

A New Generation, A New Engagement?

by

Harry Basehart and Peter Nagler

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About the Authors

Harry Basehart is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Salisbury University. He is co-founder and formerly co-director of PACE. He received his B.A. degree in Political Science from Kent State University and M.A. and Ph.D. from The Ohio State University. He is the co-author with David Saffell of *State and Local Government: Politics and Public Policies*, now in its ninth edition.

Peter Nagler is currently an Energy Industry Analyst with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, Washington, D.C., specializing in electric utility tariff and rate issues. He received his BA in History and Liberal Studies from Salisbury University and his Ph.D. in Political Science from The Ohio State University. The opinions and views offered here are his own and not necessarily those of the United States or the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

Introduction

For the past ten years or so, young people, and college students in particular, have been the subject of extensive analysis by scores of researchers. Upon hearing this, you may wonder: Why are we so interesting?

Your first guess might be that it is the frequency of binge drinking that generates this interest. Well, yes, researchers look at this, but that's not what this presentation is about. Rather, we will examine four questions: First, why is civic engagement of young adults a popular research topic? Second, what are the findings of this research? Third, has there been a response to this research? And, fourth, is there a new engagement? (By the way, researchers usually define young as being between the ages of 18-29, and occasionally they will use a subset between the ages of 18-24.)

Civic Engagement of Young Adults

As a Research Topic

Incidentally, there is a prior question: Why is civic engagement important and, by the way, what is civic engagement? Well, this is the core of the Presidential Citizens Scholar Program, something you will discuss, analyze and evaluate as program participants so it would be inappropriate for us to answer these prior questions for you. Anyhow, they are somewhat philosophical and better left to Dr. Kane, so we'll just answer the four questions we have posed.¹

Let's start by taking a brief look at the work of Robert Putnam. Putnam, in his 1995 article "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital"² and later in his 2000 book, *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community*³, documented

and lamented disengagement of Americans from the civic and social life of their communities.

Putnam's examples include the following:

- A significant drop in reported weekly church going and membership in church-related groups—from roughly 48 percent in the late 1950s to roughly 41 percent in the early 1970s.⁴
- A drastic drop in participation in parent-teacher organizations from more than 12 million in 1964 to barely 5 million in 1982 before recovering to approximately 7 million in the early 1990s.⁵
- Membership in and volunteering for civic and fraternal organizations has declined. For example, volunteering for traditional organizations such as Boy Scouts and Red Cross has plummeted.⁶

And what is this about bowling? Putnam says more Americans are bowling than ever before so why is this worthy of his attention? They are bowling, but not in organized leagues, existence of which has plummeted. And leagues are important because they require regular participation with a diverse set of acquaintances and represent a “form of sustained social capital that is not matched by an occasional pickup game.”⁷ (Social capital refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.⁸) The broader social significance, however, lies in the social interaction and even occasionally civic conversations over beer and pizza that solo bowlers forgo.⁹ As an aside, it would be interesting to know how Putnam would evaluate the social consequences of bowling on Nintendo's Wii where you can stay at home and actually bowl by yourself.

Finally, Putnam notes the well-known decline, at the time of his writing, in voting in national elections; from a “high point in the early 1960s, voter turnout by 1990 had declined by nearly a quarter; tens of millions of Americans had forsaken their parents' habitual readiness to engage in the simplest act of citizenship.”¹⁰ Voter turnout in local elections reflects a similar decline.

But, you may say, Putnam isn't writing about young people. And that's true, he is writing about the general population. So what do his conclusions have to do with college students and other young adults?

Some observers suggested an important idea, or hypothesis, that this decline in engagement—disengagement—could be generational, that is, younger generations are less engaged or involved than older generations. If this is true and if the decline in engagement continues then total or almost total disengagement is in the very near future. This specific concern is why research focusing on young adults and civic engagement is now popular.

Research Findings

Perhaps the best research on generations and civic engagement is *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen*¹¹ by Cliff Zukin, et al. It is recently published and based on surveys completed in 2002. Although some of their important findings may have been anticipated by earlier studies, their research is impressive from the perspectives of comprehensiveness and presentation of data; it is truly first-rate and is the focus of this section.

