

ROCKING THE VOTE

The music industry and the mobilization of young voters by Timothy J. Dowd

volumes



While Al Gore and George W. Bush are competing for the U.S. presidential election, we take a step back to the elections of 1996. Then, for the first time young people were addressed by campaigns of the record



industry — Rock the Vote — and MTV — Choose or Lose — to go voting. How did these two facets of the music industry develop a concern for young voters? And, what are the implications of this new concern? Here we reprint the answers to these questions, offered by Timothy J. Dowd at that time.

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Music industry's concern for young voters A casual perusal of college campuses and MTV reveals two facts. First, election time is drawing nigh. Second, record companies and MTV want young people to vote in this election. The latter fact raises — at least — two questions. First, how did these two facets of the music industry develop a concern for young voters? Second, what are the implications of this new concern?

In this article I offer brief answers to both questions. First I provide an historical account of the record industry's Rock the Vote and MTV's Choose or Lose. Of course, any re-telling of history entails some emphases on the part of the writer, so let me state mine. The Rock the Vote program was created so that the record industry could deflect criticism, particularly the criticism that emanated from government officials. Indeed, the founders of Rock the Vote explicitly acknowledged that it was founded to fight the threat of government censorship (Hall, 1992; Rock the Vote, 1996). The Choose or Lose program was established after Rock the Vote and, hence, adopted many aspects of its predecessor. While criticism was not the initial impetus for its founding, Choose or Lose personnel — and others — acknowledged that this program had enhanced the image of MTV and, thus, had muted criticisms about its more controversial content (Granger, 1993; Multichannel News, 1993).

Regarding the second question, I briefly address what the popular press has found significant about Rock the Vote and Choose or Lose. I then discuss an issue that is significant but is not commonly addressed in the popular press. Simply put, Rock the Vote and Choose or Lose are mechanisms by which the music industry has managed the political realm.

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Recorded music and the political realm While discussing Choose or Lose, Anne Gowen (1992) noted that recorded music had become "political" where it had once been "popular." That is, the lyrics of recordings were now scrutinized by politicians and judges. A careful reading of history, however, reveals that recorded lyrics — and music — have drawn political fire for many decades (see below). Moreover, the concern with content is just one of many ways in which the political has penetrated the music industry. Understanding this larger political context helps us see that Rock the Vote and Choose or Lose are but the latest attempt of the music industry to manage the political realm.

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Since the inception of the U.S. recording industry in 1878, U.S. policy has stipulated how recording firms can make money (Dowd, 1996). Copyright law, for example, holds that a record firm cannot charge radio stations for the broadcasting of its records: while these stations are legally required to pay the recordings composer and publisher, they are not required to pay the record firm. Not surprisingly, record firms have tried for decades to change this feature of copyright law, but they have yet to attain any success (Newmark, 1992; RIAA, 1995). U.S. policy has also shaped how record firms transact with non-record firms (Dowd, 1996). A record firm, for example, cannot covertly pay radio stations to play its recordings (Segrave, 1994).

Because such policies define the very nature of the record industry, record firms have tried to sway policy in their favor, often using the Recording Industry Association of American (RIAA) to act in their collective interest (Sanjek, 1988; see: RIAA, 1995). In 1950, the RIAA faced an issue that had affected other media: the regulation of content (see: Beisel, 1992).

Congress was concerned with the "dirty disks" that were being shipped across state borders. They entertained a bill that, if implemented, would have allowed the Justice Department to inspect interstate shipments of recordings. The burgeoning number of small record firms that dealt in rhythm and blues (R&B) complained that this legislation was targeted specifically at them. The RIAA reacted by demanding hearings on the matter. Eventually, the legislation fell by the wayside (Billboard, 1950; Simon, 1950).

