

**THE BLOG**

We the Morons

By Marty Kaplan

03/14/2006 08:07 pm ET | Updated May 25, 2011

Maybe I've been drinking too much blogosphere Kool-Aid, but my sense is that this country is right now more politically engaged, more actively interested in issues and public affairs, than at any time since, oh, the '60s (i.e., the period from the assassination of JFK through Watergate).

Obviously I'm not measuring political engagement by voting behavior; there's a whole world o' reasons that Americans are voting way less than they used to, but one of them is *not* that they could care less about the direction of the country.

They may think that their votes don't count, that their representatives don't represent them, that economic power trumps political power, that the party system is archaic and unresponsive... but that doesn't mean they've lost their passion for how things are going in the public sphere. Far from it: my guess is that we are at a watershed high in Americans' hunger for political information, intensity of political feeling, and yearning to make a difference.

Ironically, at such a ripe moment, the political class seems to be catastrophically out of touch with the governed whose consent they depend on. I'll leave moderate Republicans to bemoan for themselves the way their party has been hijacked. But as for the Democrats, it's hard to imagine a gap more yawning than the one between the leadership and the citizens.

If you set aside a handful of national figures like Feingold, Murtha, and Gore 2.0, what you hear is timid, fence-straddling, cliché-ridden, condescending rhetoric, focus-grouped to within an inch of its life, and above all designed to appeal mainly to the remaining nine or fourteen or whatever-it-is percent of the country that *doesn't* care enough about issues to be partisan about them — partisan in the best sense, meaning take a stand, feel a stake, give a damn. Republican leaders, whatever you might think about them, at least stoke up their base. Democrats treat us like morons, or with egg-coddling caution, as though we'd break under the pressure of straight talk.

I can't imagine a potentially more exciting political time for this country than now - a moment when debate could be more usefully raucous and consequential. And yes, I can see why the Democratic leadership might think that first-do-no-harm and let-them-hang-themselves should be the operative principles for their opposition. But it sure is tough to get excited by your team when its leaders treat your political passion as some kind of demonic, volcanic force requiring containment, rather than the ultimate source of democratic legitimacy.