We should note that generation is a useful concept as it enables researchers to examine political behavior in terms of how different age groups, shaped at different times and by different experiences, respond to political phenomena. Specifically, Zukin et al. are interested in (1) the extent to which different age groups, having experienced different political and cultural events in their formative and coming-of-age years, engage in the political process and (2) whether the younger groups behave differently than the older ones.

Zukin et al. identify four distinct generations that they say constitute the population of the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The authors note that drawing boundaries between generations is risky, nevertheless, they offer four:

- Dutifuls is the name for the oldest generation, born before 1946.¹² Experiences that shaped this generation include the Great Depression and World War II even though many experienced these events indirectly through their parents. They are driven by duty and sacrifice. The Dutifuls lump together two age groups, the World War II generation (which is quickly diminishing) and the following age cohort (1925-45) which is often referred to as the Silent Generation. Today, the youngest Dutiful is 64 and the oldest is...(90+ or really old).
- Baby Boomers are the next generation. Born between 1946 and 1964, they were shaped by the civil rights movement, Vietnam War, and Watergate. This generation is also noted for its rebellion against the norms of the preceding generation. Today, the youngest is 45 and the oldest is 63.
- Generation X, born between 1965 and 1979. Oldest of the GenXers grew up in the late 1970s amid perceptions of government economic and foreign policy failures

and atmosphere of financial and familial insecurity. Zukin et al. note that Generation X came of age amid rising rates of divorce, recession and the threat of AIDS. Today the youngest is 30 and the oldest is 44.

- DotNets, Generation Y, GenNext, Millennials, Zukin et al.'s fourth group, are suggested names for those born between 1980-2000. They are defined as coming of age with the Internet. During their lifetime, technology has been cheap and easily mastered and community has become as much a digital as a physical place. And, of course, there are the major political events: 9/11 terrorist attacks in the U.S. and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.¹³ Today the oldest is 29 and the youngest is 18, and 16 is sometimes used for current research purposes.

Now, do these generations differ by their engagement? Before looking at the answer offered by Zukin et al., we want to point out that they see a distinction between civic and political engagement. Political engagement is defined as activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government policy or affecting the selection of public officials. Civic engagement is defined as voluntary activity focused on problem solving and helping others, normally within nongovernmental organizations and rarely involving electoral politics.¹⁴

Using a variety of quantitative indicators of engagement, Zukin et al. find that about half of all Americans are engaged in public life in some way with one in five specializing in the political realm and one in six specializing in civic engagement. About one in six Americans are active in both civic and political engagement. Respondents were considered to be civically engaged if they participated in two civic activities, including regular volunteering for an organization other than a candidate or political

party, working with others to solve a community problem in the past year, raising money for charity, or actively participating in a group or association. People were considered to be politically engaged if they participated in two or more political activities including voting, volunteering for a political organization or candidate, trying to persuade someone how to vote, displaying a button, bumper sticker, or sign for a candidate, or contributing money to a party or a candidate.¹⁵

Zukin et al. also report that one's generation does affect political engagement. The authors discover that 36 percent of the entire population engaged in two or more political activities. The corresponding figures for the four generations are:

Millennials – 26 percent

GenX – 26 percent

Baby Boomers – 39 percent

Dutifuls – 48 percent.¹⁶

Dutifuls are clearly above the average, Baby Boomers slightly below; GenX and Millennials come in at the bottom.

With respect to civic engagement, the authors report that 32 percent of the entire population engaged in two or more civic activities, but with different generational effects than found in political engagement. The figures for the four generations are below:

Millennials – 28 percent

GenX – 34 percent

Baby Boomers – 39 percent

Dutifuls – 25 percent.¹⁷

Although differences are smaller than with political engagement, Millennials and GenX have a higher level of activity than Dutifuls, with Baby Boomers at the top. Here's a qualitative summary of several distinctions between generations and how they engage.