The possibility of content regulation continued after 1950, particularly as critics attacked the quality of music and those who provided it. In the mid-1950s, the record firms that made R&B and rock and roll recordings were accused of "infiltrating southern white teenagers with rock and roll" (Denisoff, 1986: 380). The same firms were later scrutinized for using questionable business tactics (U.S. Congress, 1960); a major antitrust case charged that the vapid music of rock and roll had illegally displaced that popular music which had aesthetic integrity (U.S. Congress, 1958). The concern with content continued into the late 1960s, when the government exerted pressure on radio stations that broadcast "pro-drug" songs (McDonald, 1988). While these — and other — instances generated much sound and fury, they did not lead to the regulation of recording content. A new phase in the criticism of recorded content began in 1985. At this time, Tipper Gore and the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) appeared before a Senate subcommittee to detail the dangers of obscene and violent lyrics. Supported by additional — but questionable — testimony, PMRC members made several proposals regarding recording content. The president of the RIAA and several performers testified against the PMRC proposals, but their words had little effect. The RIAA eventually accepted a PMRC proposal that was also endorsed by the subcommittee: record firms would voluntarily label those records whose lyrics explicitly dealt with violence, sex, or substance use. A form of content regulation, then, had become a reality for record firms. This regulation, in turn, could affect the sales of albums, particularly when certain stores were reticent about stocking those that were labeled as being explicit (Binder, 1993; McDonald, 1988; see Zappa 1989).

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The impetus for Rock the Vote The PMRC hearing signaled a new political climate for record firms and the RIAA. Three developments in 1990 further substantiated this new climate. First, a Florida judge ruled that a 2 Live Crew album was obscene, which eventually led to the arrest of a record store owner who continued to sell the album. Second, the Louisiana legislature considered a bill that would make lyric-labeling mandatory, though it was never enacted. Finally, the curator of a Robert Mapplethorpe exhibit faced obscenity charges in Cincinnati. Although the Mapplethorpe case did not directly involve the recording industry, a number of record executives saw it as a further assault on artistic freedom (Rock the Vote, 1996; Star, 1993).

Jeff Ayeroff of Virgin Records was concerned about the events of 1990. However, he felt that the RIAA lacked the necessary grass-roots support to address these recent events (Hall, 1992). Consequently, Ayeroff and other record personnel established Rock the Vote. This non-profit organization received generous financial support from the major record firms and from the RIAA. Its generous funding was matched by a well-connected board of directors that included performers, record firm executives, and officers in the RIAA and the National Association of Recording Merchandisers (DiMartino, 1991a; Rock the Vote, 1996).

Rock the Vote pursued two tasks in its early days: fighting censorship and mobilizing grass-roots support via voter registration of people aged 18 to 24 years (Fine, 1992). Its televised public service announcements (PSAs) initially emphasized First Amendment issues. Rock the Vote augmented this emphasis by selling T-shirts that proclaimed "Censorship is Un-American" and by creating a 1-800 line that gave information on states with pending lyric-labeling bills (DiMartino, 1991b; Newman, 1992). Subsequent PSAs, however, emphasized voter registration more than censorship. The most notorious voter PSA featured Madonna draped in a flag while proclaiming, "If you dont vote, youre going to get a spankie" (Colborn, 1990).

Rock the Vote aimed its voter PSAs at viewers aged 18 to 24 because the voter turnout for this group had declined from 42% in 1972 — the first election after the voting age was lowered to 18 years — to 36% in 1988 (Siricia and Williams, 1992; Weinstein, 1992; Wilson, 1996). Rock the Vote bolstered its PSAs with other promotional techniques. It printed material on voter registration that was available in numerous record stores. Likewise, Rock the Vote registered young voters on campuses and at various concerts, including the Lollapalooza concerts (DiMartino, 1991b; Nunziata, 1992; Weinstein, 1992).

Rock the Votes' ability to register voters, however, was hampered by regulations that varied from state to state. Consequently, its leaders lobbied for the "Motor Voter" bill that would automatically provide an opportunity to register when people obtained drivers licenses. This bill would also standardize registration procedures across the states. To help lobby for the bill, record firms printed a "Dear Senator" or "Dear President" postcard on the — now-defunct — cardboard boxes in which compact discs were sold. Despite the flood of some 50,000 postcards, President Bush vetoed Motor Voter legislation in 1992 (Holland, 1992).

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The related emergence of Choose or Lose Rock the Vote allied with a number of organizations as it pursued voter registration, including People for the American Way, the League of Women Voters, and the National Association of Secretaries of State (Newman, 1992; Rock the Vote 1996). Yet MTV soon proved to be its most significant ally. For if the PSAs of Rock the Vote were the message, then MTV was the medium (Ryan, 1992). Moreover, MTV was a willing medium. Between 1990 and 1992, it donated an estimated twenty million dollars worth of air time for free and repeated airing of PSAs (Hall, 1992).

