

Fifteen to Twenty-Five Year Olds' Civic, Electoral, and Political Behavior...or the Lack Thereof.

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Abstract

Some researchers lament the good old days when youth were engaged in traditional civic and political behaviors, still others disagree, claiming that more youth are engaged than ever before. I am throwing myself into the fray, asking whether civic behavior is replacing electoral behavior. Using 2006 data from The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), I analyze the political, electoral, and civic behaviors of 15 to 25 year olds. Employing several indexes of engagement, I investigate how youth who are involved politically, electorally, and civically, as well as those that are disengaged differ. I then discuss what these differences mean for the health of our democracy.

Engagement of Youth

The youth of America are among the most politically disengaged citizens of the nation. The fact that young people age's 18 to 25 do not vote in high numbers is well established in the political science community. There is no debate that there has been a steady decline in the percent of young voters since the 26th amendment was ratified in 1971. The issue has been the focus of countless studies and research since 1972.¹ Simply put, they are often one of the lowest demographics when measuring voter turnout. Even McDonald and Popkin (2001) who argue that methodological errors have shown to significantly impact the drop in overall turnout, conclude that the turnout for 18 to 24 year olds is still sagging.

There has been extensive academic research on the idea of engagement, it has been called many names and categorized various ways. Putnam (2000, 2003) argues that civic engagement is key to his concept of "social capital"-the social networks and associated norms of reciprocity or the collective value of social networks and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other (Putnam 2000 p. 21). Putman argues civic engagement and therefore social capital is declining especially among young people. Putnam shows how changes in work, family structure, age,

¹ Dennis Edwards (2005), Kendra Hamilton (2004), Douglas Amy (1993), and Mary Cooper (2000).

suburban life, women's roles, computers, and especially television have contributed to the decline in the belief or faith in traditional systems and the political process. Similar to Putnam, the article by David Masci, (2006) claims that in recent years the number of students who are involved in political activism has gone down. He also addresses explanations for why students are seen as apathetic, including a cynicism about traditional politics, for example, students being involved in more nontraditional forms of activity. Masci focuses primarily on the political behavior of students which is by most accounts diminishing.

Civic behavior as distinct from political behavior of 18 to 25 year-olds such as involvement and volunteering has become a rather controversial subject as of late. According to Putnam (2000, 2003) young people are becoming disengaged and if there is a rise in youth volunteering it is only a slight rise, nothing significant. However, there are many who disagree with Putnam's theories on social capital. McLean, Schultz and Steger (2002) disagree with Putnam's (2000) organization of generations, claiming it sways the ideas of generational change and aspects that affect generational attitudes and behavior. McLean, Schultz, and Steger (2002) also point out several gaps in Putnam's research such as the focus on associations that are favored only by older Americans and the idea that new technology does not have a positive effect on associations (i.e. organizing, or net-roots). Ladd (1999) also disagrees with the idea that fewer people are involved, and discusses in great detail how the civic engagement sphere has changed, and grown with more of a focus on volunteering and less of a focus on political behavior. Dekker and Halman (2003), Ehlich (2000), Jenkins, Andolina, Keeter, and Zukin (2002,

2003), Masci (1998), and Soule (2001), and Wilson (2000) all cite a rise in the number of young people who volunteer for non political activities.

Many academics agree that there has been a recent rise in the number of young people that are volunteering; the issue that is now being debated is why this is so. One reason that is brought up by most skeptics of increased youth volunteerism is the idea of compulsory volunteerism. More young people volunteer today because it is required by their high school, college, or it is necessary to get scholarships, or college admission. This question is a gap in the research, while it is mentioned briefly by many authors little empirical work has been done on it. This idea is mostly either tossed out as a possibility or put as if it were the only possible explanation for a rise in youth volunteers. Putnam and Feldstein (2003), Ehlich (2000), Soule (2001), and Clary, and Snyder (1999) all mention this idea in their works.