Dutifuls -

They follow the news about government and public affairs. Not only are they registered to vote, they always vote (political engagement). They have been active in working with others to solve a community problem, raising money for charitable causes and volunteering in various community service organizations, although some of their civic engagement activities are less frequent, probably because of their advancing age.

Baby Boomers -

Compared to Dutifuls, they are less likely to follow the news, slightly less likely to be registered to vote, and slightly less likely to always vote. On the other hand, they are engaged by volunteering in their local communities (civic engagement).

GenX -

Compared to Baby Boomers, GenXers are even less likely to follow the news, have lower voter registration rates and report lower levels of always voting. Volunteering in their communities was a mixed picture; on some activities they were at the same level as the Boomers and on some they were lower.

Millennials -

Compared to the previous three generations, Millennials are the absolute lowest when it comes to following the news, lower on registering to vote and on always voting. On the other hand Millennials are "holding their own" in community

volunteering, problem solving and fund raising. For example, Millennials are as active as other generations when it comes to participating in walking, running, or bicycling for a charitable cause.¹⁸

Where does all of this leave us? Are the Millennials completely indifferent, as many observers said? No, clearly they are not. They value community service and problem solving; on the other hand, they see little value in politics and government. And it was this finding—volunteering for Habitat for Humanity but not voting in an election for mayor, as an example—that troubled many social scientists.

Response to Findings

Still, the Millennials lack of political interest was of concern; a concern that found its voice in a 1999 document called the “Presidents’ Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education” (Signed on July 4 by a number of college and university presidents meeting in Aspen Colorado.)

As wonderful as it is that Millennials are engaged in community service and as valuable as this is, the declaration concludes:

...(college) students are not connected to the larger purposes and aspirations of the American democracy. Voter turnout is low. Feelings that political participation will not make any difference are high. Added to this, there is a profound sense of cynicism and lack of trust in the political process.¹⁹

And it wasn’t only college presidents that were concerned. What could be called a grassroots response was emerging on many campuses, not the least of which was the founding at Salisbury University of the Institute for Public Affairs and Civic Engagement

(PACE) in 1999 by Fran Kane and Harry Basehart, assisted by a generous startup gift of \$250,000 from the Grayce B. Kerr Fund in Easton, Maryland.

Nationally, other organizations came forward address the Millennials apathy toward politics:

- Rock the Vote
- Smackdown Your Vote
- Campus Compact
- American Democracy Project
- National Campaign for Political and Civic Engagement at Harvard University
- Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Maryland College Park, now located at Tufts University.

The common feature of these organizations and others is that they are “intentionally” political, in the good and traditional sense of that word.

A New Engagement?

The study that makes the clearest case that your generation is developing a new model or type of engagement is Russell Dalton’s *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation is Reshaping American Politics*.²⁰ He argues that your generation is changing the types of citizenship norms (pattern of behavior considered normal) that are emphasized or stressed.

Dalton notes two main types of citizenship: duty-based citizenship and engaged citizenship.²¹

- Duty-based citizenship is the more traditional view of citizenship and is more

common among older generations. Dalton refers to this as a more constrained model of citizenship which reinforces existing authority. This view stresses the following duties and responsibilities of citizenship (and in this order): always voting, paying taxes, serving in the military at a time of need, obeying the law, keeping watch on the actions of the government, and being active in social or political associations.

- Engaged citizenship stresses a more assertive elite-challenging role for citizens and a broader definition of citizenship to include social concerns and the welfare of others. The engaged citizen participates primarily in non-electoral activities. In other words, it is possible to be a good citizen even if one does not vote or conform to the duty-based idea of citizenship. Indicators of this engaged citizenship include (and in this order) trying to help people in America or in the rest of the world who are worse off than you, understanding the reasoning of people with other opinions, being active in social or political associations, and keeping watch on the actions of the government.