The airing of the Rock the Vote PSAs came at an opportune moment for the Music Television Network. This network — like the record industry — had come under fire for its provocative and explicit content. These critiques emanated from a number of quarters, including conservative Christians groups (Denisoff, 1986; 1988). Furthermore, the eventual passage of the Childrens Television Act of 1990 signaled that government officials were willing, once again, to scrutinize and regulate television content (Brand, 1992; FCC, 1995). The Rock the Vote PSAs, therefore, offered MTV the chance to enhance its image.

The PSAs also complemented the efforts of MTV executives who sought to develop a legitimate news program. Kurt Loder was hired from Rolling Stone, for example, to give some credibility to MTV's entertainment news. The credibility of the news further increased when MTV won a Peabody Award for its special report, *The Decade in Rock*. The airing of the PSAs in 1990 and beyond, thus, allowed MTV to continue its emphasis on social issues. As the 1992 Presidential Election drew near, MTV executives initiated the Choose or Lose program, which encouraged voter registration and entailed Tabitha Soren's full-time coverage of the election (Simpson, 1992).

Given the youth of its viewing audience, MTV personnel focused on those issues that apparently mattered to young voters: abortion, affirmative action, AIDS, the economy, education, and the environment. While pursuing the "3 A's and 3 E's," Choose or Lose gained notoriety for questions about the candidates boxer shorts and for its irreverent coverage of the conventions — which included reports by Megadeath's guitarist. Nevertheless, the 90-minute forum with Governor Clinton and a tense interview with President Bush helped established the legitimacy of MTV's coverage. Its winning of MTV's second Peabody Award demonstrated that Choose or Lose was now an established force in political coverage (Ciolli, 1994; Eilperin, 1996; Gowen, 1992; Herlinger, 1992; Martin, 1993; Rochlin, 1993; Simpson, 1992; Weinstein, 1992).

5 **The expansion of organizational activities** The 1992 election brought a new-found status to both Rock the Vote and Choose or Lose. Many extolled Rock the Vote and Choose or Lose for registering some 750,000 new voters. In fact, a record number of young people — more than 11 million — voted in 1992, representing a 7% increase over 1988 (Jaegger, 1993). Consequently, the newly-elected president made known his appreciation of both groups. Clinton's praise of Rock the Vote and Choose or Lose surfaced at an inaugural party, a fund raiser, and the signing of Motor Voter legislation in 1993 (Atwood, 1996; Choose or Lose, 1996; Howard, 1994; Martin, 1993; Redbord, 1996; Rock the Vote, 1996). Rock the Vote continued its focus on censorship and voter registration. Regarding censorship, the executive director testified before a 1994 Senate committee on lyric content. True to form, he argued that lyrics should not be censored; instead, the objectionable must be tolerated so that the good may thrive. The recent activity of Rock the Vote provided a handy rhetorical device for demonstrating the "good" that existed in the record business. Likewise, Rock the Vote continued its voter registration drive (U.S. Congress, 1994). The newly-passed Motor Voter Act permitted registration by mail. This, in turn, enabled Rock the Vote to explore the options of registration via the phone and via the Internet. The "Net-Vote 96" web-page, which was co-sponsored by Rock the Vote and MCI, registered some 20,000 new voters in a matter of days (MCI, 1996; Rock the Vote, 1996). Rock the Vote also pursued a direction not emphasized in its 1992 campaign: voter education (Hall, 1992). The most notable example was its publication of Rock the System: A Guide to Health Care Reform for Young Americans. It launched a massive campaign to disseminate this document. One million copies were relayed to music retailers and concert sites; subscribers to magazines such as Rolling Stone also received a free copy, as did all 150,000 members of Rock the Vote. This effort was made possible by a \$2.4 million grant from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (American Political Network, 1994; Russell, 1994).

MTV's Choose or Lose continued to pursue its past goals of voter registration and news coverage, but in an expanded fashion. The news crew of 10 that covered the 1992 conventions gave way to a crew of 100 in 1996. Moreover, the coverage of 1996 conventions also included those of the Taxpayer and Green parties. Meanwhile, voter registration was now done in an oversized yet stylish bus — designed, in part, by Todd Oldham — that toured across the country. Like Rock the Vote, Choose or Lose also delved into a new area. In 1996, it offered a number of special news programs on timely topics, including programs on race relations and education (Choose or Lose, 1996; Martin, 1993; Walker, 1996). Given that President Clinton was pressuring television networks to develop educational programs (see: CNN, 1996), these news programs were a boon to the reputation of MTV.