Engagement vs. Non-engagement

This brings us to the question that has plagued social scientists for quite some time, why do people volunteer? And more specifically, why are more young people spending their time volunteering? Clary and Snyder (1999) point out six motivations to volunteer these motivations include, values, to gain understanding, enhancement (of one's own skills or to feel better about oneself), career, social, and protective (to escape one's own troubles). Bussell and Forbes (2001) identify essentially the same motivations only worded differently, altruism and helping others, the family unit consuming the collective good (coaching your child's soccer team), selective incentive (social contact), or improvement of human capital (this combines career, protective, enhancement, and understanding). Wilson (2000) takes different demographics into account when

considering the motivations of volunteers. Wilson and Musick (2000) addressed the idea of volunteering and its effects upon the person doing the volunteering. Using a complex model Wilson and Musick address many of the motivations to volunteer. They attempt to test empirically if volunteerism is a path to good jobs, or provides the self confidence and skills needed to secure or keep good jobs. Essentially the question that this article attempts to test is whether the motivation to volunteer is actually fulfilled. For example, if the motivation for volunteering was enhancement or protective, does volunteering help contribute to good mental and physical health.

An underlying theme in many works addressing civic and political engagement is the possibility that people (especially 18 to 25 year olds) are replacing political behaviors such as voting with civic behaviors primarily volunteering. This idea is paradoxical in that often the skills and behaviors learned during volunteering help a person become more civic-minded and more capable of understanding the concepts of voting (Jenkins, Andolina, Keeter, and Zukin 2003). Also a large number of the groups that people volunteer for have political motives, or use a political agenda to better the group (i.e. advocating for more government funding of homeless shelters). Wilson (2000) debates the idea of volunteerism building peoples' skills to become more active citizens. Wilson never reaches any conclusions about the issue while Sapiro (2004) argues that in a global context those who develop a sense of membership and citizenship have better skills to participate in a democracy.

Different types of volunteering have different impacts upon citizens, but the political impact may not be as clear as scholars once thought. Torney-Purta and Amadeo (2003) find that volunteering is not viewed as political activity by the youth in the US.

They found that what fosters future political behaviors is very separate from what fosters future community behaviors. One point made by Ladd (1999, 71) is that a decrease in political participation is not a cause for concern among citizens today, and government isn't the center of public life.

“Politics just isn't as important for most of us as other facets of civic engagement. We settled fundamental issues of how government should be organized a long time ago, and we opted for a limited government. With political conflict relatively muted we feel able to pay little attention to the game of politics much of the time and to instead focus on civic activities that really interest us.”

While there is much to be debated in this view of politics it makes a relative point, many are not aware of how much government is involved in their lives. Soule (2001) also points out that many Americans fail to see the diversity of values in this country. People often think there is a consensus and most reasonable people agree with them on what societal problems are most important. Arguably with the way that our democracy and party systems have evolved there is not much need for politically active participants. With the centralization of parties and winner takes all districts, some would argue that the voice of the people is not truly heard, and that involvement doesn't really make a difference. Jenkins, Andolina, Keeter, and Zukin (2003, 11) have a different perspective, “Regardless of how politically expressive civic specialists are, their absence for electoral politics means that they will exert less influence over the making of public policy,”

The attitudes and values of today's society and youth could be one of the possible reasons for youth's disengagement in the political sphere. McLean Schultz and Steger point to a negative attitude towards politics, with things like Watergate, The Vietnam War, Iran-Contra, and the impeachment of president Clinton making Americans angry and distrusting of politics. Soule (2001) reflects this idea as well, pointing out that trust

and confidence in political institutions has reached very low levels with 64% of young people agreeing that government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves. Soule also points out this negative attitude towards politics in addressing why youth don't vote. According to Soule it stems from ideas like the idea that voting doesn't make a difference, negative campaigns, lack of time, and the idea that not voting is voicing a protest.

Our society's focus on media has also been cited for the youth's disconnect from public life. Media such as TV, internet, and radio has also been shown to be young people's major source of political information and civic knowledge. Mass media has done much to shape 18 to 25 year old attitudes about politics (Key Facts; 2004). Putnam (2000) indicates explosion of TV news, in that citizens who read newspapers are more engaged civically and politically than those who get their news from TV.

