

GEN.COM: YOUTH, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, AND THE NEW INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

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Working Paper

What follows is a somewhat disorganized and incomplete discussion of the current disengagement of young Americans from public life, some thoughts on the roots of this disengagement, and speculations on the ways in which new technologies such as the Internet might be used to improve this state of affairs. It is meant to be a starting point for discussion.

• THE CIVIC DISENGAGEMENT OF AMERICA'S YOUTH

While the decline in civic engagement over the past thirty years is evident among all age groups, it is particularly acute among the young. Put simply, America's youth appear to be disconnecting from public life, and doing so at a rate that is greater than for any other age group. A comprehensive review of the standard indicators of civic engagement reveals a consistent and disturbing picture. Whether compared to older Americans or to younger Americans from earlier eras, today's young adults are significantly:

- *Less trusting of both government and of fellow citizens.* Young adults under the age of thirty are significantly more likely than those over thirty to say that government is run by special interests, that public officials don't care about average citizens, and that people are more likely to look out for themselves than to try to help each other.
 - *Less interested in politics or public affairs.* Only 19 percent of those between the ages of 18 to 29 say they follow politics and government "most of the time," compared to 51 percent of those 50 or older. Only 27 percent of college freshmen (in 1997) think keeping up with public affairs is very important, compared to 59 percent of college freshmen in 1966.
 - *Less likely to feel a sense of identity, pride or obligation associated with American citizenship.* Less than 20 percent of 18 to 29 year olds say they are very proud of how democracy works in the U. S., compared to over 50 percent of those 50 years old or older. Young adults are also significantly less likely than older adults to feel that citizenship is an important part of being an American. Only 26 percent of those between the ages of 15 to 24 believe "being involved in democracy and voting" is "extremely important," and only 28 percent mention civic obligation or duty as a reason to vote.
 - *Less knowledgeable about the substance or processes of politics.* Only one-in-ten young Americans between the ages of 18 to 29 can name both their Senators, compared to one-in-five of those between the ages of 30 to

45 and one-in-three of those over the age of 45. On a 50-item quiz about national politics, young adults could correctly answer only one-in-three questions, compared to one-in-two correct for those 30 or older. Lack of knowledge was cited by 18 to 24 year olds as one of the two most important reasons why young people do not vote.

- *Less likely to read a newspaper or watch the news.* Thirty six percent of young adults (18 to 29) say they follow the news every day, compared to 52 percent of those between the ages of 30 and 50, and 67 percent of those over 50. On any given day, just over 40 percent of 19 to 29 year olds watch the news on television, compared to 55 percent of those 30 to 50 years old and 65 percent of those over 50. Less than 20 percent of young adults read the newspaper on any given day, compared to about 40 percent of those between the ages of 30 to 50 and 60 percent of those over 50. Newspaper readership among young adults is less than half what it was for this age group in 1965.
- *Less likely to register or vote.* Turnout in the 1996 presidential election among 18-24 year olds was 28 percent, compared to well over 60 percent for those 35 or older. This is the lowest turnout on record for this age group (42 percent of 18-24 year olds voted in 1972, the first year that 18-20 year olds were eligible).
- *Less likely to participate in politics beyond voting.* Less than 50 percent of those between the ages of 18 to 29 say they engaged in at least one political act beyond voting (worked in a campaign, contacted a public official, participated in informal community activities, attended a community meeting, and so forth) in the last year, compared to over 70 percent of those between the ages of 30 to 69.
- *Less likely to participate in community organizations designed to address public problems through collective action or the formal policy process.* Thirty percent of those between the ages of 18 to 29 (and only 20 percent of those between the ages of 18 and 24) are affiliated with an organization that takes a public stand on at least one policy issue, compared with 55 percent of those between the ages of 30 and 69. Only 14 percent of young Americans (15 to 24 years old) have ever joined a club or organization that deals directly with government or politics, while 64 percent have joined a non-political club or organization.
- *Less likely to connect individual efforts to help solve problems with more traditional, collective forms of civic engagement.* Traditionally, different forms of participation reinforce each other: whether one first becomes involved through volunteering, voting, or participation in community organizations, it tends to increase the likelihood that one will subsequently participate in other ways. Among today's young adults this connection has

become weakened. Indeed, one study found that young adults who volunteered for local public service such as working in a soup kitchen, tutoring or helping to clean up a local park or river were *less* likely to participate in more traditional ways such as voting—exactly the reverse of the pattern for older Americans and prior generations.

