

The Virgin Vote: How Young Americans Made Democracy Social, Politics Personal, And Voting Popular In The Nineteenth Century

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Review

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Grinspan, Jon *The Virgin Vote: How Young Americans Made Democracy Social, Politics Personal, and Voting Popular in the Nineteenth Century.* University of North Carolina Press, \$28.00 ISBN 9781469627342

'The Thrill is Gone: ' The Virgin Vote and American Political Culture

During the heated presidential primary leading up to the 2016 election young voters under thirty turned out in droves to support the unconventional seventy-five year old Vermont Senator, Bernie Sanders, handing him more primary votes than they did to the two eventual major party nominees combined. In assessing Sanders' appeal pundits and scholars alike pointed to his plain speak message that the American nation had fallen under the control of a self-serving moneyed elite whose policies hindered opportunity and threatened the American credo of democratic equality. Young voters seemingly found a voice and call to action in Sanders' Populist crusade. Their strong support did not, however, translate into unwavering backing of the party that Sanders sought to lead. On the contrary, once their candidate lost the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, enough of these young voters either stayed home on election day, cast their ballots for third party candidates whose views more closely aligned with their own, or threw their support behind the anti-establishment populism of Republican Donald Trump to ensure a Democratic defeat.

Jon Grinspan's pithy and thought-provoking work, *The Virgin Vote*, offers us a powerful portrayal of a time in our nation's history where such limited partisan fealty was unimaginable and suggests that today's parties might learn lessons about cultivating party loyalty by closely examining nineteenth century political culture.

Focusing his gaze on the period 1840-1900, Grinspan deftly describes the central role of young Americans in driving the tumultuous politics of the nineteenth century. While some of this influence can be ascribed to demographics—America was a nation of young people with its median age

hovering close to 18 throughout much of this era—Grinspan rightly connects this phenomenon to the social and cultural upheaval that swirled through nineteenth century American life. In a striking parallel to the plight of today’s young voters, America’s nineteenth century youth, grappling with the everyday pressures of maturation, also confronted a tsunami of sweeping change (the market revolution and the second great awakening, the physical expansion of the nation and dispersal of the population, rapid technological change, civil war and reconstruction, the influx of millions of foreign born immigrants, industrialization and labor strife, the erosion of rural life, and urbanization, to name but a few) that left them uncertain about their futures and about how best to create stability in their own lives. As traditional life gave way in the face of these forces, the nation’s voters steered the nation’s political culture into a pronounced democratic turn (eliminating property requirements for voting and establishing 21 as the age of majority) as the electorate looked to the political system to help them navigate uncertain times and to restore the nation to stability. “Grasping for maturity in the shaken nineteenth century,” Grinspan writes, young men and women used the extroverted world of politics as a convenient handhold.” (55)

This combination of forces proved a potent brew and the nation’s youth (most especially, of course, its white males) eagerly embraced the new political order (and vice versa), “trading their energy, and eventually their votes, for identity and importance.”(5) The result, the reader is reminded was a raucous political culture characterized by pole raisings, hard cider, barbeques, torch lit parades, log cabins, polling place brawls, and extremely high voter turnout. Importantly, Grinspan argues, while some of these youthful voters sought to shape policy, far more important to them was how the political process could be used to help them achieve personal goals (asserting their manhood, impressing members of the opposite sex, exerting women’s voices in a highly patriarchal culture, ingratiating oneself with party leaders in the hope of gaining employment or influence, etc.). Stepping eagerly forward to cast their “virgin votes” and to declare their partisan fealty was not, Grinspan argues, a matter taken lightly. On the contrary, years of political acculturation in combination with personal goals (most readily achieved through long term commitments) and the active solicitation of party leadership who recognized the vital importance of capturing virgin voters and cementing their partisan identities, ensured that the votes of America’s nineteenth century youth remained steadfast for a lifetime.

While offering a sensitive and illuminating overview of the vital role of young voters in America's nascent political party system Grinspan's work does have its limitations, especially in its accounting of the Civil War/Reconstruction years. Missing, for instance, is a thorough consideration of the role of ideology in shaping political affiliation. As Harry Watson, J. Mills Thornton, Michael Morrison, and a host of other historians have shown, fundamental and deeply held convictions about the nature of American freedom and its threatened demise played central roles in inspiring political and personal action. Indeed, one cannot explain the century's pivotal event (the Civil War) absent ideologically driven politics. In this sense, Grinspan's general disregard for third party movements and/or partisan realignment (he frequently attributes such movements to an "in" versus "out" dichotomy), particularly in the antebellum era, and his privileging of personal aspirations over interest in policy, falls especially short in helping the reader to understand why a young Democrat or Whig might, in 1854, suddenly shift his allegiance to the upstart Know Nothing or Republican movements. More puzzling still is the short shrift given to exploring how young America's most defining experience—the Civil War—shaped political identity and partisan behavior. One would be hard pressed to pinpoint a moment in time of greater consequence (and one where personal ambition would seemingly play less of a role) for more virgin voters than their casting of votes while serving in the armies of the north and south and yet this experience remains mostly absent from Grinspan's work.

Another gap in Grinspan's narrative thread is the political infancy of African-American voters in the aftermath of the war. To his credit, the author does a wonderful job of integrating the experience of young women into his account of nineteenth century political life (indeed, this is one of the work's most important contributions). Virtually nothing, however, is said about newly enfranchised African-Americans and the era's politics. Did they view political action in the same way as their white peers? Did politicians (white and black) look to bind these "virgin voters" (a great many of whom were well beyond the twenty-one age of majority) through similar raucous, hands on, participatory means to party? Did African-American voters, when possible, turn out at the same rate as their white peers? In those places where their voting rights were preserved, did electoral turnout diminish as precipitously as it did among the nation's white youth? Obviously, for many African-Americans, political identity died stillborn in the face of Jim Crow, nonetheless, this segment of the nineteenth century electorate is deserving of much greater attention in this

account.

More persuasive is Grinspan's account of the demise of youth-driven politics in the United States in the waning years of the nineteenth century. Beginning in 1888 youthful voters began to lose their zeal for politics and the number of virgin votes plummeted by fifty percent over the next thirty-six years. Two primary factors, Grinspan argues, led to this precipitous decline. First, the nation's moneyed elite, always uncomfortable with the messiness of a democracy often dominated by working class politicians and eager to order the United States into a well-defined and rational nation, steered young voters away from the streets and into the more restrained and structured world of "good government" and in so doing killed the excitement and spontaneity that had made earlier politics so appealing to young voters. Likewise, the simultaneous emergence of "a vital youth culture" provided young Americans with alternative forms of entertainment and a new, more confident identity, thus leading young voters "to value relating to their generation above struggling for maturity." (132) The net effect of this disentangling of youth culture and political culture, Grinspan contends, was a political alienation of American youth that has continued down to our present time, in spite of a broadening of the electorate via the 26th Amendment. Sadly, *The Virgin Vote* warns us, upticks in youth voting, such as the one supporting Bernie Sanders in the recent presidential primary, are nothing more than fleeting glimpses of what could be and that efforts to build consistent voter turnout and affinity among the nation's young voters are bound to fail without the successful reunification of the personal need for politics and a consistent and sustained exposure to democratic political life.

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