Do civic behaviors have a negative impact on political behavior? If people's motivation to volunteer is altruistic or they wish to make a difference in their community why do they shun politics? Why do people who care enough about their community to volunteer not make their political voice heard? If young people continue to be involved civically and not politically how damaging will the repercussions be on our democracy? The answers to such questions will be varied and complex, but will help us to further understand the concept of participation in our civic and political culture.

Methods and Analysis

To address the questions about young peoples' political, electoral, and civic behavior, I used the information provided by the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the

Nation Survey. The data set used in this research was collected by CIRCLE, The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. The survey was conducted by phone and online, from April 27th to June 11th 2006. The sample consists of a nationally representative group of people. Surveyed were 1500 15 to 25 year olds, as well as 550 people who were 26 and up. Young people and minorities were over sampled, but weights are used to achieve a representative sample.

[Table 1]

The first type of activity I chose to analyze is electoral behavior. There is a key difference between political and electoral behavior. All electoral behavior is political, however not all political behavior is electoral. Electoral behavior of young people is where my research questions all begin. Table One uses age groups as the independent variable, and the dependent variable is the number of electoral activities in which a person is involved. The questions inquire if the subject has volunteered for a political campaign or candidate, persuaded others to vote for a candidate or party, worn a button, sticker, or placed a sign in yard, worked or given money to candidate, party, or political organization, or voted. Different questions are asked to deduce if the subject is a regular voter.² The percentages in the table show that generally older people are more engaged in electoral activities, for example 14.9% of 58 to 97 year olds are engaged in three electoral behaviors compared to 9% of 15 to 25 year olds. The gamma is .215 which shows a positive trend, however, not a strong one. The significance is at .000. These findings support my theory of young people moving away from politics, electoral

² Questions depend upon age of the respondent. Subjects who are 18 or older are asked if they are registered to vote, subjects who are 20 or older are asked if they vote in national and local elections, and if they voted in the 2004 elections. Subjects who are 15 to 19 are asked how often they think they will vote in local and national elections.

behavior, and government. The percentages in the table show that the older the group is the more engaged they are in traditional political (electoral) behavior. The slight dip in the oldest age category is expected as age tends to immobilize people, making traditional political behavior more difficult.

[Table 2]

The dependent variable in Table 2 is the four item civic engagement index. The independent variable is age groups. The four civic engagement activities are any that were done within the past 12 months including, community problem solving, volunteering, being an active member of a group, walking, running, bicycling or working to help raise money for a charitable cause. The percentages in this graph show that the number of unengaged 15 to 25 year olds is relatively close to unengaged 26 to 37 year olds. The gamma of this table is .031 with the significance of .000, which shows there is little association. Essentially this table helps to display that young people are not less engaged in civic behavior than those in other age groups.

[Table 3]

Table 3's dependent variable is the number of voice engagement activities in which the subjects participate. These activities include contacting public officials, contacting print media, contacting broadcast media, protesting, email petitions, written petitions, boycotting, buycottting³, and canvassing. The gamma of this table is .062 with .000 significance. This shows that there is little or no trend. The number of political voice activities is not correlated with age. The percentages show that while 44.4% of young people are not using their political voice, 55.6% are doing so, some in 9 different

³ Buycottting is the act of purchasing something because you like the political or social values of the company that produces or provides it.

ways. Over half of young people care enough to use their political voice in a year. This table shows that young people use their political voice a little less, but are not truly the disengaged group they are often labeled as.

[Table 4]

Table 4 uses the typology of engagement as the dependent variable and age groups as the independent variable. Typology of engagement consists of the disengaged, electoral specialist, civic specialist, or the dual activist. The electoral specialist is a person who performed at least two electoral activities (mentioned in the discussion of Table 1) and less than two civic activities in the past 12 months, civic specialists are people who participated in a least two civic activities (mentioned in the discussion of Table 2) and less than two electoral activities in the past 12 months. The disengaged are those who haven't participate in at least two or more of each activity. Dual activists are people who are both civic and electoral specialists. The gamma for Table 4 is .138, this shows that there is a positive trend but it is slight. The percentages in this table show that youth tend to lag behind as electoral specialists compared to the older groups, 16.8% of 15-24 year olds, 19.1% of 26-37 year olds, 27.6% of 38-57 year olds, to 33.3% of 58-97 year olds. While as civic specialists and dual activists young people fare much better when compared to the other age groups.