The evidence that young Americans are disconnected from public life seems endless. In a recent survey, a majority of high school students could not name a single government or non-government public leader who had the qualities they most admired: caring about average people; consistency in beliefs; strong leadership skills and experience; ethical values; and good communication skills (the most named person was President Clinton, who was selected by only 7 percent of those polled). Sixty one percent of 18 to 24 year olds believe that today's political leaders have failed them. Only one-in-four young Americans aged 15 to 24 think government or elected officials have a major impact on their day-to-day life. Young adults are significantly less likely than older adults to think their participation in politics would make a difference (for example, 45 percent feel their vote doesn't matter regardless of who wins an election). A majority of those under the age of 29 believe the Social Security system will not exist by the time they are old enough to need it and that they will have to fend for themselves for basic social services when they are older. Young adults express declining interest in serving in appointed or elected government positions or in pursuing careers in other public-sector jobs such as teaching, public law or the non-profit sector (for example, in one recent survey of U.S. teenagers, 70 percent said they had no interest in jobs related to government or politics). Enrollments and majors in political science courses are declining, as are applications for public policy and public affairs graduate programs.

Two additional factors make the patterns summarized above particularly unsettling. First, while young adults have been historically less engaged in many of the more traditional aspects of public life (for example, voting, knowledge of politics, or reading newspapers) than have older Americans, the extent of this disengagement and the "participation gap" between young and old are far greater today than in the past. Second, there is some evidence that young Americans are not increasing their participation in public life as they grow older at anything like the rate for prior generations. In short, the current civic malaise that has engulfed America's youth appears to be an ingrained generational characteristic rather than a stage in the life cycle that will remedy itself with time.

- **IDENTIFYING THE ROOTS OF THE CURRENT DISENGAGEMENT OF YOUNG AMERICANS**

People—young or old—choose to become engaged in public life when they have the motivation, opportunity, and ability to do so. The motivation to participate derives from a number of sources: a sense that it is your

responsibility to do so; the satisfaction that comes from participating with others for a common purpose; the identification of a public problem that affects you or those you care about; and the belief that your involvement will make a difference. Motivation alone does not assure engagement however. Citizens must have the *opportunity* to become involved in public life in meaningful ways. Opportunities are determined by the civic infrastructure: from the structure and processes of elections to the number and type of civic and political associations. Finally, to take advantage of the opportunities that are available citizens must have the ability to do so. The specific abilities necessary to participate vary depending on the kind of participation in question, but can include time, money, information, and certain kinds of organizational, communications and leadership skills.

The decline in civic engagement among young adults can be directly traced to each of these three factors. As discussed below, young Americans do not lack for problems that concern them and express a strong if sometimes ambivalent desire to be more engaged in public life. What is missing is the belief that becoming involved in public life in any way that involves politics, government or organized collective action (for example, joining an organization that is attempting to affect policy change; working for a party or candidate; voting; running for office) is likely to be effective or satisfying.

This lack of faith in the efficacy of civic involvement results from the systematic devaluing of the public sector over the past thirty years. Beginning in the early 1970s with the Watergate scandal and the resignation of Richard Nixon and continuing through the sex and financial scandals leading to the impeachment of President Clinton, government and politics has become viewed as irrelevant and ineffective at best and corrupt and the source of many of our problems at worst. Adding to this perception is the growing faith in the private sector and the market as the best way to address the nation's and the world's public concerns. This devaluing of the public sector was initially limited to the formal institutions and processes of government, but has spread over time to include most forms of collective public problem-solving (e.g., interest groups and civic associations), all of whom are increasingly painted with the broad and negative strokes of "special interests."

