges that educate students about political issues and about ways to get involved spur interest in politics. They also bring groups of people together who have similar values and present them with a forum for political discussion and participation. However, these groups should not just be limited to colleges; there should be opportunities for young people to come together to become informed on current issues and to voice their opinions of the political system.

There are also some general changes that could be made to the political system in order to attract young voters. If independent parties gained strength and were able to distinguish themselves from the Democrats and Republicans that have been in control of the country for so

long, many young voters might feel more able to relate to politicians. Also, if campaigns reduced the number of negative ads they aired before elections, young voters might feel positive about candidates and be more likely to vote for them. The diminution of corruption and scandals within the government would also help to eliminate the disillusionment of young people with the government, and if these young people felt that their government was honest and trustworthy, they would feel that giving their time and attention to politics is a worthy cause.

By focusing attention on the education and distinctive attitudes of young people in America, the political involvement of these important citizens could be increased. This development of a new involved youth will take time and effort, but it will be very rewarding in the end. These young people have unique ideas that would add a youthful rejuvenation to the American political scene, and since they are the people who will someday be completely in charge of the government, it is important to notice the worthiness of this effort. America cannot truly be a nation by the people, of the people, and for the people until its political activities fully include the young people and its issues fully address the young people. When this happens, the nation will be as Abraham Lincoln promised, and the involvement and pride of the young people in the institution of the American government will ensure that this great democracy will never perish from the earth. 🐉



Becca Leathe, from Eliot, Maine, wrote her essay while a senior at Marshwood High School. Since graduation, she has been participating in a foreign exchange program that is taking her to Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji, where she is performing community service. Upon her return, she will enroll at Middlebury College, Vermont, where she plans to study languages and international relations.