[Table 5]

Table 5 is similar to Table 4, using typology of engagement as the dependent variable, but splitting the independent variable, age groups into smaller groups, to focus on the differences between 15 to 25 year olds. The other reason for the age groups in Table 5 is to account for the very different life roles of those between the ages of 15 and

25 for example, still in high school 15 to 18, first starting college 19-20, middle college or almost done 21-22, late college or recent graduates 23 to 25. Also the issue of 15 to 18 year olds not being able to vote demands more intricate study of age. Table 5 shows us in percentages that something major happens around the age of 20, and into the early 20's. At this time engagement rates drop, especially electoral engagement drops, and disengagement goes up. These tables also conflict with my theory of civic behavior replacing traditional electoral behavior; they show that young people 15 to 19 do behave more in the electoral sphere than the civic sphere, with a notably large number of dual activists.

[Table 6]

Table 6 also uses a similar independent variable, age broken up by groups. The dependent variable is a political/governmental cynicism index made from four questions asked of all respondents. The questions were coded to find the more politically optimistic, pessimistic, or ambivalent answers.⁴ The table shows a gamma of .187 in Table 6, with .000 significance that there is a weak positive trend. The older a person gets the less optimistic they feel about politics and governments role in their life. This is shown with the percentages in the tables, 26.8% of 15 to 25 year olds answered optimistically compared to 16.3% of those age 38 to 56 which is often the most engaged group. The decline of optimistic responses is very noticeable in all of the percentages in

⁴ The 4 questions include;

- A. (3) Politics is a way for the powerful to keep power to themselves or (1) politics is a way for the less powerful to compete on equal footing with the powerful, (2) Depends/Both/Neither.
- B. (1) Government should do more to solve problems, (3) government does to many things better left to businesses and individuals, (2) Depends/Both/Neither.
- C. On the whole, would you say the political system in this country IS or is NOT responsive to the genuine needs of the public, or haven't you thought much about it? (1) Is responsive, (3) Is not responsive, (2) Haven't thought much about it.
- D. (3) Government is almost always wasteful and inefficient. (1) Government often does a better job than people give it credit for. (2) Depends/Both/Neither

the table. When age is analyzed further I found that the dip of optimism seems consistent with the dip in engagement in the early 20's. This index brings up some interesting questions about the relationship between people's view of government and politics and their electoral behavior. Why does the age group that has the lowest numbers of those disengaged have the highest level of cynicism? Why does the faith in government and politics go down while electoral engagement goes up?

[Table 7]

The dependent variable in Table 7 is volunteer activities. The gamma is very low .003. This is interesting in that it shows that young people are just as likely to volunteer in the past 12 months as people in most other age groups. The number of people who have never volunteered remains level across the board. When I inspected age further I found the drop of engagement occurs again around the age of 19, where the number of people who volunteered in the past month declines sharply and then levels out at a lower level for the mid-20s. This helps to establish that young people are volunteering, some more than their older counterparts. The number of people who haven't ever volunteered is rather high; however, it is for every age group not merely young people. This shows that people are rather consistent, from the way the question is asked you can deduce that those who didn't volunteer when they were young probably will never volunteer.