What has made these attacks so powerful is that many of them are rooted in reality: government has often failed in its mission; candidates and elected officials have engaged in inappropriate behavior; organized groups have often put narrow interests over the public good; the private sector and market approaches to solving problems are often superior. The fact remains, however, that government plays a central (even growing) role in the lives of Americans and that many of the nation's most pressing problems can not be effectively addressed without a healthy public sector

that includes the regular participation of citizens. The importance of the government in people's day to day lives, the positive benefits we all enjoy because of policies enacted by government, the ways in which ours and our fellow citizens lives could be improved by future government action, the ability of civic action to affect meaningful change—all of these messages are either absent or drowned out by the larger, anti-public sector chorus.

The disconnection of young adults from public life also results from the lack of meaningful opportunities to become engaged. True, young adults have the right to vote, to participate in campaigns and elections in other ways, to join organizations, and so forth. But most of the formal institutions of public life either ignore young adults and the issues that matter to them, or are ill-equipped to attract young adults and provide them with meaningful opportunities to participate. Parties and candidates see little reason to devote their resources to reaching out to

young Americans given that this age cohort is less likely to vote than older Americans. Government officials are unlikely to listen to young Americans knowing that there is little risk that they will be punished for their neglect at the polls. The news media is aimed at an older and increasingly shrinking audience. Traditional civic organizations and interest groups are dominated by issues, governing structures, policy solutions and/or civic styles that are anathema to younger Americans raised in a faster-paced, entrepreneurial, mass-mediated and global environment. The schools, while increasingly acknowledging their responsibility to provide students with opportunities to become involved in public life, have largely limited their efforts to narrow definitions of public service such as one-to-one volunteerism. And those school programs and civic organizations that are effective at reaching young adults struggle at the margins of public life and lack the resources and visibility to have a significant impact.

Finally, young adults often lack the ability to become involved in public life. Most important in this regard is the lack of information—from general knowledge about how government works to specific knowledge about how to register and vote. And while young adults today are no less likely to have basic organizational, communications or leadership skills than in the past, they are much less likely to apply these skills (or see their relevance) to collective public problem solving. This decline in civic ability can be directly traced to the relative lack of attention paid to young adults and the issues that matter to them by the media, candidates and officeholders. It can also be traced to the poor quality of civic education in the schools and the ineffectiveness of civic organizations at reaching out to this age group.

While this thirty-year decline in the civic infrastructure has affected both young and old, its effects on younger Americans have been particularly devastating. The years from early teens through early twenties are extremely important to the formation of "civic habits." Early socialization is critical to the development of one's political worldview. Since particular age cohorts share a set of common social and political experiences, each new generation tends to develop its own "civic style" or set of deep-seated attitudes and practices. While these attitudes and behaviors can change to some degree over time, new issues and events tend to be interpreted through these generationally shaped lenses. As a result, dramatic shifts later in life in the overall level of civic engagement of a particular generation are rare. Rather, increases in participation as generations age tend to be gradual and directly tied to initial rates of civic engagement.

In short, while older Americans have the ability to put the current anti-politics environment in perspective, drawing on experiences of effective public-sector policy, of respected public-sector leaders, and of meaningful collective action, for Americans under the age of thirty, *the current environment is all they know*. Never having experienced a period in which their own participation has affected meaningful change on an issue that mattered to them, and raised in an environment that regularly tells them such action is unlikely to succeed, it is hardly surprising that they are disinclined to participate in public life. Young Americans are not disengaged because they are satisfied with the current state of affairs, because they are apathetic, or because they do not care about their fellow citizens. Rather they are disengaged because they are alienated from the institutions and processes of civic life and lack the motivation, opportunity and ability to overcome this alienation.

Indirect support for this argument can be found through a closer look at what young people say themselves. Surveys suggest that, despite their popular image, America's youth want to be connected to public life in some meaningful way and lament the sense of disconnectedness they feel. A 1996 poll revealed that 70 percent of young adults were "worried and concerned" about the future of the country. Nearly nine-in-ten young adults agree that voting is one of the most important rights we have as Americans, and three-in-four agree that the decline in voting among the young is a serious national problem. Over sixty percent say that goals such as "being involved and helping their community become a better place" or "being a good American who cares about the good of the country" are important to them. Majorities say they have at least a fair amount of interest in volunteering for charitable causes (63 percent), voting (60 percent) and following the news about public policy issues of the day (57 percent). And young adults are as or more likely than older ones to believe that there are important public problems facing the nation that need to be addressed.

