

## ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING

# Calling out the young

by Richard Thompson and Peter Schwartzman

"There comes a time when silence is betrayal." — Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

What happened in last month's U.S. election may shatter environmental protection in our country. While the coming weeks and months should be full of political surprises (from election recount results, lawsuits, and demonstrations), it is likely that most of the candidates that have been declared winners will soon be taking office. Thus, we can expect the President and the Congress to be controlled by Republican interests, at least until the next election. The Republican majorities in both houses of Congress have increased, and several of the new Republican congressmen are considered more conservative than their predecessors. But what does this all mean for us, especially for the youth among us?

With these substantial gains in conservative representation, it is likely that legislation, which just a year ago would have been far too outlandish for congressional committees to even consider, might now get sufficient support to pass both Houses. For instance, one of President Bush's more visible proposals on the environment, promoted as "Clear Skies," will very likely get a strong hearing. This piece of legislation will worsen the nation's air quality since it will lower pollution reduction targets and allow the largest polluters to take advantage of additional loopholes in regulations. It didn't get much play during the Bush's first four years, likely because it is so obviously a boon to big corporations. Now, it looks like it will have more supporters in the new Congress. Additionally, there are definite signs that the next four years will see the a right wing attack on the Endangered Species Act; apparently this law, one of the strongest pieces of environmental legislation in our nation's history, is now considered far "too restrictive" by the Administration (Knickerbocker). With little resistance from the Dems (barring significant response by concerned voters), conservatives will be able to push through more pro-corporation, anti-environment, anti-children's health legislation. It seems that legislation that was far too conservative just last year might now be ripe for passage.

Are you worried that this shift to the right in our government will send the environmentalist movement back another couple of decades by weakening the Endangered Species Act or by perverting the Clean Air Act to the ends of multinational corporations? President Bush, who has one of the worst records on the environment according to many scholars and organizations, now has the opportunity to pass legislation that undermines environmental protection further. But, as disheartening as this may sound, there is something the youth can do about it. Namely, we need to speak openly and informatively in response to the President and his Administration's environmentally destructive policies.

**It's time that the youth of this country start speaking out against the maladies in our environment and public health system that plague our nation.**

The youth have the potential power to make big contributions and changes. How so? Well, there is strength in our numbers as well as a willingness and conviction to change. Youth Vote, an organization devoted to registering younger voters, estimates that the number of people aged 0-18 (73 million), outnumbers the number of people in the baby-boom generation.

Also, there are an estimated 43 million people under the age of 30 eligible to vote ([www.youthvote.org](http://www.youthvote.org)). Just think what would happen, if the youth demanded that the air and water in their communities be free of lead, mercury, benzene and dioxin and that everyone had health care. Does this all sound too optimistic? Don't become cynical. Again, we have the votes. Even if just 60 percent of youth voters supported one issue, nearly 26 million votes would be mobilized. With this level of support, issues such as clean air or mercury-free tuna, politicians will have to listen, especially if the elections are as close as they have been recently.

Don't think that your voice counts when you speak to our elders in Congress? You would be surprised at how politicians will listen to young people once they become politically active. After all, we're the ones that are going to be voting for the next 50 or 60 years. Remember, we are a huge block of voters. We will have a major impact on these elections once we start voting and actively promoting issues and causes that are beneficial to our country and our world. If we continue to unite, we can wield massive power in this country. As we unite around particular issues, politicians will start listening to us and speaking out about issues we care about.

Do you still think that your voice will not make a difference? You won't be alone when you speak up. There will be millions of Americans speaking out against the harmful policies and practices of our government. There is reason to believe that massive numbers of Americans are dissatisfied with President Bush's policies. Consider that more votes went against Bush than ever before in any previous presidential election; so much for the so-called "mandate." Senator Kerry also broke Ronald Reagan's record of 54 million votes by getting more than 58 million votes of his own. This means that 58 million people preferred a change at the top, despite Bush being a war president and an incumbent. Given this level of dissatisfaction, it is very likely that millions of Americans will be speaking out against the President over the next four years. These people need you to take the initiative to be politically involved as well, if, and when, you agree with their concerns and arguments.

The youth have the numbers, but do we have the willingness to change? Well, in order to change, we have to become informed. There is no doubt that more information and evidence exists today which suggests the costs of our unlimited, and largely unregulated, consumer culture are too great and completely unsustainable. The waste streams we generate by our consumption habits release tons of toxic and hazardous materials into the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the soil we use to grow our food. We need to educate our fellow young people about some of the current problems that they and their friends and family face, such as the lack of health care, the increasing number of people earning below a living wage, the increasing ozone levels in urban and agricultural regions, or about the children that have developed learning disabilities because of their exposure to mercury emissions from coal plants. According to a recent National Academy of Sciences study, perhaps as many as 60,000 babies born in this country each year "have been exposed to enough mercury *in utero* to cause poor school performance later in life" (NAS in Freese). When the youth come to terms with these realizations, they tend to get angry and frustrated. Many respond by changing the

way they live (i.e., by becoming vegetarians, by buying only second-hand clothes, by driving fuel efficient vehicles, etc.) and many become active politically as well. It is this activism that is called for now, as much as ever. So let's become informed and use this new found awareness as a source of inspiration to act and change.

