Sifry, M. L. (January 2000). Finding the lost voters. *The American Prospect.* Vol. 11, no. 6, pp. 23 – 27.

Al Garcia is one frustrated Democratic campaign manager. A criminal defense lawyer by trade and a twenty-year veteran of Minnesota politics, he ran two candidates for the state assembly in 1998. Both were in Anoka County, ground zero of the Jesse Ventura vote. One candidate, Jerry Newton, a decorated Vietnam veteran and small-business owner, fiscally conservative but very supportive of public schools and the environment, lost badly to a far-right pro-lifer as the voters who turned out for Ventura voted for Republican state representatives down the ballot. Garcia's other candidate, Luanne Koskinen, an incumbent with strong labor backing, barely held onto her office. Garcia's problems were hardly unique: Ventura voters across the state ended up costing Democrats control of the state assembly.

Over lunch last winter at Billie's, a popular Anoka County restaurant, Garcia delivered his postmortem: Democrats had gotten whipped because they hadn't reached out to new voters— and there had been a lot of them. "At 7:45 in the morning on Election Day," Garcia recalled, "I'm number 250 at my polling place in Coon Rapids [a city in Anoka County]. Six people were registering to vote, and they had already registered eighty people. At 8:00 p.m. you still had lines of people waiting to vote. When the first Coon Rapids numbers came in, I got a chill. Humphrey 120, Coleman 35, Ventura 340. The election was over."

And why had his candidates fared so poorly? "We were too focused on the regular voters," Garcia said. "If you hadn't voted in two out of the last four elections, you didn't get anything from Luanne or Jerry." Targeting likely voters, of course, is standard practice in most campaigns these days. But Garcia said he'd known that strategy wouldn't be enough.

"I could sense it coming," he said. "My wife told me early on that she would support Ventura, and she hates politics. All my legal clients were supporting Jesse, from the first-time DWI offenders to the major dope dealers! And he was pulling at me, in my gut. I'm a blue-collar guy who grew up in north Minneapolis. My dad's a dockworker, my mother's a waitress. Like the folks in Anoka. And he was saying things that average people could connect with."

Garcia said he'd wanted his candidates to do the same thing. "The number-one issues in Anoka are taxes, wages, and traffic. That's what we wanted to focus on." But he'd been hamstrung by centralized campaign effort run out of the House Democratic Caucus. "They had a $15,000 mail program—half of our budget—that we were forced to buy into or lose our field worker and party funds. Six out of the nine pieces they mailed were on education, even though we said that wasn't our top concern. And they mailed to too small a target group, and they wouldn't let us change it."

Campaigns at all levels of American politics these days are focused narrowly on "likely voters," people who vote regularly. Eric Johnson, campaign manager to Hubert "Skip" Humphrey, the losing Democratic candidate for governor, admitted as much after the election. "We didn't see Ventura coming because our polling screened out unlikely voters," he told *The Wall Street Journal.* All four of Minnesota's major polling organizations also failed to project Ventura's victory because they factored out these voters.

The assumption governing the typical political campaign is that the American electorate is a stable, predictable mass—or, worse, that they're apathetic and easily manipulated. Ventura's victory is just the latest and loudest explosion of that piece of conventional wisdom.

Indeed, politicians are making a huge mistake when they focus only on "likely voters." A large subset of the "unlikely voters" filtered out by pollsters and left out of campaign targeting efforts might be better described as *discouraged* voters—potential participants who have been turned off or pushed out by an increasingly money-driven and manipulative electoral process. Many of these citizens, people who are disproportionately downscale and correspondingly attracted to working-class issues and symbols, can be remotivated to turn out. A central question is whether more Democrats will take their campaigns to these voters or, by failing to do so, will continue to create opportunities for outsiders ranging from Jesse Ventura to Bernie Sanders to Patrick Buchanan.

Apathy or Independence?