While many of these sentiments are contradicted by other opinions and by much of the actual behavior of young adults, at a minimum they suggest that young adults are struggling to find their place in public life and are ambivalent about their current disconnection from the public world. The tension produced by this ambivalence is perhaps best exemplified by current rates of volunteerism among the young. Student volunteerism is at record levels—in 1997, 73 percent of high school students performed volunteer work of some kind, up from 62 percent in 1989. While some of this increase is attributable to the increase in high school programs that encourage or require this kind of behavior, it is a clear indicator that America's youth are willing and able to participate in public life, *given the incentive and opportunity to do so*. At the same time, however, it is also reflective of the individualistic, anti-politics ethic that has dominated public discourse over the past 30 years. Civic engagement has become *defined* as the one-on-one experience of working in a soup kitchen, cleaning trash from a local river, or tutoring a child once a week. What is missing is an awareness of the connection between the individual, isolated "problems" these actions are intended to address and the larger world of public policy; a sense that these problems might be addressed more systematically (and at times) more effectively through other forms of civic engagement (from joining a community group to voting); the belief that politics *matters*.

○ **CAN THE INTERNET INCREASE THE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OF YOUNG AMERICANS?**

A new communication environment, driven largely by the growth in the Internet and World Wide Web, is rapidly changing the economic, social and political landscape. According to a recent survey, 55 percent of Americans have access to the Internet, with over a third of "wired" Americans (or 20 percent of the general public) going on-line five or more hours a week. While these changes affect all age groups, they are particularly significant for young Americans, who are more quickly embracing this new technology -- 18-29 year olds are significantly more likely to have access to the Internet and to go on-line. In addition one recent survey found that 70 percent of 18 to 25 year olds saw the Internet as a useful source of political and issue information (compared to 48 percent of those over 25). Indeed, this survey suggests that this age group saw the Internet as *the* most useful source of such information, outstripping television news, newspapers, radio, magazines, personal conversations, and direct mail.

Given the exponential growth in both the use of the Internet and the availability of news, political, and public affairs oriented sites, it is natural to wonder whether this new form of communications might offer

opportunities for increasing the civic engagement of younger Americans. To do so, however, this new communications medium must effectively address the root causes of motivation, ability and opportunity discussed above. Is there any reason to think this is or could be the case?

The first step in attempting to answer this question is to consider what is different about the new information technology. There are a number of now familiar characteristics of the Internet (and related new communications technology) that distinguish it from earlier media. In particular, the new media environment: (1) increases the speed with which information can be gathered and transmitted; (2) increases the volume of information that is easily accessible; (3) creates greater flexibility in when information is accessed; (4) provides greater opportunity and mixes of interactivity (one to one, one to many, many to one, and many to many); (5) shifts the nature of community from geographic to interest-based; (6) blurs distinctions between types of mediums (print, visual and audio); (7) challenges traditional definitions of information gatekeepers and authoritative voices; and (8) challenges traditional definitions of producers and consumers of information. All of these characteristics have potential implications for the motivation, ability and opportunity to become engaged in public life, though the nature of this impact is hotly contested.

One way of thinking about the utility of the Internet for affecting civic engagement is to distinguish among various types of actual or potential civic actors. For *political elites* (candidates, officeholders, organized interests, non-profits, the media), the Internet offers new opportunities for creating new networks, easing organizational communications, reaching new audiences, targeting particular audiences, tailoring messages, and so forth. For example, an organization such as the YouthVote 2000 Coalition (a coalition of over 50 youth-oriented organizations committed to increasing the voter turnout of young Americans) uses its Website and e-mail to facilitate the coordination of its various efforts around the country, to recruit new volunteers, and so forth. And Youth Service America is using e-mail and the Web to encourage its network of supporting organizations that are already working to encourage young Americans to volunteer to also engage in coordinated efforts to increase voter turnout among this age group. In short, if part of the reason young adults tend to eschew politics is the unwillingness or inability of political elites and organized groups to effectively reach them, the Internet provides opportunities for increasing their ability to do so.