[Table 8]

Table 8 is a difference of means analysis, using the previously mentioned political cynicism index and a civic cynicism index that was made of three questions and was scored according to how civically optimistic or pessimistic the respondents' answers

were.⁵ The mean of the answer, for each age group, and each typology of engagement is compared to the mean for the disengaged, showing the difference of the mean from the mean of the disengaged⁶. The largest differences of means in each age category are the civic cynicism of the disengaged compared to the dual activists. This would show the more a person is involved, no matter the age, the better their attitude is about being able to make a difference in their community. All of the civic specialists are more politically cynical than the disengaged except for the 15 to 25 year olds. This table shows an interesting trend about civic specialists, as age gets older civic specialists consistently grow more and more cynical about politics and government. This would show that my replacement theory of politics being replaced by civic behaviors could possibly be present in older age groups rather than young age groups as I had previously expected. Also interesting is with age civic specialists become more positive about the impact they can have upon their communities and civic attitudes. This growth in positive civic attitudes is even more present in the dual activists, the older the activist the less pessimistic about civic behaviors the person becomes.

Findings and Conclusions

This information leads one to draw several inferences; young people 15 to 25 are not less involved in civic activities than older groups. However, there is a slight increase

⁵ The three questions include:

A. Thinking about the problems you see in your community, how much difference do you believe YOU can personally make in working to solve problems you see- (1) great deal of difference (1) some difference, (2) a little difference, or (3) no difference at all.

B. Thinking about problems in your community, how much difference do you believe that people working tighter as a group can make in solving problems you see-(1)great deal of difference, (1) some difference, (2) a little difference, or (3) no difference at all.

C.(1) Most of the time people try to be helpful or (3) Most of the time people are just looking out for themselves or (2) depends/both/neither

⁶ As coded the more optimistic the answer the smaller the number, so when viewing the means the larger the mean the more cynical the response.

in electoral behavior as age increases. Oddly enough as electoral behavior increases so it seems does political cynicism. Many young people seem to be willing to use their political voice, showing that as far as non-electoral influence goes 15 to 25 year olds are not lagging far behind. The question of whether young people are replacing electoral behavior with civic behavior remains unanswered but, in light of this information it seems to be a possibility. Also it seems that older age groups could also be falling victim to the replacement theory. Young people are shown to not be significantly less engaged than any other group; however they are lagging in a few aspects. Inspected further young people's behavior cannot be grouped together in one lump of disengagement, decreases in engagement and increases in cynicism seem to occur around the age of 21 and continue on to the mid to later 20s. Some of the possible factors for the dip in behavior could include issues such as graduating college or no longer being in school, when leaving the school environment, becoming engaged is more difficult, (young people are no longer as perused by clubs, groups or organizations). Young people in this age range often are experiencing displacement from moving, so they are not yet connected with the community they live in. Besides this age group being a very mobile part of the populations there is the possibility that some of the members of this age group are just starting out working several jobs, with out the means or the time to become involved.

The attitudes of people about politics and the government seem to have little effect upon their engagement; however, civic attitudes seem to become significantly more optimistic the more one is involved. This would go along with Wilson (2000) and Sapiro (2004) in suggesting the possibility the more a person is involved the more they believe they can change their own community. However, my findings about political attitudes

would not agree with Sapiro in that there doesn't seem to be a connection between engagement and a positive outlook on government and politics.

My findings do disagree with Putnam's (2000) discussion of social capital, relationships, and engagement all declining among youth. Levels of youth volunteering, and other engagement measures showed consistently that youth were not truly disengaged compared to their older counterparts. While youth did lag slightly with electoral behavior, virtually all other measurements showed youth engagement. This leads to the conclusion that with volunteering levels, civic engagement, and political voice activities kids these days are no less apathetic than adults these days.

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Table 1

Five Item Electoral Engagement Index by Age Groups

		Age Groups				Total
		15-25	26-37	38-57	58-97	
Number of Electoral Activities	0	39.2%	42.0%	22.6%	25.1%	31.7%
	1	30.7%	26.4%	32.8%	24.5%	29.2%
	2	18.0%	19.2%	25.2%	23.6%	21.6%
	3	9.0%	8.9%	13.8%	14.9%	11.7%
	4	2.4%	2.6%	3.3%	7.8%	3.9%
	5	.7%	1.0%	2.3%	4.2%	2.0%
Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Gamma .215; Sig. .000; N=19847

