

Changing the World One 23-Year-Old At a Time: An Interview with Eli Pariser from Moveon

By Manda Aufochs Gillespie

Young people are less involved in politics and less likely to vote than ever. But, lest you think that the generation of 18-to-30-year olds, our generation, has sent themselves to their proverbial bedroom letting the adults pick up after or destroy the world on their own, think again. Many of the political world's super-stars are of that forgotten younger generation—the one that no one is quite sure if they are x or y or maybe z.

Eli Pariser, the 23-year old Executive Director of MoveOn PAC, is probably one of the best-known names in the fight to get the average American back into the political process. Pariser hit the mainstream when after 9/11 he launched a website to encourage a peaceful response to the attacks by having citizens get involved in the democratic process. Within days the website received almost 2 million hits and claimed one seventh of Alta Vista's browsing traffic, and Pariser began fielding calls from media all over the world, including Bulgaria, China, the Netherlands and the UK.

Pariser describes MoveOn as “working to bring ordinary people back into politics... helping busy people who are also concerned citizens find their political voice.” MoveOn builds electronic advocacy groups when they find there is a disconnect between broad public opinion and legislative action. MoveOn PAC is an arm of MoveOn that makes electoral change by raising money for candidates that embrace moderate to progressive politics through numerous grass-roots giving campaigns to offset the larger corporate and private interest donations.

Manda Aufochs Gillespie: In many circles, you have become quite a superstar. And not just because you are smart and good-looking but because the good work you are doing has made your name a household word in liberal households across the country. What is the story of your success?

Eli Pariser: I think a lot of it has to do with persistent political entrepreneurialism through which I failed quite a lot of the time but that didn't dissuade me. Through college and after college I had all these little weird projects, a little conference, a resolution at the college board, that I tinkered around with. Most of them mostly failed or completely failed. One of them, the site I put together after 9/11, exceeded beyond anyone's expectation.

The thing, looking back, that seems most important is that I was throwing a lot out there and something stuck. The experience of building MoveOn has been like a wave that we are partly riding and partly creating. We find ourselves in a position to help people who feel compelled to take action to find new and creative and powerful ways of doing so.

MAG: How did you first get involved with social change?

EP: A lot of it was a sense of responsibility. It seemed to me if I didn't do something about some of this stuff that there wasn't anyone else who was going to take care of it, like if you're in a boat and it's veering toward the rocky ledges and no one is at the helm, you think, "shouldn't someone be on that?" So I thought I should do something. Growing up in Maine, the feeling I had was that the power of the people who saw a beautiful, natural environment as something to exploit was greater than the power of those that saw it as something to steward.

MAG: What can other young people learn from your success?

EP: Part of it is just that our generation has an enormous advantage over previous generations because of the technological tools at our disposal. The average 15-year old has so much more power to affect the world than the average 15-year old had a generation ago. Our leverage is so high. My little website was one example of that. Technologically, it wasn't fancy, it just leveraged something that I had a mastery of. So, in that sense, it is just being aware of that power and the ability to exploit it for the common good.

MAG: Are there other superstars of our generation?

EP: There are so many. But I don't think it will depend on a specific person. We are in a situation now, where the big difference will be if we can engage everyone in solving the problems before us. The intelligence we have as a society is greater than the intelligence of any individual. With the right kind of conditions you can make huge leaps by relying on the collective intelligence of people. Not experts or certain classes but everyone. There is no vanguard.

MAG: What do you see as the greatest challenge of our generation?

EP: Cynicism is a huge one. I always bristle when people castigate our generation as cynical. The problem with cynicism is that if everyone is cynical we definitely lose. We are screwed if everyone believes that we are selfish and that we are screwed. If you are not cynical, we may still be screwed, but our chances are a hell of a lot better. Though it may be rational, it is not a good affect if you hope to have a future.

MAG: People 18-30 vote less than any other demographic. Do you believe this is a trend that can be reversed?

EP: It's a chicken and egg situation—politicians don't speak to people who are young because they don't vote, and people who are young don't vote because politicians don't speak to them. Both are acting reasonably. The way that you change that is to build from a small, concrete base of organizing power. Someone will step forward and organize a group of young people and will win and it will develop hope. This is a different application of what has happened with MoveOn. Many progressives in 2002 felt that a lot

of politicians weren't speaking about issues that they cared about. We had to demonstrate that people weren't wasting their time when doing our alerts, that politicians would listen if enough people acted.

MAG: What do you say to those young people who say that they don't vote because it doesn't matter or because it's just a choice between the lesser of two evils?

EP: First, this time, in certain places in the country it is an objective fact that it matters. If you are in Michigan, or Wisconsin, or 20 other states, it's going to be a squeaker and someone is going to cast the deciding vote. And that could be you or it could not be you. The lesser of two evils? When is that ever a reason for not making a choice? When you go into a grocery store and you have to choose a cereal and the kind you most like isn't there, you don't just go hungry.