Public trust in government has been declining steadily over the past four decades. The authoritative surveys conducted biennially since the 1950s by the University of Michigan's National Election Studies (NES) have found that large majorities of Americans, across all demographic groups, don't believe "you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right just about always [or] most of the time." Similarly, most people think "the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves." According to the NES, the percentage agreeing that "people like me don't have any say about what the government does" rose from 31 percent in 1952 to 53 in 1996. This is a strong statement of disaffection.

But some Americans still feel better represented than others. People are more likely to believe that they "don't have any say" if they are black rather than white, are poor rather than well-off, have a limited education compared to a college diploma or postgraduate degree, or work in blue-collar jobs rather than white-collar or professional fields. For example, 62 percent of people with a high school diploma said they don't have any say in what government does, compared to 40 percent of those with more education. And about 56 percent of those in the bottom two-thirds of the national income distribution felt left out, compared to 38 percent in the top twentieth.

A similar pattern applies to how Americans think about the major political parties. In general, polls find that between 50 and 60 percent of the population believes there are "important differences in what the Republicans and Democrats stand for." But in 1996, while most people in the top income brackets believed that there were significant differences between the parties, 50 percent of people in the bottom sixth of income distribution thought there was no difference. Similarly, 59 percent of those with less than a high school education and 40 percent of those with a high school diploma said there was no difference between the parties, compared to just 25 percent of those with at least some college education. Overall, blue-collar workers were almost twice as likely as professionals to believe party distinctions were meaningless.

Among active voters, the trend is away from the major parties and toward independence. From 1990 to 1998, while the number of voters registered as independent or third-party increased approximately 57 percent, the number of registered Republicans dropped by almost 5 percent and the number of Democrats by almost 14 percent, according to data collected from state agencies by the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate. Voters' political preferences—a looser definition than party registration—showed the same trend. The proportion of people identifying themselves as independents increased from 23 percent in 1952 to an average of 35 percent in the 1990s, according to the NES. Independent voters are somewhat more likely to be of lower income, education, age, and occupational status than hard-core party partisans (though this variation is tempered by the strong Democratic loyalties of many blacks). And 41 percent of people under the age of 29 self-identify as independents, according to a 1999 Gallup poll.

Independents are the most volatile of active voters, with a marked tendency to support candidates who come from "outside the box." All the exit polls going back to George Wallace's 1968 presidential candidacy show that voters who identify themselves as independents are about twice as likely as other voters to support third-party candidates. In Minnesota in 1998, Ventura won with 37 percent overall, but got 52 percent of the independents.

As the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (known as the motor-voter law) brings more voters onto the registration rolls, this trend toward electoral volatility seems likely to strengthen. In Florida, the numbers of registered Republicans, Democrats, and nonaffiliates/third-party registrants each rose by about 500,000 in the first two years of the law's implementation. Since 1996, however, the number of major party registrants has declined slightly, while the number of non-major party registrants has risen another 250,000. The same thing has happened in California, where the number of major party registrants has held steady since 1996, while the number of non-major party registrants has risen about 300,000.

Of course, rising voter alienation and disaffection from the two major parties does not prove that a different kind of political engagement is possible. After all, as measures of political alienation have risen, turnout in national and state elections has declined. But are citizens really just signaling their apathy when they fail to vote? Or' are they more specifically alienated from the Democratic and Republican establishments and their candidates? In fact, a significant number of nonvoters look a lot like politically active independent voters.

It is difficult to find data that distinguishes those abstainers who are principled or angry and those who are merely indifferent, but it does exist. In May of 1996, the League of Women Voters released a poll that showed nonvoters were no more distrustful of the federal government than regular voters. Active voters were, however, far more likely to see significant differences between the parties on major issues, to believe that elections mattered and that their votes made a difference. The poll also suggested that efforts to mobilize voters were highly important: About three-quarters of voters said they had been contacted by a candidate or party, compared with less than half of the nonvoters.