6 **The implications of Rock the Vote & Choose or Lose?** In the popular press, most discuss the implications of the voter movements by referring either to the actual registration numbers or to the issue of liberal bias. I briefly address these before turning to what I find significant about Rock the Vote and Choose or Lose: the management of the political realm.

Numbers and motivation. If Rock the Vote and Choose or Lose were successful in their efforts, then we should have seen an increase in young voters. As the figures given above demonstrate, the 1992 Presidential Election yielded a record number of young voters. Nevertheless, only 42% of those aged 18 to 24 were registered to vote in 1992 and only about 25% of these actually voted (MCI, 1996). It remains to be seen, then, if 1996 will bring an increase in the number of young voters and in the proportion of young, registered voters who actually go to the polls (see also: Choose or Lose, 1996; Gowen, 1992; Rock the Vote, 1996).

Many view this increase in a positive light (see: Sheehan, 1996; Choose or Lose, 1996). Democracy depends on the participation of its citizens; the more citizens that participate, the more that democracy will thrive (see: Wolfe, 1992: 309). The music industry efforts are especially valuable, some argue, because of current situations: high schools no longer instruct students in civic responsibility, and there are high levels of apathy among high school seniors and college students (Huerta, 1996; Simpson, 1992; Star, 1993; Weinstein, 1992; Wilson, 1996).

Certain commentators are not pleased by the mere increase in the number of young voters. They argue that democracy is best served when its citizens are motivated and well-informed. Motivated citizens would not find it difficult to register at a central location, such as a library. The present situation wherein Choose or Lose and Rock the Vote register voters by phone or e-mail runs the risk of pampering these unmotivated citizens, they argue. In addition, unmotivated voters are most likely uninformed. If all their election knowledge comes only from MTV, then they lack an adequate preparation for responsible voting. Thus, these critics prefer more of an emphasis on the quality of voters rather than the sheer numbers (see: Feder, 1996; Redbord, 1996). The extent to which new voters are unmotivated and uninformed, however, is better addressed by empirical study than by the speculation of these critics.

Partisan and liberal bias. Certain critics argue that Choose or Lose and Rock the Vote are marked by a pro-Democratic Party orientation. This argument is particularly relevant for Rock the Vote because its non-profit status requires that it remain non-partisan (Redbord, 1996). Representatives of the music industry and a number of analysts counter such a charge by describing the political orientation of young voters. First, they argue young voters tend to be liberal on lifestyle issues and conservative on economic issues. Second, the proportion of young voters identifying themselves as Republicans is nearly equal to the proportion identifying as Democrats. Finally, they argue that Clinton did not gain an undue proportion of the youth vote in the 1992 election, especially because Perot had commanded a fair share of the new voters (Eilperin, 1996; Kot, 1993; Star, 1993; Wilson, 1996).

Another camp worries that Rock the Vote and Choose or Lose purvey a left-leaning agenda, one that is more aligned with liberal Democrats than with conservative Republicans. While officials at both programs assert their non-partisan stance, critics cite a number of factors to strengthen their charge of liberalism. First, several critics mention that a number of Rock the Vote officials were formally employed in Democratic campaigns or administrations — including those of Ann Richards, Edward Kennedy, and Bill Clinton. Likewise, a few cite that Sumner Redstone — the CEO of MTV's parent company — is an "unabashed" liberal (Feder, 1996; Hall, 1992; Redbord, 1996). Finally, commentators and politicians argue that the environmental focus of both programs — including their concerns with global warming and nuclear power — lies beyond the pale of the mainstream (Gowen, 1992; Weinstein, 1992; Wilson, 1996).

My initial inspection of the Rock the Vote and Choose or Lose material suggests that both groups convey a non-partisan stance on a variety of issues. However, their reports seem to favor government intervention in a variety of realms — e.g., student loans. This pro-intervention stance is more in keeping with current Democratic rather than Republican sensibilities. The positive view of government intervention disappears, however, when the topic turns to media content. I also find that the material of both groups tends more towards liberalism than conservatism because it entertains *multiple* opinions and solutions on such issues as AIDS, abortion, and same-sex marriage (see: Hunter, 1990; Luker, 1984). Of course, a systematic content analysis would illuminate the extent to which Democratic versus Republican or liberal versus conservative themes mark the material of both Rock the Vote and Choose or Lose.