We intentionally left out of this list an important activity of engaged citizenship because we would like to say a bit more about it. Zukin also refers to this activity and calls it “political consumerism,” that is, when individuals’ political and social concerns influence their retail decisions.²² One type of political consumerism is boycotting, not buying a particular product because you “dislike the conditions under which it was made or disapprove of the conduct of the company that produced it...”²³ Another example of “political consumerism,” and the one used by both Zukin and Dalton, is boycotting, the

choosing (buying) of products for political, ethical, or environmental reasons, even if they cost a bit more.²⁴

We are not in complete agreement with Dalton's citizenship typology. Survey questions in his analysis are rather limited, nevertheless, his ideas are certainly a contribution to the discussion of citizenship and worthy of consideration.

Conclusion

We are not convinced that a new model of civic engagement is emerging or is needed at this point. As with many topics in politics and social science, only time will tell whether the differences characterizing younger generations' engagement is truly generational (i.e. resulting from the unique influences of your socialization and the times in which you came of age) or more of a life cycle effect. If the latter, then we would expect to see the young become more engaged in the political process as you finish school and settle into a community and lifestyle and thus have more at stake in influencing how public decisions are made. (In fact, the coauthors of this paper have some disagreement on this point.)

We note that the technology, especially for political engagement, has changed and will continue to change. Email, blogs, social networking sites, text messaging, Face Book social applications, twitter, voting in favor or against a news story on Digg or commenting on a YouTube video, are all examples of new technology, and who knows what will appear next week. The significant point for PACE, and Dr. Kane has always said it best, but in our words it is this: Working for the public good can be done in many ways; volunteering for community service is certainly one and so is supporting and voting for candidates for public office. And today's young adults are increasingly

becoming aware of the latter, as can be seen by changes in your generations' voter turnout. (See voter turnout graphs.) PACE's mission continues: to create a dialogue with SU students that focuses on how politics is a way to achieve the public good.

Notes

¹Dr. Francis Kane is Professor of Philosophy at Salisbury University and co-founder of PACE.

²Robert Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* (January 1995), pp. 65-78.

³ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

⁴Putnam, "Bowling Alone: Declining Social Capital," p. 69.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., p. 68.

⁷Putnam, *Bowling Alone: Collapse and Revival*, p. 113. The term social capital is discussed at length in *Bowling Alone: Collapse and Revival*. A concise definition states that social capital "refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit." See "Bowling Alone: Declining Social Capital," p. 67.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Putnam, "Bowling Alone: Declining Social Capital," p. 69.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 67.

¹¹Cliff Zukin, Scott Keeter, Molly Andolina, Krista Jenkins, and Michael Delli Carpini, *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹²Researchers do not always use the same names or dates in identifying generations. For Zukin, Dutifuls were born before 1946; Baby Boomers, 1946-1964; Generation X, 1965-1976; DotNets, after 1976. Another classification: G.I. Generation, 1900-1924; Silent Generation, 1925-1945; Baby Boom 1946-1964; Generation X, 1965-1979; Millennials, 1980-2000.

¹³Our brief summaries of social and political events of each generation are based on Zukin, et. al., *A New Engagement*, pp. 14-15. A fuller description of events for GenX and DotNets can be found on pp.17-48.

¹⁴ Zukin et al. note that both of these forms of public action are valuable but that neither alone is sufficient to address the multitude of collective decisions that must be

made in our representative democracy. The authors state that at its best, the U.S. system combines elements of both types of participation.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 63-64.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., See pp.68-86.

¹⁹“President’s Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education,” available at <http://www.compact.org/resources-for-presidents/presidents-declaration-on-the-civic-responsibility-of-higher-education/>.

²⁰ Russell J. Dalton, *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation is Reshaping American Politics*, rev.ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2009), pp. 4-5, 9-10, 27-32. A less sanguine view of engagement and young people is Martin P. Wattenberg, *Is Voting For Young People: With a Postscript on Citizen Engagement* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2008), pp. 175-195.

²¹ We should mention that Dalton’s citizenship typology is based on a 2004 General Social Survey question that asks respondents what it “takes to be a good citizen;” 10 qualities of citizenship are evaluated on a seven-point scale from not at all important to very important.)

²² Zukin, *A New Engagement*, p. 77.

²³Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., see also Dalton, *The Good Citizen*, p. 26.