



## Inside the beltway, outside politics

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With memories of the closest election in history still fresh on our minds, millions of typically apathetic voters hope to make a difference in this year's election. The only problem is finding a candidate who will change our lives for the better.

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I'm feeling very attractive lately. Two rich guys want me, and I have something they need — an undecided vote.

Most people have a position when it comes to politics. They formulate their political opinions starting with their parents' party views and then shape their own beliefs as they grow and develop their own identity. But I don't have a position, and I honestly don't know why.

My father was a World War II and Korean War veteran. My mother was a Cold War information-gatherer-turn-stay-at-home-mom. Given those two facts, you'd assume the obvious:

*Republicans.*

But I'm not sure if that's the case. Politics were never discussed in our house. We lived in Virginia, inside the Beltway. Naval Reserve pay and defense contracting put food on our table, but my parents never discussed the defense budget, rising health care costs, Social Security, or anything remotely political as you would expect growing up in Washington, D.C.

My father loved Archie Bunker, hated hippies, and thought women should stay out of the military service academies. The only time I suspected he might be a Republican was when we saw Richard Nixon get on the Sequoia after we enjoyed a trip to the wharf to get crabs. Dad smiled when the president waved to us.

Mom grew up on a farm in North Carolina and left at 18 to go to Washington to become a civil servant. Her last post with the U.S. Air Attaché in Bonn, Germany in the late 1950s required her to be friendly with the locals and bring information back to her superiors. In the 1970s, she watched the Equal Rights Amendment movement, and she believed in the right to choose. The only political opinion she ever expressed was "I'd vote for Jesse Jackson." But now she listens to Rush Limbaugh.

I was a sophomore in college when I attained the right to vote. I worked at the Pentagon, writing press releases during college breaks, and volunteered as a reading instructor for the mentally challenged. Throughout the years, I continued to volunteer in my community instead of voting — that way, I could actually see the difference my actions made.

I finally registered to vote when I was 26. I was engaged and almost out of graduate school, and I felt like it was time to care about national politics. My brother was 24 years old, serving on a submarine in Charleston, South Carolina. We decided our votes didn't matter in the general scheme of how the country was run. We did the unthinkable: We voted for Perot in 1992.

Not much has changed for me in the subsequent 12 years. I've been laid off twice and was just days from getting laid off three other times. I've cashed out two 401(k)s and one IRA while under- or unemployed. I've moved to four states to get a job. Dad's dead after years of mediocre care from military doctors. Mom's on a government pensioner's fixed income living in the same house. My brother is now a civilian dodging downsizings within his company, and he joined the Naval Reserve primarily to ensure he'd have health care and a small pension. We're all doing OK, but not great.

One thing has changed recently. I registered to vote again. My political apathy turned to action when I checked the "other" political party box on the voter registration form and added "undecided." I find comfort in the fact that millions of Americans are as undecided as me and fearful of another Florida voting debacle.

The 2004 candidates appear to have distinct opinions about major topics. Kerry supports a woman's right to choose. Bush opposes abortion and passed legislation banning U.S. funding to any international health care agency providing reproductive services. Kerry is against school vouchers. Bush is ready to hand them out so parents can send their kids to schools that perform well. Kerry believes in gay civil unions. Bush wants to amend the Constitution to ban gay marriage.

I see truth and fiction in each of their arguments. For example, Bush supported No Child Left Behind, but didn't fully fund it while in office. The threat of vouchers may force a

school, with the right resources, to develop programs to help children. Neither candidate can fully define what terrorism is and how to stop it. This only heightens my indecision. I must select the best man for the job. But given the choices before me, my decision may come down to choosing the most promising of the non-promising.

I believe if I grew up less apolitical, I still wouldn't know what to do in this election. I'm coming back from a 12-year voting hiatus. Is there a presidential hopeful who will reassure me that I made the right decision to vote in the wake of this current indecision?

Only time will tell.

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### **The writer**

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