But this says little about the actual political preferences of novoters. More answers can be found in two little-noticed surveys, one conducted in the summer of 1983 by ABC News, and the second done after the election of 1996 by Republican pollster Kellyanne Fitzpatrick. ABC News polled more than 2,500 voting-age Americans and then compared highly likely voters (people who were registered to vote who said they always vote) with very unlikely voters (people who were not registered to vote and gave little inclination that they were planning to vote in the next election). The Fitzpatrick poll compared a sample of 800 voters with one of 400 nonvoters. Together, the two surveys reveal some telling points.

First, about a third of the nonvoters aren't apathetic. Rather, they're angry and feel shut out by the choices offered. When asked by ABC why they didn't vote in the 1980 presidential election, 36 percent of the nonvoters gave a political reason such as "None of the candidates appealed to me." Thirty-eight percent of the nonvoters in the Fitzpatrick poll didn't vote in the 1996 because they "did not care for any of the candidates" or were "fed up with the political system" or "did not feel like the candidates were interested in people like me."

Second, nonvoters tilt toward liberalism. In the ABC News poll, 60 percent of the nonvoters who said they had voted in 1980 recalled choosing either Jimmy Carter or John Anderson; only 30 percent said they had voted for Ronald Reagan. Considering that after an election, voters tend to "recall" voting for the winner, this is a striking finding. Sixty-seven percent of nonvoters said they had voted for the Democratic candidate for the House of Representatives, compared to 52 percent of regular voters. In the Fitzpatrick poll, just 38 percent of nonvoters identified as conservatives, compared to 48 percent of the voting public. And while 17 percent of voters called themselves liberals, 22 percent of nonvoters chose that label. (A *New York Times/CBS* News poll found that those who were not planning to vote in the 1998 election preferred Democrats for Congress by 49 percent to 27 percent; likely voters, on the other hand, were evenly split between Republicans and Democrats.)

How to reach discouraged voters

"Low turnout is the compound consequence of legal and procedural barriers intertwined with the parties' reluctance to mobilize many voters, especially, working-class and minority voters," says Frances Fox Piven, who along with her husband Richard Cloward wrote *Why Americans Don't Vote* and built the movement that passed the motor-voter law. "I've come to the conclusion that party competition takes the form of demobilizing, not mobilizing, voters, because new voters threaten incumbents, raise new issues, or create the incentive to raise new issues," she adds. "You need mavericks, outsiders to try to mobilize new-voters—nobody else wants to take that risk."

"Nonvoters matter a lot," agrees pollster Stanley Greenberg, "though most candidates act as if they don't.... There's no questions that you can change the shape and size of the electorate, though that is more true for presidential elections than for individual, even statewide, campaigns." For example, turnout increased by 5.5 percent in the three-way presidential race of 1992. "There's reason to believe that the populist economic issues that Clinton was raising and the independent-libertarian issues that Perot was raising were at work there," Greenberg argues. "By comparison, in 1994, conservative definitions of the issues brought in more rural, conservative portions of the electorate while the health care reform failure led many noncollege women to drop out." Pollster John Zogby agrees: "If there's a strong independent candidate in the race, you begin to see the numbers of undecided voters in those groups who often don't vote—younger voters, registered independents—start to decline in our surveys, a sign they are planning to vote."

Representative Jesse Jackson, Jr., points to his father's 1984 and 1988 campaigns as proof that discouraged voters can be effectively mobilized. Indeed, the number of Democratic primary voters rose from 18 million in 1984 to nearly 23 million in 1988, with Reverend Jackson's total share rising by 3.4 million. "If you're able to tap into the people who aren't consciously involved in politics or following it," the younger Jackson says, "and show how everything they do has something to do with politics—that shirt they wear, the stop sign, the taxes they pay, the schools they attend, the police officer on their street. .. you can inspire them and give them reason to participate."