For *engaged citizens*, the Internet provides ways to lower the costs of their engagement, improve its quality, and/or increase the types of activities engaged in. For example, on-line sites such as Project Vote Smart provide relatively easy ways to obtain information about the issue stands of local, state and national candidates, and allows citizens to compare their own

views to those of the candidates. The Rock the Vote site provides on-line voter registration. A number of environmental groups now share their membership lists allowing for the sending of targeted e-mails to citizens who have expressed an interest about one type of environmental concern and providing information about a related issue (along with easy ways to contact public officials about the issue or get involved in other ways). The recent experiment with on-line voting in Arizona eliminates the need to go to a polling place, lowering the cost of participation. The Youth Service America site allows citizens interested in volunteering to identify opportunities to do so in their own communities. In short, for those who are already likely to be engaged, the Internet and related technologies provides ways for sustaining, expanding and improving the quality of this engagement.

In addition to the impact of the Internet on organized elites and engaged citizens, there is also reason to believe it could be effective at reaching *interested but inactive* citizens. Most surveys suggest that more citizens express concern or interest in public issues than actually act on these issues. To the extent that the Internet can reach this segment of the youth population, provide information on how to translate this interest into action, and provide relatively easy, attractive ways to do so, it is possible that some percentage of this group could become more engaged. For example, technologies such as Web TV allow people who view a show on homelessness or school violence to easily connect to sites that can provide additional information and specific ways to act, and to do so at the moment they are most likely to be motivated. And a number of environmental groups have used an approach called "viral campaigning" in which mass and chain e-mails are sent to Internet users informing them about a particular issue or policy and providing easy ways for interested citizens to contact the appropriate officeholder or government agency to voice their opinions. In short, the Internet and related technologies provide new ways for tapping existing interest in particular issues and using this interest to motivate and facilitate action.

All of the groups and segments of the population described above are either already engaged or have some interest in public issues. The most difficult group to reach are those who are *neither engaged nor clearly motivated*. Since motivation (interest, attention, efficacy and so forth) is the sine qua non of participation, the question is whether the Internet can be a useful means for increasing these attributes among young adults. One might argue that the same approaches used to translate existing interest into action could be used to increase interest itself. For example, Web TV provides the possibility of an audience for a popular TV show (for example "Party of Five") in which an episode addresses a social issue like violence in schools to *both* become more interested in the issue and link easily to sites that provide ways to act. Similarly, e-mail campaigns can

target non-political communities of interest (say those interested in fishing or hiking), connect these recreational interests to more political ones (for example, the degradation of marine habitats, coral reefs, or national forests), and then provide ways for converting this new interest into action. Popular Web sites such as MTVs also provide opportunities for connecting young people who go to the site for non-political reasons to public issues in ways that could also increase interest and motivation. And school based programs such as the Student Voices project piloted by the Annenberg School of Communication at Penn suggest that Web-based information gathering and interactions can increase high school students knowledge of and interest and engagement in local elections. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that the ability of new technologies to increase the motivation to act appears to be the least well-theorized and understood aspect of the potential for increasing civic engagement.

○ CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This brief and admittedly speculative think piece is designed to stimulate discussion on the potential for new technologies such as the Internet to increase the amount and quality of civic engagement among young adults. What these technologies seem clearly to provide is access to young adults, an increased ability for organized interests to more effectively reach young adults, and new or easier opportunities for already engaged (and perhaps interested but not yet engaged) young adults to participate and do so more effectively. Less clear (but still possible) is that the new technology can also serve as a way to increase the motivation of currently disinterested and disengaged young adults. In thinking further about these issues it is important that we remain open to three additional complicating factors. First, the Internet and related technologies are changing with such rapidity that it is important to think about not only how it is currently being used, but how it might be used in as yet untested ways. Second, it is possible that the central impact of new technology will be to encourage new forms of engagement that are sufficiently different from our traditional indicators to fall beneath our radar screen. Finally, one could ultimately argue that even if the potential impacts described in this paper are real, they are or will be overwhelmed by the more negative impacts (fragmentation, manipulation, consumerism, the further dominance of entertainment over public affairs, the paralyzing impact of information overload, the devaluing of certain kinds of participation as it becomes easier to do, and so forth) of this new information environment.