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The management of the political realm Concerns with partisanship and liberalism gloss over a particular type of conservatism found in the material of Rock the Vote and Choose to Lose. I found no report that called into question either the nature of capitalism or the ethical and political implications of large corporations. Furthermore, I found no discussion concerning the possible benefits of industry — e.g., media — regulation. While these two projects may tend towards the position of liberal Democrats on some issues — e.g., the environment —, they appear to favor the status quo and a *laissez-faire* government when dealing with issues that affect *their* corporate sponsors and owners. Consequently, I find the industry concerns of Rock the Vote and Choose or Lose to be as intriguing as the issue of liberal bias.

To reiterate, the record industry and MTV faced a number of criticisms regarding content in the late 1980s and 1990s. On some occasions, these challenges were directly confronted, as with the anti-censorship T-shirts. But to a large extent, both the record industry and MTV retreated from direct confrontation. Witness, for example, Time Warner's quick abandonment of "gangsta rap" in 1992 (Landler, 1996; Terry, 1992). Instead, the record industry and MTV responded to criticism by stressing such politically positive activities as voter registration.

The stressing of the politically positive occurred as government officials had begun, once again, to target controversial media content. The incumbent Democratic President has implemented both the V-chip and rating of television programming and he has required that networks create programming for children (Chong, 1995; CNN, 1996; FCC, 1995). Moreover, Tipper Gore, now the second lady, has championed the monitoring and rating of recorded lyrics (Binder, 1993; Kot, 1993). The current Republican candidate and his allies have attacked the motion picture and recording industries for the immorality of their products. They have also held parent firms — e.g., Time Warner, Disney — accountable for the controversial content of their subsidiaries — e.g., Interscope and Death Row, Miramax (see: Fleming, 1995; Schoemer and Samuels, 1995).

Given the recent actions of both candidates, it might be more appropriate to characterize Rock the Vote and Choose or Lose as anti-content regulation rather than as pro-Democratic or pro-Republican. As one pundit cleverly noted, these groups are ultimately more concerned with Time Warner's freedom of speech than with the free speech of 20 year olds (Star, 1993).

These voter programs may ultimately undermine the current challenge of content regulation, especially if their activities continue to expand. Consider that recording artists become political figures when they assist the registration efforts of Rock the Vote and Choose or Lose. As a result, the regulation of their content becomes problematic when explicit lyrics re *also* the words of a known political figure (see: U.S. Congress, 1994). Simply put, content regulation is less likely in the mid-1990s than it was in 1985, for although members of Congress still critique controversial lyrics, they have also begun lauding the civic efforts of performers and the music industry (see: Squires, 1994).

The music industry's voter registration programs may outlive their usefulness, because a host of corporations have followed in the footsteps of Rock the Vote and Choose or Lose. These imitators have seized on the marketing and advertising advantages of voter registration. The ranks of these imitators include such firms as The Body Shop, Chrysler, Coors, Esprit, McDonalds, Pepsi, and 7-UP (Miller, 1992; Rubel, 1996). The unique goodwill that Rock the Vote and Choose or Lose both enjoy could be diluted by an onslaught of corporate "activists" that are also pursuing voter registration. After all, rocking the vote may have produced benefits for the music industry, but it did not put an end to the long tradition in which it has grappled with the political realm.

Authors note:

I owe a double debt of gratitude to Stephen Hart. I thank him for the invitation to write this piece and I especially thank him for his patience and suggestions. □

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Web Sites:

- [Rock the Vote Homepage](#)

This essay appeared originally in: The News Letter of the Culture Section (American Sociological Association), 1996, 11, 1: 1, 4-7. Timothy J. Dowd is Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology, Emory University (Atlanta) and author of: "Musical Diversity and the U.S. Mainstream Recording Market, 1995-1990." (In: *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 2000, 16, 2: 223-263). E-mail: tdowd@emory.edu.

Rock the Vote is a nonpartisan nonprofit dedicated to building the political power of young people through pop culture, music, art, and technology. For over 25 years, Rock the Vote has been providing easy to use voter registration and supplies important election information throughout the United States.