When you vote, you gain leverage on those [politicians] you vote for. If progressives really help to elect John Kerry and pour money into his campaign, then when he becomes president he owes that community something. He knows he is there because they put him there. Especially in progressive politics, where people almost never use the carrot—politicians are more likely to be considered “a sellout” and very rarely get rewarded when they do well. If I am a politician and I am trying to figure out where my priorities are, the people who are yelling at me because they don't like what I am doing matter less than those who helped me get there because they don't do anything for me. Ultimately, politicians represent the constituencies that get them elected—it could be a bunch of rich donors, or us, or anyone else. If you don't play that game then you don't get represented.

MAG: Do you know artists who are using their art for progressive social change?

EP: I don't know a lot of [visual] artists, but I know a lot of musicians. There are a lot of them getting involved. Downtown for Democracy in New York helps artists channel their energies into winning this election. One of the things that has made politics so unbearable is that all the cultural juice has been sucked out of it. One of the things making it more exciting this time around is that the culture is becoming more a part of the politics.

MAG: What do you think about Fahrenheit 9/11?

EP: I thought it was a great movie. Some of the particular scenes are really masterful filmmaking. There are definitely people who make valid criticisms that it includes everything but the kitchen sink. If it is art, then it's the gestalt that matters, not the specifics of every little piece, and the emotional power of the whole pictures he draws is quite compelling.

MAG: What do you do when you pass those Democratic National Committee workers on the street who ask you, “Do you want to defeat Bush in November?” as an entry into asking you for money, not registering the young to vote? Why isn't the DNC more interested in registering new voters?

EP: The DNC is mostly doing an ad war, but partly that is because an organization named ACT [America Coming Together] is registering an unprecedented number of voters. Specifically about registering young voters, again it's the chicken and the egg issue, the stakes are too high at this point to reach out to groups for noble reasons, you reach out to them to win. On the one hand I want politicians to pay more attention to young people, on the other hand I want young people to organize to get that attention and not enough of that is happening. The rates are so low that it's not unreasonable that if I am figuring out where to put my energy [in an election] to say, "why not turn out black voters or unmarried women or another group?" [rather than the young].

MAG: Do you think that young liberals identify with the Democratic party? Are the Democrats learning anything from the involvement of young people?

EP: No, not as far as I can tell. People are happy to put energy into the party to the extent that it represents issues that it cares about. The party has a way to go to re-earn the trust of young people. There is potential for a real revolution in what [the Democratic Party] represents—a party that is powered by lots of people working together. I think the Kerry campaign is a really exciting thing because when I think about who Kerry is going to look at when he gets elected and who is he going to have to please—a lot of the donations are from individual, small donors. That means he's not going to look at big business or other special interest but [will ask], "how do I make the people that got me elected happy?"

MAG: Will the Democrats ever again be a party that stands for those issues that we consider to be good liberal values, like an accessible medical system, abolishing the death sentence, good public education, and the freedom to express dissent?

EP: Yeah, just the fact that Kerry is the nominee is a step in that right direction. People can complain that he's not perfect but his voting record has made him one of the most progressive candidates in the Senate in the last years. The fact that he's the nominee and the likelihood he will win means the party is moving in that direction.

MAG: Do you foresee that we will become a country with two parties that provides real differences and choices or toward a country with multiple parties and voices, more like in Britain and Canada?

EP: Britain and Canada are the way they are because their electoral system is what it is. Our system will have to undergo a lot of changes before that is even a possibility. The voting system that we have now is the worst system that you can have for representing the preferences of the majority of the people. Nader in Florida is a good example of that. The people in Florida who voted for Nader did not prefer Bush over Gore. It was an incredibly poor result if it was supposed to show how voters felt. Most voters would have ranked Gore first, Nader voters would have ranked Gore second and Nader first. The voting system needs to be looked at very seriously and be a gateway to talking about these things.

If something like Florida happens again you will see quick changes, because it will indicate the system is broken. I hope we don't need a disaster to prove that the plurality voting system isn't working.

MAG: Is there a special role for artists in creating liberal political change?

EP: In a business metaphor, there are sales and there is marketing—sales is selling the car and marketing is selling the feeling of the care when you are driving it. Art can play a huge role in the appeal of politics. Getting people out to vote is dry and mechanical but capturing people's imaginations about what it is about, there is no better way to do that than through art.

MAG: How do you keep from getting depressed by the enormous amount of work that lies ahead of us to restore our image abroad, improve our political system and provide real resources for the disenfranchised?

EP: I get messages from our members. To get a message from some 60-year-old lady in Kansas who has never been politically active in her life and who we've helped. Like people who got on our list and ran for local office or started an organization, or on and on. Just that sense of millions of real, everyday Americans acting out of selfless love of their country is a beautiful thing and that is what keeps me hopeful.

MAG: How can young people and artists be involved now?

EP: Volunteering for ACT, taking off the last four days before the election and going to a swing state to help get out the vote. MoveOn isn't the be all and end all. There are other organizations like the League of Independent (pissed off) Voters and Downtown for Democracy.

For more information visit www.moveon.org or www.moveonpac.org.

Or, visit fnewsmagazine.com for other ideas on how to get involved in the upcoming election.

Relevant Links

MoveOn www.moveon.org or www.moveonpac.org

Downtown for Democracy www.downtownfordemocracy.org

League of Independent (pissed off) Voters www.indyvoter.org