It takes a certain kind of candidate, message, and campaign to reach these voters. "You're not going to be able to cater to traditional economic forces that have significant influence," says Jackson. "You have to have some relationship to them, but you can't be seen as beholden to them. You have to be seen as a real American; you have to be someone who can look the press right in the face and tell them exactly how it is. You have to be Beattyite, almost Bulworthian."

Not many American politicians are trying to run this kind of campaign or can convincingly pull it off. However, there are a number of successful examples that predate Jesse Ventura. What seems to matter most is that the candidate have a populist message and style—someone who wants to empower ordinary people versus the establishment, who is blue collar as opposed to button-down, who favors effective government on behalf of the interests of average working people, and who supports sweeping efforts to clean up politics and reform the electoral process itself.

Those were Paul Wellstone's attributes in 1990, when he came from nowhere—had been a college professor and progressive activist—to win the Minnesota Senate race. Not only did Wellstone draw more votes than the Democratic candidate in the previous Senate contest; more voters came out in 1990 than did in 1988, a presidential election year. (According to Francis Fox Piven, Wellstone attributed his victory in part to the increased number of poorer voters on the rolls, thanks to the earlier passage of a state-level, agency-based voter registration system.) Something similar happened in 1998 with Iowan Tom Vilsack, who waged a successful underdog run for governor and raised the Democratic vote total nearly 20 percent over the previous gubernatorial race. And activists in Washington State argue that their 1998 ballot initiative to raise the state minimum wage to the highest level in the country had a similar effect—drawing more votes than any other item or candidate on the ballot and bringing in enough new voters to swing control of the both houses of the state legislature back to the Democratic column.

In 1990. Bernie Sanders, the former socialist mayor of Burlington, won Vermont's lone seat in Congress as an independent. He ran on issues like national health care, tax fairness, environmental activism, addressing the needs of the poor, and involving working people in the political process. In his first try for Congress in 1988, he came close, drawing 37.5 percent of the vote. Two years later, he won a solid victory with 56 percent of the vote. In both races, the total vote was way up—13 percent higher—compared to the previous election cycle.

And while Sanders did well in his breakthrough victory in 1990 with the college-educated, alternative life-style types who have moved up to Vermont in the past generation, his strongest support actually came from the poor conservative hill towns and farm communities of the state's "Northeast Kingdom." For example, Sanders's strongest showing statewide came in the county of Orleans, where he pulled 62 percent of the vote. A rural county on the border of Canada that voted solidly for George Bush in 1988, Orleans had a median household income in 1990 of $22,800, about $7,000 less than the state average, Only 14.2 percent of Orleans's residents were college graduates. The standard of living was low, with homes worth on average just $66,500, compared to $95,600 statewide. Nearly 15 percent of Orleans's residents were living under the official poverty line. 4 percent more than in the rest of the state.

And then there is Jesse Ventura, a socially liberal, fiscally conservative, pro-campaign finance reform, anti-establishment candidate with a working-class style, who hit discouraged voters—as well as disaffected Democrats and Republicans— on the bull's-eye. His campaign deliberately targeted "unlikely voters" by focusing his public appearances in an "Independent Belt" of bedroom communities to the north and west of Minnesota's Twin Cities, and by placing his offbeat TV ads not on the nightly news shows but on Fox programs like *The Simpsons* and *The X-Files,* and on cable TV wrestling programs. Helped by same-day voter registration, his candidacy drastically boosted turnout, and most of those new voters pulled his lever. He won a near-majority of 18- to *44-year* olds, the heart of political independents.

In several other ways, Ventura's vote corresponded with those groups least satisfied with the existing political choices. Far more self-identified liberals than conservatives voted for him. Women voted for him almost as much as men. In the high-income professional suburbs, Ventura did poorly. In the less affluent suburbs, he did very well. Turnout in many of these blue-collar districts was over 70 percent, with as many as 20 percent of the total registering on Election Day. Many rank-and-file union members swung to Ventura as well. "I could tell going into the election," said Doug Williams, head of an electrical workers' union. "I was getting requests for information on him from my members. People were wearing his T-shirts and bumper stickers—people who hadn't really participated before."