Table 2

Four Item Civic Engagement Index by Age Groups

		Age Groups				Total
		15-25	26-37	38-57	58-97	
Number of Civic Activities	0	48.8%	47.0%	43.8%	48.5%	46.9%
	1	26.2%	26.2%	22.5%	26.8%	25.2%
	2	14.4%	14.9%	12.6%	12.1%	13.5%
	3	7.0%	4.2%	15.6%	8.4%	9.4%
	4	3.6%	7.8%	5.5%	4.3%	5.1%
Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Gamma .031; Sig. .000; N=19841

Table 3

Nine Item Voice Engagement Index by Age Groups

		Age Groups				Total
		15-25	26-37	38-57	58-97	
Number of Voice Activities	0	44.4%	33.0%	31.2%	40.5%	37.6%
	1	19.6%	22.9%	19.4%	20.3%	20.3%
	2	15.5%	17.7%	15.4%	14.4%	15.6%
	3	9.8%	8.5%	17.2%	14.3%	12.8%
	4	4.9%	10.3%	6.6%	4.7%	6.3%
	5	3.3%	5.4%	6.8%	3.8%	4.8%
	6	1.1%	2.3%	2.3%	1.1%	1.7%
	7	.6%	.0%	1.1%	.7%	.7%
	8	.3%			.3%	.2%
	9	.4%				.1%
Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Gamma .062; Sig. .000; N=19845

Table 4

Typology of Engagement by Age Groups

	Age Groups				Total
	15-25	26-37	38-57	58-97	
Disengaged	58.1%	54.1%	38.6%	41.9%	48.1%
Electoral Specialist	16.8%	19.1%	27.6%	33.3%	24.0%
Civic Specialist	11.8%	14.3%	16.8%	7.7%	12.9%
Dual Activist	13.2%	12.6%	16.9%	17.1%	15.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Gamma .138; Sig. .000; N=19844

Table 5

Typology of Engagement by Age

	Age groups					Total
	15 to 18	19 and 20	21 and 22	23 to 25	26 and up	
Disengaged	50.6%	55.3%	70.6%	62.8%	43.6%	48.1%
Electoral Specialist	18.7%	17.8%	9.3%	18.1%	27.2%	24.0%
Civic Specialist	11.7%	16.1%	11.7%	9.9%	13.3%	12.9%
Dual Activist	18.9%	10.8%	8.4%	9.3%	15.8%	15.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Gamma .145; Sig. .000; N=19843

Table 6

Political Cynicism Index by Age Groups

	Age Groups				Total
	15-25	26-37	38-56	58-97	
More Optimistic	26.8%	25.0%	16.3%	17.1%	21.3%
Ambivalent	45.3%	43.9%	40.7%	39.7%	42.5%
More Pessimistic	28.0%	31.1%	43.0%	43.2%	36.1%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Gamma .187; Sig. .000; N=17442

Table 8

Difference of Means Analysis
Civic and Political Cynicism by Age Groups and Typology of Engagement

	Disengaged		Electoral Specialist		Civic Specialist		Dual Activist	
	Mean	Diff	Mean	Diff	Mean	Diff	Mean	Diff
Age 15-24								
Political Cynicism	8.095	0	7.864	.231**	7.731	.364***	7.735	0.359***
Civic Cynicism	5.208	0	4.954	.326***	4.747	.534***	4.514	0.766***
Age 26-37								
Political Cynicism	8.301	0	7.785	.516***	8.490	-.1889**	8.207	0.0939
Civic Cynicism	5.444	0	4.794	.650***	4.897	.546***	4.758	0.686***
Age 38-57								
Political Cynicism	8.677	0	9.015	-.337***	8.880	-.202*	8.323	.354***
Civic Cynicism	5.539	0	5.251	.287***	4.394	1.145***	4.245	1.294***
Age 58-97								
Political Cynicism	8.682	0	8.919	-.237**	9.096	-.414***	8.075	.607***
Civic Cynicism	5.340	0	4.885	.456***	5.170	.170	3.938	1.402***

* .05

** .01

*** .001