

# Gen.com: Youth, Civic Engagement, and the New Information Environment

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What follows is an exploratory examination 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 30 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 review of the standard indicators of civic engagement reveals a consistent and disturbing picture.<sup>1</sup> Whether compared with older Americans or with younger Americans from earlier eras, today's young adults are significantly:

- *Less trusting of their fellow citizens.* Young adults under the age of 30 are significantly more likely than are those over 30 to say that most people cannot be trusted and that people are more likely to look out for themselves than to try to help each other (Rahn, 1998).
- *Less interested in politics or public affairs.* Only 19% of those between the ages of 18 and 29 say they follow politics and government "most of the time," as compared with 51% of those 50 or older (Zukin, 1997). Only 27% of college freshmen (in 1997) think keeping up with public affairs is very important, as compared with 59% of college freshmen in 1966 (Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 1997).
- *Less likely to feel a sense of identity, pride or obligation associated with American citizenship.* Less than 20% of 18- to 29-year-olds say they are very proud of how democracy works in the U.S., as compared with over 50% 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 (Rahn, 1998). Only 26% of those between the ages of 15 and 24 believe "being involved in democracy and voting" is "extremely important," and only 28% mention civic obligation or duty as a reason to vote (National Association of Secretaries of State, 1998).
- *Less knowledgeable about the substance or processes of politics.* Only one in 10 young Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 can name both of their senators, as compared with one in five of those between the ages of 30 and 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, as compared with one in two correct for those 30 or older (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). 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 (National Association of Secretaries of State, 1998).

- *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, as compared with 52% of those between the ages of 30 and 50 and 67% of those over 50. On any given day, just over 40% of 19- to 29-year-olds watch the news on television, as compared with 55% of those 30 to 50 years old and 65% of those over 50. Less than 20% of young adults read the newspaper on any given day, as compared with about 40% of those between the ages of 30 and 50 and 60% of those over 50. Newspaper readership among young adults is less than half what it was for this age group in 1965 (Zukin, 1997).

- *Less likely to register or vote.* Turnout in the 1996 presidential election among 18–24-year-olds was 28%, as compared with well over 60% for those 35 or older. This is the lowest turnout on record for this age group (42% of 18–24-year-olds voted in 1972, the first year that 18–20-year-olds were eligible).<sup>2</sup>

- *Less likely to participate in politics beyond voting.* Approximately 50% of those between the ages of 18 and 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, as compared with over 70% of those between the ages of 30 and 69 (Schlozman, Verba, Brady, & Erkulwater, 1998).

- *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 and 29 (and only 20% 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, as compared with 55% of those between the ages of 30 and 69 (Schlozman, Verba, Brady, & Erkulwater, 1998). Only 14% of young Americans (15 to 24 years old) have ever joined a club or organization that deals directly with government or politics, while 64% have joined a nonpolitical club or organization (National Association of Secretaries of State, 1998).

- *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 (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Among today's young adults, this connection appears to have weakened. Indeed, one study found that for 18- to 24-year-olds, there was *no* statistical relationship between voluntary activities such as working in a soup kitchen, tutoring, or helping to clean up a local park or river and participating in more traditional ways such as voting (National Association of Secretaries of State, 1998).

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% of those polled) (Close Up Foundation, 1999). Sixty-one percent of 18- to 24-year-olds believe that today's political leaders have failed them. Only one in four young Americans 15 to 24 years of age 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% feel their vote does not matter regardless of who wins an election) (National Association of Secretaries of State, 1998). A majority of those under the age of 29 believe that 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 nonprofit sector (for example, in one recent survey of U.S. teenagers, 70% 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 historically have been 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, it appears that young Americans are not increasing their participation in public life as they grow older at anything like the rate for previous 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 ensure 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, citizens must have the ability to take advantage of the opportunities that are available. 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 traced directly 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 effect 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 30 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 have come to be

viewed as irrelevant and ineffective at best and corrupt and the source of many of our problems at worst. Adding to this perception is a 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."<sup>3</sup>

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 many of the nation's most pressing problems cannot 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 lives and those of our fellow citizens could be improved by future government action, the ability of civic action to effect 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 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 30-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 30, *the current environment is all they know*. Never having experienced a period in which their own participation has effected 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% of young adults were “worried and concerned” about the future of the country. Nearly nine in 10 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 60% 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%), voting (60%), and following the news about public policy issues of the day (57%) (National Association of Secretaries of State, 1998). And young adults are as likely as or more likely than older adults to believe that there are important public problems facing the nation that need to be addressed (Project Vote Smart, 1999).

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% of high school seniors performed volunteer work of some kind, up from 62% in 1989 (Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mohoney, 1997). 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% of Americans have access to the Internet, with over a third of “wired” Americans (or 20% of the general public) going on-line five or more hours a week (Nie & Erbring, 2000). 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% of 18- to 25- year-olds saw the Internet as a useful source of political and issue information (as compared with 48% 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 (Project Vote Smart, 1999).

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 (a) increases the speed with which information can be gathered and transmitted, (b) increases the volume of information that is easily accessible, (c) creates greater flexibility in terms of when information is accessed, (d) provides greater opportunity and mixes of interactivity (one to one, one to many, many to one, and many to many), (e) shifts the nature of community from geographic to interest based, (f) blurs distinctions between types of media (print, visual, and audio), (g) challenges traditional definitions of information gatekeepers and authoritative voices, and (h) 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, nonprofits, 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 Web site and e-mail to facilitate the coordination of its various efforts around the country, to recruit new volunteers, and

so forth ([http:// youthvote2000.wego.com](http://youthvote2000.wego.com)). And Youth Service America is using e-mail and the Web to coordinate its extensive network of local, state, and regional nonprofits into a national campaign to encourage young adults who already volunteer for community service to also vote (<http://www.ysa.org>). 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 allow citizens to compare their own views with those of the candidates (<http://www.vote-smart.org/yip>). The Rock the Vote site provides on-line voter registration (<http://www.rockthevote.org>). 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 provide 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 program 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 office-holder 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 for an audience of a popular television 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 nonpolitical 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 that of MTV also provide opportunities for connecting young people who go to the site for nonpolitical reasons to public issues in ways that could also increase interest and motivation (<http://www.mtv.com>). And school based programs such as the Student Voices project piloted by the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania 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 the Internet is currently being used but also 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, and so forth) of this new information environment.

## **Notes**

1. The statistics and trends regarding young Americans reported in this paper are based on surveys and aggregate data that vary to some degree in the particular age groups they refer to, but (unless otherwise noted) are generally representative of young adults currently between 18 and 29 years old. I also include some data on younger Americans (generally 15 to 17 years old).

2. The statistics were provided by the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate.

3. Of course, all participation is ultimately driven by some special or particular interest (e.g., health care, the environment, etc.). What I refer to here is the increasing tendency to paint such participation as inappropriately encouraging the interests of a minority of citizens against some broader notion of the public will or general good of society.

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