People think Ventura won because he was a celebrity. But his early name recognition in Minnesota, while high for a third-party candidate, only gave him a chance to get the voters' attention. It's what he said and how he said it that made him a contender. "The voters saw Jesse as someone who's an outsider who's going to change things," said Ed Gross, who worked on voter targeting for the Ventura campaign. "Watching the TV debates, they saw two 'suits' and one 'nonsuit'—and most of them don't wear suits. Not only that, one of the 'suits' has worked for the other, and they both were owned by big money."

Gross recognized the dynamic from the 1990 and 1996 Wellstone campaigns for Senate, on which he had also worked. "I told Ventura, in a lot of ways, to the voters, you are a Wellstone. And voters went for Wellstone because they want to have a connection. They've felt disconnected for a long time. They want to feel like the guy up there knows how they live." In the end, they latched onto Ventura with enthusiasm. And the strength of his campaign—which succeeded in a state with one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country—stands as a warning to both of the major parties: This could happen to you.

Raising Turnout, Reviving Politics

As the barriers to voter registration have fallen with the gradual implementation of motor-voter, the pool of potential voters has grown. According to the Federal Election Commission, the total number of registered voters rose from 129 million in 1994 to 151 million in 1998, an increase of 8 percent of the total voting-age population. But politicians haven't caught on. "Candidates aren't yet campaigning to those voters," says Linda Davidoff, the former executive director of Human SERVE, the nonprofit organization set up by Piven and Cloward to spearhead the motor-voter drive. "[But] motor-voter is laying the groundwork for poorer people to participate differently. There's an enormous opportunity here for candidates who get the picture and campaign to the potential voter," she says.

Jesse Jackson, Jr. is one politician who understands very well the new potential of reaching out to discouraged voters. One of the keys to his first race, in which he beat a veteran Democratic legislator backed by the Daley political machine in a special election to fill Mel Reynold's seat, was his energetic campaign to register young voters. "He set up voter registration tables during local college registration," says Frank Watkins, his press secretary, "and we kept a record of those people and sent them a personal letter just before the election." Jackson registered about 6,500 new voters—5.000 of whom lived in his district. It's likely that many of them made his winning margin of 6,000 votes.

Despite Jackson's evident success and personal energy (even though he's in a safe district, he's continued to work to turn out more voters, winning more votes than almost any other member of Congress), there's been little interest from the Democratic Party establishment in helping him spread his message of increasing political participation. "We went to the DNC and showed them how we did it," Watkins says, "and they sat there and looked at us like we were crazy. They'd rather focus on raising more and more money to spend on advertising to fewer and fewer people,"

Obviously, going after the discouraged voters involves taking some risks, and it may be especially hard to do so in states that close their registration rolls weeks before Election Day. And there is a deeper challenge: convincing these citizens that voting really can matter again. Noting that outward expressions of populist anger seem to have declined in recent years, pollster John Zogby points to despair about politics as the explanation. "In one of my focus groups, a guy in Cleveland said. ‘I'm now in the third of a series of lousy jobs. I lost my good job in '85. I was angry before. But now it's not going to happen. Government can't do anything. And my vote doesn't matter at all.' He had downsized his expectations," Zogby concludes. Piven agrees: "The sense that politics is so corrupt, combined with neoliberal rhetoric that argues that government can't do anything, tends to demobilize people."

The ultimate challenge then for anyone seeking to connect with discouraged voters is to restore their hope while not denying that they have good reason to be cynical. What is fascinating and exciting about each of the handful of populist victories of the last decade—by Jackson, Sanders, Wellstone, and Ventura—is that in every case, their success raised expectations about politics across the country. Hope, it seems, can be contagious; we need to keep it alive.