As young people, we have free time that others lack. We realize that many of you are very, very busy with your colleges and jobs, but we're not asking for a huge time commitment. Two letters to Congressmen take about 30 minutes to write. A phone call to a Senator's office takes almost no time at all. One or two letters and a phone call may not seem like much in the whole grand scheme of things, but if everyone that opposed environmentally damaging policies spoke out against them, politicians would be forced to respond. Imagine if just half of Kerry and Cobb voters wrote President Bush a letter about the Endangered Species Act, the White House would be steeped in almost 30 million letters, inundating the President's mail room with complaints. This level of involvement would get attention. Furthermore, while we understand that you may be busy now, you will be much busier when you have kids. Most adults don't have time to speak up because they have kids and multiple jobs, so it is imperative that you speak now. If you don't speak up now, then when will you speak?

Voting alone is not enough. It is very important to vote, of course, but voting alone will not provoke politicians to make the changes necessary. We have to publicly protest the policies of the current government. Together, we can give a voice to all those that feel angry, dispirited, and discouraged by the policies. Once these masses of people see someone speaking up, they, too, will become empowered and begin to join our political movement as well. Many people, young and old, are just waiting for someone to show the courage and strength to take on environmentally irresponsible politicians and the multinational corporations that serve their self-interests — i.e., profits.

Some of you may scoff at this. You may be thinking that there are so many political activists that you need not get involved. You don't need to push for corporate accountability, AIDS funding, or mandatory pollution reductions because someone more informed and determined will do it for you. They will call up their representatives and senators. They will go vote. As someone who has had many friends that are political activists, I (Richard) have to tell you that there are not as many as you might think. Though few in number, these political activists do keep the politicians at least a little honest through their unrelenting effort and work. But these few full-time activists are no match for the large polluters with fat bank accounts that have paid employees that lobby Congress non-stop. Though a few people may not be able to have a huge influence on our government, when put up against wealth and power, if even half of our generation (24 million people) start speaking out, we will have a huge impact on the government's decisions and direction.

We must ask, "Have our elders gotten the job done?" In the three Congressional elections and two Presidential elections since 1998, those over 30 years of age dominated the electorate—comprising at least 83 percent of those who voted. And, for the most part, those that have been elected by our elders have made it harder for us to get health care and have closed off U.S. involvement in the Kyoto Protocol

on climate change. In fact, 5 million fewer American children have private health care than the number that had it four years ago ([www.msn.com](http://www.msn.com)), yet our parents still re-elected the President to a second term. The youth can have great influence in the future. Remember, the youth actually voted for Kerry by 54 percent to 45 percent margin. *Our elders have proven that they cannot take control over the problems that plague our great nation.* We have to make important contributions for necessary changes to happen now, for no one else will make it happen for us. Our parents will not bail us out.

Given the problems we face, there may have never been a more urgent time to speak than now. For those of us that do not want to see our skies treated more recklessly, it is time to speak up. We cannot be silent while the government allows power plants to pollute our nation's rivers and fish with mercury, poisons which ultimately pass on to our fetuses as well as infants. Do not sit idly while so many problems beg for your support. Get active now and do something good for yourself, humanity, and the Earth. Previous generations of youth contributed to the passing of environmental legislation and to cultural shifts that had a tremendous impact on the way we treat each other as well as the environment. There is no doubt that the youth will have to play an important role if we are going to change the tide once again.

Together, we can start a strong movement to help nurture our environment and protect public health. Let's begin a movement that will hold our government accountable for the ills done to us because of corporate greed and ignorance. Let's contribute to a movement to protect those 16 million young Americans (under age 25) without health insurance, who suffer without the basic health advantages that we enjoy. Let's be part of a movement that considers all humans equal and worthy of the environmental services that are necessary to live a rewarding life.

I (Richard) am starting a couple of political groups that will be based in both Kansas City (my hometown) and Galesburg. The groups will do everything they can to get young people's views heard on environmental and health issues. If you have even 30 minutes of time every week and would like to help out, send me an e-mail at [trickydrjt@yahoo.com](mailto:trickydrjt@yahoo.com) and let's get things moving in a progressive direction for a change.

I (Peter) also feel compelled to act in reaction to current world matters. I spent a few weeks earlier this month putting together a new website dedicated to peace and justice. It also has links to local websites that might be of interest to people in Western Illinois. It can be found at: <http://home.grics.net/~sfactor>. Take a look and provide feedback. Works Cited:

Freese, Barbara. (2003) *Coal: A Natural History*. New York: Penguin, 304 pp.

Knickerbocker, Brad. (2004) "Analysis: Bush's 2nd Term Stamp on the Environment." *The Christian Science Monitor*. Nov. 17.

Peter Schwartzman is associate professor and chair of the Environmental Studies Program at Knox College. He is a research climatologist with peer-reviewed publications in the area of climate change and human population growth.

Richard Thompson is a 19-year-old, first-year student at Knox College who lives in Overland Park, Kans. Academically, he is interested in politics, writing, and psychology. He also spends inordinate amounts of free time volunteering for political causes, writing and working with the Knox College Theatre department.